



# Signs of Safety and Contextual Safeguarding

---

Key Messages for Practice

Carlene Firmin, Tracey Hill, Wendy Hill, Andrew Turnell, Penelope Turnell and Joanne Walker

February 2021

## Introduction

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

In this briefing document we explore the relationship between Contextual Safeguarding and Signs of Safety – and ways that these two approaches can work together when safeguarding young people affected by extra-familial harm, as well as assessing and intervening with extra-familial contexts and groups.

The briefing is divided into three sections. In section one we summarise the two approaches. In the second section we reflect on what the two approaches share and where they may diverge. In the final section we present how they could work together by use of two case studies – one focused on a young person, and another on contexts – to make recommendations for how to explore this potential in the future.

## Signs of Safety: A Summary

The Signs of Safety practice approach created by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards (Turnell and Edwards, 1999) sought to address the default paternalism or colonisation of child protection systems where professionals believe they know what is wrong and what must be done to solve the problems. The abuse and neglect of children is a serious matter and for professional responses to have the best chance of success they need to fully involve the children, parents and everyone with natural connections to the child in analysing and addressing the problems.

If children are to stay in and be reunited with the families and communities where they belong professionals and families need to think through the problems and solutions together. Most assessment protocols are professional enterprises designed for professional audiences and families and children are often left confused and alienated. The Signs of Safety assessment process is designed to bring professionals and families together using a straightforward assessment and planning protocol focused on four core questions:

- What are we worried about?
- What's working well?
- What needs to happen?
- Where would you rate things for the child on a scale of 0 to 10 where ten means the child is safe and professionals can close the case and 0 means the situation is dangerous for the child and they very likely need to live away from their parents until things change?

### Signs of Safety Assessment and Planning Framework

What are we worried about?	What's working well?	What needs to happen?

On a scale of 0–10 where ten means everyone knows the children are safe enough for the child protection authorities to close the case and zero means things are so bad for the children that they can't live at home, where do we rate this situation?  
Locate different people's judgements spatially on the two-way arrow.

0 ←————→ 10

Figure 1 Signs of Safety Assessment and Planning Framework

The professional's role is to bring forward their concerns without minimising the seriousness, in a plain language the family can understand, and rather than jump to answers lead by asking questions to elicit detailed answers from a family and their community to those four questions. To energise the partnership with a family it is vital that professionals find eyes to see, ears to hear and the voice to honour everything that has and is going well around the child in their family and community.

This shared assessment process is the foundation to build a professional and family agreed safety plan and a clear trajectory to achieve it. Within the Signs of Safety approach, safety is defined as actions that will be taken by adults and sometimes the young person themselves to ensure the child is safe and cared for when the danger is present. Signs of Safety offers a suite of practical tools and practice methods to support this behaviourally detailed safety building work.

In summary the purpose of Signs of Safety is:

*'To enable professionals to undertake all child protection practice with a rigorous focus on child safety by equipping agencies to establish their practice, policy, procedures and organisation so that professionals can do everything humanly possible to put the parents, children and everyone naturally connected to the children at the centre of the assessment, decision-making and planning and give them every opportunity to come up with and apply their ideas before the professionals offer or impose theirs. Full family and network involvement is always pursued whether the child lives permanently with or outside their biological family so that everything is done to enable the child to sustain lifelong connection with their family, culture and community of origin throughout all child protection involvement'* (Elia, 2020)

## Contextual Safeguarding: A Summary

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families<sup>1</sup>. The approach has been in development in the UK since 2011 following a three-year review of practice responses to cases of peer-to-peer abuse (Firmin, 2017). The Contextual Safeguarding Framework (Firmin et al. 2016), which provides a conceptual, strategic and operational framework for designing the approach in local areas, is made up of four 'domains'. As detailed in Figure 2, a Contextual Safeguarding System:

- **Targets** the contexts (and social conditions) associated with abuse (Domain 1)
- **Uses a child protection** as its principal **legislative framework** to develop responses to extra-familial harm rather than those underpinning community safety or criminal justice (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 responses – and the change created in public, education and peer settings, as well as for individual children and families (Domain 4).

