

EDINBURGH'S CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING PILOT:

SUMMARY PAPER

HOLLY MACLEAN
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INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a summary of an evaluation of Edinburgh’s Contextual Safeguarding Pilot. The full version of this report can be accessed [here](#). The Pilot ran in the Northwest locality of Edinburgh, from July 2022 to June 2023. The pilot was funded through the Promise Partnership: A Good Childhood, with Action for Children the lead partner alongside the City of Edinburgh Council. The pilot sought to introduce Contextual Safeguarding to Northwest Edinburgh, focusing specifically on using this approach as a response to Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). This involved:

- Awareness raising inputs and the development of resources about Contextual Safeguarding and CCE
- Building relationships with new and existing partners
- Running safety mapping activities with children, young people, families and wider community members
- Supporting one school in the identification of places of safety and risk.

The Children and Young People’s Centre for Justice (CYCJ) ran a small-scale evaluation of the pilot. This involved interviews and focus groups with the pilot’s steering group, a survey of external partners who had received inputs from the pilot, and a documentary analysis of data collated throughout the pilot. This summary paper will provide a brief overview of what Contextual Safeguarding is, before presenting the key findings, recommendations and conclusions.

WHAT IS CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING?

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to extra-familial risk and harm (EFRH). This was developed by Carlene Firmin (2017) following concerns that traditional child protection processes were inadequate in responding to EFRH. These processes typically responded to EFRH in the same way as intra-familial risk and harm, tailoring assessments and interventions at the child and family level, despite harm occurring in contexts where parents had limited control or influence. Firmin argued a new approach was needed – a Contextual Safeguarding Approach. Through this, child protection processes could focus on the contexts in which harm is occurring, with the aim that these spaces are made safer for both the individual child and the wider population. Incorporating a Contextual Safeguarding Approach requires substantial system and cultural change, which should typically occur across four key domains and two levels, as specified by Firmin and Lloyd (2020, pp. 4-5):

1. Target

Child protection processes must target the contexts in which children and young people experience risk and harm

2. Legislative Framework

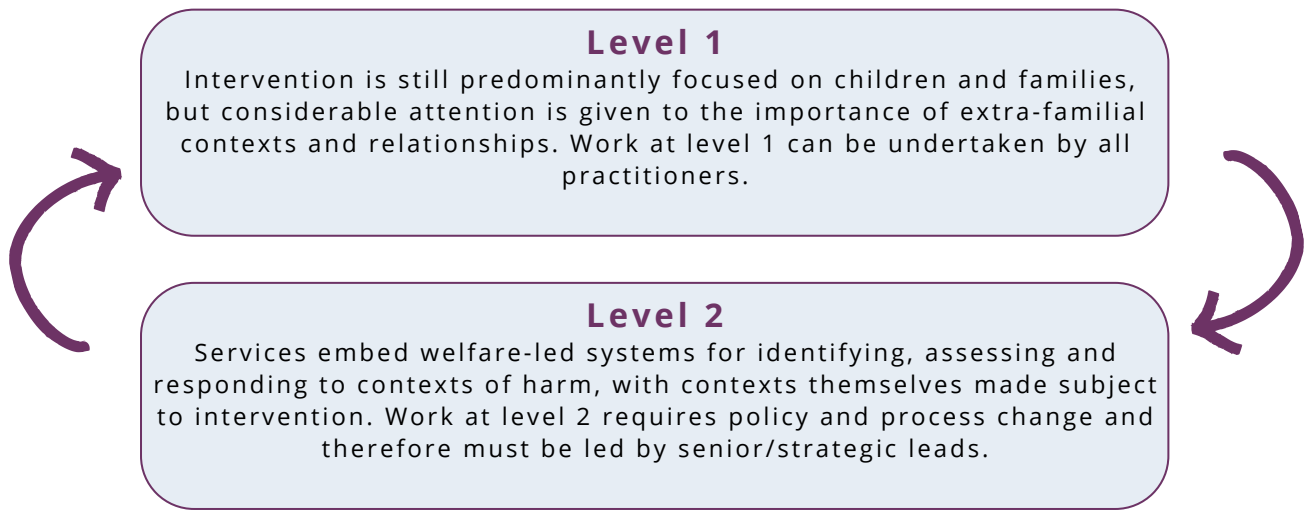
Whilst criminal justice responses might occur, the primary response should be through child protection

3. Partnerships

Social work must work in partnership with statutory agencies as well as a range of non-traditional partners

4. Outcomes

In addition to the protection of the individual child, outcomes also assess whether contexts have been made safer



