



# **Building Context into Child Protection Conferences**

## **Initial thoughts**

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## **Background**

Contextual Safeguarding (CS) is an approach to safeguarding that supports practitioners to recognise and respond to the harm young people experience outside of the home.<sup>1</sup> This document has been produced to share how thinking in Hackney has developed in relation to building explicit reference to context into child protection conferences. It has been developed by Hackney Children and Families Services with the University of Bedfordshire to child protection conference chairs and lead practitioners to consider how they acknowledge, and where appropriate address, extra-familial factors which are impacting a parents' ability to be protective. This guidance is designed to be used when implementing Contextual Safeguarding in a local area, and is best read alongside the Assessment and Intervention Guidance produced in Hackney which would be used prior to these cases being discussed at a child protection (CP) conference.

As per the London Child Protection procedures, and Working Together 2018:

An initial child protection conference brings together family members (and the child where appropriate), with the supporters, advocates and practitioners most involved with the child and family, to make decisions about the child's future safety, health and development... [its purpose is] to bring together and analyse, in an inter-agency setting, all relevant information and plan how best to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child. It is the responsibility of the conference to make recommendations on how organisations and agencies work together to safeguard the child in future (Working Together 2018: 47)

As a result, young people and families who are experiencing extra-familial risks will only be discussed at a CP conference if the primary concern is a familial one. If a young person's parents/carers are taking all appropriate steps to care for their child but that child continues to experience harm in their community, peer group or school, a CP conference may not be appropriate. In these cases Hackney have developed an Extra-Familial Risk Panel to assume oversight of these cases, which are then allocated into Child in Need, Young Hackney or Family Support services and so on.

However, if factors within a family setting are contributing to the levels of risks faced by that young person, or are indeed a principle concern for services (while the young person is additionally facing extra-familial risks) then a child protection conference and plan may be appropriate. This document is produced to inform such CP conferences.

This document remains in development, and as its application is tested, and Contextual Safeguarding is further embedded within Hackney Children and Families Services it is likely that it will undergo revision. All such revisions will be documented to assist others in developing their practices and processes as they too implement Contextual Safeguarding.

## **Structure of meeting**

Hackney's CP conferences are structured as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Visit [www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk](http://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk) for more information.

1. The Chair meets with family members before the conference to talk about how it will run and how they might best participate.
2. 'Ice-breaker' session where the family help to provide information about significant members of their family and network.
3. Discussion of assessment recorded visually on paper that is displayed on the meeting room wall, under seven headings:
  - Danger/Risks (detail regarding incident(s) bringing the family to the attention of the agency/pattern/history)
  - Safety (strengths demonstrated as protection over time, pattern/history of exceptions)
  - Strengths/Protective factors (assets, resources, capacities within family, individual/community, presence of research based protective factors)
  - Complicating Factors (conditions/behaviours that contribute to greater difficulty for the family, presence of research based risk factors)
  - Grey Areas (issues in dispute where fuller information may be needed)
  - Historic factors
  - Child's views
4. A plan is formulated to address any risks and needs.
5. All those present are asked to give their view as to whether the plan should have the status of a Child Protection Plan and reasons for this. If so a core group of family members and key professionals are identified to work out in detail how the plan will operate and ensure support and monitoring occurs in between Conferences.
6. A record of the Conference containing the completed assessment framework, any additional significant information, and the plan, will be circulated within 15 working days of the Conference.

### **Considering contextual factors**

As illustrated, a CP conference is primarily focused on discussing the risks identified during an assessment, agreeing the actions required by parents and young people to increase safety, and identifying the support available from other services to assist them in this endeavour.

Through initial discussions with conference chairs it has been suggested that contextual issues may emerge as either *complicating factors* or *grey areas* which can impact the capacity of a parent/carer to protect their young person. Examples of such contextual factors may be:

- Poverty
- Social isolation
- Living in fear within high-crime areas/estates/streets
- Family being targeted with threats due to the actions of other family members, older siblings etc.
- Risks/negative experiences within school, community, online and/or peer contexts that are influencing the decisions taken by that young person

Many of these issues are systemic, may be entrenched in areas, and impact multiple families beyond the one participating in the CP conference. So as to maintain a focus on the family during

the CP conference discussion, it is proposed that a framework is built around how to record, action and review progress in relation to these contextual issues. Such a framework should acknowledge that without attempting to address too many issues within a conference discussion.

