

A guide to using resources from the Contextual Safeguarding Network

October 2024

The Contextual Safeguarding Network

About this guide

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families (for example child sexual or criminal exploitation, abuse and violence between peers). Since its inclusion in Working Together to Safeguard Children in 2018, and in National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland in 2021, there has been significant strategic and operational uptake of the approach in England, Wales and Scotland.

In the Contextual Safeguarding Research Programme, we have been supporting local authority children's services, schools and voluntary organisations to adopt Contextual Safeguarding to make changes to their systems and practice and build safety with and around young people in their communities.

We have documented this journey on our Contextual Safeguarding [website](#) – a digital hub for professionals to access and adopt free practice resources developed through our action research work. This guide signposts to key resources you can draw on through the different stages of the child protection process. Click the link to freely access each resource.

About Contextual Safeguarding

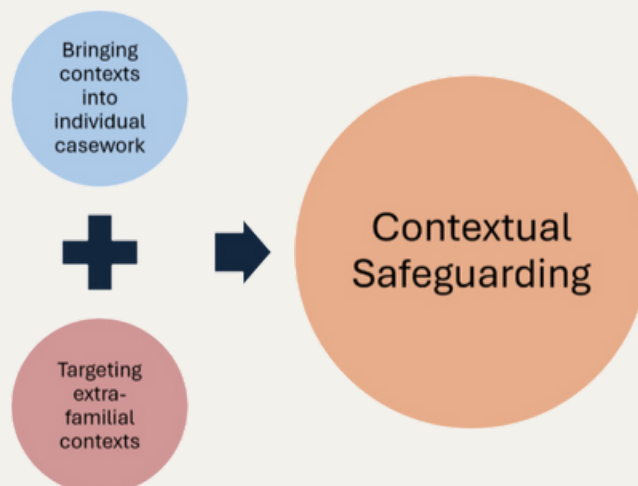
Before you start it's important that you understand the Contextual Safeguarding framework and the values that underpin it.

We recommend you have a look at the [About Us](#) section on our website which links to key videos and a briefing for an overview of Contextual Safeguarding from theory to practice.

Contextual Safeguarding can be implemented at two levels:

At level 1 professionals and organisations draw extra-familial contexts into their direct work with children and families.

At level 2 professionals and broader organisations, develop practices, systems and structures for identifying, assessing and intervening with contexts and groups in which young people are at risk of significant harm. This is a radical shift in practice, requiring child protection professionals to not only acknowledge the relationship of contexts to individuals but actively take steps to change those contexts.



Where to start

Reviewing your system

If you're starting from scratch and unsure about how your service is responding to extra-familial harm, we suggest that you review your system. This is a chance to pause and reflect on the extent to which your system – and your wider safeguarding partnership – respond to extra-familial harm by creating safety in the contexts and relationships where such harm occurs.

This [toolkit](#) guides you through this process.

It's a good idea to think about how you can engage young people from the onset (see resources below).

One way of reviewing your system is to review cases to find out particular questions about what happens in your system. These [resources](#) explain how to use case reviews to understand threshold decisions for cases of extra-familial harm.

Reviewing thresholds

Child protection systems have been designed to intervene when parents/carers pose a risk of harm, or don't have the capacity to safeguard children. This makes the issue of thresholds particularly challenging when referrals feature protective parents but a child is at risk of significant harm in an extra-familial setting. The resources below can help you to review your thresholds to respond to extra-familial harm.

Here is an [example threshold document](#)

A [podcast](#) on revising a child and family threshold document to consider extra-familial harm and developing a new threshold document relating specifically to contexts

A [podcast](#) on review policies for thresholds and allocation of referrals

Engaging young people in systems change

To respond effectively when young people experience harm, we need to take into account the reality of their lives. This means listening to young people about how they feel in different contexts (for example at home, with friends, and at school). This [toolkit](#) provides guidance on engaging with young people in various ways, including how to start conversations with young people about safeguarding systems.