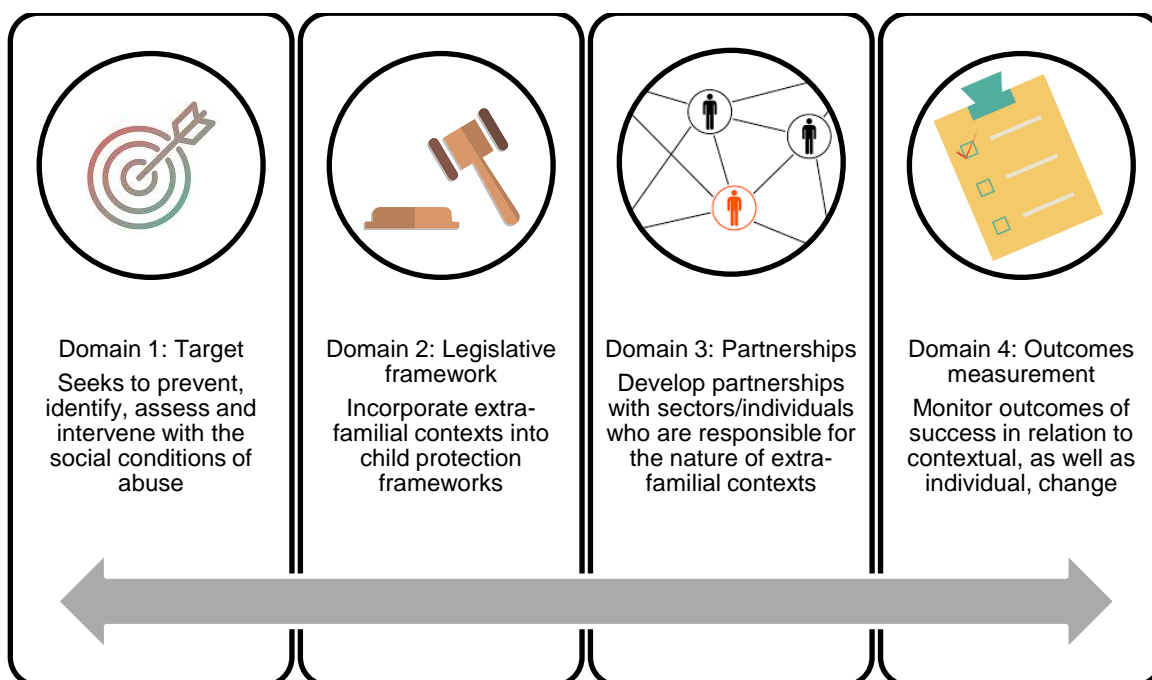


Figure 2 Contextual Safeguarding Framework

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 Safeguarding Framework – understanding these is integral to ensuring the framework's use stays true to the intention behind its design. The need to assert these values emerged through testing and were

<sup>1</sup> Such as sexual or criminal exploitation and radicalisation (instigated by peers or adults unconnected to a young person's family); teenage relationship abuse or 'dating' violence; weapon-enabled violence and other forms of physical harm between peers, and suicide or suicidal ideation associated to experiences of bullying or social isolation during adolescence

published in 2020 (Firmin, 2020; Firmin and Lloyd, 2020; Wroe, 2020). Contextual Safeguarding is:

- **Collaborative:** Is 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:** Grounded 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.

The Contextual Safeguarding framework is built upon an international evidence base that demonstrates how extra-familial harm is informed by norms in peer group, school and neighbourhood/community contexts (Barter, et al., 2009; Sidebotham, et al., 2016; Smallbone, et al., 2013). More specifically that when young people come to harm in extra-familial contexts or relationships, safeguarding responses in the UK had assessed and intervened with young people and their families rather than the peer group, school and community contexts where they had come to harm – contexts in which risks persisted (Firmin, 2017). By applying the Contextual Safeguarding framework and set of values, practitioners address this shortfall by engaging in activities which: recognise the *interplay* between contexts to which young person is associated, and assess the *weight of influence* these different contexts have on young people's safety - illustrated in Figure 3 (Firmin, 2020).

