Systemic Social Work and Contextual Safeguarding

Key Messages for Practice

Becky Lewis*, Caroline Pipe** and Lisa Bostock***

*Strategic Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service Manager, Bristol City Council

**Clinical Director, Centre for Systemic Social Work

***Senior Research Fellow, Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire

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Introduction

Over the last decade much work has been done in social work settings to establish evidence-based practice frameworks which enable improvements in child protection responses and systems. In most local areas social workers and partners are asked to work to an integrative practice model within these frameworks, drawing from evidence, tools and models to provide services which are congruent across the local system within the preferred framework of the local authority and adaptive to local and family need.

In this briefing we explore the relationship between Contextual Safeguarding and systemic practice theories and approaches within social work – and the opportunities there are to integrate these approaches within a local area's practice model. We have provided cases examples and some questions to support applying these ideas in practice.

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to safeguarding young people from harm they experience in extra-familial contexts. Systemic theories focus on understanding how the problems faced by many families and children who are supported by social care are complex and span multiple systems and contexts requiring holistic, multi-perspective assessment and interventions.

The briefing is divided into three sections. In section one we summarise the two approaches. In the second section we reflect on what the two approaches share and where they may diverge. In the final section we present how they have worked together by use of a case study and make recommendations for how to explore this potential in the future.

Contextual Safeguarding

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. The approach has been in development since 2011 following a three-year review of practice responses to cases of peer-on-peer abuse (Firmin, 2017). The Contextual Safeguarding Framework (Firmin et al., 2016), which provides a conceptual, strategic and operational framework for designing the approach in local areas, is made up of four 'domains'. A Contextual Safeguarding System:

- **Targets** the contexts (and social conditions) associated with abuse including spaces, places and people causing harm outside the family home (Domain 1)
- **Uses a child protection** rather than community safety **legislative framework** to develop responses to extra-familial harm (Domain 2)
- **Features partnerships** between children's services and young people, parents, wider communities along with the range of agencies who have a reach into the places and spaces where extra-familial harm occurs (Domain 3)

- **Measures contextual impact** of its work – and the change it creates in public, education and peer settings, as well as for individual children and families (Domain 4)

Collectively, these four domains describe the capabilities of a safeguarding system designed to respond to the contextual dynamics of extra-familial harm.

There are a set of values that underpin the Contextual Framework – and understanding these is integral to ensuring its use stays true to the intention behind its design. The need to assert these values emerged through testing and were published in 2020 (Firmin, 2020; Firmin and Lloyd, 2020; Wroe, 2020). Contextual Safeguarding is:

- **Collaborative**: Is achieved through collaboration between professionals, children and young people, families and communities to inform decisions about safety.

- **Ecologica**l: Considers the links between the spaces where young people experience harm and how these are shaped by inequalities.

- **Rights-based**: Rooted in children's and human rights.

- **Strengths-based**: Builds on the strengths of individuals and communities to achieve change.

- **Evidence-informed**: Grounded in the reality of how life happens. Proposes solutions that are informed by the lived experiences of young people, families, communities and practitioners.

When applying this framework and set of values, practitioners have engaged in activities which: recognise the *interplay* between contexts; assess the *weight of influence* different contexts have on young people's safety, and; seek to build contextual safety on two levels (Firmin, 2020).

At Level 1 level practitioners and teams have identified ways to consider extra-familial contexts in their direct work with children and families – such as foregrounding the impact of these contexts during assessments, or recommending interventions in these contexts as part of the plan to safeguard and promote the welfare of a young person.

At Level 2 systems have been created for referring, assessing and providing support into groups and contexts themselves as a means of building safety.

Systemic Social Work

Systemic thinking promotes a focus on the relationships and the interconnectivity between different parts of a person's life and the systems around them. The theory has gained traction in children's social care settings where professionals have traditionally struggled to capture the nuanced and sophisticated interplay between families, professional networks and the broader contexts influencing their thinking and

actions, focusing more exclusively on individual capacity to create change. Systemic approaches were pioneered in the 1970s by Gregory Bateson who explored how family patterns, including inherent beliefs, drivers and power structures, develop and maintain family functioning. These concepts remain important to systemic thinking today.

