

Key messages and implications for policy and practice from the evaluation of the pilot of Contextual Safeguarding in Hackney

1. Contextual Safeguarding is a new way of configuring safeguarding services and interventions in order to address the risk to young people of extra-familial harm. Developed by Carlene Firmin and colleagues,ⁱ the approach does not offer a manualised model but rather a framework of domains and principles which need to be interpreted and operationalised to fit the geographies, culture, needs, capabilities and governance of a local areaⁱⁱ.
2. The first Contextual Safeguarding system was developed and piloted in the London Borough of Hackney between 2017-2022, supported by two rounds of funding from the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme. Two independent evaluations were conducted over this period by the University of Sussex/Research in Practice. This briefing sets out the key messages and implications garnered over that period and presented in our two reports.
3. Our [first evaluation reported in 2020](#)ⁱⁱⁱ that system development was well under way and improvements in practice to address extra-familial harm had been achieved, particularly with respect to incorporating 'contextual thinking' about extra-familial relationships, networks and locations into individual work with children and families (defined as 'Level 1 aims'). This demonstrated that Contextual Safeguarding could offer a structure for a coherent and workable system to address extra-familial harm. However, developments were still in train, and no impact evidence was yet available. Further work was subsequently undertaken by Hackney 2020-22 to finalise implementation and embed the approach. A specialist unit was introduced as a key mechanism to embed practices, systems and structures which enable identification, assessment and intervention with the contexts themselves (e.g. peer groups, environments) in which young people encounter risk (defined as 'Level 2 aims').
4. Our [2023 follow-on evaluation report](#)^{iv} constitutes the only independent evaluation of impact outcomes and cost-effectiveness relating to a Contextual Safeguarding system. We found that much progress had been made towards project aims but the new system was not yet fully implemented in its entirety nor embedded into mainstream organisational context and delivery processes as 'business-as-usual'. In part, this was due to unexpected delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, in addition, iterative loops of trialling, review and system redesign had been needed. This was not due to poor project management but a reflection of what is entailed in a radical innovation^v, such as Contextual Safeguarding, which involves a disruptive transformation of existing safeguarding systems^{vi}. **We recommend that funders and service leaders set longer timescales for funding and reporting so there is time for such radical innovations to embed and create impacts.**
5. **There were some positive indicators of the impact of Contextual Safeguarding on systems and practices** in Hackney: well-functioning IT systems and tools to direct practice: culture shifts; mobilisation of interagency partnerships, and enhanced practitioner capacity to recognise, assess and work with extra-familial harm. However, the system design in Hackney had concentrated expertise in a small number of specialist practitioners, with the result that confidence had reduced for the majority of workers in children's services in building relationships with young people, addressing risks and intervening effectively in contexts.

