

Contextual safeguarding, Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Vulnerabilities

A Briefing for the Police

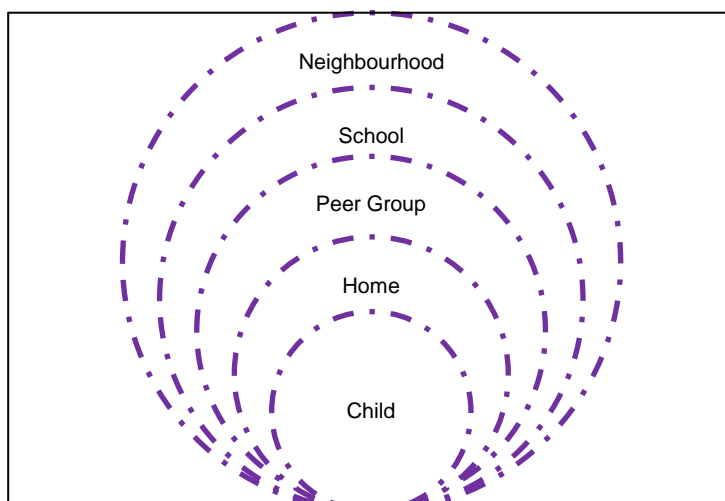
1. BACKGROUND, INTRODUCTION AND STRUCTURE

Since 2013 the International Centre (IC) at the University of Bedfordshire has been supporting the development of ‘contextual’ responses to exploitation between young people under its work on the **MsUnderstood** Partnership. This programme has yielded learning for broader work on child sexual exploitation (CSE) and safeguarding that is being applied across a number of our research projects – one of which is the CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub – and this briefing has been developed for this purpose.

This briefing is intended to introduce the concept of ‘contextual safeguarding’ to a strategic policing audience, and consider the implications of this approach for policing responses to CSE and related vulnerabilities. It highlights four ways in which the police service can, and does, contribute to developing contextual responses to CSE and related vulnerabilities. The range of policing roles/units, the ‘victim, offender, location’ methodology, access to contexts of concern and experience in mapping (and engaging with the dynamics of) peer association all present opportunities for engaging in the multiple contexts in which CSE manifests.

The remainder of this briefing is split into three parts that: a) summarise the concept of contextual safeguarding; b) present the key implications that contextual safeguarding has for policing practices; and c) share some concluding thoughts about ways in which to embed and advance contextual approaches within policing responses to CSE and related vulnerabilities

2. CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING – A SUMMARY



[Contextual safeguarding](#) promotes the idea that young people’s behaviours, levels of vulnerability and levels of resilience are all informed by the social/public, as well as private, contexts in which young people spend their time. Drawing upon research into adolescent development, it recognises that as children grow they spend increasing amounts of time socialising

Figure 1 Contextual Safeguarding Framework

with peers, at school and in public environments independently of parental/carer supervision. When spending time in these extra-familial contexts young people may be exposed to healthy norms which promote pro-social relationships or they may encounter harmful norms that are conducive to abusive and exploitative relationships.

Research is increasingly highlighting the public and social contexts in which young people experience sexual exploitation including parks, high streets, disused garages, schools and peer groups. This evidence base, combined with that concerned with adolescent development, suggests that profiling, assessment and intervention activities need to engage with the social contexts, as well as individuals, affected by CSE: contextual safeguarding methodologies seek to foster such an approach using the framework presented in Figure 1.

3. CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING – KEY MESSAGES FOR THE POLICE

There are a number of avenues within existing policing structures and approaches that could facilitate a contextual response to CSE and related vulnerabilities. This briefing will explore four such opportunities before summarising the implications of these recommendations for policing approaches in the future.

Roles and units: which police, which context

One of the challenges faced by most services when seeking to develop a contextual response to CSE is that their work is largely focused on one or two contexts of concern. Schools for example can influence the nature of educational establishments and the peer groups that form within them but are often less able to engage in shaping the nature of neighbourhoods that students navigate outside of school hours. Likewise social work practice is primarily engaged with assessing and intervening with the families of the young people that they work with but are rarely able to intervene with their peer groups. Given the vast array of roles and units within policing however, the service, as a whole, is well equipped (and has expertise in engaging with) most of the contexts associated with CSE.

