

The Next Chapter



Case Studies of Contextual
Safeguarding practice

Introduction

The Sustaining Social Work project looked at how Contextual Safeguarding is changing social work and related professional practice. It ran from July 2022 - April 2024, as part of the Contextual Safeguarding programme, 'The Next Chapter'.

Contextual Safeguarding asks practitioners to do new things and work with different partners. It is changing the day-to-day professional lives of social workers, youth workers and related professionals. In this project we engaged over 60 practitioners in whole day reflective workshops to find out what they do, feel and think about Contextual Safeguarding. We worked closely with a practitioner co-research group - five leading experts in the field, who helped to shape, co-facilitate and analyse the findings. You can read about the methods, findings and recommendations in the Sustaining Social Work report on the Contextual Safeguarding website.

We present here four case studies that show how Contextual Safeguarding is changing practice. They are drawn from the stories shared by practitioners during the Sustaining Social Work project. You'll read about how professionals are working in new places (like safeguarding on the train network, for example), but also about how they are feeling emboldened to centre young people's rights - including their rights to have fun and be together. You'll also read here about practice that widens the lens, beyond changing the behaviour of young people and parents, to shifting the attitudes and actions of adult professionals and members of the public. We hope these case studies are an inspiration to you and help to shape what 'doing Contextual Safeguarding' means in your practice.

Case study 1: Parallel work with young people and the community

Target

In a rural area, a group of young people were coming to police attention for some 'anti-social behaviour' concerns. It was quite 'low-level' to begin with, but the police were reacting quickly. They made profile sheets for each young person, and were logging everything they did and sending it over to children's social care, asking what they were going to do about it. The Contextual Safeguarding social work team went into fire-fighting mode initially, but then took a step back and thought, "okay, what can we actually do? This is a peer group that are coming to attention, so what can we do from a contextual perspective as opposed to the individual risk management for these young people that we've done before"?

Response

The Contextual Safeguarding team developed support for the young people. To do this they completed a peer group assessment for the group, and also a context assessment, to find out what they needed. They found that the young people needed a safe space that they could just be themselves, rather than always having to be in public places. The young people told the workers that saw all the comments on social media, about how the community viewed them, and so they just 'lived up' to this negative view. So, the Contextual Safeguarding team focussed on developing safe spaces for this group of young people. They set up a group in a youth space that wasn't being used very much, and invited the young people to come along, engaging them in activities and building relationships with them. In parallel to this they also focussed on trying to change how the young people were viewed in the community and the negative social media around them. They ran a community event and invited all the partner agencies: Youth Justice Service, social workers, volunteers, the CCTV companies, drug workers and the voluntary sector, town councillors and the police. It was an opportunity for the local community to come and talk to the Contextual Safeguarding workers about what they were putting in place to safeguard these young people and to protect them as a community as well. At the event, they also asked people to sign up to training on being 'community guardians' - people who were committed to being a helpful, respectful presence in the local area.

Outcome

The young people engaged with the Contextual Safeguarding team incredibly well. They had been very 'hard to reach' and had not wanted to engage with social care before, but the team found that through the group work, their engagement improved. Their social workers came along to the group and supported the sessions. They also invited specialist services to run joint sessions and went on an outing for food. The workers were impressed to see the young people, despite have been so vilified on social media, doing things like helping other members of the public, being polite and engaging with them. The workers had thought the young people would want to sit away from them at the restaurant, but they wanted to sit together and were chatting and enjoying themselves. The young people asked if the sessions could carry on. The risks are still high around them, but now that they have strong relationships and a safe space on a weekly basis, they are in a much better position than before.

Case study 2: Creating a safe environment for young people on public transport

Target

A team of youth workers in a seaside town were asked to do some detached work in their area. Spending time in the area with the young people, they realised that quite a few were coming in from other local areas and neighbouring towns, to take part in youth work activities. The youth workers wondered how these young people were travelling and if they were safe, because the local transport wasn't always very reliable, and some were quite young. Some of these young people had been reported 'missing' when they'd been travelling to the town to attend a group. Could the workers do anything to understand the risks involved? For example, what would young people do, if a train was cancelled or if they didn't have enough money for their travel? Were there any other risks around people looking to exploit this type of vulnerability and could the youth workers reduce it? After an initial scoping, they realised that the walk from one of the main town's train station to the centre was quite hazardous and that there were also potential risk issues on the trains themselves.

Response

The youth workers decided to travel with the young people on the trains, to get to know them and understand their routes and to also be there at the other end, when they were travelling to and from the youth centre. They invited the train company to meet with them, on the train, to explain what they were doing and why it was important to be a friendly safeguarding presence at the train station. They explained some of the dangers that young people faced when travelling to their youth activities and also potentially on the trains themselves, during the journey. It was important to the team to make it clear to the train company that their intention was not to be 'eyes and ears' on these young people, to surveil them or watch out for 'bad behaviour'. In the meeting they sometimes had to steer the transport manager away from this and reiterate that they are coming from a children's-rights and welfare perspective, which means creating safe environments for young people to have fun, relax and do ordinary things in - like travelling independently without being harmed or exploited. They wanted to make the journey welcoming and comfortable for young people, not stressful or risky. Eventually, the transport managers understood that the project was about gently building relationship, saying hello to young people in a non-intrusive way, being a caring presence for them on the way and on the way back from their activities. The train company agreed for the youth workers to travel for free on the trains and to do this work and to support it in any way that they could, but telling the staff to also adopt a similar attitude of welcome and care towards the young people.

