



THE CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING DEBATE

Local authority leaders discussed how they are using contextual safeguarding approaches to improve young people's safety outside the home, at a *CYP Now* debate in partnership with Servelec. By *Charlotte Goddard*

Whether it is involvement in county lines drug networks, sexual exploitation, radicalisation, bullying or abuse, young people are often vulnerable to harm coming from outside their own home and family. The child protection system and its procedures however tend to focus on individual young people and their families rather than the public environments where vulnerabilities can be exploited.

To tackle this problem, Dr Carlene Firmin MBE, principal research fellow at the University of Bedfordshire, began to develop work in 2013 on safeguarding young people in different social contexts outside the home. It meant focusing on a whole-system approach to identify and mitigate risks in a young person's wider environment. The university is working with 10

sites, including around 5,000 practitioners, to test approaches to contextual safeguarding.

The hunger for such an approach is evident. Firmin launched the Contextual Safeguarding Network bringing together practitioners to share their learning, aiming for 100 members. Membership of the network currently stands at 5,500. Last year, the government included contextual safeguarding in its updated statutory guidance on inter-agency working, *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, highlighting the need to consider and address extra-familial threats when assessing children.

On 24 September, *CYP Now* hosted a debate with social work and safeguarding leads in councils that have already made strides in adopting a contextual safeguarding approach. The debate took place with Servelec, a provider of digital care software across social care, youth services, education and health. Participants discussed learnings, opportunities and challenges around assessment, information

sharing and wider partnerships – and the longer-term implications for child protection.

COMMUNITY INTERVENTIONS

Participants shared some of the ways in which they have worked with community partners to deliver interventions, including the retail sector. “We identified issues with a number of McDonald's in the city,” said Anna Gianfrancesco, head of safeguarding and performance at Brighton & Hove Council. “We did some training with the staff around managing the space differently. We also identified a group of young people we thought were being sexually exploited, who were going into the Apple shop and using their devices for free to send messages.” Gianfrancesco's team raised awareness with the Apple shop employees without identifying who the young people were.

Angela Killalea, principal social worker at the London Borough of Sutton, underlined the importance of working with shopping centres



and phone shops, while Wiltshire service manager Andrea Brazier said her team had gone as far as delivering training on adolescent brain development and antisocial behaviour to leisure centres and libraries. “There was a complete change in the way librarians would speak to young people,” she said.

Firmin said it was indeed crucial to focus on the positive rather than the negative: “What you’re trying to do is create environments that welcome and are protective of young people, and therefore are hostile to abuse.”

“Community partnerships are crucial for sustainability”, agreed Melissa Ireland, contextual safeguarding manager at the London borough of Merton. She said: “From a social care perspective, people go in, assess, intervene, and exit. But when you exit, you need to be assured that work will continue, and you can’t do that without the support of the community.”

LEADERSHIP

There was consensus that while partnership working can have a transformative impact, there are plenty of issues to resolve. “I think we’ve got some way to go yet in terms of working out whose job is what, and how you engage the wider partnership in taking responsibility for leading on some of that,” said Sarah Wright, director of children and families at the London borough of Hackney. “There is quite a debate still going on about what the social work task is, and what someone else’s task is in this area.”

Damian Rees, principal officer, safeguarding and quality assurance at Swansea Council, said while agencies could agree on the ethos, establishing ownership of contextual safeguarding as an approach could be tricky.

Merton’s Ireland pointed out successful contextual safeguarding requires buy-in from adult services, as adults often use the same spaces as young people. “I need an adult community development worker who will be coming out with me and impacting on the adults in that space,” she said. “I think that’s where it adds a layer of complication, because we can do the assessments, but interventions are not just specific to that peer group.” Gianfrancesco said Brighton & Hove had addressed this issue by introducing one exploitation strategy for the city, covering adults and children.

TRAINING

However, social work training does not cover the skills needed for contextual safeguarding. Ireland noted: “There is definitely a space for further embedding education around community engagement and group work.”

Louise Toye, practice lead at Wigan Council, said training on contextual safeguarding needs to be thorough and timely. “There are pockets of teams and managers who are really excited and want it,” she said. “They hear the word and they think they understand it, but we have to be really clear about what it means. When we are talking about training it should be a journey, it shouldn’t just be getting everyone excited without also asking what does that mean, what is the impact, who is at the table?”

YOUTH WORK AND HOUSING

All agreed that youth workers play a key role in contextual safeguarding. While the pendulum has swung away from detached youth work in recent years, towards one-to-one case work, contextual safeguarding relies on community-

AROUND THE TABLE

1. **Hayley Bodiam**, Practice Development Lead, Kent
2. **Andrea Brazier**, Service Manager, Wiltshire
3. **Ravi Chandiramani** (chair), Publisher, Children & Young People Now
4. **Anne Farmer**, Service Manager, Bristol
5. **Dr Carlene Firmin MBE**, Principal Research Fellow, University of Bedfordshire
6. **Anna Gianfrancesco**, Head of Safeguarding and Performance, Brighton & Hove Council
7. **Melissa Ireland**, Contextual Safeguarding Manager, Merton
8. **Angela Killalea**, Principal Social Worker, Sutton
9. **Nikki Redmond**, Children’s Strategy Lead, Servelec
10. **Damian Rees**, Principal Officer, Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, Swansea
11. **Louise Toye**, Advanced Practitioner, Wigan
12. **Sarah Wright**, Director of Children & Families, Hackney

based, detached youth workers. Firmin revealed: “When we’ve had conversations with local authorities starting to embark on contextual safeguarding, a number of them have stressed that they have started to reinvest in detached youth work. They felt that it’s not possible to do contextual safeguarding if they didn’t have that in the bag.”



