

The Next Chapter



Sustaining social work:
practitioner experiences of Contextual
Safeguarding



This project is part of the Contextual Safeguarding programme's 'The Next Chapter' project. The Contextual Safeguarding research programme is based at Durham University. For more information about the research and to find resources from this project please visit: www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk

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Introduction

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

Contextual Safeguarding encourages new partnerships beyond social care. New multi-agency responses have sprung up and residents and shop owners have been engaged in new guardianship roles. In our excitement about including partners beyond social care, we are in danger of overlooking how Contextual Safeguarding is also changing the day-to-day professional lives of those who coordinate those multi-agency responses or engage those community guardians. As the professionals with the primary statutory safeguarding duty, it is important that we pay attention to the opportunities and implications of Contextual Safeguarding for social workers. In this report we do just that.

Contextual Safeguarding requires practitioners to take a new focus (harm outside the home); develop new skills (engaging different partners and often traumatised and disenfranchised teenagers); and work in a new policy landscape (where safeguarding and crime prevention legislation rub up against each other). But perhaps, most radically, Contextual Safeguarding requires a new way of seeing 'the problem', a new lens to consider the world. Under this approach, practitioners are asked to shift from trying to fix the behaviour of individuals towards working ecologically to change the dynamics, relationships, features and structures of a specific context, be that physical, policy or relational. These changes are considerable and, if we are serious about reforming child protection systems so that they can respond to extra-familial harm, and if we want to align with the values and domains of Contextual Safeguarding, then we need to take a closer look at the impact such a shift is having on social workers and related professionals, particularly youth workers.

Since it was first introduced as a concept in 2017, social workers have enthusiastically taken up Contextual Safeguarding. Nearly a fifth of all Children's Social Care Local Authority departments are members of the Contextual Safeguarding Local Authority Interest Network – a national network of areas committed to implementing the approach, representing a champions network of approximately 400 people. Anecdotally, we are aware of many roles which have 'Contextual Safeguarding' in their job title. But the question remains – what are social workers doing, when they are doing 'doing Contextual Safeguarding'? With so much attrition in the profession (famously a 7-year lifespan), how do social workers feel about their Contextual Safeguarding work? What do they, and others, think about what they are doing?

This project is named ‘sustaining social work’ because it explores:

- How Contextual Safeguarding practice can be sustained, so that it is not just a ‘flash in the pan’
- If the experiences of Contextual Safeguarding social workers and related professionals help to sustain the social work profession more widely

Background

For decades, social work has been a profession in flux (Daniel, 2013), with considerable media and political scrutiny, particularly when it comes to extra-familial harm (Firmin et al., 2022). The government is currently consulting on a major policy reform, ‘Children’s social care: stable homes built on love’, (Department for Education (DfE), 2023) with implications for the social care workforce and child protection practice. The DfE has also recently published a new Children’s Social Care National Framework (2023) to create greater consistency of service delivery. In December 2023, a new revision of ‘Working Together’ was published (DfE), which for the first time includes extra-familial contexts within the Common Assessment Framework and strengthens the statutory responsibility on children’s social care to consider contexts beyond the family and beyond the reach of parenting capacity.

This report, therefore, is a timely contribution to the question of what we want the future of social work professional practice to look like. It is the first of its kind to ask how Contextual Safeguarding is changing social work practice and what we can learn from this. It is also the first Contextual Safeguarding project to involve professional practitioners as co-researcher and in co-analysis. The voices of practitioners come through strongly in this report: they want to be sustained by conditions that allow them to respect children’s rights, enact social justice and bring about ecological change, through building trusted, collaborative and caring relationships.

A note about youth work

We set out to look at social work, but we discovered that one of the interesting things about Contextual Safeguarding social work is that it is being combined with youth work, in new and interesting ways. A small number of youth workers asked to join the project, and this has added a richness to the findings. When we talk about ‘practitioners’ in this report, we are referring to social workers and iterations of youth work that are utilised within a Contextual Safeguarding approach to create safety in contexts. Whilst we have explored some of the social work/youth work themes here, there is a deeper question to be explored about what it means to situate these roles side by side for the purposes of safeguarding, but this was not the focus of this project.

