

Family Group Conferences and Contextual Safeguarding

Key Messages for Practice

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Introduction

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to safeguarding young people from harm in extra-familial contexts. As such it is compatible with, and supports the development of, a range of practice frameworks and models that are used to improve child protection practices and systems.

In this briefing, we consider how Family Group Conferences (FGCs), informed by Contextual Safeguarding, can be utilised within children's safeguarding as a response to extra-familial harm.

The briefing is divided into three sections. In [section one](#) we summarise the two approaches. In the [second section](#) we reflect on current knowledge of the cross-overs between the two approaches and what we are yet to understand. In the [final section](#) we present a case study and make recommendations for how the two approaches can work together in the future, including questions for further development.

Family Group Conferences

Background to FGCs

FGCs are decision making meetings in which plans are constructed by a family (including extended family members and friends) to address identified child welfare concerns and ensure a child's future safety and well-being. They have been used effectively in a broad range of child welfare situations including in youth justice.

The development of the FGC model and its use in mainstream social work practice began in New Zealand during the 1980s. The model developed in response to concerns about the over-representation of Maori children in state care and the view that this was a result of structural racism in part arising out of an inherently white western social work focus. Since their inception and incorporation into legislation in New Zealand, the FGC model has been adopted in a wide range of countries internationally as a good practice model for ensuring effective family participation in decision making.

Family Rights Group was instrumental in 1990 in introducing FGCs to the UK. They invited New Zealand practitioners here to share practice, which led to the first trial of FGCs in the UK. Since then, services have in the main adhered to the original New Zealand model with a focus on the independence of the co-ordinator and the fundamental importance of private family time to the success of the approach. Growth of FGCs in the UK was helped by the introduction of the public law outline in 2006, with the emphasis on local authorities needing to consult with the wider family prior to initiating care proceedings in relation to concerns about children. In 2019 Family Rights Group estimated that 78% of local areas had introduced FGCs.

Despite the extensive use of FGCs in relation to youth justice work in New Zealand and elsewhere there has not been a corresponding growth of the use of the model in this area in the UK.

FGC Principles

The FGC model places the family as central to decision making about their children and some key practice principles are key to achieving this and to the success of the model.

Independence of the co-ordinator: The FGC is arranged and managed by an independent co-ordinator who is employed by a local FGC service which is part of or commissioned by the local authority or local agency. The co-ordinator has no decision-making role in relation to the identified concerns in relation to the child's welfare. This independent role is considered significant in ensuring that the family are given the fullest opportunity to make decisions.

Family driven: The FGC process is family driven rather than determined by professionals. The role of professionals, including the referrer (usually a social worker) is to frame the question for the family to address; ensure family members have appropriate information about the child welfare and/or protection concerns to be considered at the FGC; provide information about local authority or other agency resources; and to respond on behalf of the referring agency to the family's plan.

Voluntary: FGCs are a voluntary process and should only go ahead with the agreement of the family.

The Family Group Conference process

For a more detailed description of the FGC process, please see Appendix A.

Effective preparation

Once a referral is accepted by a local FGC service, a co-ordinator is allocated to work with the family and plan, and prepare for the meeting.

Effective preparation of the network is key to FGC success. How this happens recognises the decision-making role of those with parental authority in determining how the process evolves. With the agreement of the person with parental authority the co-ordinator visits and prepares the young person and family members, including wider relatives and friends for the FGC meeting. Safety planning is an integral part of the role. The child normally participates in the FGC and should be offered an advocate to help ensure their voice is heard.

The co-ordinator liaises with the referrer and other relevant agencies to check that they understand their role and to ensure that they provide accessible information to assist the family to address the concerns they have.

The Family Group Conference

- The co-ordinator negotiates the date, time and venue for the conference, sends out invitations and makes the necessary practical arrangements.
- The FGC should be held at a time and place that is right for the family
- **Information giving** – service providers give information about the reason for the conference, the resources and support available to the family, any welfare concerns which may affect the plan and what action will happen if the family cannot make a plan

- **Private family time** – agency staff and the co-ordinator leave and the family have time to come up with a plan that addresses concerns raised, including resources and support from agencies, as well as within the family, needed to make the plan work.
- **Plan and agreement** – the referrer and co-ordinator return to hear the family's plan. They agree the plan – including any resources requested – as long as it is safe and relates to the reason for the FGC.

