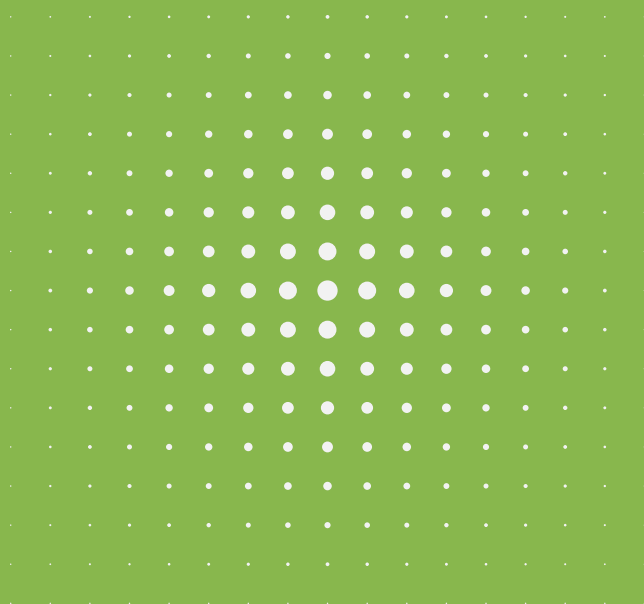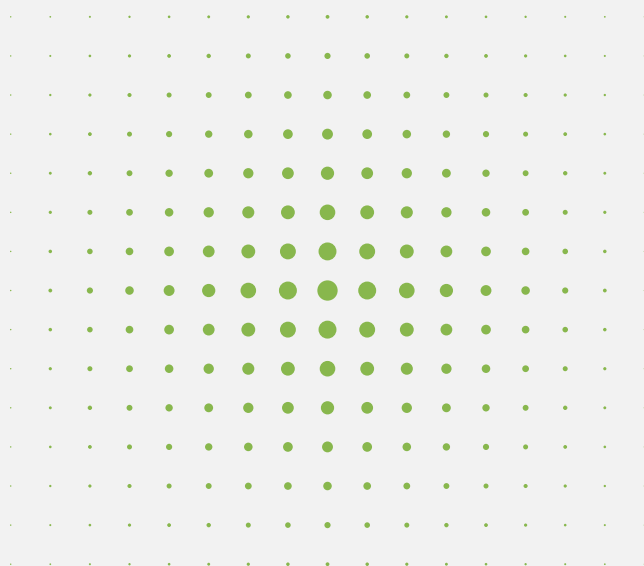# From Capacity to Context Research Project:

Interim report

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Introduction

'From Capacity to Context' is a research project concerned with the experiences of parents within the child welfare system. It sits within the Global Centre for Contextual Safeguarding (GCCS) and runs from April 2024 until March 2027. We are focussing on two 'entry points' in the child welfare system that align with the priorities of the GCCS – 1) the treatment parents who are adolescents; and 2) the treatment of parents of adolescents.

A central intention of this project is to build trusting relationships between a core research team, parents, practitioners and practice organisations, providing a foundation for collaborative learning. To this end we are partnering with The Ivison Trust (experts in supporting parents of children who experience harm outside the home); Plymouth (due to their commitment to improving outcomes for young parents) and Leeds Children's Services (as an established site innovating with the Risk Outside the Home Pathway). These partnerships have supported us to facilitate two consortia, each one made up of parents and welfare professionals from these local authorities. Our shared overarching aim is to uncover new opportunities for welfare and safeguarding services to engage with parents as partners. To achieve this, we hope to:

- Discover the cultural and systemic barriers preventing safeguarding services working collaboratively with parents to address the context of their lives
- Partner with parents and practitioners to imagine ways of overcoming these barriers
- Develop new ways of working through testing and piloting, including a new practice framework developed in participation with parents that supports practitioners to work with the context of parents' lives (and not their parenting capacity)
- Produce an arts-based output (film, etc.) for practitioners and policy makers that promotes cultural change in terms of how practitioners engage with parents of adolescents and parents who are adolescents
- Disseminate the new ideas generated by the research to policy makers and practitioners

The research is led by Dr Rachael Owens and Dr Lynne Cairns from the GCCS. In the parents of adolescent strand, we are working closely with Sarah Hall (Ivison Trust), Joanne Ross (Leeds Children's Services) and in the young parents' s strand with Rachel McDonough (Plymouth Children's Services).