According to systems theory, change is generated in families by the introduction of new ideas and perspectives. This enables practitioners to help create change by introducing new perspectives and observations to assist families to develop new understandings of their relational patterns (Bateson, 1972). This may include challenging narratives of deficit - often seen in families who feel stuck in certain viewpoints and behaviours - which can limit possibilities of change and create a sense of hopelessness (White, 1990).

By moving away from individualising problems and a practitioner adopting a relational approach, a more holistic perspective on the complex difficulties experienced by some families is established. Family difficulties are often developed and maintained by historical experiences of marginalisation, oppression and poor experiences of so called "helping" agencies (Mason, 2010). Through a practitioner introducing different perspectives, problems can be understood as interconnected, multifaceted and unique and this can provide families the space to see things differently and identify opportunities for change.

By taking a systemic approach professionals seek to assist families to resolve their difficulties by adopting a more curious and appreciative stance with an emphasis on transparency, collaboration and compassion. To do this, professionals are required to move away from a position of "safe certainty" where professional expertise is unquestioningly accepted (Mason, 1993), to a "second order" (Burr, 1995) position where local knowledges of families and communities are valued and utilised to create change.

A key concept in systemic theory is considering multiple perspectives and multiple possibilities. In this way, practitioners need to recognise that there is no "single unified truth" in complex family difficulties and everyone involved is likely to have a different understanding of what is happening and what has happened. To respond the practitioner much ensure that many ideas are presented and explored in interventions (Willott et al., 2012). In practice, promoting the coexistence of multiple narratives challenges family behaviours focused on proving which account is correct and instead focuses on how varying accounts have been created and finding opportunities to move forward positively.

In responding to extra-familial harm when taking a Contextual Safeguarding approach, social workers may be faced with an even greater number of multiple perspectives and competing narratives. For example, the narratives of multiple families and peers within a peer group affected by serious violence and conflict; the neighbours' who are witness to the harm the group are experiencing; the businesses who are affected by the increased violence in the area; and the school environment in which some of the harm occurs.

What they share in common

- Traditionally professional agencies focus on problems as defined by their perspectives and expecting families to alter their behaviour accordingly. This process of "first order change" – expert led and motivated by external influences (monitoring, threat of legal action etc) is often insubstantial and poorly sustained. Both Contextual Safeguarding and systemic approaches seek to achieve "second order change" where the environmental factors, beliefs and relationships which underpin problems are rethought.

- To understand need and harm, both promote a holistic approach to assessment. The systemic approach to understanding family difficulties and functioning - understanding of unhelpful relationship patterns, narratives of deficit, power differentials and factors contributing to marginalisation and oppression - all have considerable relevance to both understanding of extra-familial harm and intervening effectively.

- This includes focusing on the interplay between different contexts/systems and the need for practitioners to identify and understand the weight of different contexts on any given situation. For example, whether the influence of a peer group or perpetrator network is greater than the influence of carers' parenting capacity.

- Adopting a systemic "second order", non-expert position and taking a contextual approach embraces the value of multiple perspectives by drawing on local knowledges, skills and ideas. This enables new solutions to emerge by exploring differences in perspectives. It also promotes partnership with non-traditional safeguarding partners from community groups to residents associations, parks to transport providers as well as parents and carers.

How they can work together

Having considered the shared framework of Contextual Safeguarding and systemic social work approaches you may now want to consider ways in which you can bring these ideas into your own, or your team's practice. A good starting point is to consider what opportunities might exist to bring multi-perspectives into practice concerning extra-familial harm.

Supporting practitioners to maintain professional curiosity through a systemic approach is principally achieved through use of hypothesising. Hypothesising enables practitioners to generate multiple perspectives about what might be happening within a context (Brown, 1995). This skill can be applied when considering individual young people, peer group or place of concern and is important to embed within personal practice, supervision and multi-agency environments.

Across many areas, multi-agency meetings have been introduced to support identification and planning in response to young people at risk or experiencing extra-familial harm. Some meetings have a specific focus, for example child sexual exploitation, others have a wider remit to respond to all forms of extra-familial harm, including intervening in locations of concern. These meetings bring together information from multiple sources, including police intelligence, social care and local practitioner knowledge to support identification of risks to young people from different contexts with a view to making timely and develop effective safety plans. They provide an important opportunity for practitioners to have the space to consider multiple perspectives, test assumptions and ensure plans are evidence based and informed by holistic analysis.