The circles presented earlier in this briefing provide one way to illustrating this expertise and reach:

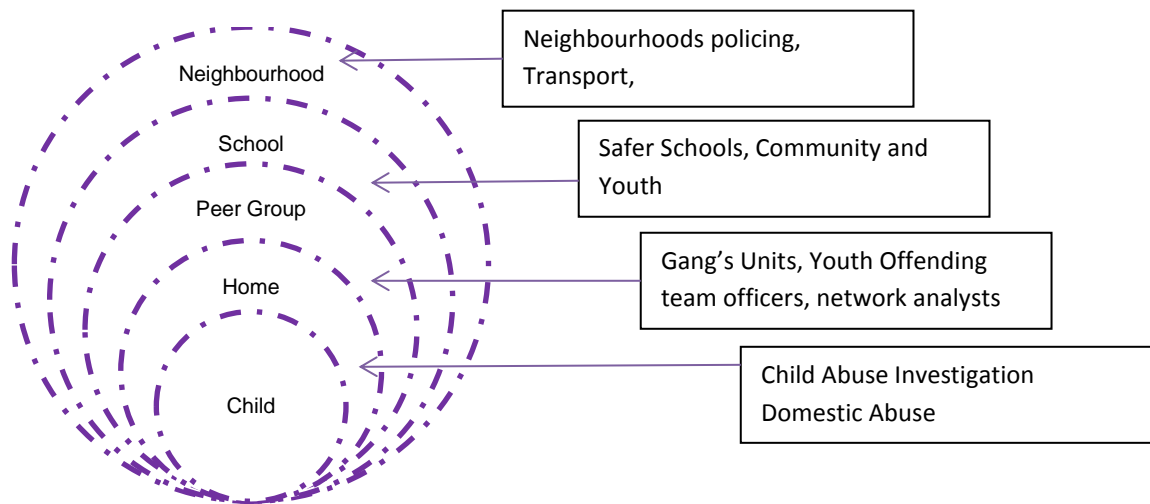


Figure 2 Contextual interpretation of policing roles and units

As Figure 2 suggests, the range of activities and units within policing means that different parts of the service are already engaged in, or have developed techniques for engaging with, profiling or assessing, the different environments featured in a contextual safeguarding framework. The units/roles included in Figure 2 are far from exhaustive and in different ways police forces as a whole engage across the contexts associated with sexual exploitation. However they serve to highlight that any police service is in a prime position to develop a strategic and operational contextual model by mapping their internal partnerships against contexts of concern for adolescent safeguarding. In terms of CSE therefore, a contextual policing response would engage with far more than the work of a public protection unit or any specialist CSE investigative team. Rather the roles that are engaged with, or have expertise in working with, the contexts associated to an emerging profile or case under investigation could also play a part in identifying, disrupting or investigation concerns.

Offender, victim, location – histories of contextual practice

Child sexual exploitation work has traditionally focused interventions on the person who has been exploited (the victim) and sometimes their family, as opposed to the person who has exploited them (offender) – an approach under increasing critique and review. An application of contextual safeguarding would take this critique one step further and state that even when responses apprehend or disrupt those who exploit children, until recently interventions rarely take account of the locations in which the exploitation occurs. This latter limitation is gradually being addressed, with interventions targeting the night-time economy, hotels, taxi firms and take-away shops in which young people may be exploited. These services are also seen as the eyes and ears of some neighbourhoods and are ideally located to identify concerns regarding CSE and raise the alarm.

However, far more work is required to proactively utilise the notion of ‘location’ in all responses to CSE and related vulnerabilities. Youth clubs, parks, stairwells, schools, peer groups, disused garages and houses etc. have all featured on CSE problem profiles but are yet to be subjected to evaluated processes of engagement. Ensuring the consistent consideration of location in all CSE responses sits well within wider policing cultures which already promote the ‘offender, victim, location’ triangle when profiling/investigating an issue. As such contextual approaches are to an extent an intuitive part of wider policing activity and can be drawn upon to develop this much needed area of work.