Gianfrancesco said that with the decimation of youth services across the UK, it is often housing that is commissioning and funding youth work. “You can’t go into a space and not have housing as one of your key partners, purely for the sustainability,” agreed Ireland. “They know the young people and where they’re going, what alleyways they go down. If you’re a social worker looking through an assessment lens and you’re getting stuck on interventions, and how to support shifting a physical space, housing teams are so crucial in that, especially when the conversation so regularly comes back to a resource issue.”

INFORMATION SHARING

Taking a contextual safeguarding approach can generate a lot of information. Having good analytical capacity is therefore crucial, said Hackney’s Wright: “You need people who understand how you pull that information together, and how you build that into helpful pictures.” Hackney uses Servelec’s Mosaic case management system.

The process of information sharing, bound as it is by GDPR requirements, can be difficult even among statutory partners. When it has to embrace wider members of the community as well, there are a number of challenges. Participants recognised this, but felt the kind of information being shared was not necessarily personal. “We could be putting up far more information about positive places where our young people are welcomed and encouraged,” urged Firmin. “It’s very much sharing information about context, not about children.”

Anne Farmer, service manager at Bristol Council, suggested police in particular often have concerns about information sharing. “In Bristol, we’ve moved away from being quite siloed, the police being quite anxious about sharing information, and moving more towards seeing that if this is going to work, then you have to move towards a much more collaborative approach.”

Wright shared experience of the benefits from information sharing. “We had a very serious instance of youth violence but because we had done a lot of peer network mapping we knew immediately who the other young people were who might also now be at increased risk,” she said. “We were able to get social workers and

youth workers to bring families together for family meetings in a way that five years ago, we wouldn’t have been able to.” Servelec is enabling integration of information held by social care and youth services.

Child protection practice typically reacts to harm arising from a child’s environment by removing the child rather than trying to change the environment, said Firmin. However, this approach is often undertaken despite social workers’ knowledge that it will not be effective. “When it comes to extra-familial harm we see a lot of movement of children, and that is often driven by fear and anxiety – ‘this child is so vulnerable here, I just need to get them as far away as possible’ – even though the social worker knows they are going to go missing from that placement and come back, because it just feels too risky to hold them where they are.” Contextual safeguarding, she said, requires senior leadership and a system that is willing to hold risk and support practitioners to make those decisions.

SCHOOLS

Participants agreed that schools had a key role to play in contextual safeguarding. “We thought we’d get a lot of resistance from schools, but actually they are overwhelmingly positive about the approach,” stated Firmin. She said schools liked the fact that a contextual safeguarding approach would allow them to make referrals about out-of-school environments that were causing them concern. “Schools often feel if they stick their hand up and say, ‘we’ve got a problem’ then the press will jump on it,” said Gianfrancesco. “Whereas, because this is around contextual safeguarding within the context of young people’s lives, they’re working as part of a systemic response to issues around young people, so they’re not being singled out.”

Wiltshire’s Brazier described an incident where a school noticed two pupils who would not usually have had much money carrying designer bags. As a result of sharing that information the girls were identified as being exploited, and the perpetrator was prosecuted. Mapping work with schools has also resulted in the identification of county lines drug networks, she said.

Firmin pointed out that schools hold a huge amount of information about the peer dynamics

between young people that can help social workers when it comes to assessments and interventions. Swansea’s Rees said that information gathered through a contextual safeguarding mapping approach could also help schools. “We have had the flipside where the school thought they understood the dynamics, but were surprised that a set of young people were also associated with another group that they don’t hang around with in school at all,” he said. “Out in the community there were many more links that they just were not aware of, which could change the way they were thinking about them.”

LEGISLATION

Disagreement between partners when it comes to safeguarding risks is still an issue, said Firmin. “Social workers say to me: ‘The assessment I have done with this child concludes the largest risk this child faces is exclusion, and if they are excluded, then risk is going to escalate quite rapidly,’” she explained. “Then the school excludes against the advice of the social worker.”

Firmin asked where the recourse is in such a situation: “If parents go against the advice of an assessment, and it compromises the welfare of a child, there is an escalation. When the risk sits in the action of a partner, and not in a parent, there should be a further conversation to be had. That’s where this broadening of the capacity to safeguard becomes really complicated, and it isn’t provided for at the moment, in policy framework or in legislation.”

Firmin hopes the work her team is doing will uncover existing legislation which could be “used as a stick if the carrot doesn’t work”, and also identify where new legislation is needed. As there is no consistent guidance on the law around peer assessment and peer mapping, for example, Hackney took legal advice. “It was very helpful to have that clarity,” said Wright. “But I think formalised and updated national guidance would be helpful. Historically, there’s been a sense of responsibility sitting across various different departments, and never quite seeing one taking the lead on it.”