Implementing and review the plan

- **Implementation of the plan** – everybody involved implements their parts of the plan within the agreed time.
- **Review of the plan** – the plan is reviewed and monitored, and a review meeting is offered to consider how the plan is working.

Research concerning FGCs

Research concerning FGCs has mainly focused on the satisfaction of those involved, how the plan is carried out and the extent to which informal care replaces formal care. Research demonstrates consistently high satisfaction rates with FGCs which have been found to bring family members closer together and strengthening positive family ties; keep children safe through the delivery of a plan which protects and safeguards children and parents/carers; improve partnership working between families and social work services and achieve more timely permanency and exiting out of home care more rapidly (Mason et al 2017; Pennell and Burford, 2000; Merkel-Holguin, 2003; Holland et al., 2005; Marsh, 2013; Metze et al., 2015).

FGCs have been successfully held in situations where there has been substantial abuse, including domestic violence (Pennell and Burford 2000; Mason et al 2017). Studies have shown that FGCs have led to a reduction in reports to child welfare statutory services (Kiely and Bussey, 2001) and that children suffered less maltreatment following an FGC (Pennell and Burford 2000).

Contextual Safeguarding

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. Unlike FGCs, Contextual Safeguarding is not a model of practice, but an overarching framework for the entire child protection system, underpinned by a set of values. Contextual Safeguarding has been in development in the UK since 2011, following a three-year review of practice responses to cases of peer-on-peer abuse (Firmin, 2017). Over 50 local authorities are now involved in implementing Contextual Safeguarding, with much local variation. The Contextual Safeguarding Framework (Firmin et al., 2016), which provides a conceptual, strategic and operational framework for implementing the approach in local areas, is made up of four 'domains'. A Contextual Safeguarding System:

- **Targets** the contexts (and social conditions) associated with abuse (Domain 1)
- **Uses a child protection** rather than community safety **legislative framework** to develop responses to extra-familial harm (Domain 2)

- **Features partnerships** between children’s services and young people, parents, wider communities along with the range of agencies who have a reach into the places and spaces where extra-familial harm occurs (Domain 3)
- **Measures contextual impact** of its work – and the change it creates in public, education and peer settings, as well as for individual children and families (Domain 4)

Collectively, these four domains describe the capabilities of a safeguarding system designed to respond to the contextual dynamics of extra-familial harm.

There are a set of values that underpin the Contextual Framework and understanding these is integral to ensuring its use stays true to the intention behind its design. The need to assert these values emerged through testing and were published in 2020 (Firmin, 2020; Firmin and Lloyd, 2020; Wroe, 2020). Contextual Safeguarding is:

- **Collaborative:** Achieved through collaboration between professionals, children and young people, families and communities to inform decisions about safety.
- **Ecological:** Considers the links between the spaces where young people experience harm and how these are shaped by inequalities.
- **Rights-based:** Rooted in children’s and human rights.
- **Strengths-based:** Builds on the strengths of individuals and communities to achieve change.
- **Evidence-informed:** Grounded in the reality of how life happens. Proposes solutions that are informed by the lived experiences of young people, families, communities and practitioners.

When applying this framework and set of values, practitioners have engaged in activities which: recognise the *interplay* between contexts; assess the *weight of influence* different contexts have on young people’s safety, and; seek to build contextual safety on two levels (Firmin, 2020). At ‘Level 1’, practitioners and teams have identified ways to consider extra-familial contexts in their direct work with individual children and families – such as foregrounding the impact of contexts during a child and family assessment. At ‘Level 2’ the focus is on working with a context (peer group, neighbourhood, school etc.) rather than with an individual child or family. This involves creating systems for referring, assessing and providing responses for contexts themselves as a means of building safety for young people outside of the home.