Short summary of the findings

In this project we used creative methods to engage with practitioners about their day to day work, including collage making (this is explained more below). Table 1 tells the findings in three short summary statements, with a relevant image from a participant's collage to illustrate each one and a short narrative.

Summary Statement	Collage image	Narrative
I've got a new lens to see the world		Contextual Safeguarding gives people a new lens with which they can look on the world. It has opened new possibilities for practice. Through this approach, social workers and youth workers can form new types of relationship with young people and new ways of working creatively with adults. There is a lot of energy, excitement and joy around being able to work in this way.
But I feel like I'm going into battle		But practitioners face considerable barriers to trying to do Contextual Safeguarding in systems that seem to be working against them. They face significant ethical questions around how to work with other partners, especially the police and frustration about the limited resources, knowledge, lack of a shared vision and understanding that they are met with. Under pressure, systems continue to revert to process, and procedure over relationships.
So I have to act like a bridge		Practitioners live with the core tension which exists between the possibilities created by Contextual Safeguarding and the reality of the systems they are in. They work hard to bridge or patch this gap, using their own effort and skills – showing, explaining, advocating on many fronts. They come close to young people experiencing considerable harm, and care deeply about them and their safety. They feel responsible and burdened, lonely, tired and often misunderstood. They experience paradoxical and contradictory feelings – imposter/expert, powerful/powerless.

Methodology

In this project we wanted to learn about what practitioners did, what they felt and what they thought about their work. We did this in three ways:

1. Practitioner co-research group

We invited five people to join a Practitioner Co-research Group. They were selected based on their advanced knowledge of Contextual Safeguarding implementation, gained through leading system change in their local areas. Three members were social workers, and two had a youth work backgrounds. The role of the group was to advise and help with setting up the project, reflect on their professional experiences together, take part in ethnographic diary keeping (see below), co-facilitate research workshops, analyse the data and participate in its dissemination. The group met 10 times during the project – eight times online and twice in person.

2. Digital diaries

Members of the co-research group were invited to use an app called ‘Trip Cast’ to write private messages to the research lead. The instructions were very open – anything that related to their work on Contextual Safeguarding that they wanted to share.

3. Research workshops

We ran four in-person workshops in the following locations: Bristol, Solihull, London and Motherwell. Each workshop ran from 9.30am – 3.30pm and followed a similar format. Practitioners sat in a circle (or as near as was possible) and were led in a series of arts-based reflective activities, the longest of which was making collages to reflect on the one side on ‘how I see my role’ and on the other on ‘how others see my role’. Each session was facilitated by the research lead and a member of the co-research group and was attended by approximately 15 people. In total, across the four workshops 63 practitioners participated in the study.

Findings

When it comes to practitioners' experiences of implementing Contextual Safeguarding there are three factors of note:

1. Practitioners are very enthusiastic about Contextual Safeguarding and the possibilities it opens up – they love it and want to do more of it. It helps them to **practice in ways that feel exciting and energising**. They shared examples of practice which are ecological, justice-oriented and relationship-based (see Case Studies for examples which are published separately).
2. Practitioners feel like they must battle on many fronts to be able to do their work. They do not have the support from partners or within their own organisations to work in the way they want to and **experience ethical conflicts around the parameters of their roles**, especially when it comes to working with the police.
3. Practitioners experience a **tension** at the heart of their work. This is between **what they see is possible through Contextual Safeguarding and what is achievable in their current systems**. Coming close to young people through direct work, and caring deeply about them, this tension is increased. Practitioners try to bridge the shortfall within their systems, hoping to mitigate its failings. They gain support through solidarity with peers. Inevitably however, trying to individually mitigate system failings can create a sense of personal failure and isolation.

This is summaries in the diagram below:



Figure 1: The experiences of practitioners doing Contextual Safeguarding

These findings are explored in more detail below.

