

Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018: Consultation response to the inclusion of Contextual Safeguarding in revised guidance

Introduction

This consultation submission has been developed by the University of Bedfordshire's *International Centre: Researching children sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking*, (IC) to respond to the 2018 revision of *Working Together*. It has a particular focus on the inclusion of Contextual Safeguarding in the revised guidance – a concept that has been developed at IC. This response gives particular consideration to:

- The proposed wording used to describe Contextual Safeguarding in the guidance
- The location of Contextual Safeguarding within the guidance framework
- The implications of including Contextual Safeguarding for the assessment triangle
- Opportunities to reflect Contextual Safeguarding in other parts of the guidance document
- Remaining questions regarding further development in future iterations of the guidance.

Evidence base

The position taken in this submission is built upon the evidence generated by the Contextual Safeguarding research programme at IC. The programme has been run by Dr Carlene Firmin since 2013 and current/recent research projects in the programme include:

- 20 contextual peer-on-peer abuse case reviews
- A rapid evidence assessment and primary research into group-based harmful sexual behaviour amongst young people
- 14 local area audits and 18 action research activities to co-create contextual interventions in response to peer-on-peer abuse
- Supporting a London Safeguarding Adolescents Steering Group – through practitioner surveys, young people's engagement and policy development to test the sufficiency of child protection processes for safeguarding adolescents
- Learning projects within the Contextual Safeguarding practitioners' network – including: peer group mapping; holistic approaches to safeguarding adolescents, and; responding to peer-on-peer abuse in schools
- A mixed methods study of enablers and barriers for preventing/responding to harmful sexual behaviours in schools
- Creating a Contextual Safeguarding system in Hackney Local Authority

Publications and further information on all of the above studies can be found at www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk

Response: Overarching comment

Through the research programme outlined above, contextual Safeguarding has emerged as a theoretical, strategic and practice framework designed to advance responses to young people who were at risk in extra-familial environments and relationships (Firmin, 2017). It has been defined as:

‘... an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people’s experiences of significant harm beyond their families. It recognises that the different relationships that young people form in their neighbourhoods, schools and online can feature violence and abuse. Parents and carers have little influence over these contexts, and young people’s experiences of extra-familial abuse can undermine parent-child relationships. Therefore children’s social care practitioners need to engage with individuals and sectors who do have influence over/within extra-familial contexts, and recognise that assessment of, and intervention with, these spaces are a critical part of safeguarding practices. Contextual Safeguarding, therefore, expands the objectives of child protection systems in recognition that young people are vulnerable to abuse in a range of social contexts’ (Firmin, 2017:1)

As such we welcome the inclusion of Contextual Safeguarding within statutory *safeguarding* guidance: including reference to the concept in *Working Together* authorises local authorities, and the partners with whom they work, to recognise a) the significant harm that can be caused by extra-familial risks, and b), incorporate extra-familial risks into child protection frameworks – rather than address them solely through policing and community safety mechanisms. We also strongly welcome the language used to describe Contextual Safeguarding in Chapter 1, Paragraph 34. It accurately reflects the intention of the Contextual Safeguarding concept and the various types of extra-familial risks that may require a contextual response.

Response: Structure and location of Contextual Safeguarding in the guidance framework

While we welcome and commend the description of Contextual Safeguarding in Chapter 1, Paragraph 34, we make two recommendations about its current location in the guidance document:

1. Child sexual exploitation (CSE) panels or multi-agency groups, or gangs panels, would provide a more relevant illustration of Contextual Safeguarding in practice than Channel panels. A number of local authorities have drawn upon Contextual Safeguarding to build reference to peer group, school and neighbourhood contexts into strategic and operation planning associated to CSE and gang-related violence. We would recommend that such examples are used to provide a practice explanation of Contextual Safeguarding in place of Channel panels.
2. Contextual Safeguarding is intended to inform planning, profiling, partnerships and interventions, as well as assessment. As such it can provide a lens through which to develop all activities related to child protection which includes, but is not restricted to, assessment. At present the concept is introduced in the assessment chapter which could imply that it is only relevant to the assessment process. In order to ensure its wider application it would help to move Paragraph 34, alongside an added practical explanation of the concept, to the introductory section of the guidance. Here it would provide a complimentary addition to the section entitled *a child-centred and coordinated approach to safeguarding*. In particular, it could be added after the sub-section on a child-centred approach.