What they share in common

Family Group Conferences and Contextual Safeguarding share four common features, which are built on a set of values underpinning how we understand and respond to harm experienced by children and young people. These can be seen in a shared commitment to:

1. collaborative and democratic methods that also respect parental rights
2. restorative and strengths-based approaches
3. safeguarding as ‘everybody’s business’
4. recognising the environmental and social conditions affecting harm and abuse experienced by children and young people

1) Collaborative and democratic

FGCs and Contextual Safeguarding both seek to re-balance and shift traditional power dynamics within decision making about how to create safety for children and young people.

A good illustration of this is comparing FGCs with traditional child protection conferences. Whilst traditionally there may be one or two family members in attendance, the majority of people at a child protection conference are professionals, and it is they who make decisions at the meeting. In contrast, at an FGC, the focus is on enabling the wider family and support network to participate and take the lead in decision making. At an FGC, the majority of attendees are family members, with on average 10 to 12 family members present. The result of this is to shift the dynamics of the meeting and to prioritise the voice and primacy of the family as experts in their own lives. The effect of this is that within FGCs a greater range of voices are heard and a wider range of creative responses to the presenting 'problem' can be shared and explored. In FGCs, the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people are given prominence and taken account of in the development of a plan. Importantly, in terms of power, there is a shift from the child welfare agency, towards the family taking a lead in determining what is the right way forward, albeit that the agency needs to agree the plan if it concerns the safeguarding of a child.

Contextual Safeguarding emphasises the importance of collaboration with young people, families and communities to create safer contexts outside the home. Workers seeking to understand the nature of harm in contexts outside the home spend time with young people, asking where young people feel safe and unsafe, using a range of tools like [safety mapping](#), the [All about me'](#) tool, and [school surveys](#). Young people's views are then central to any response to address harm in a context, framed around increasing safety rather than solely focussed on reducing risk. Running through this, is an ethical requirement for anyone following a Contextual Safeguarding approach, to explicitly grapple with the rights of young people to privacy – alongside their right to be safeguarded – which is a key area of focus in our research.

2) Restorative and strengths-based approaches

Both FGCs and Contextual Safeguarding are committed to treating people humanely and with dignity. This involves resisting the dominant blame and problem focussed narrative that many families experience when engaged with child welfare agencies, in favour of looking for and working with strengths in the family, young people's networks and the wider community.

FGCs start from the premise that members of a family have unique knowledge of their situation and through their ongoing emotional and relational connection with children, will want the best for them and will often be best placed to know what that requires. FGCs use a restorative lens to explore past harms and, by allowing all voices to be heard, can enable change in the nature of relationships as people take responsibility for past harm and make amends. This is as equally relevant in youth justice, child welfare, or in community-based FGC settings.

A Contextual Safeguarding approach considers those who spend time in a community, neighbourhood or school context to have unique understanding of that place. When

conducting a safeguarding assessment of a context therefore, practitioners will actively engage with the people who live, work and spend time in that context, harnessing their local knowledge and investment, rather than for example, relying on datasets and crime reports to identify and profile an area. This is done following a strengths-based approach, meaning that practitioners ‘safety profile’ alongside ‘risk profiling’ a context.

A tool that helps with this is [Context Weighting](#) because it directs practitioners to consider strengths, risks and vulnerabilities within a given context. Following on from this, proportionate and relevant information about safety and harm in a context is discussed with those who have a role to play in creating safety. This can include police, housing, health, community safety, residents, the voluntary and community sector and local businesses. Partners are encouraged to view young people as young residents and citizens living in an unsafe environment, with constrained choices and subject to exploitation, rather than, for example, as ‘engaging in anti-social’ behaviour’. With the aim of increasing safety, they create a multi-agency plan that draws on strengths and reduces risks to make the context safer for any/all young people who associate with it. This may involve developing enjoyable activities for young people and/or increasing community ‘guardianship’, whereby people who live and work in the area actively participate in maintaining a safe context for young people who spent time there.

3) Safeguarding as ‘everybody’s business’

Fundamental to both approaches is the idea that professional social workers are not the sole agents in bringing about safety for children in families and communities. Instead, responsibility for safety is jointly held by all those who have an interest and role in the life of a family and/or community. Professionals take the role of facilitators and conduits helping families and communities become places where young people live free from harm.