Finding 1: The possibilities created by Contextual Safeguarding

Practitioners were very enthusiastic about the transformative potential of Contextual Safeguarding – it was, one said, like “discovering a new world”. Contextual Safeguarding had opened up new and exciting possibilities for their work with young people and with other professionals. It had given them a “new lens” that allowed them to “see beyond the walls”. They felt like they had a new language to name system harm and resist practice as usual. Several spoke of how it had enabled them to do work that they felt proud of.

I'm quite enthusiastic about how I feel about Contextual Safeguarding. The wonder never stops! I think like I'm always curious about what's going on within [my area]. Rebuilding lives as well. So, like kind of looking at our young people from a different perspective to rebuild kind of how we're offering practice to them (Workshop participant)



Collage title: How I see my work

Words: discover; a new era; heart; gateway; journey, and a place to feel good

Description: Collage exemplifying feelings of transformation that Contextual Safeguarding provides

Practitioners also talked about how exciting it is to be part of a movement with other people who are Contextual Safeguarding enthusiasts. They described how much they get out of seeing professionals ‘get’ Contextual Safeguarding for the first time and the impact that this can have on practice, for example seeing police colleagues working with a ‘welfare’ lens.

Being given permission, through Contextual Safeguarding, to consider the contexts of harm was important for many – they could see the “power” and potential of being able to change the social conditions. They spoke about the importance, within the approach, of developing trusted relationships – with other professionals, people in the community and young people. Most of the practitioners in the research were all involved in direct work with young people. They spoke about how Contextual Safeguarding helped them to relate differently to young people:

For me, my personal favourite thing about it is honouring the strengths of young people. They have got a thousand strategies for being

safer. They are much more able to assess the safety on their estate, like to the extent that when I come and visit they meet me at my car and chaperone me to their door because they're so worried about what's going to happen, like, they are skilled in so many ways. And I love to kind of like acknowledge that with them, learn from them and really like sort of celebrate that as well (Workshop participant)

This idea of Contextual Safeguarding holding out tantalising possibilities for how professionals relate to young people and what this could mean for how they experience services was echoed by a workshop participant whose collage and description of it are shown below:



Quotation: *"This is one man telling another man about a butterfly, there's a speech bubble with a butterfly, which...is essentially what I feel like I was doing a lot of the time, talking to other young men about ... you know, the chance of things changing and being different" (Workshop participant)*

Many practitioners shared the idea that Contextual Safeguarding was in line with the reasons why they came into social work, and for youth workers, it gave them a different focus and sense of purpose. For many this was about being able to work with young people in a way that felt empowering and meaningful. They spoke about how it was a privilege and a joy to work with teenagers, there was a strong sense of care and love.

Contextual Safeguarding had given permission to many to work in new ways, for example, social workers using youth work methods, like group work:

I've had several lads who were in that group together and then got consent from them and their parents to see them together... so, a lot of my work has been with them as a pair or ..as a trio, sometimes, ...I'm still doing the same kind of work that I do with one of them, but actually, I can expand that and we use the local youth club because it's a [Council owned] building, and it's got a kitchen, great! So, we do pool and we cook food ... and then you've got your actual session that you can do, which is a bit more structured, it's basically youth work. But specifically targeted on exploitation, and conventional exploitation, on the back of which you then get disclosures. So then, and then you go, "Okay, well, now we have a disclosure," and then you have, then your enhanced safeguards then kicks in (Workshop participant)

Practitioners described how much they enjoyed working in new team configurations and new types of work – for example working in pairs rather than alone, working with peer groups (as in the example above) and working to create safety around a context rather than trying to alter young people’s behaviour. They spoke about the sense of togetherness they felt with others who are committed to Contextual Safeguarding. Some practitioners described having a shared identity and purpose which they could draw on for support when things were hard, and which gave them a sense of shared risk and responsibility. The extent to which practitioners were ‘allowed’ to step outside of conventional ways of doing social work varied across regions. Those areas who were given the freedom to integrate youth work into safeguarding practices were also the ones who seemed to have licence to be creative generally. This gave them a sense of autonomy and enjoyment of their work.