Key questions for chairs of multi-agency meetings to address extra-familial harm

The following list of questions are designed to support chairs of multi-agency extra-familial harm panels or complex strategy meetings, reflect on how best to facilitate participation, balance community knowledge with official reports and focus intervening in contexts of concern.

Participation

- Who's voice has been loudest in this meeting?
- Are there voices we haven't heard from – is this meeting accessible to everybody who has stake in this issue?
- Who isn't represented at this meeting?

Knowledge

- What is the unsaid in this meeting?
- What assumptions are we making?
- What types of information are we privileging in this space? Are we falling into the trap of preferencing statutory "knowledge" e.g. crime reports over community "knowledge" e.g. what local people tell us about safety and harm?

Agreeing actions

- Who here has the resources to influence change in the space or group we are discussing?
- Does our action plan respond to the systemic and contextual drivers of harm for example disproportionality, relational history, poverty, educational opportunity?
- Does our action plan take actual action to intervene or does it rely on process to create "unsafe certainty"? Are our actions actions, or are they actions for more meetings?

Case study: bringing systemic thinking into contextual assessment, planning and intervention

What was the issue?

A peer group of five young men - aged between 16 and 17 - were at the point of eviction from their accommodation for young people at risk of homelessness. One had recently been released from a custodial sentence for a series of violent offences and robberies. Three of the five were in care and the other two were housed by the local authority because relationships had broken down at home.

There were regular reports of drug dealing around the accommodation provision. Young people reported drugs as easily accessible and concerns about conflict between residents spilling into the community. Daily incidences of young people going missing were reported by accommodation staff who were spending excessive time completing paperwork at the expense of direct work with the young people. This was compounded by frustration with the police who were perceived as failing to look for the young people, only for them to return in the early hours of the morning.

What was the response?

Initially planning was fragmented, and the young people were responded to on an individual rather than group basis. However, seeing the children in isolation limited understandings of their lived experiences within the contexts of the harm. The children were impacted by their family dynamics but were also dislocated from them. In their peer group, they had begun to develop new relationships and systems around themselves. Informed by a Contextual Safeguarding approach, it was recognised that their accommodation was a context of concern and that relationship between the children and their environment was significant.

Ecomaps provide a systemically informed method of exploring young people's relationships as they cross multiple contexts. In situations of extra-familial harm, they enable workers to explore what is happening for young people, elicit multiple perspectives and highlight differences in understanding of the nature of relationships. Systemic questions might include:

- What is going well in your friendship group which professionals tend to not notice?
- *What would [person X] say about this relationship?*
- *How would you describe this situation to someone who didn't know anything about it?*
- *What's your view of what happens when you don't return home in time for your curfew? What do you think [person X] thinks is happening when you don't come back?*
- *When something happens such as there is a fight outside the place where you live, how does [person X] respond? How would you like them to respond?*
- *Who in your friendship group is the first to notice when a situation is might be harmful? How do other people involved normally respond?*
- *Is your friendship the same whether you are together at home where you live or when you are out in the local area? How does it differ?*
- *Who has the most "power" in your group? How do they show their power and what affect does it have on others?*

Concerns about the accommodation was referred to the weekly multi-agency meeting aimed at addressing child exploitation and serious youth violence. A lead professional was allocated – a specialist exploitation social worker – and the accommodation became the subject of a Contextual Safeguarding location assessment. This included:

- surveys with staff, residents and local businesses
- observations of the location at different times of day and night
- a review of placement policies and processes
- chronologies of police incidents, missing patterns and children's disclosures

The location assessment was based on the Signs of Safety social work assessment template. This enabled the lead social worker to build shared understandings between children's social care, housing, police and accommodation provider about the issues. A series of shared danger statements and safety goals were identified, and scaling used to understand congruence and any differences in perspectives.

Scaling can help tease out different views, the reasons for these different views and build shared understanding and aims. When using scaling be sure to:

- Be very clear about what you want to scale
- Clearly define both ends of the scale
- Ask for the person's/group's rating
- Ask them to identify at least **three** things that bring them that high on the scale
- Explore other people's ratings and **three** things that bring other person up to that number
- Ask what would be the next smallest thing that needs to happen so they could rate one point, half a point or even 0.1 point higher - the lower people are on a scale the smaller the step
- Use the same scaling question between a group of professionals or young people, use that question again in future sessions to review progress or identify change
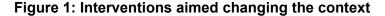

The location assessment revealed a break down in relationships between agencies. The police were frustrated that accommodation staff did not search for missing children and provided limited intelligence on which to act. Accommodation staff felt left to manage high risk young people with limited support from other agencies. Social workers felt that the young people were not always recognised as children and that eviction was too readily used as a strategy to manage difficult behaviour.