Disrupting contexts as well as individuals

Building on the two aforementioned points, policing expertise in considering locations and policing presence in a range of locations creates an opportunity to disrupt/change contexts associated with CSE and other related vulnerabilities. A key element of contextual safeguarding is the identification of ways through which to change the social conditions of neighbourhoods, schools or peer groups when they are conducive with CSE occurring. Without approaches that seek to change the nature of these contexts, safeguarding responses largely comprise interventions which either a) support a young person to better navigate an unsafe environment or b) relocate a young person out of an unsafe environment.

The limitations of such an approach are addressed in part by targeting resources at disrupting the perpetration of exploitation – i.e. targeting offenders. However, the notion of the ‘victim, offender, location’ triangle acknowledges that in order for exploitation to happen an individual/group requires a situation, context or relationship in which they can exploit others. The multi-contextual engagement of policing illustrated in Figure 2 demonstrates that the police play a role in shaping, managing, and where necessary intervening with, the contexts in which CSE occurs. How do Safer Schools’ officers contribute to the nature of school environments? How do safer neighbourhood policing activities ensure that buses or parks can be used by young people without them being at risk of CSE when they do so? As a result, part of a contextual policing response to CSE would involve identifying both the locations associated to the issue and the contribution that policing can make to ensuring that they are ones in which CSE cannot occur.

Group mapping, group dynamics and proactive group intervention

In keeping with the opportunity outlined above, much of the response to CSE to date has focused on the disruption of individuals (both those who have been exploited and those who have exploited them). More complex investigations have involved mapping adults who form organised criminal groups involved in CSE. But general consideration of peer groups affected by the issue, peer roles/dynamics and routes to group intervention remain under-developed within multi-agency partnerships. The mapping of peer group dynamics (for the purposes of assessment and intervention – not just investigation) is a central pillar of contextual safeguarding. It rests upon the knowledge that during adolescence most young people are heavily informed by the social norms of their peer network, and as a result peer relationships can provide strong protective, as well as risk, factors associated to a young person’s safety and well-being. [Case reviews](#) into CSE have documented the ways which peer groups and peer associations have provided a pathway into exploitation for some young people, and have been a context in which peer-on-peer exploitation can occur.

The expertise of policing practices related to serious youth and gang-related violence, as well as the work of network analysts within policing, holds the potential to ensuring more contextual responses to the peer-group dynamics of CSE. From profiling informal and dynamic peer associations (rather than organised crime groups) through to the identification of leaders/followers and the direct street-based engagement with groups of young people, policing response to serious youth violence may hold transferable skills and approaches that can be applied in contextual responses to CSE. This skillset has the potential to extend beyond investigative work, and could be used to inform broader multi-agency safeguarding assessments. For example, when social work teams are assessing the risk

posed to an individual young person, being supported to understand the dynamics of that persons peer group, their role within it and identifying opportunities to engage the group as a whole could all contextualise what would otherwise be a largely individual/familial assessment process.

4. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Each of the recommended areas of activity outlined above requires further investigation, testing and potential adaption. As part of the CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub there are a number of ways in which we could support policing colleagues who have an interest in taking them forward. In addition, the IC is now running a contextual safeguarding research programme which includes practitioners' network providing peer support and highlighting promising approaches to those interested in contextualising their safeguarding practice – so if you'd like to join please get in touch.

Ultimately a contextual response to CSE and related vulnerabilities requires a multi-agency commitment to identify and engage with all of the social and public, as well as private locations, associated with the exploitation of children. Each service within such a partnership will bring their own expertise and access to the contexts of concern. However, as this briefing has outlined, the police service in its widest sense, rather than specialist CSE teams specifically, could make a significant contribution in developing local contextual responses to CSE specially and adolescent safeguarding more broadly.