### **Pre CP conference**

Utilising Hackney's *Contextual Safeguarding Assessment and Intervention Guidance* all social workers will have paid due regard to contextual factors that may be impacting children and families. In particular assessments will now explicitly make reference to:

- Appropriate utilisation of the many tools and resources which are now available for assessing risk outside the home (i.e. "All around me"; Context Weighting Tool; Safety Mapping);
- Reflection or consultation with peer colleagues which supports the practitioner to think beyond familial risks (e.g. online activity; peer groups; unsupervised travel; the neighbourhood etc.) and about how these factors interplay within any familial features;
- Knowledge that already exists with partners in the professional network (i.e. youth services, school) to inform the assessment and intervention plan;
- Visits to locations outside the home (for observation and discussions), where these are implicated in the cause of harm;
- A strong commitment to reflecting the views and voice of the young person and their parents/carers (verbatim if possible), including an account of how they see the world, their own life and what they believe would make them feel or be safe/r; and
- An assessment summary which identifies how pre-existing vulnerabilities and risk factors combine within a context to cause harm, and an intervention plan which is clearly targeted at the context in which the harm takes place.

Prior to the CP conference chairs can consider what contextual factors have been identified during the assessment, and during their pre-conference conversation/s with the social worker identify which of these are:

- a) Complicating or grey areas that may be discussed at the CP conference
- b) Contextual factors that have previously/currently been flagged at the Extra-Familial Risk Panel (such as a location or peer group) and are subject to their own assessment or plan

Furthermore, many social workers in Hackney are using the *Safety Mapping* tool with young people to identify where they feel safe/unsafe/neutral in the local authority, and what these experiences of safety (or lack thereof) may mean for their engagement in interventions, attendance at school and wider decision-making behaviours. If that map has been produced the conference chair and social worker completing the assessment may consider whether it should feature at the conference and what findings from that process, if any, should be held in mind when building the plan.

### **During the CP conference**

Dependent on the pre-conference conversations there are a number of opportunities for chairs to consider broader contextual factors during the CP conference.

- a) Contextual factors identified during the assessment process by parents or young people could be recorded as risks, complicating factors or grey areas during conference proceedings.
- b) If a young person has completed a safety map of the local area or school this might be presented and discussed, with their consent, in the 'Childs View' section of the conference
- c) Chairs could ask parents to describe the context in which they are trying to parent their young person at the outset of the meeting – both the positive and challenging aspects of that context – and consider how these factors may be informing (or interacting with) decision-making

### **Following the CP conference**

Following the CP conference it is important that contextual issues, where possible, are given attention. There are a number of ways that this could happen.

- a) The conference chair could flag contextual factors recorded in the meeting with Hackney's First Access and Screening Team (FAST) by email – so that any thematic concerns (shared across multiple referrals) might be picked up by them as part of their contextual screening activity (for example intimidation or drug dealing in the area where the family lives, or experiences of robbery when the young person travels to school)
- b) The safety map produced by the young person could be referenced by the presenting social worker when identifying/offering services for the young person within their plan, considering whether these are delivered in areas they have marked as 'red zones' or whether they would need to travel through a 'red zone' to access that support
- c) Lead practitioners could continue to track any changes in contextual factors reported by parents or young people – feeding these into both FAST and the Extra-Familial Risk Panel if they intensify
- d) Lead practitioner could inform parents and/or young people if action has been taken to address any of the issues that they raised, and/or ask them if they have any views as to how they may be addressed, so that they factors are being explicitly acknowledged with a view to changing them (rather than the service accepting them as an inevitability)
- e) Strategic reports on repeat concerns at CP conferences can also be fed into the Safeguarding Board as part of a quarterly contextual return

In all of the above it is important that young people and families recognise that where possible the local authority will act, alongside partners, to address contextual factors impacting families and the capacity of parents to protective, while also supporting parents to make changes that they need to in order to safeguard their young people.