The FGC model is premised on the principle that there is a network of support around a child who have a shared investment in their safety and wellbeing. FGCs work because these people understand their own situation well and know what is needed. The role of professionals is to provide support, to give clarity about their concerns and by offering resources to support a plan.

Contextual Safeguarding also extends traditional professional boundaries by asking who has capacity to safeguarding a particular context and understanding what might be undermining this. This shifts the focus away from a sole interest in parental capacity, or the ‘behaviour choices’ of young people, creating space for a wider set of partners invested in a context – professional and non-professional – to help to safeguard young people. Practitioners actively engage with new partners who live, work and spend time in the relevant contexts, and by doing this open up opportunity for collaborative common ground with parents, who are not considered responsible for preventing harm to their children. In this way, a Contextual Safeguarding approach seeks to open out and broaden the responsibility of the wider community for safeguarding and therefore, like FGCs, sets clearer boundaries about responsibility and power.

4) Recognise the environmental and social conditions experienced by children and young people

Contextual Safeguarding and FGCs both approach a child's welfare as environmentally and contextually derived. This means taking a holistic and systemic view of the way in which people are interconnected and inter-dependent.

The FGC model recognises and capitalises on the social system surrounding parents and their children. It begins from the premise that there are often valuable, if sometimes untapped resources and a unique understanding of a family's lived experiences within a child's network. In an FGC, those who are part of a wider network are brought together to commit to being part of a plan alongside a parent, offering practical and emotional support, in an attempt to enhance the family and community environment of that young person. The resulting plan draws on the resources within families and sets out how these could be effectively complemented or supported by public and community resources to enhance a child's welfare.

Contextual Safeguarding is founded on the idea that our social context is very important and influential, and for young people, peers are particularly significant. We understand, and seek to work with a belief that people behave differently when they are in different contexts with different people and adjust according to the 'rules at play' within their social context (Bourdieu, 1990). Importantly however, in Contextual Safeguarding, although young people are understood to have a role in changing their social contexts, they are not held responsible for doing so. This distinction opens up room to question and critique safeguarding practices, like placing young people and their families to live in other areas as a response to extra-familial harm. This is because relocation does not address the social conditions associated with the harm but instead effectively targets the young person and their family as the problem, whilst also removing them from their supportive social contexts. In contrast, a Contextual Safeguarding approach would seek to reduce the opportunity for harm to take place to any young people who associate with a given context, rather than focussing on individual young people. An example of this is if there was a culture of sexist attitudes in a school linked to harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) – a Contextual Safeguarding response would include addressing the structural and cultural sexism which enabled the HSB to take place, and by doing so create sustainable safety for the whole school community.

In summary, FGCs and Contextual Safeguarding are both commitment to safeguarding practices which are anti-oppressive and shared with young people and parents. This is underpinned by a belief that this is not only ethical but more effective. Both start from a recognition that parents' wish for their children to be safe has been undermined by traditional safeguarding practices, and as a result, both hope to change the focus away from blame and towards a process of drawing on a wider network of support and safety.

How they could work together

We present two case studies to illustrate how contextual safeguarding and FGCs could be used together to safeguard children and young people. These are fictionalised accounts inspired by practice examples. The first case study has a Contextual

Safeguarding 'Level 1' focus (where the aim is to safeguard an individual young person in the context of their family network) and the second case study has a Contextual Safeguarding 'Level 2' focus (where the aim is to change a context to make it safe for all/any young people who spend time there).

Case Study 1 – Working with a young person experiencing EFH

Referral and Assessment:

A referral was received to a safeguarding panel for Timi, a 16 year old boy, experiencing criminal exploitation via county lines drugs distribution. There were discussions about the possibility that he may need to be accommodated into local authority care to protect him from harm. FGC Team Manager suggested an FGC to avoid this.

