

Contextual Safeguarding: A Briefing for ADCS

The term *Contextual Safeguarding* was first coined in 2015 and was introduced into Working Together in 2018. This briefing provides an overview of the approach and work conducted to date; the importance of clear terminology; the nature of local area involvement, and; explains of how Contextual Safeguarding can be used to develop responses to extra-familial harm.

What is Contextual Safeguarding?

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach and a term developed by Dr Carlene Firmin and colleagues at University of Bedfordshire. The term was first used in 2015 to describe an ambition for how to advance practice and policy responses to extra-familial harm.

Analysis of cases in which young people had come to significant harm in extra-familial settings and relationships (Firmin, 2017), indicated that issues such as sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, serious youth violence and teenage relationship abuse were often informed by the dynamics at play in young people's peer groups, schools and communities. Social care assessment of, and intervention with, young people in these cases focused on them as individuals and their families. Parental capacity to safeguard was often the target of the work, even when this capacity was reduced by factors beyond the control of parents. As a result, social care oversight of cases did not necessarily reduce risks that persisted in the peer groups, schools and public places where the harm had occurred. Police investigations and wider disruption activities did engage with extra-familial contexts but didn't always inform welfare-based assessments and sometimes even increased risks to young people who remained in contexts where harm had occurred. As contextual risks persisted, young people were relocated to other parts of the country, but often returned to see friends and family.

Additional exploration of these issues with practitioners in local areas from 2013-2016 (Firmin et al. 2016) led to the development of a Contextual Safeguarding Framework which converted this broad ambition about contextualising safeguarding practice into a four-pillared approach. To align with a Contextual Safeguarding framework, local systems need to:

- a) **Target extra-familial contexts and relationships in which harm occurs:** alongside direct work with children and families, contexts which pose a risk to them are identified, referred, assessed and intervened with in accordance with a plan.
- b) **Reduce extra-familial harm through a child protection lens:** contextual risk is addressed through plans/interventions where the primary goal is to safeguard children (rather than crime reduction). Such plans are overseen by social work which may feature, but are broader than, policing or community safety disruption
- c) **Demonstrate active partnerships with agencies who have reach into extra-familial settings:** this includes partnerships between children's social care and sports/leisure, parks and recreation, licensing, private businesses, schools, youth clubs and young people/parents themselves
- d) **Measure success by a reduction in contextual risk:** the impact of interventions or success outcomes are not solely measured in relation to individual behaviour change in young people (for example a reduction in truancy). Any individual measures are reported in context, and the area can also identify safety in groups and locations.

Expectations and terminology

For testing of the work to remain thoughtful and measured, accurate use is important.

Contextual Safeguarding was introduced, and continues to be developed, with a specific purpose: to identify ways to draw extra-familial contexts into responses to largely extra-familial forms of harm. The approach was not intended to be, and never could be, a panacea

for resolving all the challenges of responding to, or preventing, extra-familial harm and/or when seeking to safeguard adolescents.

The term Contextual Safeguarding was not intended as a descriptor for all adolescent safeguarding and responses to extra-familial harm, exploitation or community violence. Nor was it intended to describe those types of harm – i.e. ‘contextual safeguarding risks’.

Contextual Safeguarding interfaces with other terms and concepts, such as Transitional Safeguarding; and with structural approaches such as Greater Manchester’s ‘complex safeguarding’ approach. A briefing note was produced to explain how these three concepts relate to and complement each other: <https://www.rip.org.uk/news-and-views/latest-news/new-open-access-briefing-on-the-relationship-between/>.

Despite rapid take-up of, and interest in, Contextual Safeguarding, the approach remains very much in test phase. Contextual Safeguarding is being developed through partnerships between researchers, practitioners and local leaders, with emergent learning published by the programme. Ensuring clear definitions and parameters is key to the success of this work.

Local area take-up and testing

Through initial testing in the London Borough of Hackney, since 2017, researchers at UoB identified that, when operationalised, a Contextual Safeguarding framework allows an area to do two things which feed into one another:

- 1) Recognise contextual risks during child and family work: record contextual issues related to referrals for children and families; collect information about extra-familial risks during child and family assessments, and; where extra-familial concerns are identified refer these in for their own consideration (as per tier 2 below)
- 2) Address contextual risk: Accept referrals for peer groups, schools and public space; screen these referrals against contextual thresholds; subject them to assessment (and identify if they are a context in which children are in need of support or experiencing significant harm); discuss this assessment at a multi-agency safeguarding meeting, and; action a plan to reduce the risk in these contexts. This work feed into the individual assessments/plans for affected young people.