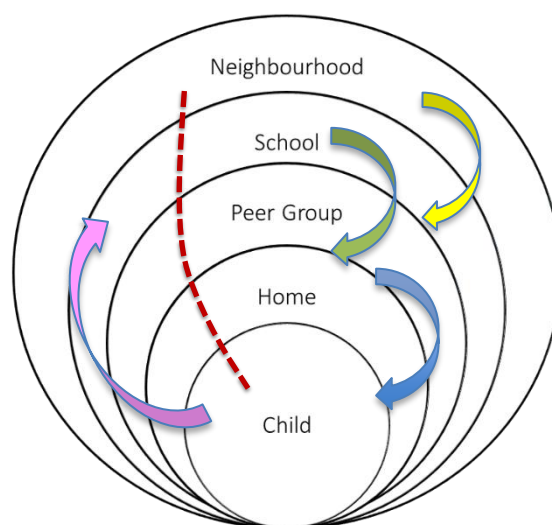


Figure 3 An example of context interplay in cases of extra-familial harm

In local child protection systems Contextual Safeguarding is implemented at two levels (Firmin, 2020). At Level 1 practitioners increase consideration of extra-familial contexts in their direct work with children and families. For example, they may foreground the influence of peer relationships when assessing a young person's needs. At Level 2, local areas have created systems for referring, assessing and providing support to contexts themselves. For example, they may accept a referral for a whole friendship group affected by street-based violence, assess their needs as a group and develop a plan to support them collectively.

## What these approaches share in common

Both approaches are complementary in that they:

1. think about the problem of abuse and its resolution systemically and contextually
2. build their practice responses based on explicit guiding principles

3. are participatory, and focused on building safety for young people and families by helping people think their way through the issues they are facing
4. are strengths-based drawing on and paying careful attention to what is already working for people in addressing problems no matter how small
5. draw upon naturally connected networks and collaboration between professionals, children and young people, families, friends, neighbours and communities as a route to problem-solving and finding solutions
6. are designed to be used as a whole, within a professional system aligned to the approach (rather than be viewed as an ad-hoc intervention)
7. have been developed on the direct experience of what practitioners and families see as effective practice

## How they differ

The two approaches differ in that:

1. They are integrated into existing practice systems in different ways. Contextual Safeguarding is an overarching conceptual framework/lens through which to develop a practice response to extra-familial harm. As such, the approach can be applied to a range of practice frameworks. Signs of Safety is primarily a process model focused on how to think, not what to think in child protection assessment and practice.
2. They were designed with different intentions and goals. Contextual Safeguarding was first designed with the specific intention of improving social care responses to abuse of young people in extra-familial contexts and relationships. Signs of Safety was originally designed to create an approach to statutory child protection practice that was safety organised and worked *with* families rather than did *to* them.
3. They had different 'groups' of children in mind. In the UK, Signs of Safety was primarily developed to improve how child protection systems supported children and families with whom they already worked. Contextual Safeguarding approaches are largely used to support young people who have previously been closed to child protection and wider safeguarding services and directed towards youth justice interventions. The harm they experience in extra-familial contexts hasn't always been viewed as a child protection or safeguarding matter (Hill, 2019; Lloyd & Firmin, 2020)
4. They are at different stages in their development. Contextual Safeguarding has been in development since 2011 and so is a relatively young concept, still in test phase in multiple local areas and at this stage principally focused on child protection responses. Signs of Safety was developed in the 1990's and is a mature but still evolving approach. Signs of Safety practice and methods continue to grow in application from referral to closure and are now increasingly used across the whole continuum of children's services continuum including Early Help/family support, Child Protection, Children in Care and Youth Justice (Turnell and Murphy, 2018)
5. They have been principally used to address different forms of harm. Contextual Safeguarding has only been used in response to cases of extra-familial harm, relationships and contexts – although it is starting to be used to consider how child protection systems respond to adolescents more broadly. Signs of Safety was designed

principally to equip statutory child protection professionals and agencies to undertake their work in a participatory way with children, parents and their naturally connected networks which deal primarily with abuse within families. However, the approach has also been used to address extra-familial abuse and exploitation.

6. They adopt different approaches to the use and dissemination of practice resources. As Signs of Safety is a 'practice' framework it features a series of practice tools and techniques that are used across a case work process within the jurisdictions where it has been adopted. Contextual Safeguarding doesn't offer a standard set of tools and methods. Instead it involves the co-design of practice resources and approaches in each site that uses the framework so that practice models are localised (although some tools that have been designed in one place have been picked up and used again in other localities via the Contextual Safeguarding Network).
7. Signs of Safety is a licensed and certified programme and trademarked. As such the approach, its ideas and methods can be used by any agency or professional but the intellectual property cannot be commercially exploited without permission of Elia International. Contextual Safeguarding is the intellectual property of its founder and the research team behind its continued development, and requires appropriate referencing in use, but is not a licenced or trademarked practice model.