Response: Implications of Contextual Safeguarding for the assessment triangle

Chapter 1, Paragraph 44 of the revised guidance identifies the importance of taking a systemic approach to assessment. Contextual Safeguarding provides a lens through which to explore the extra-familial settings in a systemic assessment framework and therefore compliments this conceptual model. Furthermore, the guidance states that assessment should investigate ‘the influence of community and environmental circumstances’ which would include contexts

highlighted by a Contextual Safeguarding model. However, in order to develop assessment in this direction, particularly when a child is at risk of significant harm in extra-familial environments, further consideration/explanation is required about how to contextually use the assessment triangle that is referenced in this paragraph. The following additional considerations/explanations would be helpful:

- For an assessment to be contextual, it needs to go beyond recording a young person's engagement in education, social integration and/or their access to community resources (that are already a part of the assessment triangle), and explore *the nature* of their school and community/neighbourhood environments and the peer relationships that form within these.
- Parenting capacity can be compromised by the influences of extra-familial risks – such as adults in the community or online who have groomed or threatened children, or the influence of problematic peer cultures. In these instances parents can lose control of their children who may be fearful of, or be in the control of, adults and peers in the community. The assessment triangle is yet to provide a conceptual framework to recognise the ways in which such external factors can undermine parental capacity. Such a dynamic would need to be considered to identify occasions where interventions may be required to reduce the risks in extra-familial settings as a means of increasing parental capacity.
- Positive peer-relationships and extra-familial factors can also contribute to the resilience of, and protection available to, a young person. For example, young people who are living with domestic violence at home may be exposed to safe and positive relationships with peers at school. It is for such reasons, as well as those outlined in the matter above, that peer relationships need to be explicitly included in a contextual assessment model. Further advice is required, however, regarding the legal parameters for considering peer relationships within assessments – particularly the use of peer group mapping alongside genograms.
- Community resources and other extra-familial factors that may influence the welfare of a young person may be multi-faceted. They can include peers, schools, youth clubs, retailers, transport providers etc. They may impact each other as well as parental capacity and therefore need to be broken down for practitioners to recognise and record the interplay between them. A contextual assessment would allow a practitioner to note strengths and risks within different extra-familial settings, such as exposure to crime in the neighbourhood (risk) and exposure to healthy relationships at school (protective factor), and allow practitioners to assess vulnerability with regards to all of these factors. In the existing triangle, the presentation of the community resources category doesn't yet capture this approach to assessment.

Response: Opportunities to reflect Contextual Safeguarding in other parts of the guidance document

While Contextual Safeguarding is referenced in one section of Working Together its implications for safeguarding practices are yet to be integrated into the wider document. As a whole-system application of Contextual Safeguarding is still being trialled in London Borough of Hackney (and other local authorities are considering the implications of Contextual Safeguarding for their child protection systems) it would be premature to attempt full implementation of the approach throughout the guidance document. However, at this stage there are some sections of the document which could make reference to extra-familial risk so as to begin a process of integrating the intention of Contextual Safeguarding into other sections of Working Together –

thus enabling practitioners to work in the spirit of the language outlined on page 25 paragraph 34; these are as follows (italics show recommended insertions):