The allocated FGC co-ordinator, Ravi, undertook a mapping exercise and identified that Timi was most at risk of harm within his peer group, the local area where they spend time, and with adults unrelated to him who have access to that area and who sell drugs. Ravi identified that the protective people in Timi's life were his mum, grandparents, uncle, sister and her partner. Ravi met with Timi and his family members before the conference to ensure that Timi was central to the process, and let everyone know that the meeting would be family-led.

Planning & Partnerships:

The conference was held in the family's local community centre, a space comfortable for the family. Timi, his advocate and his family arrived first to settle in before Ravi invited the professionals in – a youth worker, social worker and police officer. This was to set the tone that this is a space for the family and that they are in control.

Ravi invited each person to say something positive about Timi, before expressing their worries. Timi's family and professionals said that Timi is caring and supportive to his Nan and they are worried about not knowing where he goes for periods of time. They said they felt like they have little control of the situation.

The police officer said he is only worried about Timi's safety, and that this is the most important thing. Timi's advocate and social worker said they hoped that Timi felt this was a safe space to be honest about his experiences. Timi said that the group he is involved with knows where he lives and has threatened his sister, so feel like he has no other choice because he is worried about his family's safety. He did not want to name anyone.

The workers left the room so that the family could think about what would help in this situation. Timi's uncle, who, at first, was unsure of his role at the FGC, invited Timi to stay with him, while the police put alarms on Timi's house and made steps to identify the adults who were exploiting him.

Then the professionals came back into the room to discuss and agree the plan. The family felt they would feel safer if alarms were fitted at the house, so the police agreed to put these in as priority. Timi identified a career that he was interested in and the youth worker agreed to support him in accessing employment training.

Actions and Outcomes:

Holding the conference enabled Timi to continue living with his family. Punitive or blaming responses were replaced with a focus on Timi's welfare, which was shared by family and professionals.

The family came together to agree a plan to help keep Timi stay safe. Panic alarms were fitted in his house, and it was agreed that he would not be left at home alone. If Timi's mum was working nights, the plan was for him and his sister to stay with another family member. The police identified actions to target the adults who were exploiting him. The social worker identified steps to reduce Timi's vulnerabilities, with support from Timi's youth worker, including connecting him and his friends with opportunities for work experience. Timi was accepted into a training programme in his chosen area.

Instead of considering the need for local authority accommodation, the response focused on strengthening the networks around Timi to decrease his vulnerability to criminal exploitation.

Case Study 2 – Working with a context as the focus

Referral and Assessment:

A local authority Extra-Familial Harm Multi-Agency Panel received a referral for a group of young people in Whitedell town centre. The young people in Whitedell were at risk of harm from exposure to violence, substance misuse and exploitation, which had hitherto generally been regarded as 'anti-social behaviour' rather than as a safeguarding issue. A community conference drawing on FGC principals was suggested, with the aim of changing the social conditions in the context, drawing on community resources and strengths.

San and Jo were allocated as co-ordinators. They began by using the [Context Weighting](#) tool to understand which context had the greatest influence over the presenting issues. San and Joe worked with a local detached youth worker to find out how safe young people felt in Whitedell and what they wanted to happen there. After consulting with young people, San and Jo also spoke to the parents of young people from Whitedell to find out their worries and ideas for increasing the safety of their young people. They held an open meeting for community members to share their views about young peoples' safety in Whitedell, and surveyed shop owners and residents. Bringing this information together, San and Jo concluded that the community context was the biggest influence of harm for the young people in Whitedell. It was agreed that the FGC should focus on reducing the opportunity for young people to be exploited in this setting by increasing the role of positive 'guardians' (safe adults with responsibility and reach into this context). Guardianship was found to be undermined because some local residents felt unsure how to be of help whilst others were intimidated by young people and saw them as a nuisance. San and Jo pulled this information together to set outcomes for what needed to change in Whitdell for young people to be safe there.

Planning & Partnerships:

San and Jo built on the connections established by the youth service, which had been present for a long time in the community, to speak with young people and their parents about options for running the conference. All of the young people and parents known to be connected to Whitedell were invited to be part of this process. From the conversations that followed between the co-ordinators, young people and parents, San and Jo agreed to hold an initial conference with residents and community members, which would be attended by one parent to represent the views of other parents of the group. Young people decided that they did not want to attend the meeting but would like their views represented by their youth worker, who collected short films and quotes to present at the meeting.