## How they could work together

Signs of Safety offers a process framework for casework practice from initial referral, assessment and planning to closure. Contextual Safeguarding offers a lens through which to apply that process when responding to harm in extra-familial contexts. The focus is always on collaboration to achieve child safety.

### Contextual Safeguarding Level 1

At Level 1 practitioners will increase their consideration of extra-familial contexts within their work with individual children and their families. The Signs of Safety assessment and planning framework and the safety planning roadmap remain the overarching guide for casework practice, whilst the application of a Contextual Safeguarding lens enables professionals to wrap recognition of extra-familial context around all their direct work

Questions are asked about the young person's experience both within and outside the family home to actively seek to understand the contexts in which harm may be occurring, the interplay between them and their various weight of influence on a young person's safety. This might be within their friendships and peer group relationships, in education (school/college) or work settings, within their community, neighbourhoods or their online world.



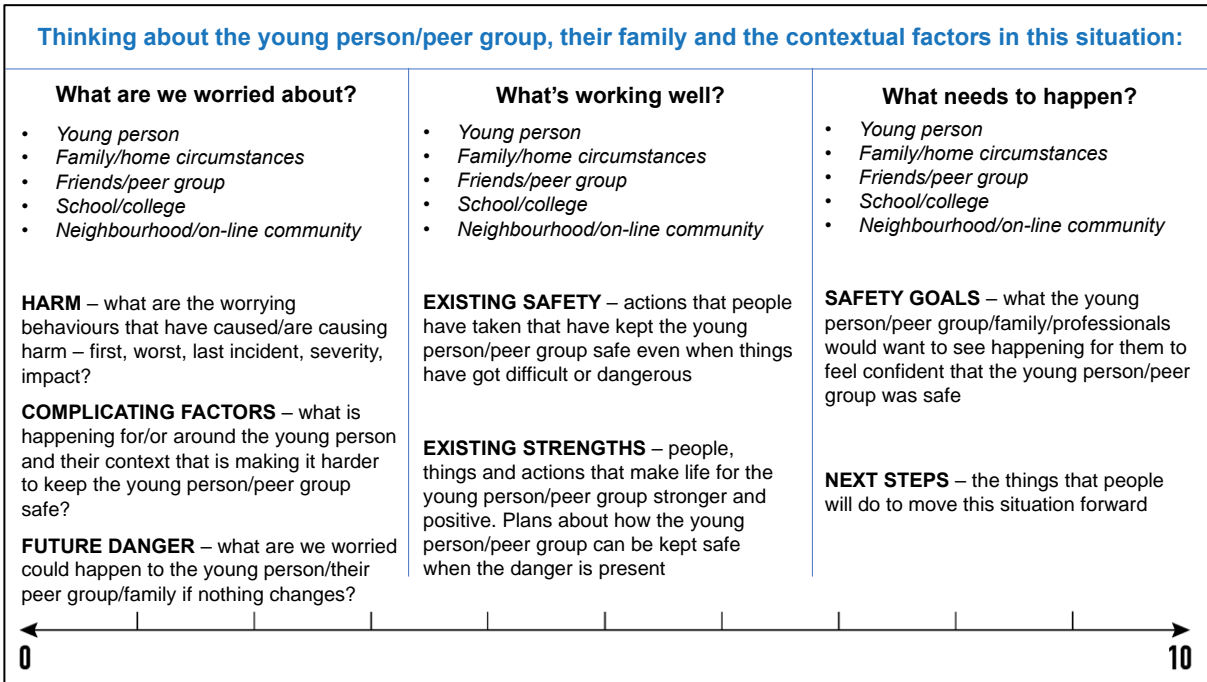


Figure 4 Considering the interplay of the extra familial context within the Signs of Safety Assessment and Planning Framework (mapping process)

In using this Signs of Safety mapping process professionals will holistically explore what is happening for the young person, their family and naturally connected network (including peers and other extra-familial relationships) and seek to understand their views about exploitation or other forms of abuse that might be occurring and where, what can be seen to be causing harm to the young person and the complicating factors that are making these issues harder to deal with. Professionals are asked to prepare one or more danger statements which explicitly describe and explain in plain language that a young person, their family and their network can understand about what they are worried has happened, and may happen to that young person in the future, if nothing changes. From a Contextual Safeguarding perspective it is important to stress the various sources of harm and safety when framing this concerns – so not only outlining what professionals are worried may happen but where such harm might occur. When exploring complicating factors, professionals can support a young person, family and wider network to recognise push-and-pull factors between contexts; for example if factors beyond the family home are outweighing the influence that parents/carers have over a young person's safety.