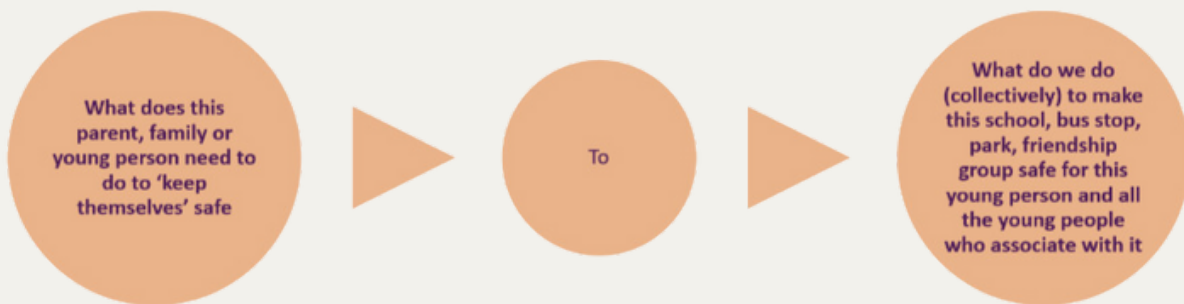
Assessments

How we understand the 'problem'

Contextual Safeguarding is about shifting how we interpret the cause of a problem. It's about seeing extra-familial harm as less due to the individual choices that young people make and parenting received, and more as linked to the environment in which harm happens. To do this we focus less on the behaviour of young people and parents and more on the behaviour of adults in partnership with young people and parents.

The Contextual Safeguarding framework support practitioners to make this shift and reframe the questions we ask when assessing a young person or a context affected by extra-familial harm.

We want to go from asking:



To do this, we need to assess what's going on for the individual in their contexts (Level 1) and by scoping/assessing the context itself (Level 2)

Contextual assessments focus on three key aspects:

1. Young people's views and experiences of safety and harm
2. Parental and community guardianship in the context
3. Resources, partner information, structural and environmental factors

This will help build a picture of the social conditions of harm.

You therefore need to hear *from*:

1. Young people
2. Guardians: parent/carers, partners, professionals, residents, businesses
3. Wider environment: policy, resources, structure, environment, systems

This will help you build a view of :

- The interplay of contextual dynamics causing harm
- The possibilities for strengthening safety

Then you will know what needs to be targeted and how. This takes time and skill. These are some key resources to support you do this.

Level 1

These tools can help you bring a contextual lens to casework work with young people and families:

- [Considering contextual factors as part of individual assessments](#)
- [Safety mapping tool](#) and [Safety mapping webinar](#) to help you develop safety plans with young people
- [Context weighting tool](#) to help you prioritise which context your intervention should focus on

Level 2

Peers

The [Peers](#) section of our Scale-Up [toolkit](#) has many resources for working with peers. This [guidance](#) is a good play to start. It defines peer groups and outlines key things to consider in peer assessments to ensure they are aligned with the values of Contextual Safeguarding. This includes key considerations around peer mapping.

You can also watch these webinars:

- [Assessing peer relationships](#)
- [Peer relationships and mapping](#)

A note on peer mapping:

Peer mapping is one approach to organising information about relationships to support assessments and should be used to inform safety plans for the young people you are worried about. It should not be used in isolation of this, solely as an information sharing tool. Sharing information about young people without a robust plan behind can raise ethical concerns and even lead to harmful practice. We consulted young people about peer mapping and they shared their concerns and key things they wanted professionals to consider - which are outlined in the guidance.



Locations

The [Locations](#) section of the Scale-Up toolkit supports location assessments. Start with this [guidance](#) to make sure that you take an ethical and welfare approach. It helps you to think about creating safety (rather than focusing on surveillance/disruption) and engaging partners to create guardianship. It lists some tools to help you engage with young people and partners such as:

- [Safety mapping](#)
- [Survey with young people](#)
- Surveys with [residents](#) and [businesses](#)

You can also watch this short [video](#) about taking a welfare approach to location assessments.