San and Jo identified people who may be potential positive guardians in Whitedell, consisting of a mix of residents and professionals. These people were invited and asked to consider beforehand the resources and services available to them which may contribute to increasing of safety in the context.

The conference took place in a community centre, with attendees sitting in a circle. Attendees included the youth worker who had made the referral, a parent representative, local school, police, housing, local businesses, a voluntary and community sector organisation, community safety, park wardens, individual residents (including one who has a family connection to a young person who spent time in Whitedell), and residents' groups. San and Jo explained that the focus of the conference was not to talk about individual young people, but to come up with a collective plan that would increase safety for all young people who spend time at Whitedell. They then asked the referring youth worker to explain the reason for the referral and invited each person to voice their concerns and ideas for addressing issues of safety for young people in Whitedell.

San and Jo worked hard to create a safe environment where everyone in the room could hear each other and begin working together towards a shared goal of improving the area for young people. Being facilitated to listen to one another and sharing their perspectives greatly improved damaged relationships. The parent representative shared that parents were worried that their children were not safe in Whitedell but that trying to stop them from going there was not working so they needed to find another way to increase their safety. The youth worker shared that young people also wanted to carry on spending time in Whitedell and that they did not agree with residents and others who said they should be moved away. Films were shown where young people explained that they felt judged and blamed by the residents and wanted more opportunities for things to do.

The co-ordinators then left the meeting so that community members could develop a plan to make the space safe. They made it clear that any draft plan would also need to be shared with the wider parents and young people's group before being finalised.

Actions and Outcomes:

The co-ordinators re-entered the room to hear the draft plan, which consisted of partners and community members taking ownership and responsibility for different aspects that would address young people's safety in Whitedell. The draft plan included:

- A VCS agency holding workshops in the community for residents and local businesses about becoming a community guardian focussing on young people's rights, welfare needs and development stage
- The boxing club offering sessions for young people in the area
- Residents wanting to create opportunities for young people to host a barbecue in the Whitedell and invite young people to help plan and organise it
- Park wardens to cut overgrown hedges and greenery that create hidden spots, increase lighting in the area, and providing more seating for young people
- The local café to pair up with the local art centre to host sessions for young people to create art that celebrates their lives and culture
- The youth centre to hold a space for a parent support group and for parents' views to feed into reviewing the plan in creating safety
- Police to focus on preventing groups and individuals of concern accessing the young people in the area

Later that day the co-ordinators shared the draft plan with the young people and wider parent group. They gathered parents in one room and young people in another room at the

youth centre. San worked with the young people and shared the draft plan whilst Jo worked with the parents. San and Jo then left the room to give some space for the young people and parents respectively to consider the proposals on the table. They then re-entered the rooms to hear their feedback. Young people agreed to the plan and said they thought it would help them feel like they belong in the area. They wanted to make one change, which was to have an area to skateboard. They agreed with San's suggestion for this to be presented to the group at the review conference, possibly by young people themselves. The parent group added to the plan that they would set up a Whatsapp group to support and share information for informal support.

San and Jo shared the young people and parents' views with the community members, and sent out a confirmed plan. They arranged a review conference for 3 months' time and presented the outcome of the conference to original referring panel.

After the conference, the Extra-Familial Multi-Agency Panel continued to monitor whether there is a reduction in harm to young people in Whitedell and trouble shoot any issues with the plan. When the risk of significant harm to young people in Whitedell had reduced, the panel closed their oversight, confident that changes in the context taken place.

Learning from the case studies

These case studies demonstrate how Contextual Safeguarding and Family Group Conferencing can work effectively together. When integrated together, their similar underlying values and principles can provide strengths-based, restorative, ecological, collaborative, and welfare-led responses to addressing harm and creating safety.