Finding 2: System battles and contradictions

One of the most challenging aspects of doing Contextual Safeguarding is working with partners within, and beyond, social care. Many were involved in multi-agency meetings and teams with strong police representation and community safety partners. Repeatedly social workers spoke about how this aspect of the work was very difficult, creating frustration and distress. They described not feeling supported to hold the boundary between the two agencies, giving examples of how police actions had undermined their efforts to create welfare and relationships-based support for young people. For example:

I’m not a happy bunny with police this weekend one bit... they have been putting curfews on kids and checking in on them-especially looked after young people and it’s driving me mad... one child had his curfew checked at 2/3am... that is provoking.. and a blatant infringement of his human rights...I hate these reactive decisions and how much harder it makes any trust in services! Traumatized young people being retraumatized by the system meant to safeguard them
(Digital diary)

Social workers felt that their professional authority was undermined in interactions with the police. This was particularly around the gendered nature of social work and policing, where the former is characterised as female and feminine and the latter as male and masculine. Working with the police created ethical tensions: in collages, people depicted images of snakes or weasels to depict how they sometimes felt when asked to share information with the police about young people they are working with. This is described by the following workshop participant:

I think for me we’re trying to protect so we share the information we need to share and that’s where I feel a little bit like a weasel sometimes. And I know we’re told ‘You’ve got to submit that, and you do this, and you’ve got to submit that.’ And it’s like they get frustrated as

they're like, 'Okay, but when does that person get arrested?' You know, that's an exploiter, we've got quite clear evidence. We know they've got to go and investigate, and we know they've got to do this, but we never get the feedback and I think that's why it can feel so one sided and feel as though you're only ever informing on someone because you're not getting any feedback on it (Workshop participant)

Although Practitioners expressed distress at having to work closely with the police, they did not offer a strong critique about whether this was something that social workers should be doing. Working with the police seemed to them to be problematic but inevitable. Practitioners experience a dissonance between the belief on the one hand that there is a shared agenda to protect young people and, on the other, their feelings about being like 'snakes, spiders and weasels'. It seems like practitioners thought this was something they had to endure (feeling "pulled, left right and centre" as one workshop participant described it) and that it came with the territory of working in extra-familial harm.

A common theme was that practitioners had to learn new ways of working, whilst also trying to educate others about the value of working in this way, even as they themselves did not feel sure of what they were doing. Asking workers to use new tools in this context felt, in the words of one manager, like sending workers "out into the oblivion". Practitioners spoke of how people perceive them in ways that do not reflect their own perceptions. This includes that Contextual Safeguarding practitioners are lazy, ("people think I'm just hanging out in McDonalds"), are lucky (to not be 'case holding'), braver than others (to work with 'problem' teenagers) and have a luxurious life ("[other social workers] probably think of my job that I go on walks, I go to the spa, I eat cake"). One workshop participant described how Contextual Safeguarding's slower pace – of "sitting and holding risk and actually thinking about what we're doing rather than firefighting" was a source of misunderstanding and judgement by others.

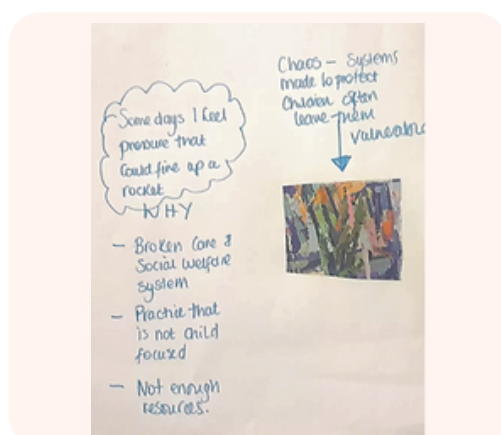
Whilst being thought of as having a luxurious life on the one hand, Contextual Safeguarding practitioners were seen as creating problems and more work for other people, because they uncovered problems not previously known. Even the term 'Contextual Safeguarding' could create an intimidating impression, they said, panicking people that they had to do more work on top of existing heavy workloads and "push back" or "systemic avoidance". Youth workers doing context-based work in a rural area had to "persuade" their community that although their town seemed quiet, extra-familial harm still happened there.