6. The specialist unit could not operate fully, either, without additional ring-fenced resource. As 'Level 2' work is additional to what children's social care would normally do, we conclude that **Contextual Safeguarding is likely to be more expensive to operate than a conventional approach to addressing extra-familial harm, unless other agencies in multi-agency safeguarding partnerships take responsibility for aspects of youth- and community-oriented work.**
7. A key question for local authorities and organisations is whether such increased costs still offer value for money if they improve safety and wellbeing of young people and communities. In Hackney, there were some notable indicators of positive effects at a child- and context-level, notably reductions in: out-of-borough and residential placements; episodes of young people going missing from care; and young people's involvement in offending behaviour. Here, the benefit/cost ratio suggests a positive return on investment. However, the administrative data used to judge this could not be relied upon (due to the effects of the 2020 cyber-attack in Hackney and the disruption to services and young people's lives during the acute stage of the pandemic). Moreover, the decreased use of out-of-home care was likely achieved through a wider strategy in Hackney, rather than specific to Contextual Safeguarding. **It remains unclear at present which parts of the service are more cost-effective than others, and whether it is specific components or the entirety of a Contextual Safeguarding service that creates impacts.**
8. Our evaluation concluded that **Contextual Safeguarding offers promise in this area of practice and the potential to offer value for money**, but these caveats and confounding factors mean that **progressive connections from improved practice, to enhanced service experiences, to the meeting of aspired outcomes cannot be readily made.**
9. Even though there is not yet incontrovertible evidence of positive outcomes and cost-effectiveness, 70 Local Authorities and more than 20 third sector organisations have engaged with Contextual Safeguarding in some form: clearly the sector places value on the principles, practice tools, and system guidance it offers. Alongside the well-theorised Contextual Safeguarding framework, there is now a comprehensive [Toolkit](#) produced by Firmin and colleagues; new sites do not now need to start from scratch but can build on the considerable raft of **policies, guidance, tools and training materials available**, some of which were developed through the Hackney pilot. This offers an excellent basis for further development, trialling and learning regarding the possible benefits of Contextual Safeguarding for addressing extra-familial harm and we conclude that the approach **does merit scaling and spreading** to other areas.
10. However, the **Hackney configuration of Contextual Safeguarding does not offer a system template to be manualised for transferring to other local authorities.** With respect to scaling and spreading, it remains the case that **the framework of domains and principles which Contextual Safeguarding sets out will need to be interpreted and operationalised to fit each new context**, unless and until there is evidence from either Hackney in the future, or one of the other [test sites](#) around the country that a) a specific configuration works well without significant additional resource requirements, and b) has system components which would transfer readily elsewhere such that fidelity to the model could be maintained. This is not a flaw in the Contextual Safeguarding framework, but merely a feature of transferability to be taken into account at the current time.
11. Consideration has been given to whether the approach justifies inclusion in statutory guidance. It is important to note that both levels of Contextual Safeguarding need to be present in a safeguarding system, operating effectively in tandem, if the approach is to positively impact outcomes for children, young people and contexts. We have observed that, while the current draft

for consultation of *Working Together* covers some part of the Level 1 Contextual Safeguarding objectives (introducing contextual thinking into work with individual children and families), it does not address Level 2 concerns: the importance of assessing and addressing the contexts of risk themselves. As Level 2 work is complex and expensive to put into practice then, in our view, it is unlikely to be seen as a priority for safeguarding agencies unless its objectives are also mandated within guidance; hence we **recommend that identification, assessment and intervention with contexts is included in statutory guidance**. As it is only Contextual Safeguarding that does offer a coherent theorisation as to why this is important, and a framework and set of tools for achieving this, then we also recommend that **statutory guidance gives a strong steer to local authorities to consider Contextual Safeguarding when developing their services to address extra-familial risks and harms**.

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ⁱ Firmin, C., Warrington, C. and Pearce, J. (2016) '[Sexual exploitation and its impact on developing sexualities and sexual relationships: the need for contextual social work interventions](#)', *British Journal of Social Work*, 46(8): 2318– 37.

ⁱⁱ Firmin, C. (2020) [Contextual Safeguarding and Child Protection: Rewriting the Rules](#). Oxford: Routledge.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lefevre, M., Preston, O., Hickle, K. et al., (2020) [Evaluation of the Implementation of a Contextual Safeguarding System in the London Borough of Hackney](#). Project Report. Department for Education,

^{iv} Lefevre, M., Holmes, L., Banerjee, R., Horan, R., Hickle, K. et al. (2023) *Evaluation of the process and impact of embedding Contextual Safeguarding in Hackney*: evaluation report, available at https://theinnovateproject.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Evaluation-of-embedding-Contextual-Safeguarding-in-Hackney_Final-published.pdf

^v Lefevre, M., Hampson, M. and Goldsmith, C. (2022) '[Towards a Synthesised Directional Map of the Stages of Innovation in Children's Social Care](#)', *British Journal of Social Work*, 53(5), pp. 2478–2498,

^{vi} Preston, O., Godar, R., Lefevre, M., Boddy, J., Firmin, C. (2021) [Considerations in the use of local and national data for evaluating innovation in children's social care](#), *Journal of Children's Services*, 16(3), pp. 233-248.