Methods and approach

The project follows three broad phrases:

1) Scoping – finding out how parents are treated by the child welfare system from multiple perspectives and analysing the findings (Nov 2024 - Sep 2025)
2) Piloting - working in small groups to develop new initiatives or approaches that could improve the way that parents experience the child welfare system (Oct 2025 - July 2026)
3) Embedding and dissemination – taking learning from the pilots and developing this into material and resources to support a culture change within the child welfare system, focussing on what will help to create more equitable and partnerships-based relationships between professionals and parents (Sep 2026 – March 2027)

Scoping

In the phase we prioritised building relationships with young parents, parents of adolescents and practitioners to learn about their lives. Parents shared personal and painful stories of their encounters with welfare services while practitioners described the challenges that parents face and the deficits within the systems they work with.

In Plymouth (young parents) we conducted semi-structured narrative interviews with young parents in their homes (=n6) and with child welfare practitioners online (=n5), asking about their experiences of working with young parents. We also observed a child protection conference of a child of a young parent; reviewed case files of child protection assessments of young parents (=n5); and held a focus group with a Plymouth-based voluntary sector organisation who support parents whose children are removed from their care (with 3 practitioners).

In Leeds (parents of adolescents), our initial scoping drew on observation data from Risk Outside the Home research, which we analysed from the perspective of parents. Alongside this we focussed on building relationships within the Ivison Trust and Leeds Children's Services and through them, engaged parents and practitioners.

By May 2025, in both Leeds and Plymouth we had recruited two consortia consisting of 10-15 people in each with a roughly equal numbers of parents and practitioners. We met several times over the following months with the purpose of scoping the problem together, as detailed in Table 1. Using the Critical Utopian method, our meetings were structured around the following three stage inquiry:

1. Agreeing the problem: **establishing a shared understanding of the 'problem'** that the research is concerned with;
2. Utopian dreaming: **engaging in shared 'dreaming' around what a better future would look like** in relation to this problem; and
3. What needs to happen: **considering what needs to happen to bring this about.**

In the consortium meetings we used creative and arts-based methods to facilitate safety, engagement and discussion, including collage making, storytelling and emotions cards.

Activity	Young Parents	Parents of adolescents
1. Consortium with parent researchers only: Agreeing the problem	1 meeting, 4 parents (+ 2 children), making collages and discussion	1 meeting; 6 parents, discussions, plus 2 individual discussions with parents
2. Consortium; with practitioner researchers only: Agreeing the problem	1 meeting, 5 practitioners, making collages and discussions	1 online focus group; 4 practitioners, discussions, plus 3 individual discussions with practitioners
3. Consortium; with parents and practitioners: Utopian Dreaming	1 meeting, 4 parents (+2 children) and 4 practitioners	1 meeting; 7 parents and 7 practitioners
4. Consortium; with parents and practitioners: What needs to happen	1 meeting, 4 parents (+3 children) and 4 practitioners	1 meeting; 5 parents and 4 practitioners

Table 1

Findings: cross-project summary

When it comes to 'agreeing the problem' collectively, the data points to the following factors:

- Parents do not feel understood or seen by services which are ill-equipped to respond to all developmental stages of life

- Child welfare services seem impenetrable, opaque, confusing and unfair to parents

- The complexities of parents' lives are flattened within welfare systems - they cannot recognise or work to change the social, systemic and cultural deficits that makes parenting harder for some of us than others

- The idea of 'parenting capacity' is a socially constructed professional concept embedded through discourse and language which is not used or useful for parents

- The resilience, understanding and wisdom that parents bring are often overlooked because the starting point for engagement is often deficit

- Parents feel patronised and misunderstood by services

- Services are overwhelmed and ill-equipped to understand the specific needs of both parents of adolescents and parents who are adolescents

- It is often very difficult for services to think about the needs of parents and the needs of children together although they are in reality, inseparable from one another, meaning the focus swings from one to another in ways that are confusing and harmful – consequently young parents and young people affected by extra-familial harm are adultified and the contextual nature of parents' needs and those of their children are addressed as inter-related.