Professionals and adults generally, when they are worried about young people, can get over organised by what they see as the problems. Applying Signs of Safety in any context always involves a detailed and forensic exploration of the detail of 'What's working well?' from the perspective of everyone involved. Mapping the middle column enables an exploration of existing strengths (all the good things happening in and around the life of a young person) and existing safety (times when the danger has been present and actions were taken to avoid or minimise the impact on the young person). Taking time to ensure that all significant relationships, including those a young person has with their peers, is important here. Concerns that professionals have about a young person's peer relationships may not be shared by that young person; furthermore, professional concerns about peers may overshadow evidence of how young people look after each other, and what benefits they may get from peer relationships that are also associated to harm they have experienced (Latimer, Adams-Elias and Firmin, 2020).



The third column of the Signs of Safety map involves working with a young person, their family and the people they are naturally connected to describe what they believe life would look for them so that those who have been worried about a young person being harmed are confident they are as safe as possible. This picture constitutes the safety goals of all participants. Professionals will usually write their own and are expected to, where concerns meet or exceed statutory thresholds of harm and danger. To ensure these considerations align to a Contextual Safeguarding framework, young people, family members and a young person's wider network will be invited to consider how a range of contexts (relevant to a young person's life) may look if they were as safe as possible for a young person. For example, what would their journey to school be like, what would their school environment feel like (moving beyond whether that young person is attending school or not as positive outcome alone) etc. Contextual activities, such as supporting a young person to colour-code maps of local areas to denote where they feel safe and unsafe can assist here; changes in the map over time (with red zones becoming amber or green), may be a way to communicate the changes the network needs to see. Framing goals in this way will sometimes mean that professionals need to undertake actions, as well as a young person, their family, or wider network, to increase contextual safety for a young person.

## **Contextual Safeguarding Level 2**

At Level 2 the extra-familial contexts/relationships themselves, rather than individual young people and their families, are the primary focus of the assessment and planning. Professionals work to actively change the extra-familial contexts identified as impacting young people and their families. This means that peer groups, schools, public spaces etc. can be subject to an assessment and support plans will be made collectively with a wider strategic focus rather than just focusing on an individual young person and their family's situation

The Signs of Safety approach to safeguarding practice can provide a methodology for how to approach and frame this work. The same Signs of Safety mapping process, outlined above, that is undertaken collaboratively with families and their networks can be used to bring together young people, their networks, professionals, family, community, neighbourhoods and anyone else involved, to explore issues and potential solutions for any extra-familial context where young people are at risk of significant harm. Using the Signs of Safety assessment and planning framework to explore 4 key questions:

1. **What's working well?** – Existing Strengths and Existing Safety
2. **What are we worried about?** – Harm, Danger and Complicating Factors
3. **What needs to happen?** The Safety Goals we are hoping to achieve in this situation and Next Steps
4. **Example Scaling Question:**  
On a scale of 0-10 where 10 is that everyone knows who is doing what to create safety for young people in the context that is the focus of the assessment/response and even though there may still be challenges, we can see that safety is being effectively sustained over time. 0 is that this situation remains so unsafe that young people are being hurt or harmed. Where would you rate this situation today? What brings you up at that number?

Below are two case study examples which illustrate how Signs of Safety approaches have been piloted in Contextual Safeguarding Level 1 and Level 2 responses to extra-familial harm.

## Contextual Safeguarding and Signs of Safety Level 1 Combined Response (Knowsley)

**Case and referral:** *A young man, ‘Jesse’, was referred into Knowsley children’s services with multiple concerns that he was being exploited to transport and sell drugs. He had been reported missing from home and had been found in multiple places a long distance from his home and family, and his parents were concerned for his physical safety.*

**Combined Response:** *As part of process to develop a response to extra-familial harm, Knowsley have developed a tool to use in strategy discussions which drawn together a Signs of Safety and Contextual Safeguarding approach. The tool considers what is working well, what professionals are worried about and any complicating factors for each of the contexts associated to a young person. Professionals apply context weighting to the information that is gathered and shared in the strategy discussion to develop an initial response to referrals that they receive.*