This resistance from colleagues was just one element in a much broader constellation of system battles that practitioners were engaged in. Their efforts to build relationships with young people and intervene in contexts were repeatedly thwarted by a system that defaults to bureaucratic processes under pressure and is full of contradictions.

We present four system issues:

1. The conditions in child welfare services can, ironically, be **less conducive to child-centred relationships-based work** than criminal justice systems
2. Children's services are **extremely depleted of resources**, making it very difficult to innovate and causing a retreat to bureaucratic procedure
3. The **systems are not agile enough** to cope with the reality of people's lives, creating, in the words of one practitioner "tipping points" that cause systemic harm to young people caught within them
4. The high profile nature of extra-familial harm means that it can be a proxy for power struggles at a macro level, creating a **system full of anxiety about external scrutiny** which limits meaningful, radical change

There were some regional variations between the workshops, in terms of how much workers felt like they were given licence to be creative and work differently. There were also examples of difference even within a region, due to the presence of a strong leadership changing practice. But in every workshop, we heard about how workers struggle with moving beyond traditional casework with individual children to making safeguarding responses that change whole contexts. Being able to shift practice so that partners worked together to change context seemed out of reach for most. In many Digital diary entries and workshop discussions there was a sense of workers feeling overwhelmed by a system that would not allow them to measure their work contextually. Several workshop practitioners spoke about the continued focus on parenting behaviour as the threshold for social care support. In one area that had made significant advancements in developing Contextual Safeguarding responses to extra-familial harm, it only took a senior manager to be off work for a matter of weeks for children extra-familial harm to be de-prioritised behind familial harm, rather than priority being based on the level of harm. This collage exemplifies how these types of system barriers are experienced by practitioners:



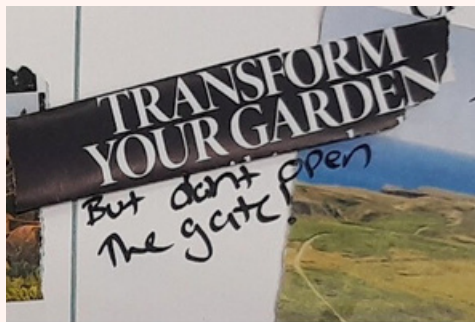
Collage title: How I feel about my work

Words (left): Some days I feel pressure that could fire up a rocket. Why – Broken Care Social Welfare System; Practice this is not child focused; Not enough resources

Words (right): Chaos – systems made to protect child often leave them vulnerable

Finding 3: Core tension at the heart of Contextual Safeguarding direct practice

A strong theme throughout all four workshops was the core tension at the heart of Contextual Safeguarding practice. This tension exists because of the possibilities opened up by Contextual Safeguarding on the one hand and the multiple battles involved in realising it on the other. This tension is powerfully depicted in the following collage:



Collage title: How others see my work

Words: 'Transform your garden but don't open the gate'

Description: What it feels like to be asked to think big and make change but not be properly supported to bring them to fruition

Although practitioners named many system barriers to why they could not 'open the gate', there was also a strong theme of self-blame for not being more successful at overcoming them. Having been exposed to Contextual Safeguarding, practitioners have experienced a kind of awakening. They can't "unsee" what they have seen. But when the system lets them down, their response is to work harder and doubt themselves. A consequence of this is that practitioners have working lives that were beset by paradoxes – for example paralysis and chaos; imposter and expert; lonely and connected; powerful and powerless. These are working conditions where 'good' and 'bad' coexist in often polarised and extreme binaries:



Title: How I see my work

Words: The good things jar, The bad things jar

The feeling of working in this way was described by one as playing a game of 'snakes and ladders' – very up and down, moving or stuck, and not much in between. The working lives of practitioners felt intense and unrelenting, especially given the high levels of interest in Contextual Safeguarding and anxiety around extra-familial harm.