What this might look like in practice

The Contextual Safeguarding approach has been piloted in a number of local authorities across the UK. In practice, this has looked like:

- Setting up referral processes for peer groups and locations
- Amending guidance on how services record peer and neighbourhood factors
- Conducting safety mapping activities with children, young people and families with their perspectives informing interventions
- Conducting school safety assessments
- Group work that involves working with a peer group, rather than an individual, when harm has been experienced or perpetuated in a group
- Establishing Contextual Safeguarding Conferences, or adapting Child Protection conferences to allow contextual risks to be addressed

Importantly, this work should be underpinned by five key principles, with implementation being: **collaborative; rights-based; ecological; strengths-based; evidence-informed.**

FINDINGS FROM OUR EVALUATION

Awareness raising

The pilot team sought to improve stakeholders' awareness and understanding of Contextual Safeguarding and CCE through providing short, one-off inputs to a wide range of organisations. They also developed and shared resources including introductory guides to Contextual Safeguarding, an FAQ document, a Language document, case studies and a toolkit. Attendees responded positively to this learning, with the pilot shining a light on the prevalence of CCE and the impact this was having for children and young people in the area. Information on the key warning signs of CCE was well received, with this increasing people's confidence in identifying and responding to CCE.

In line with a Contextual Safeguarding approach, the pilot inputs and resources framed CCE as a child protection issue, and emphasised that children who are being criminally exploited are not responsible for their abuse. This framing appears to have been particularly impactful,

encouraging practitioners to both think, speak and respond differently to children and young people experiencing criminal exploitation:

"[...] just really the reframing and having professionals working with young people use a different language and seeing the young people as a victim and not the perpetrator. And I think even hearing staff within your own environment talk about the young people as victims more. And definitely that's just purely down to the raising awareness."

(Interview/Focus Group Participant)

Partnerships

Steering group

A key strength of the pilot was the effective partnership work that took place, including via its steering group. The steering group was attended by strategic representatives from a wide range of groups with significant buy-in across organisations. Participants discussed how this partnership work has continued despite the end of the pilot:

"Having the police on it [the steering group], it was helpful because that really helped forge links. And I know from [our] point of view, our links now with the police in that area have never been stronger. And it's so much easier now just picking up the phone being like we've got concerns about so and so. Are you aware? Can you tell us anything?"

(Interview/Focus Group Participant)

Although the steering group was considered a key strength, it was also expressed that this could be quite "top heavy". It is important that future Contextual Safeguarding acknowledges this, and makes space for practitioners working on the ground to meet, reflect and share learning.

Education

One of the most consistent issues raised by participants was the lack of involvement from education. Whilst schools approached by the team showed a real interest in Contextual Safeguarding, a serious lack of resources and time, and a range of competing priorities meant that most did not engage with the pilot. This situation was worsened by the absence of a representative from education on the steering group, with the initial group member changing post and a replacement not found.

One school was, however, able to engage and the pilot team ran surveys with a small cohort of pupils to identify where in the school and surrounding areas children and young people felt (un)safe and why. This data was shared with senior leaders in the school, with discussions held about what the school could do to increase safety in their spaces.

Information sharing

The pilot largely demonstrated improved information sharing. The pilot's engagement with children's houses, third sector organisations and youth groups increased awareness about the risks facing children and young people, and created lines of communication for partners' to

share their concerns, however small, with the pilot team. This is critical, as many partners have oversight of extra-familial contexts alongside positive relationships with children and young people, and are subsequently likely to have access to information that statutory services do not. As one participant highlights:

“So I think there's a wider understanding of that kind of, no matter how small the information might be, it can still be really relevant, and I think that sometimes people miss that in terms of what we've created this new system or process or assessment, but actually that in itself sharing that information that then kind of creates the wider picture and has been great.”

(Interview/Focus Group Participant)

Despite this, though, several participants reflected on barriers to effective information sharing that impacted the pilot. In particular, there was frustration that information sharing typically went one-way, with police providing limited feedback on how information was being actioned. This has potential to create tension in the relationship between community partners and social work/police, if they are unable to see any change as a result of the concerns they are reporting.