<p><b>Peers</b></p> <p><i>What is working well What are we worried about</i></p> <p><i>Complicated factors</i></p>	<p><b>Community</b></p> <p><i>What is working well What are we worried about</i></p> <p><i>Complicated factors</i></p>
<p><b>Home</b></p> <p><i>What is working well What are we worried about</i></p> <p><i>Complicated factors</i></p>	<p><b>Neighbourhood</b></p> <p><i>What is working well What are we worried about</i></p> <p><i>Complicated factors</i></p>

*In the case of the above referral information was mapped under the Signs of Safety headings for the Jesse’s family, peer relationships, school, and a range of neighbourhood settings where he spent his time and/or where he reported feeling unsafe. The mapping process identified that Jesse’s mother, grandmother and sister had all shared concerned with professionals, particularly when they believed risks that Jesse faced were increasing. Professionals had some concerns that support from Jesse’s family was inconsistent – and that their own challenges with drug-use contributed to this. Looking beyond the family, the mapping exercise detailed significant concerns in Jesse’s peer relationships. There were separate concerns that many of his peers were being exploited and had experienced (or used) severe/fatal violence. This was further evidenced by Jesse’s accounts of where he felt safe and unsafe in his neighbourhood – and in the various neighbourhoods where his family lived. Jesse’s concerns about neighbourhood safety impacted placement decisions for Jesse – as he was unwilling to live in areas where he felt unsafe. Weighting the influence of neighbourhood and peer contexts against concerns and evidence of safety within Jesse’s family was critical for informing the initial planning process for Jesse, as well as appropriately noting the significance of the harm he faced and where changes were required (in extra-familial as well as familial contexts) for those concerns to reduce. In the case of Jesse this provided a critical foundation when discussing whether he could remain with his family, move to live with his sister or grandmother, be placed into a residential children’s home or be placed in a secure setting on welfare grounds.*

### Reflections

*The quadrant tool provides professionals with a visual framework to record and communicate the various social contexts associated to a young person’s safety. This has proved important for clearly outlining the rationale for decision-making in a range of cases, and ensuring professionals don’t over-focus on one context to the exclusion of others that are also relevant for a young person’s safety. The quadrant remains in pilot phase, and may be refined further in the future as it is used across a greater number of cases of extra-familial harm. Work is also required to embed the approach across social care processes so that a combined response is evidence through various stages of meetings and assessments that may occur prior to, or following, strategy discussions.*

## **Contextual Safeguarding and Signs of Safety Level 2 Combined Response (Bristol)**

**Case and Referral:** *As part of process to develop a Contextual Safeguarding approach, Bristol undertook an assessment a street and adjoining car park and alleyway in which there were escalating concerns about the welfare of young people.*

**Combined Response:** *The Contextual Safeguarding neighbourhood assessment triangle integrated with Signs of Safety provided the framework for the assessment process – with guardianship, the needs of the young people in the area and the wider environmental factors of the location considered in the assessment process.*

*The findings of the assessment were considered at a Context Conference, chaired by a child protection chair and attended by a range of stakeholders around that street including local youth providers, beat manager for the area, businesses including the local youth hostel, and community safety. As Bristol has adopted Signs of Safety across their wider children's services processes they drew upon this in the design of their trial Context Conference. The ideas of complicating factors, existing safety and existing strengths were used to assess the levels and quality of guardianship in the locality. This helped professionals considered whether adults in locality were able to take protective action when required (Existing safety) – thinking beyond whether the adults in the setting were 'safe' (Existing Strengths).*

*Further to this a danger statement for the area was written collaboratively with key partners in the area and 'scaling' was used in the conference to inform the multi-agency analysis of risk and safety. In line with Signs of Safety practice framework the scaling was personalised to situation with 0 and 10 defined by the Lead Practitioner and Child Protection Conference Chair. This then provided the framework for setting the Safety Goals for the location and scaling has been used in Core Group for the location to measure progress.*

*Practitioners found the signs of safety approach helpful in clarifying and focusing the assessment of concern in the area. There had been multiple previous meetings about the space and this approach enabled a more systemic focus on the nature of concerns and explored why different users of the space had different views and assessment of the risk and safety. This enabled the group to move towards a shared understanding of the risk in the area and unlocked additional resource which could be targeted effectively.*