Most of practitioners in the study were involved in close, direct, relationships-based practice with young people and families. There was a strong sense of their feelings of love and care for the young people they worked. Many talked movingly about particular young people they knew of and who they were worried about. Many were holding considerable risk on their own. Practitioners were worried about the impact of extra-familial harm, but they also very concerned about the impact on young people of limited safeguarding systems. They felt a strong sense of duty to try and change the situation. Commonly people talked about being like a “a bridge” – between the rest of the system and young people, trying to advocate and protect:

It is really positive...getting a room full of people that, that are all likeminded. But yeah, it's about how to access those people that aren't as, as likeminded and those other sort of services that, that don't prioritise it and see it as a bit of a pain really, when you're sort of trying to get additional support in for teenagers who essentially don't want to engage a lot of the time as well, cos that's the very nature of it. So sort of sitting with that, when you've got a family essentially not consenting to the work, sometimes is a difficult position to, to be in
(Workshop participant)

Practitioners talked about advocating for young people with other services and also with inspectorates. There was a sense that they were often battling on several fronts. One participant gave an example of battling with a notoriously punitive judge for a young person to be given welfare-based services. It was successful, and the young person subsequently had no more convictions and did well. Three years later the battle erupted again when the young person applied for a job with the council and the worker was called on to advocate to the HR department for the young person to be seen in terms of their strengths and in context. As one participant summed up:

We share the same frustrations as the young people over the services that are missing (Workshop participant)

The impact of trying to safeguard young people and also mitigate structural and systemic barriers, understandably took its toll on practitioners. Many spoke about the emotional and physical impact of working this way. In the words of one, feeling like a “person stood on a rock, looking at the universe”.

Another made this collage:



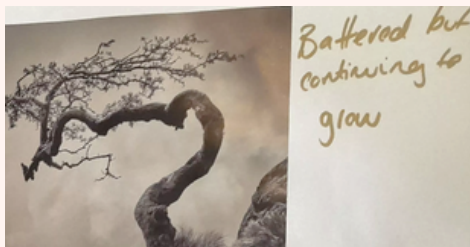
Title: How I feel

Description (left): A broken safety pin

Words (left): A stretched mechanism

Words (right): Testbench – Fear of reviews / change; Are we the “test”

Here is another extract from a collage with a similar theme:



Title: My work

Words: Battered but continuing to grow

Quotation: I've got this sort of rickety old tree, because I feel like that's where I'm at in my social work because I've been doing it for a long time and I'm like, trying really hard to not be burnt out and trying really hard to stay kind of positive, but also like it's becoming increasingly challenging in the circumstances (Workshop participant)

A strong message in all the data is that doing this work is very hard. Practitioners found different ways to cope with this. For some, it was by focussing on the small changes that individual young people made. Whilst this is clearly important, it seemed that focussing on young people's needs might become a replacement for trying to change the context, because the latter was not possible, however, working in this way meant that contextual problems remained. Others focussed almost exclusively on perpetrators as a way to create safety. This again is understandable but misses the emphasis within Contextual Safeguarding on building strengths and the complexity of young people who become adults shifting from being framed as 'victim' to 'perpetrator' overnight, and so also undermining the focus within Contextual Safeguarding on a children's-rights and a welfare-oriented approach. When asked to describe the day in the life of a Contextual Safeguarding social workers, a workshop participant said:

At times, I think it can feel very stressful. A lot of the time it will feel very, very stressful. I think they are under a lot of pressure a lot of the time because we're asking them to brave and try new things and that can be a wee bit scary, when you're working to processes and procedures that are very familiar harm.... It's like walking a tight rope or almost on a bike, hurtling towards a cliff edge (Workshop participant)

Food and drink were commonly mentioned as helping to them to cope. Many wondered how to sustain themselves and what would happen if they left. In the practitioner co-research group, we discussed whether the current situation with Contextual Safeguarding demanded a certain sort of leader – someone who was prepared to be a bit “maverick” and challenge the status quo, meaning that it attracted a certain sort of person – someone who was prepared to be a bit awkward. At the same time, however, being “maverick” as an individual or a team could be an exhausting role to have in a system. Being maverick also led to a sense that any change that had been achieved was precarious, like it being possible to have completely different approaches within one council, depending on the team leader.

