

Statement on the use of peer mapping within Contextual Safeguarding

This document clarifies the role of peer mapping as a collaborative safeguarding practice that helps build safety around young people's friendships and peer relationships, rather than monitoring peer networks.

Young people's friendships, and peer relationships more broadly, can influence their experiences of protection, safety and harm. In recognition of this, Contextual Safeguarding approaches have long championed considering them as part of safeguarding responses to extra-familial harm. However, over the last decade we have seen this position be misinterpreted and used to justify the surveillance, criminalisation and disruption of young people's friendships, often as a result of 'peer mapping' activities which are undertaken without their knowledge.

In June 2026, we released a new toolkit with updated resources to assist practitioners in working with young people's friendships and peers as part of their response to extra-familial harm. To coincide with this, we take this opportunity to clarify our position on peer mapping, peer assessment and the relationship of both to Contextual Safeguarding approaches.

How peers and friends should be considered in safeguarding practices

Contextual Safeguarding recommends that responses to extra-familial harm may require practitioners to assess young people's friendships and wider peer relationships in addition to their families. When a young person has multiple peers, such assessments can be supported by the practice of peer mapping – understanding the relationships between young people and the impact of these relationships on their safety.

Therefore, as part of Contextual Safeguarding approaches, peer mapping is a discrete activity undertaken by social workers to understand young people's friendships and peer relationships when safety planning. It should be done in collaboration with young people, to help workers better understand who is important to a young person, how relationships and contexts influence their experiences of safety and harm and what support or action may be needed. It can inform a young person's individual assessment or contribute to a contextual assessment if there is a wider need. A peer assessment can also be completed, without mapping, for duos and for less complicated groups of friends. This was the original intention of recommending peer mapping and remains so.

When peer mapping is not aligned to Contextual Safeguarding approaches

We have seen the term 'peer mapping' used to describe activity that differs significantly from its original purpose and that does not align with Contextual Safeguarding. In the name of peer mapping, safeguarding partnerships collect and share information about groups of young people across agencies, often with crime-prevention objectives that do not necessarily promote children's welfare or hold it as paramount. Young people who are not open to children's social care and whose families/carers do not know they are being discussed in multi-agency panels may be included on 'peer maps'.

Such maps are often developed using agency-held intelligence or service datasets, rather than using information provided by young people in the context of relationship-based support by social work or youth work. It is not evident that such mapping is used to inform social care assessments or to develop safeguarding with children and young people.

When mapping activities are designed to monitor risk through the surveillance or scrutiny of young people's peer networks, they are not aligned with Contextual Safeguarding.

The values underpinning safeguarding practice with friendships and peers

When peer mapping is used, it needs to be done as part of a wider assessment, in collaboration with young people, undertaken with their knowledge and accompanied by careful explanation of how the information they provide supports practitioner decision-making. It should be purposeful, proportionate and transparent.

As part of a Contextual Safeguarding approach, peer mapping can be used for two purposes only:

- To work collaboratively with young people to understand who is important in their lives, supporting social workers to identify relationships, contexts and priorities that should be considered when developing safety plans as part of individual or group work.
- To bring together relevant information already held within social care systems about young people who are connected to each other but are currently being supported via individual plans only. This approach supports coordinated safeguarding responses and helps professionals avoid working at cross purposes when supporting different young people who are friends.

Advice on the use of peer mapping

We advise safeguarding partnerships to stop holding forums that are used solely to systematically identify, record or discuss young people's peer associations without their knowledge, without an expressed safeguarding purpose and in the absence of any wider welfare-based assessment that it is intended to inform. Likewise, we clearly state that any 'peer mapping' activities that share information about children who are not known by any of the practitioners involved, are devoid of relationship-based work with young people, or are devoid of a specific safeguarding rationale are not considered a feature of Contextual Safeguarding practice and there is no evidence to support their use.

To support a re-set we propose that practitioners, service leaders and policymakers use the language of peer and friendship assessment as they do child and family assessment and consider peer mapping as part of this assessment in situations where it is needed. We hope that this will steer peer mapping towards its two intended purposes: 1) understanding what matters to young people, and, 2) understanding what matters for their safety and to meet their needs, when it comes to their friendships and peer relationships.

Undertaking work with young people's friends and peers is best supported in the context of relationship-based practice. Peer assessments and any responses they generate should be concerned with building safety in partnership with young people, parents and supportive adults through meeting needs and engaging with the contexts that shape young people's experiences. Such practice should be grounded in care and upholding young people's rights.

See our new toolkit, Context Assessments and Responses, and select 'Building safety with friends and peers' for practice resources.

Find out more on www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk
search for our Context Assessments and Responses toolkit and select
'Building safety with friends and peers'