**Reflections:** *Alongside the Context Conference, youth practitioners used similar scaling outside of the conference with young people to compare their views on the location with those of the professionals who attended the conference. However this was built around the concept of the children feeling 'safe' and there was learning for practitioners about the need to further define the concepts in undertaking Signs of Safety scaling effectively (what did they mean by feeling 'safe') or to use the same danger statements and scaling questions as were being used in the Context Conference. Ideally the work with the young people would have then developed into shaping the children's own Safety Goals and them contributing to a Safety Plan for the location however the progress of the work was put on hold by COVID-19 with children's use of the space having changed significantly. .*

*The concepts of safety and strengths were particularly helpful in identifying resource in the location and considering how to better resource people to take an active guardianship role.*

*Further work may be required to underpin scaling, danger statements and safety goals as they would be applied to a location particularly in developing and testing effective scaling questions to build practitioners' confidence in using the technique in these settings.*

## Next Steps

This briefing paper maps out the potential for using a Signs of Safety practice framework in systems that are adopting Contextual Safeguarding approach to extra-familial harm. Over the coming 12-18 months the teams behind both Signs of Safety and Contextual Safeguarding will be taking steps, both separately and together, to put these ideas to the test.

Four of the Contextual Safeguarding pilot sites (Bristol, Knowsley, Swansea and Merton) use a Signs of Safety framework. The University of Bedfordshire will be tracking pilots in those sites over the coming 12-16 months and identifying points of intersection and integration between the two approaches.

Elia, the team managing Signs of Safety, will be running a sustained learning lab, to consider the findings of the Contextual Safeguarding pilot sites along with a wider group of local authorities who they currently support to implement a Signs of Safety approach and who have an interest in Contextual Safeguarding. Both Elia and the University of Bedfordshire are working with case management system providers in the UK as both approaches are integrated into ICT systems.

Key questions that we will be exploring as part of this work include:

- How to consistently apply the Signs of Safety practice framework, tools and methods when responding (assessing and developing support plans) to locations and peer groups where young people are at risk of significant harm
- How to integrate the Signs of Safety practice framework with tools that have emerged as central to Contextual Safeguarding in practice – such as the peer group and location assessment framework
- How to integrate location assessment methods often used as part of a Contextual Safeguarding – such as resident’s surveys – with practice tools used by Signs of Safety
- Where there are opportunities to use this integration to create a shared multi-agency language around safety, protection, risk and vulnerability
- Whether there are opportunities for integrated messages in training content

As we take our next steps to explore the relationship between Signs of Safety and Contextual Safeguarding we will produce a range of case examples that illustrate an integrated approach. These will be circulated via the Contextual Safeguarding Practice Network and the Signs of Safety Contextual Safeguarding Learning Group.

Please follow the below link to express your interest in being part of this learning group;

<https://www.signsofsafety.net/contextual-safeguarding-eoi/>

References:

Barter, C., McCarry, M., Berridge, D. & Evans, K., 2009. Partner Exploitation and Violence in Teenage Intimate Relationships, London: NSPCC.

Elia. 2020. What is Signs of Safety. Webpage: <https://www.signsofsafety.net/what-is-sofs/>

Firmin, C., 2017. Contextual Risk, Individualised Responses: An Assessment of Safeguarding Responses to Nine Cases of Peer-on-Peer Abuse. *Child Abuse Review*.

Firmin, C., 2020. *Contextual Safeguarding and Child Protection: Rewriting the Rules*. 1st ed. Oxon: Routledge.

Hill, N., 2019. *Serious Case Review – Chris*, London: Newham Safeguarding Children Board.

Lloyd, J. & Firmin, C., 2020. No Further Action: Contextualising social care decisions for children victimised in extra-familial contexts. *Journal of Youth Justice*.

Sidebotham, P. et al., 2016. *Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014: Final report*, London: DfE.

Smallbone, S., Rayment-McHugh, S. & Smith, D., 2013. Youth Sexual Offending: Context, Good Enough Lives, and Engaging with a Wider Prevention Agenda. *International Journal of Behavioural Consultation and Therapy*, 8(3-4), pp. 49-54.

Turnell, A and Edwards, S (1999) *Signs of Safety: A safety and solution oriented approach to child protection casework*. New York: WW Norton

Turnell, A and Murphy, T (2018) *Signs of Safety Comprehensive Briefing Paper (4th edition)* Resolutions Consultancy Pty Ltd