- Page 13, paragraph 23: 'Safeguarding partners should use this assessment to help them understand the prevalence *and contexts* of abuse and neglect in their area'.
- Page 17, paragraph 15: 'In addition to high quality support in universal services, specific local early help services will typically include family and parenting programmes, assistance with health issues, *responses to emerging thematic concerns in extra-familial contexts such as parks, high streets and schools*, and help for problems related to...' (or an additional paragraph could be included here documenting some contextual early help interventions rather than listing them with those targeted at children and families).
- Page 19, paragraph 23: 'the capacity of the child's parents or carers to meet those needs, *and any external factors that may be undermining their capacity (such as peer influence or grooming by adults in the community)*'.
- Page 20, paragraph 27: 'information sharing is also essential for the identification of patterns of behaviour when a child has gone missing, *when multiple children appear associated to the same contexts or locations of risk*, or in relation to the secure estate...'
- Page 31, paragraph 57: 'Social workers, their managers and other practitioners should be mindful of the requirement to understand the level of need and risk in, *or faced by*, a family from the child's perspective...'
- Page 73, paragraph 41: 'YOT...are therefore well placed to identify children known to relevant organisations as being most at risk of offending *and the contexts in which they may be vulnerable to abuse*'.

In addition, Chapter 2 provides a good foundation for the engagement of wider services in child protection practices who have an influence over extra-familial contexts – such as education providers, health providers, transport police, leisure and sports services VCS and private organisations. The relevance of this section to Contextual Safeguarding could be reflected by adding a sentence on page 62, in section 4. All points made in that section are extremely helpful and would be further strengthened with a statement about the role of these organisations in '*creating a culture of safety, equality and protection within the services that they provide*'. Such a statement would clarify the role of these organisations to prevent abuse (particularly peer-abuse) within their own services as well as to refer concerns about abuse to external agencies. This is particularly important given that the final bullets in this section (page 65) are concerned with allegations against adults in these services but provide less direction in cases of peer-on-peer abuse.

Response: Future considerations

The recommendations outlined above are achievable routes at this stage of the Contextual Safeguarding model's development. Once Hackney, and other local authorities, have further implemented the approach into their children's social care systems the following sections of Working Together may require contextual consideration:

- Page 29, paragraph 47: further advice is required for when children are being returned to safe families whose homes are located in extra-familial contexts which remain unsafe – such as being impacted by gang-related violence or exploitation.
- Page 32, paragraphs 65-66: in a Contextual Safeguarding model outcomes and interventions beyond families would need to be considered as well as those targeting children, parents and carers.

- Page 36: provision is provided for practitioners to use additional assessments. It remains to be agreed whether the child and family assessment can be used to conduct an assessment of an extra-familial context or if a contextual assessment may act as a 'further assessment' in cases of extra-familial risk. If so, such an assessment would need to be referenced here.
- Pages 40-41: collecting information for assessment: social workers would require information about which services have been agreed to address extra-familial risks, and would need to collect information as part of plans that reflect these risks in addition to those within families.
- Page 43: strategy discussion: in a Contextual Safeguarding model those who manage/oversee relevant extra-familial contexts would also play a critical role, in addition to those working with children and their families.
- Page 47-48: making enquiries: advice is required about how social workers may gather information from partners about the broader contextual factors that may be impacting families, as well as information about children and their parents/carers. Relevant partners would also need advice about how to provide such information
- Pages 53-54: the plan: at present the plan is said to document the support that will be provided by the family and wider family members. In a contextual model this may extend to other professionals who are responsible for extra-familial contexts and the role that they too will play in promoting the welfare of the child.
- Page 68 – 70: wider partnerships: the police (paragraph 22), housing (paragraph 28,) and transport providers (paragraphs 29-30) could all provide information on emerging concerns about contexts as well as the children and families with whom they interact. For example, neighbourhood policing may be identifying street-based trends, housing providers may be noticing anti-social behaviour presenting a risk to young people in certain localities, and transport providers may be aware of travel corridors in which young people are being exposed to violence and abuse.

Conclusion

In short, we welcome the inclusion of Contextual Safeguarding in *Working Together*. We recognise the potential to further integrate this inclusion into other parts of the guidance document, particularly in relation to assessment at this stage. As Contextual Safeguarding develops we will be better able to identify the implications of this for strategy meetings, child protection plans, conferences and partnerships and will feed this learning into Government at the earliest opportunity.

For further information on Contextual Safeguarding, or queries related to this consultation response, please contact carlene.firmin@beds.ac.uk.

Reference:

Firmin, C (2017) *Contextual Safeguarding: An overview of the operational, strategic and conceptual framework*, Luton: University of Bedfordshire