Safety Mapping

Another key strand of work the pilot undertook was a safety mapping exercise of the Northwest area. This involved collecting information about where people felt (un)safe and why, with the team engaging with children and young people, families and local practitioners. Some children and young people were initially reluctant to engage in these activities, saying that they didn't want to be a 'grass', however the pilot team emphasised that they were only looking for information about spaces not people, and this largely put their minds at ease. Following data collection, the pilot team collated this information into a safety map of the Northwest area, using a RAG system to denote contexts of risk, neutrality/mixed, and safety. This map was then shared with the steering group, external partners and youth groups. This has since been used to inform context-focused interventions, most significantly with the youth groups operating in the area, who worked together to change their schedules so that a local park that had been identified as unsafe now had a regular presence of youth workers. This demonstrates the principles of a Contextual Safeguarding approach in action: with organisations collaborating to make the park itself safer, informed by what children and young people had told them. Moreover, this work was strength-based: focused on extending the protective qualities of the local youth groups, rather than trying to remove children and young people from the park altogether.

Several interview participants, however, felt the safety mapping activity was hindered by the police's inability to share information about where crime and/or anti-social behaviour was known to be occurring. There was a sense that because the pilot team had only collected people's subjective perspectives, rather than 'facts' from police about where crime was 'actually' occurring, they could not take the results of the safety mapping further. Whilst information from police is undoubtedly useful, it is well documented that this kind of 'official' information only shows us a proportion of crime or harm occurring in an area (Biderman &

Reiss, 1967; Buil-Gil, Medina, & Shlomo, 2020). Thus, insights gleaned from children, young people, families and community members about what is happening in these spaces should be considered just as vital when it comes to designing and prioritising interventions that seek to make the local area safer.

Policy and Process Change

A key strand of work initially planned for the pilot was to set up procedures for partners who have identified EFRH to have joint, multi-agency responses, and implement a process for the recording of groups and places in risk assessments and meetings. These ambitions have, however, remained largely unrealised. As yet, there have been no changes to referral or recording processes, although the pilot team is continuing to work on this. The pilot team have developed and disseminated a Contextual Safeguarding toolkit for practitioners to use for Risk Assessments where EFRH has been identified, however this has not been formalised in local guidance or policy.

That the aims around changing policy and process were not achieved by the end of the pilot was not the result of a lack of commitment from the pilot team or wider steering group. Instead, it could be argued that the pilot was overly ambitious in terms of what it initially set out to achieve within the very small timeframe it had. Given the lack of awareness around Contextual Safeguarding in the Northwest and wider Edinburgh area, the pilot was essentially starting from scratch, with only two pilot workers who were both part-time. In this context, a year is too brief to design and implement system, policy and process change when the team were first having to scope what was needed, through their awareness raising work, relationship building and safety mapping exercises.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This evaluation has identified a number of key strengths within the Edinburgh Contextual Safeguarding pilot, along with areas in need of further development. Importantly, 'level two' work has not started, with no official change to system processes for the referral, assessment or response to CCE. The pilot has, however, created ripe conditions for this work to be embedded going forward.

The impact of the awareness raising activities has been important in shaping individual practice at 'level one'. There were clear examples of the pilot raising the profile of CCE and increasing professionals' confidence in identifying and responding to it, along with shifting the narrative in terms of how children and young people being criminally exploited are discussed. The excellent partnership work conducted by the pilot team and wider steering group has also established lines of communication that have facilitated the sharing of concerns amongst partners. One of the most impactful pieces of work undertaken by the pilot team was the safety mapping activity. This demonstrated excellent engagement with children, young people, and families, who shared vital insights into issues in the local area, with these findings then actioned by youth groups who worked to make a local park safer.

Cutting across the main areas of work was the challenge of incorporating a Contextual Safeguarding approach with very little resource. The pilot team showed a real passion for bringing Contextual Safeguarding to the Northwest, but timeframes meant they had to prioritise awareness raising and relationship building work before policy and process change could be attempted. The pilot has, however, generated a significant amount of momentum for Contextual Safeguarding. Should the partnership seek to roll this out further, the evaluation makes the following five recommendations, informed by the findings within this report:

- 1.** Prioritise changing policy and process to formally embed a Contextual Safeguarding approach in terms of the referral, assessment and response to CCE and/or other EFRH.
- 2.** Incorporate children, young people and families as key partners in a Contextual Safeguarding approach.
- 3.** Extend the excellent relationship building work of the pilot to other community partners and guardians, including local transport providers and business owners.
- 4.** The involvement of Education in any future attempts to incorporate a Contextual Safeguarding approach is essential
- 5.** Any future work seeking to roll out a Contextual Safeguarding approach in Edinburgh needs to think critically about the value and risk of focusing on CCE rather than encompassing all forms of EFRH. To undertake the latter, significant resource is required to embed this at 'level one' and 'level two' across the city.

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