The way a local area achieves this will differ related to local demographics as well as the operating systems used by children’s social care and their partners. As such Contextual Safeguarding is not a model. Further testing is now underway to explore the shared and distinct lessons, challenges and opportunities that emerge in different areas. From 2019-2022 the UoB team is supporting the development of Contextual Safeguarding systems in a further nine children’s services departments.

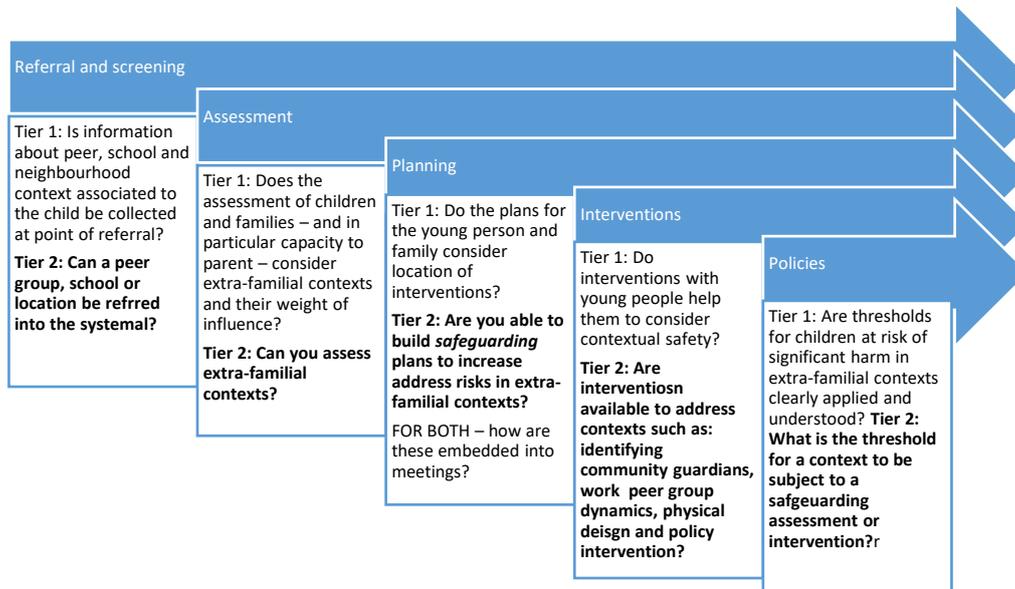
- Bristol
- Wiltshire
- Kent
- Swansea
- Knowsley
- Merton
- Ealing
- Sutton
- Barking and Dagenham

Contextual Safeguarding approaches are also being developed outside of formal test sites. UoB has convened a CS Implementation group comprised of the ten test sites and a further six (who are developing their work independently of the CS team). These are:

- Brent
- Brighton
- Devon
- Lewisham
- Lincolnshire and
- West Sussex.

The group will meet twice a year to share lessons learnt as they build their approach, and problem-solve strategic challenges. An additional 19 areas are receiving strategic advice from Carlene Firmin as they embark on the development of their CS approach – including a number of areas in the Midlands and the North. As their work develops they too will join the implementation group as sector leadership on the CS approach strengthens.

Across all of this work the research team, local leaders and practitioners will seek to answer a set of system-wide questions about how safeguarding responses in these areas do and could engage with extra-familial contexts (Figure 1)



Membership of the [Contextual Safeguarding Practitioners'](#) network is nearing 5,000 – with representation from all local authority areas in England. Network members are ensuring the development of the approach is informed by practice wisdom; and the network is a place to showcase steps taken by individuals and teams to develop contextual practices.

Keeping updated

The current test phase of Contextual Safeguarding will run until 2022. During this time parents and young people will be consulted on the approach in test sites and nationally. The work will also be informed by other research in the wider Contextual Safeguarding research programme including studies into creating contextual safety in schools (Beyond Referrals) and the rate, cost and impact of relocation in response to extra-familial harm (Securing Safety). The UoB team is also monitoring and supporting the development of contextual interventions in Oldham and Hounslow, supporting a collective of VCS organisations to consider the impact of the approach for the design and evaluation of intervention, and supporting Violence Reduction Units who are using CS to shape their design.

To keep updated on all of this work, and to access any resources or briefings that emerge out of the research programme please visit www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk

If you are a Director of Children's Services or Assistant Director and would like some strategic input in the design of your Contextual Safeguarding approach please contact the team directly on contextual.safeguarding@beds.ac.uk

ADCS is represented on the Contextual Safeguarding UK Advisory Group, which is independently chaired by Dez Holmes, Director of [Research in Practice](#) and [Research in Practice for Adults](#).