The workshops and co-researcher group were described by participants as important for sharing common feelings and gaining support and solidarity. The co-researchers formed a WhatsApp group called “Imposters Assembled” where they shared messages about challenging situations, celebrated achievements and offered many messages of support and kindness to each other. Practitioners doing Contextual Safeguarding can feel exposed and exhausted. Coming together to reflect on their experiences and talk helped them to off-load and share their emotional burdens. It was also crucial to prevent them from ‘othering’ those who ‘don’t get’ Contextual Safeguarding: the final discussion in the co-researcher group was on the importance of not dismissing colleagues who take a different approach and resisting seeing them as ‘the enemy’ but instead having compassion and patience to bring them to a different way of working with young people. The group agreed that this type of wider view was only possible with strong peer support and solidarity.

Implications and recommendations

We present three overarching recommendations and a series of more detailed implications for policy makers, leaders and practitioners and for those developing Contextual Safeguarding.

Recommendation 1: That The Association of Safeguarding Partnerships (TASP), Social Work England, The Scottish Social Services Council, What Works Centre for Children's Social Care and other related bodies work together to bring the values and principles underlying Contextual Safeguarding to bear within the whole safeguarding system, including working ecologically, collaboratively and through the lens of children's rights and welfare.

The study shows that Contextual Safeguarding offers a way of doing child-centred, justice-orientated, relationship-based work that makes a difference. Practitioners find working in this way exciting and rejuvenating. Many practitioners are drawn to this work because it is in line with their values and the reasons they came into social work. For those who are concerned with sustaining social work as a profession, there is much to be learnt here about practice that is effective, ethical and meaningful to be involved with. Practitioners long to be able to work creatively alongside children and families and not in combat with them. They want to be able to change communities, not by focussing on the behaviour of young people and/or the parenting they receive, but by bolstering strengths and creating caring adult guardians. They should be supported to do so.

Recommendation 2: That Department for Education, Home Office, British Association of Social Workers (BASW), College of Policing, National Youth Agency prioritise addressing the barriers that prevent practitioners realising the potential of Contextual Safeguarding, particularly the question of the role of social worker, youth work and the police in extra-familial safeguarding.

There are considerable cultural, structural and system barriers preventing social workers realising the possibilities of Contextual Safeguarding. In the words of one, they have been shown a beautiful garden but not been allowed to open the gate. To extend the metaphor, some practitioners just climb over the gate, looking over their shoulder the whole time, trying to persuade others to do the same. Others accept the situation and try to grow flowers in the pavement on the side, valuing the small successes they can produce there. But neither of these are very effective nor sustainable. As we write this report, two of the five members of the Practitioner Co-researcher group – who are highly specialised expert leaders within two of the most successful iterations of Contextual Safeguarding systems – are doing familial safeguarding work, due to the prioritisation of this above extra-familial harm, when the pressure is on. This is unsustainable and need to change.

Recommendation 3: That Association of the Directors of Children's Services, Contextual Safeguarding Local Authority Interest Network (LAIN), BASW, National Youth Agency work collectively to recognise the needs of social workers and youth workers working in Contextual Safeguarding, identifying opportunities to provide and prioritise reflective spaces, supportive supervision that offers emotional containment and peer-support and solidarity.

The focus of this study is practitioners. Sometimes we can be reluctant to focus on the needs of practitioners, deflecting attention onto families and young people who are after all the reason practitioners exist. But to ignore the needs of practitioners doing Contextual Safeguarding work, or any social work, is a bit like expecting a beautiful garden to emerge using only neglected, rusty tools, poor soil and dried up seeds. We have seen in this study that practitioners are struggling to manage the multiple demands upon them – they are trying to safeguard children alongside, and often through, challenging their own organisational systems. This is complex and counter-cultural work. They are often exhausted and blame themselves for not being/knowing/doing enough. The conditions that have created this situation need to shift (see Recommendations 1 and 2). In the meantime, we need to support those doing Contextual Safeguarding work to stay hopeful and energised.