When it comes to dreaming of a different future, we agreed on the following set of common hopes for the future:

- Professionals recognise and work sensitively with the (often invisible) structural and social harms experienced by parents

- Parents are provided with the same opportunities and chances as other parents (older parents, corporate parents)

- Parents are offered respectful, humane and rights-based support where their expertise and needs are understood and do not cancel each other out.

Findings specific to young parents

What about the specific findings related to young parents? Joint reflection and analysis with young parents and practitioners led us to three inter-related themes about the 'problems' we want to address. In Table 2 below, the left column shows the themes alongside collages and quotations texts taken from consortium sessions, whilst the right-hand column contains a summary of the findings.

Theme	Summary findings
What it's like being a young parent *Collage by a young parent researcher with annotation from consortium recordings*	Young parents experience personal growth, develop resilience, and discover new forms of confidence through having a child/ren. Young parents experience rapid change and challenges in their relationships with family and friends. Young parents face complex developmental transitions, meaning that they need both a continuation of care and independence. Young parents often have their rights eroded – they are no longer thought of as a young person, but neither are they respected as an adult.
The harm that young parents experience in their day to day lives *Word cloud created from consortium discussion and quote from interview with young parent*	Young parents experience judgement and negative assumptions that assumes inferiority – this is ubiquitous. Young parents experience discrimination around their age and their gender. Young parents experience fear, social isolation and alienation. Young parents have inadequate welfare support/services (housing, health access).
Barrier to services working in partnership with parents *Collage created by young parent in a consortium meeting*	There is a lack of a framework, meaning that there is a vacuum and, in that vacuum, cultural norms and assumptions to dominate. The culture of services is on the child (baby) not parent and child together. The focus is on assessing and addressing parents' 'capacity', not helping to improve the context of their lives. There are higher expectations for young parents and increased scrutiny, compared with older parents.

Table 2

Having reflected on these findings and agreed that this is an accurate summary of the 'problem', the next stage was 'dreaming into' a different future. Young parents and practitioners took part in playful and imaginative exercises about what they wanted to see. They would like:

- Access to welcoming universal support services
- To be treated with dignity and respect and as a 'person on my own right' with needs that are valid and cared for
- To feel included and connected
- Training for people who deliver groups and services to young parents
- New messages in society about young parents that are not about correcting a 'mistake' but about celebrating strength and successes

We then worked with these 'dreams' to develop possible pilots and agreed on three key aims to shape the pilots - see Table 3. The final task for the scoping phase was to develop a collection of concrete options for piloting. We developed these by working with ideas shared in the group and local availability – also contained in Table 3.
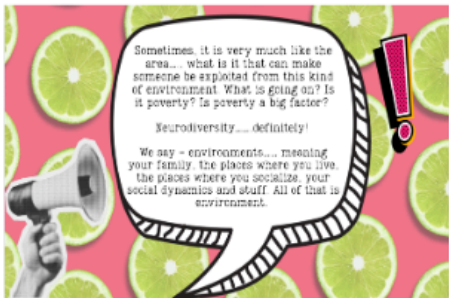
Table 3