Schools

The [Schools](#) section of the Scale-Up toolkit has resources for addressing harm that might be happening in a school or between students outside of school. This [briefing](#) is a good place to start if you are considering developing contextual approaches with and in/around schools.

There is also a whole section about conducting [school assessments](#).

Planning

The goal of our work

It's important to think early on about what needs to change to increase safety with and around young people. This will help you ensure that the plan you develop clearly matches your goals (and that you do not draw on interventions just because they are available).

These resources can be used alongside resources to support multi-agency partnerships listed in the following section.

Level 1

[Risk Outside of the Home planning meetings](#): This section of the website also has lots of resources for those who play a role in designing, chairing or participating in safeguarding planning. Collectively, they outline steps to take when developing plans for young people affected by extra-familial harm and matters to consider during and after planning meetings. You could try some to support your own meetings, for example:

- You could look at the exemplar safety plan and have a go at developing your own
- You could use the context weighting tool to help you develop a plan. This [video](#) explains how the tool can be used in planning meetings.

The Securing Safety toolkit has [resources](#) to support the planning for relocations in cases for extra-familial harm with key things to consider for young people, parent/carers and professionals.

Level 2

Context Conferences: Here you will find tools and guidance for conducting 'Context Conferences' - meetings that bring together partners to make a safeguarding plan around a specific context.

Supporting multi-agency work

We have a number of resources to support multi-agency partnership. This is often challenging because Contextual Safeguarding requires partners to work together in new ways.

- Multi-agency panels resources and guidance: These resources cover key things to consider when developing multi-agency panels to address extra-familial harm, including types of panels, how to include young people and key findings from our research with panels.
- Effective chairing and collaborations: These resources for chairs can be used in training and support chairs before/during meetings. For example, this set of key questions for chairs.
- Workshop: Doing Contextual Safeguarding with partnerships: Our research shows that while partnerships have been able to turn their focus to harm outside the home, they have found it much harder to change contexts for young people. We have seen that instead of changing contexts, the focus of safeguarding work is often on changing the behaviour of young people. This workshop, that you can run yourself, is designed to help local safeguarding partnerships carve out the time they need to reflect on how they work together and think about how they can develop a shared vision around making changes to contexts, rather than to the behaviour of young people.
- The conditions for a welfare response: This webinar shares a framework developed as part of our research to help practitioners prioritise the needs of children who are involved in 'crimes' like violence and criminal exploitation. It shares language and examples of what a welfare response to harm in communities might include.
- Workshops: Bringing young people's voices in meetings: These two workshops that people can run themselves - one for professionals and one for young people - help to reflect on how young people are discussed in multi-agency meetings and how professionals can bring their voices into these spaces.

Response

Matching responses to our identified goals

The responses we deliver need to be aligned to the goals we've set and need to make sense i.e. not just because they are available. When the responses we need don't match what is available, this is a system problem and should be acknowledged, systematically recorded and escalated to those who commission services.

Remember your assessment framework when framing responses – do they:

1. meet young people's needs
2. build capacity of guardians
3. change environmental factors (community/neighbourhood/policy)

- Our [Responses and Interventions Catalogue](#) contains over 30 entries. Each one is an example of a Contextual Safeguarding practice response that has been tested by partners involved in developing Contextual Safeguarding work.
- This short [video](#) explains what community guardians are.
- Some areas are also developing [community group conferences](#) – an approach that combines the Family Group Conference method with Contextual Safeguarding.
- These [case studies](#) share examples of Contextual Safeguarding in practice.

Outcomes

Measuring success

We worked with practitioners to create a new approach to measuring contextual change. This led to a new [framework and guide](#) that support this process.

When we track changes to the context, we need to think carefully about the 'data' we're drawing on to tell us if we've achieved our goals. It can be tempting to use police data (i.e. rate of arrests) or health data (A&E admissions) as a way of measuring contextual change – but this data isn't collected for welfare purposes and/or doesn't tell us about the contextual issues. As with familial harm, we need social care framed, relational, child-centered ways of knowing if safety has been achieved, based on the specific reasons that we intervened. The framework and guide help you to do this.