Rees, however, warned against a rush to issue practice guidance. “There’s that worry that in this eagerness to get things out, you actually miss things, and then you end up changing



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Dr Carlene Firmin MBE, Principal Research Fellow, University of Bedfordshire

things very quickly after you’ve just introduced something,” he said. Firmin indeed noted that the inclusion of contextual safeguarding in *Working Together to Safeguard Children* had led to some issues. “It sits above a paragraph on extra-familial harm. What that has meant is some areas think they’re doing contextual safeguarding if they respond to extra-familial harm, even its one-to-one work with children and families affected by sexual exploitation, but that is not contextual safeguarding,” she said. “The other issue is that the whole section sits in assessment, as if contextual safeguarding is just about assessments.”

DIGITAL SAFEGUARDING

When it comes to e-safety, Hayley Bodiam, practice development lead at Kent County Council, described why safeguarding young people online is a difficult issue. “It is really hard for adults to understand what it is like to be an adolescent today, because when we were adolescents the world was different,” she said. “We are so far behind understanding what the trends are, and how they can make networks, and link to each other.”

Rees suggested practitioners think of the benefits associated with online as well as the negatives. “When we talk about online, immediately most people think there’s something negative associated with that, rather than all of the very beneficial things which it also brings for lots and lots of young people,” he said. Brazier agreed: “There’s all these opportunities online that we could strengthen, but too often what we do is just take away the device.”

Firmin pointed out that for most young people the digital space and the real world are interlinked. “We see it as this other world that we don’t really know how to engage with,” she said. “But while there will be occasions when all of the harm is online, in 90 per cent of cases with an online element, the young people also knew each other in person. All the education on e-safety has the message ‘you don’t know who these people are’ and it was just going over their heads because they did know who those people were.”

Rees questioned whether assessments should look in more depth at young people’s social media use. “We are not that great at talking to young people about who they see on a face-to-

face basis,” he said. “So the idea that we’re somehow going to talk to them about who they speak to online and what they do online – I’m not sure that’s part of the day-to-day toolkit most workers that are going out and doing this have really got.”

IT SYSTEMS

The digital space nonetheless has a key role to play in contextual safeguarding, particularly when it comes to mapping the connections between a young person’s peer groups, something Hackney has done a lot of work on. “Now when I go into a file, I can see if there is a piece of recording about a young person being involved in an incident with another young person,” Wright explained.

In terms of IT’s role in contextual safeguarding, Wigan’s Toye said systems needed to be visual and interactive, and flexible enough to be used by practitioners and the community. Servelec has developed “ecomap” functionality, which is embedded in its Mosaic system and allows practitioners to work with young people and the wider community to map out the contexts in which they operate. Bodiam thought an ability to overlay different types of information would be valuable: “It would be really good if I can have an understanding of where it is that our young people feel safe, and is that different from our perception of where safety is in Kent?” Participants also thought it would be helpful if young people could feed their own data into the system.

“We need something where we can record a place and associate people to places,” said Rees. “I also think a manager needs the same database to do something different to what the social worker does and as a senior manager I need it to do something different again. I would like to see something that supports practice rather than just supports data analysis – there has been an emphasis in the past on things that look good in terms of the data you get back out.”

Servelec is developing a range of tools and assessments to support contextual safeguarding in collaboration with the local authorities it works with, and the University of Bedfordshire. These include the Peer Group Assessment process, to be piloted by the Network in April 2020, and the “All Around Me” contextual mapping tool using its Ecomap functionality.

NEXT STEPS

Participants discussed the challenges they are currently facing, with resources high on the list. “Local authorities still have to make significant savings over the next few years – trying to balance that with business as usual with this new work will be our biggest challenge,” said Sutton’s Killalea.

Under contextual safeguarding, child protection conference chairs need to consider how they acknowledge, and where appropriate address, extra-familial factors that are impacting a parent’s ability to be protective. Rees and Gianfrancesco discussed the inevitable impact of contextual safeguarding on child protection policies and processes, how that is broadening the range of people involved, and affecting decisions over when child protection conferences are appropriate and when they are not. Rees said: “The challenge is taking the partner agencies and our own workforce on this journey, so we have a shared understanding of what we mean by contextual safeguarding, and what they apply it to.”

Kent’s Bodiam agreed. “How you bring everyone on the journey is the greatest challenge, getting partners and communities to be at the same level of knowledge, understanding and enthusiasm, and bringing them with you including staff going through restructure and realignments.”

On the wider contextual safeguarding movement, Firmin is continuing to work with the 10 test sites, despite pressure to widen her focus. “We hope to get some clarity by 2022 as to what looks different when you adopt a contextual safeguarding approach – how much of that is replicated across any area that tests it, and how much is unique to a locality,” she said. “One of the challenges we encounter is that it pulls apart and puts back together the role of a social worker. I don’t think we are quite clear what we expect of social workers as opposed to everyone else from this, and I hope the testing will help us articulate that a bit better.” ■

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