Key Aim	Possible pilot 1	Possible pilot 2
A supportive network of peers to help us feel more connected with each other, safe and confident as young people and parents	Befriending Service – a new voluntary service supervised by paid staff. Piloting with 2 parents who would review whether this has made a difference to them	Buddy network for under 25s run via health. A parent under 25 with some experience of parenting can be budded with a newer young parent
Better care and welcome and integration in universal services public life that challenges & mitigates the discrimination we experience	Developing training for those running/facilitating universal services on what it's like to be a young parent – could be in the form of an I-doc/ leaflet/ in person	Trialling the idea of topic related co-facilitated by a young parent
A specialist framework for children's social care that supports our transition as adolescent parents that challenges & mitigates discrimination	Trailing the idea of topic related co-facilitated by a young parent	Creating a suite of adolescent sensitive resources (policies, assessment guide, film) for children's social care that works on assumptions and attitudes towards young parents and leads to more resources being offered

Table 3

To conclude the scoping phase, we 'workshopped' the options with young parents and practitioners. Members were invited to select a pilot idea and work with a partner to imagine what it could look like and what it could achieve. This was an exciting time for generating hopeful ideas and conversations changing the context of young parents' lives. This led to a final decision to focus on three tasks for piloting which are 1) developing a training package for professionals working with young parents 2) developing options for multi-media outputs (for professionals and the public) and 3) scoping the options for a buddying network.

Findings specific to parents of adolescents

What have we learnt about the specific nature of the 'problem' as it relates to parents of adolescents through this work? These are presented in Table 4, below, with representative quotations and images on the left and a summary explanation on the right:

Theme	Summary findings
What it's like being a parent of teenagers in contact with safeguarding systems *Slide with quotes from consortium meeting with parents about the emotional impact of parenting teenagers in contact with safeguarding systems*	Parenting through adolescence is complex and fragile, involving developmental and relational transitions and losses. Parents hold deep knowledge of raising children and adolescents within complex social worlds. Everyday life presents multiple challenges, including balancing wider family needs, mental health, and poverty. Parents often experience individual and cumulative trauma, including the trauma of their children experiencing harm, alongside fear, violence, and the impacts of extra-familial harms. Navigating systems can be overwhelming and exhausting, with trust in professionals often fractured. Systems may feel rigid and hostile, as parents experience under-resourced 'slow' services (such as CAMHS) alongside 'fast' responses from police and schools, including exclusion. There is an over-focus on compliance and behaviour, and an under-focus on the capacity of systems and professionals. Barriers include language, understanding, space, power, and shame.
The harm that parents of adolescents' experience in their day to day lives *Slide with quotes from consortium meeting with parents about social conditions of harm in 'environments' (contexts)*	Parents and families experience social and systemic harms, including poverty, isolation, dislocation, and racial and class inequalities. These cumulative harms can manifest as lack of safety, insecure housing, unemployment, extreme fear, violence, and stress, with the greatest risk for many being losing their child through welfare or justice systems. Such traumas are often invisible, and parents face blame and shame from systems meant to support them. This includes disempowerment, being unheard, and a lack of supportive professional relationships to build trust. Misconceptions of parental 'capacity' are frequently centred, with unrealistic expectations to control or protect children, little attention to everyday challenges, and a narrow focus on internal factors rather than external inequalities. System capacity is often neglected, including inadequate welfare support, housing, health services (CAMHS), exclusionary education practices, and harmful or absent support from police.

Theme (cont..)	Summary findings (cont..)
Barrier to services working in partnership with parents *Slide* with quotes from consortium meeting with parents about 'environments' (contexts) where harm flourishes*	Overwhelmed, fragmented systems that lack coherence, shared understandings and responses. Lack of consideration of parenting adolescents – creating a vacuum for unrealistic and idealised expectations placed on parents (unlike for 'corporate parents') Focus on capacity not context – creating a systemic trauma/harm (including lack of articulating, acknowledging and response to trauma) Intersectionality – increased isolation, discrimination and harm for racially and ethnically minoritised parents

Table 4

We brought parents and practitioner researchers together to reflect on these findings. A memorable moment from this experience was practitioner researchers sharing their emotional responses to how parent researchers have articulated their profound, lived understanding of 'contexts', despite having no training in Contextual Safeguarding. We then bridged into the second phase of our methodology, 'utopian dreaming', to reimagine social and systemic possibilities for parents of teenagers and their families. In these sessions we witnessed dialogue between parent and practitioner researchers and a deep empathy expressed to the different and similar challenges and hopes for the systems everyone lives and works within. Despite parent's traumatic experiences of systems and broken trust, sometimes shattering over prolonged periods of their lives; they expressed their empathy and respect for practitioners and their shared vision for a better future for other parents and their families through the 'dreaming' stage. This led to the consortium group agreeing that they would like to see:

- Systems that stop scapegoating parents and take active responsibility for creating safety with families and communities.
- Support responding to cumulative trauma affecting adolescents, parents and practitioners.
- Parents as partners in planning and decision-making - never passive, never excluded for being distressed.
- Sensitivity to adolescence and parenting including developmental and relational transitions - not parenting younger children applied rigidly to teenagers.
- Respect and understanding for parents that recognise their unique knowledge, wisdom and contexts

We then worked with these 'dreams' to develop possible pilots and agreed on three key aims to shape the pilots. We then developed possible pilot projects aimed to meet these key aims, based on ideas shared in the group and local networks – see Table 5.

Key Aim	Possible Pilot 1	Possible Pilot 2
Better support and sensitivity for parents of teenagers who have contact with systems to support them to feel safer, more respected and able to participate as valued partners of plans around them and their family.	A parents' forum to create a safe space for parents of adolescents experiencing harm and exploitation. Develop 'bridges of voices' between strategic spaces and forum to enhance participation and reflections between systems, practice and parents.	A language guide for parents, practitioners and chairs to challenge assumptions and misconceptions around parenting in adolescence and refocus towards contexts of parents' lives. A guide for parents, by parents to support them to participate as partners rather than problems, including resources for parents to use such as understanding multiagency roles, planning for participation and challenging systems and social harms. Sensitised to barriers including language, culture, discrimination and emotional experience including trauma.
More sensitive, relational and respectful practice with parents of adolescents to support them as partners for protection. Practice frameworks that focus on the experience and capacity of systems, challenge power imbalances that shame and blame and create equity for parent's participation.	A practice toolbox to explore and understand relational practice with parents including their past & present experiences of services, power imbalances, contexts of parents' lives to inform planning and support for parents as partners.	Explore support by practitioners for practitioners to nurture relational practice with parents and young people who experience harms. Develop individual, horizontal and vertical and multiagency resources to create safer spaces for reflection, containment and wellbeing.
Safeguarding systems that foster connections and allyship between parents, practitioners, systems and communities. We want to reframe systems as relational ecosystems working with trauma that centre trust and partnerships, rather than perpetuating fragmentations, shame and blame.	Bringing together system representatives in reflective 'thinking spaces' to examine how systemic structures can perpetuate trauma and relational harm. These spaces will explore parental experiences of judgement and practitioners' ethical distress, challenge individualised blame, and support multi-agency collaboration grounded in complexity and shared responsibility. Participants will include diverse professionals, including police and strategic leaders.	

Table 5

Conclusion

The scoping phase of this research has surfaced that young parents and parents of teenagers are denied the sensitivity, dignity and respect afforded to those not parenting through these developmental windows. As a group of co-researchers we are committed to changing this.

Through piloting new ways of working, we hope to critically examine the dominance of 'parenting capacity' and engage instead in activity that addresses the contextual, structural and systemic harms that parents face. This is critical work because are data shows that without a significant cultural shift, our current safeguarding systems have an iatrogenic impact on the lives of parents. Despite aiming to help and/or protect infants and teenagers, welfare intervention often shames and isolates parents and therefore may in fact harm relationships between parent and child, now and lifelong. This underlines the importance of involving practitioners as co-researchers alongside parents, so that we have a multi-perspectival understanding and approach which can create local change with national and global impact.

Despite the harm to parents that the research has highlighted, as a group of co-researchers we are hopeful and energised as we enter the piloting phase. We believe that this work really matters and are excited to contribute to changing welfare systems to become developmentally sensitive and able to provide young parents and parents of teenagers the enhanced space, support and dignity they deserve.