Outcome

The youth workers found this to be one of their most successful detached youth work projects. One of the difficulties with detached youth work is actually getting to see young people, which can be very unpredictable. This was not a problem with this project, and the youth workers saw many of the young people on the trains and station that they already know from other work. They commented that the young people seemed "almost happy" to see them there! Nevertheless, at the start, the young people found it hard to understand why the youth workers were on the train or at the stations - they were understandably a bit suspicious of their intentions, as this was not something they'd encountered before. When young people asked the youth workers what they were doing, they'd reply that they were there if the young people needed them, to make sure they got home alright and for anything else. They said they knew that sometimes they get 'caught short' with their fares or have missed the train or been refused entry and they wanted to make sure there was someone they knew there, if anything like this would happen again. They said "if you've got any problems, you've got our numbers, here they are" and they told the young people where they were going to be at different times, so that they could find them. The youth workers also liaised with their colleagues who were running the youth nights that the young people were attending and also the night clubs who had nights for under 18s. They discovered through this that one of the most popular youth nights ended after the last train was scheduled to leave. So they liaised with the transport and club night to find a solution to the timetabling, so that young people had enough time to finish the night and walk to the train and get safely home.

Case study 3: Challenging injustice and promoting the strengths of young people and their families

Target

A group of social workers in a small town realised that almost every family on the street was open to children's social care in some way or another. Many of the older young people were thought to be at risk from extra-familial harm and the younger children were open to safeguarding services or early help. The social workers were under a lot of pressure to separate these children from their families, either through care placements, relocation or youth justice orders. The families themselves were being forced to move via closure orders on their houses put forward by the council. The social workers were concerned that this was not going to solve the problem but just entrench the existing issues

Response

The social workers were worried about the narratives that were building up about these families, ideas about 'sink estates' or 'troubled families' were not being critiqued but used to make the lives of their lives more oppressed and traumatic. They got together to think about what was happening and realised that the current issues were a result of housing policy, fifteen or sixteen years ago. This was a policy of placing families in a poor-quality housing on the edge of the town, with few services. This, they realised had created a 'dumping ground' for the council, and the families were being treated as rubbish. The efforts to now break them apart through closure orders was only going to increase their marginalisation and poverty and was fundamentally unjust. Strengthened by this bigger picture that allowed them to see that the problems were not located in the families and young people, but in the structural inequalities inherent in the housing policy, reinforced by a culture of blaming individuals for their own poverty and trauma.

Outcome

The social workers realised that they need to join together and challenge what was going on collectively. They worked together with the young people from the estate. Over several weeks they realised what they had thought to be the case all along – that the children had created safety around themselves and had many strengths. The 'antisocial behaviour' and crime was one thing, but this should not detract from the safety network that they had created around themselves and which should be recognised and preserved. Using this information, the social workers advocated to the council about the needs of the young people and families. They argued that the problems the families were facing were due to a lack of support and unjust policies and that the closure orders were going to break up networks of support and care that were vitally needed. They also worked with the young people to explore what they wanted from their community – both in terms of housing but also in terms of facilitating their friendships and need for space. The young people wanted their families to be in safe accommodation that suited their needs. The social workers set up a meeting with the council so that they could listen to the young people. In this way, the decisions they made about housing were being held to account by the families that were impacted. This worked helped to build on the strengths within the community rather than punishing the things that were unwanted.

Case study 4: Overcoming procedural obstacles to support young people's relationships

Target

A social worker was the chairing meeting to discuss the needs of young people who were placed in their area as outside of county placements by other local authorities. He came across a situation where two young people from different local authorities formed a relationship. They were placed in two different homes, run by two different private companies. The young people wanted to be together but because of being from different councils, living in different homes, run by different companies, there was too much bureaucracy around the risk assessment to allow them to spend time together in either one of the homes. The result of this was that the young people were finding places all around the community to be together – in abandoned buildings, in the woods. They were thought to be smoking weed, having sex etc. in these places on the edges of the community.

Response

The social worker chairing the meeting brought everyone together to present them his idea. It was to allow the young people to spend time together in a safe place, with some supervision but with some freedom too. He knew it had some risks attached. He also knew that getting people from different local authorities and care companies was a massive barrier to getting this agreed. The social worker faced what he described as “some very old fashioned opinions in social work about how to manage safety without just saying no”. Throughout the meeting he was mindful that the thing he was advocating for might not work – the young people, who had experienced many traumatic upheavals might not welcome the offer with open arms. But he persisted with it as an idea, as something that should be offered to them. Speaking to the meeting he said that these young people should be given a chance to be in each other's homes, to cook and eat together as many other young people not in local authority care do. Although he was convening the meeting, the social worker did not have any authority over the decisions of these two different local authorities and care companies, whose each had their own procedures and sign off protocols. Its fair to say that this fairly ordinary thing felt like a massive thing to bring about. He recalls that the first reaction he had was “who is this social worker, are they mad?” The idea of allowing young people to talk and be in each other's bedrooms, to let them just hang about and enjoy being together seemed to be beyond the capability of this system. Although it was set up ostensibly to protect these children, in fact, by driving them to the margins, it was making them more vulnerable.

Outcome

To the amazement and delight of the social worker, the people at the meeting agreed to his plan. For a period of time the plan worked and the young people enjoyed the freedom to be together. The worries about them being in abandoned buildings etc. reduced worries greatly. The social recalls how exciting it was to have helped bring about a different approach, a different way of thinking. To connect them to the humanity of these young people, he asked them to think about what if it was their own child. He said he himself thought in this way: although it was hard to face all the opposition, he persisted by thinking that he would want the same for his own daughter - he would want her to have friends to the house rather than disappear into the woods, and so why should it be any different for these young people? Why should they be worthy any less care and love and effort by their corporate parents?