Below, we highlight three benefits of integrating the two approaches:

1) Increased buy-in/engagement with young people, families and communities

Integrating FGCs and Contextual Safeguarding can increase buy-in between those responsible for safeguarding young people, parent/carers and community members. This challenges the narrative that some families and young people are 'difficult to engage'. Both approaches centre on participation, restoration and relationship-building, placing decision-making into the hands of the people affected by safeguarding concerns. A combined approach also enables a flexible and creative coming together of all the key stakeholders involved and provides a more accessible framework for working with peer groups where harm may exist in their collective activities.

2) Increasing welfare-led approaches that focus on restoration and building safety, over punishment

The case studies highlights how Contextual Safeguarding and an FGC approaches can help change the narrative from expecting young people to 'keep themselves' safe from harm to a focus on community responses to create safety. This staged process takes everyone involved on the journey of understanding the context through the lens of young people's needs, rights, beliefs and circumstances, identifying and responding to the needs of young people in the context of not just their family, but also the community (Julich *et al.* 2009). The change of focus of the conference from a problem-

focused approach to a strength based one also challenges the traditional power dynamics between social care and families/professionals. Ultimately, the approach should bring about reciprocal benefits for young people and the wider community, such as creating a culture of care over surveillance.

3) Increased ability and capacity to focus on interventions – the whole journey

Using a combined Contextual Safeguarding and FGC approach provides a pathway to address extra-familial harm from referral through to developing interventions and planning outcomes. This process addresses the four Contextual Safeguarding domains: a) targeting the context of harm; b) ensuring that this is carried out in a welfare-led way; c) facilitating effective partnerships, including the reach of non-traditional partners; and d) measuring the changes within contexts, including the impact of interventions on wider structural and contextual factors.

What we are yet to understand

Whilst there are many cross-over similarities, we acknowledge that Contextual Safeguarding and FGCs were introduced into the UK safeguarding system to address related but different problems with safeguarding practice. On the one hand, FGCs focus on recognising parental rights, addressing the imbalance of power within these processes and whilst some developments have taken place around youth offending practice, the focus is primarily on familial contexts of harm. On the other hand, Contextual Safeguarding shifts the focus away from holding parents accountable for harm that take place outside the home, thereby galvanising a wider network of safeguarding partners who have reach into the contexts where harm takes place. In bringing the two together, therefore, questions remain about how practice in this area can and should develop. In particular, conferences where the aim is to change the social conditions in a context – rather than bring about safety for an individual young person within their family network – raise questions about how we honour important features of the FGC process and the values that underpin it. These include:

- Where does the balance of power sit within a community/context focussed FGC? Who are, and should be, the decision makers?
- Given the multiple partners with various roles involved (parent, young people, community members, services) how do we work with subsystems in the process?
- How do we balance focus on the context/community with focus on the family? Is there danger that, in wanting to shift the focus away from holding young people responsible for harm and focussing solely on a context, the voices of those parents and young people implicated in the decision may be inadvertently obscured?
- What is the opportunity for more explicit restorative methods involving young people within context/community focussed FGCs, in which for example young people and community members hear and respond to hearing about the impact of their behaviour on one another?

- How do we balance model fidelity against flexibility? For example, how do we retain the important element of private family time within the process to empower young people and families?
- Who oversees and manages community/context focussed FGCs, who provides ongoing support and what kind of training and resources are needed to develop this work in a local area?

Next Steps

The Contextual Safeguarding team are currently piloting context/community focussed FGCs within Kent as part of the Scale-Up project, and have produced a [podcast](#) based on Level 1 work. available on the [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#), which is free to [join](#). If you would like to join the conversation about the use of FGCs within a Contextual Safeguarding approach, we would be delighted to hear from you.

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About Family Rights Group

Family Rights Group works with parents whose children are in need, at risk or are in the care system and with wider family members and friends who are raising children (known as kinship carers). The charity runs a free legal and practice advice service including advice line and this year will advise more than 7000 parents, grandparents, relatives and friends about their rights and options when social workers or courts make decisions about their children's welfare.

We campaign for families to have their voice heard, be treated fairly and get help early to prevent problems escalating.