By exploring each perspective, a place-based, welfare-led plan was developed (see Figure 1). This was separate but congruent to the plans for the individuals and the peer group. The multi-agency response targeted the context in the following ways:

- New protocols assessed any potential for peer conflict prior to placing young people in the accommodation
- Specialist services provided on-site, preventative support to young people, including drop-in sessions by a police team dedicated to perpetrator disruption and sessions by a local voluntary community and social enterprise (VCSE) service around drug use and the links between drugs and criminal exploitation

- Workforce development regarding child exploitation, additional support, and training for night-shift staff
- Increased police patrols and improved police relationship with the provider
- Named police officer for responding to missing reports for young people
- Engagement with local businesses to build trust and community guardianship capacity to increase safety for young people
- Consultation with young people on safety inside and outside the house

In addition, police reviewed local intelligence data and identified a possible adult of concern linked to children in the wider friendship group. Evidence for a sexual harm prevention order was gathered and granted.

Figure 1: Interventions aimed changing the context

Direct work with the five young people improved understanding of peer relationships and the importance of emotional support provided by their friendships. As a professional network, a new narrative emerged about unmet needs rather than risks to the young people. It had become evident that assessment of risk for the young people was based on limited tangible evidence. This was because they were often out of professional sight, meaning agencies were left managing the uncertainty of the risk they posed to themselves or others. A plan to separate the peer group was also challenged and a more balanced conversation held about working with the boys' realities whereby their friends provided much of their emotional support. Funding for holiday activities for the peer group was provided and relationships between staff and the boys improved by asking them about how they wanted to use the budget.

Young people in the accommodation report feeling safe when they are in the hostel. The young people have maintained their tenancies in the supported accommodation setting for over a year, which is significant in the context of their previous histories of dislocation. One young person has now been served with a notice to leave, but this move has been planned and emotional support provided.

By valuing different perspectives, relationships within the professional network have improved by surfacing the pressures different agencies have experienced. This includes a willingness to share of resources across agencies. The housing provider has reported being less isolated, and staff better supported to work with young people with high support needs. Additional resource has been provided for the young people to address their high vulnerability and build long-term safety.

The location assessment highlighted significant pressure on the housing provider, given insufficient supported accommodation for children who have experience of youth custody or are vulnerable to exploitation in the city. This has triggered a city-wider review of how high support accommodation is commissioned. This aims to diversify the housing and support offer to young people more effectively in the future.

What we are yet to understand

- By embracing multiple perspectives to draw on local knowledges, skills and ideas, there are opportunities to better understand community guardianship, who can be a safeguarding partner and what is appropriate for statutory agencies to ask of them. For example, what is appropriate to ask of local businesses – reporting evidence of exploitation to the police may be appropriate but would training business to intervene in incidents be?

- How can practitioners bring new perspectives into locations where there is not a static group of people using the space or who can be engaged to respond to the issue?

- What is the most effective way to assess impact of contextually informed approaches in larger contexts where there are multiple goals and perspectives of what "good" looks like? For example, for young people having more opportunities and spaces to safely hang out with their friends may be a positive outcome for them whereas this may not be the same aim as a local resident.

- What opportunities might systemic social work approaches offer in developing interventions with peer groups and multiple family systems?

Next Steps

Contextual Safeguarding and systemic practice are two areas of social care practice which currently enjoy considerable attention and interest. We hope that this briefing support practitioners to realise an integrated approach to practice, in which both approaches can be used to the benefit of children and young people and their families.

The Contextual Safeguarding programme at the University of Bedfordshire and University of Durham plan to continue to explore how issues of poverty, oppression and discrimination can be effectively built into assessment processes when social work assessments of places and peer groups are undertaken.

We invite you to join this conversation. Please get in touch at lisa.bostock@beds.ac.uk if you have a practice example that you would like to share where a Contextual Safeguarding and systemic social work practice has been engaged to support a family or child or group of children and young people.

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