The implications of the findings and recommendations are as follows:

Leaders and practitioners need to:

- Recognise the core tension at the heart of this work, pay attention to the toll this take on us (individually and as teams), and name the structural and systemic conditions that influence how they practice
- Advocate for strong peer support and safe spaces with like-minded passionate people for sharing knowledge and investing in a network of practitioners doing Contextual Safeguarding, recognising that it is only through strong professional relationships that sustained change is created
- Seek conditions that allow us to be caring, reflective, work fluidly and creatively and to resist work cultures that are hyper-professionalised and bureaucratic, and which reinforce white supremacist values and practices
- Be vocal about the fact that CS needs resourcing, including responses for young people and staff support, but not feel individually responsible for this
- Recognise the gender power imbalance in inter-professional work and find ways to counter this and value female knowledge and expertise held within social work
- Find ways for the maverick local leader to integrate into systems
- Celebrate small shifts in young people and manage the expectations of workers, but continue to hold out a vision for large-scale ecological change
- Embrace compassion and patience towards colleagues (like we would towards young people) – this will help us to resist 'othering' and splitting people who don't 'get' CS

Those developing Contextual safeguarding research need to:

- Research the role of the police in multi-agency safeguarding to support policy development in this area
- Evidence the importance of professional peer support and reflective spaces
- Provide opportunities for sustaining relationships to develop and grow i.e. via the champions network
- Communicate clearly that Contextual Safeguarding represents a radical cultural shift and not an 'add on' to existing systems

Policymakers need to:

- Recognise that children's social care context is fatigued with budget restraints and processes that are unaligned with a Contextual Safeguarding approach
- Take seriously the transformative potential of Contextual Safeguarding for the whole social care system (i.e. centring an ethics of care and young people's views etc.) which is not just good for young people but good for practitioners and whole systems too
- Understand that Contextual Safeguarding is not just about changing policy, it's also about reinforcing and resourcing a culture change. This means that along with resourcing changes in practice, practitioners also need safe, reflective professional spaces for peer learning and support so that this cultural shift can happen
- Recognise that integrating Contextual Safeguarding into a system needs time, investment, support and patience
- Resource workers to do Contextual Safeguarding as their core work, rather than an additional thing they often don't have time for
- Allow Contextual Safeguarding workers the space to work creatively, relationally and to be respected and recognised for their work, including looking at how social work and youth work can complement each other
- Develop multi-agency safeguarding guidance that centralises the rights of young people around an ethics of care so that there is a much clearer understanding of what it means for safeguarding to be 'everybody's responsibility'
- Recognise the relational and embodied reality of social work – having face to face meetings and co-working for fostering relationships of trust

Conclusion

Contextual Safeguarding has moved social work and related practice into new areas. This is the first study to look closely at what this means and how it is experienced by those doing the work. By tracking the day to day lives of five practice leaders and reflecting deeply through arts-based methods with sixty more, a picture has emerged of practitioners full of vision, love and enthusiasm to work differently and to support young people to have positive futures in safe communities. If these practitioners are making strides forwards, it is often despite, not because of, the system conditions they work within. Many think of themselves as being a bit of a 'trouble-maker', willing to be seen as 'maverick' and to be unpopular. However, this is not sustainable as a model for innovation leadership and nor does it address the fact that not everyone can, due to structural inequalities, 'risk' standing out and being unpopular.

This leaves us with a core tension – felt individually and collectively – at the heart of Contextual Safeguarding practice. This is a tension created by living with a dissonance between possibilities and reality, when caring for the safety and well-being of young people. Bearing this tension is not only exhausting but it can also lead to self-blame, loneliness, exhaustion and ethically compromised practice. This is not good for workers, young people or families. The message of this report is that Contextual Safeguarding can, and does, enable safeguarding responses that are founded on ecological approaches, social justice, care and trusting relationships. However, if we want to sustain and grow this work and see it embedded across children's services, we need to name and recognise the system barriers at play and work collectively to create cultural, systemic and policy reform.

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