We promote policies and practices that keep children safe within their family and strengthen the family and community networks of those children who cannot live at home. This includes introducing child welfare family group conferences into the UK and developing the Lifelong Links approach, which aims to build lasting supportive relationship for children in care. The charity hosts the national Family Group Conference and Lifelong Links Network. We have also developed with the Network an FGC accreditation framework for local FGC services in order to promote adherence to FGC principles and standards.

Appendix A -The Family Group Conference process

Stage 1: The referral

A referral is made to the local FGC service, usually by the child's social worker, although it could be other professionals such as the child's teacher, youth offending team worker or health visitor. In some services families can refer themselves.

For a referral to be made the following will need to be met:

- there are concerns about a child's welfare that meet the criteria set by the local family group conference service
- a parent or carer with parental responsibility or a young person aged 16 or 17 year old with sufficient maturity agrees to the referral and to the sharing of information

Whether or not an FGC takes place is a decision made by the family and a family cannot be made or forced to have a family group conference.

Once a referral to the local FGC service is made, the service allocates a co-ordinator to the family. The co-ordinator helps the family to prepare for and plan the meeting. The co-ordinator is different from the referrer, has no case holding or decision making responsibilities, and thus is independent. The co-ordinator will not influence the family to make a particular decision but will help them to think about the decisions that need to be made. Families should be offered the opportunity to request a co-ordinator who reflects their ethnicity, language or religion, and the family's request should be accommodated wherever possible.

Stage 2: Preparation

The co-ordinator organises the meeting in conjunction with the child/young person and parents, identifying who is in the family network for the child. This can include close friends.

The co-ordinator discusses with the child/young person how they can be helped to participate in the conference and whether they would like a supporter or advocate at the meeting. The co-ordinator meets with members of the family network, discusses worries or concerns, including how the FGC will be conducted, and encourages them to attend. Safety planning is an integral part of this role.

The co-ordinator liaises with the referrer and other relevant agencies to ensure family members have appropriate information about:

- the child welfare and/or protection concerns which need to be considered at the FGC. This includes identifying any 'bottom line' about what can, and, importantly, cannot be agreed as part of the plan for the child from the agency's perspective
- services that could help the child or family

The co-ordinator negotiates the date, time and venue for the conference, sends out invitations and makes the necessary practical arrangements.

Stage 3: The conference

The FGC follows three distinct stages.

a) Information giving

The co-ordinator makes sure that everyone is introduced and understands the purpose and process of the FGC. They agree how the meeting will be conducted including, if felt helpful by those present, explicit ground rules. The service providers give information to the family about:

- the reason for the conference;
- information they hold about the child and the family that will assist the family to make the plan;
- information about resources and support they are able to provide;
- any child welfare concerns that will affect what can be agreed in the plan (e.g. that the child must not have contact with a particular person); and
- what action will be taken if the family cannot make a plan or the plan is not agreed.

The child/young person and family members may also provide information, ask for clarification or raise questions.

b) Private family time

Agency staff and the co-ordinator are not present during this part of the conference. Family members have time to talk among themselves and come up with a plan that addresses concerns raised. They will identify resources and support which are required from agencies, as well as within the family, to make the plan work.

c) Plan and agreement

When the family has made their plan, the referrer and the co-ordinator meet with the family to discuss and agree the plan including resources. It is the referrer's responsibility to agree the plan of action on the day of the conference. The plan must be agreed, unless it puts the child at risk of significant harm. Any reasons for not accepting the plan must be made clear immediately and the family should be given the opportunity to respond to the concerns and change or add to the plan.

It is important to ensure that the children involved have a clear understanding of what is decided and that their views are understood. Resources are discussed and agreed and timescales and task responsibilities are clarified as well as contingency plans, monitoring arrangements and how to review the plan also need to be agreed.

The co-ordinator distributes the plan to family members involved and to the social worker and other information givers/relevant professionals.

Stage Four: Implementation of the Plan

It is essential that everybody involved implements their parts of the plan within agreed timescales and communicate and addresses any problems that arise.

Stage Five: Review of the plan

There should be a clear process for reviewing and monitoring the implementation of the plan. A review FGC or other meeting should be offered to the family so they can consider how the plan is working, and to make adjustments or change the plan if necessary.

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