

Guide to delivering Contextual Safeguarding Community Group Conferences

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Guide to delivering Contextual Safeguarding Community Group Conferences

Introduction

Welcome to this guide to delivering Contextual Safeguarding Community Group Conferences (Contextual Conferences for short). Contextual Conferences use a combination of traditional Family Group Conference (FGC) methods within a Contextual Safeguarding approach to addressing extra-familial harm. Practitioners, service managers and policymakers are increasingly aware of the need to engage communities and professionals in multi-agency responses to young people who face harm beyond their family contexts. But knowing there is a problem and knowing what to do about it are two very different things. We are pleased to be able to share Contextual Conferences as one of the first concrete examples of contextual practice responses that have been trialled and implemented within local communities.

In this guide, we:

- explain why the two methods of FGCs and Contextual Safeguarding work well together
- talk you through how to run a Contextual Conference
- provide three case study examples
- discuss workforce considerations and practicalities
- refer to an outcomes framework to help set goals and measure changes contextually

This guide aims to support four 'audiences':

1. Practitioners wanting to develop community-based responses that create contextual safety
2. Service managers and strategic leaders keen to design responses that target contexts
3. Funders and commissioners who are interested in resourcing contextual responses
4. Evaluators and data-analysts who need to measure safety contextually.

Background

Between 2019-2022, the Contextual Safeguarding research programme worked with Kent County Council's FGC service to pilot contextual FGCs as part of the Scale-Up project. In 2021, we wrote a briefing with partners from Kent and with the Family Rights Group to explore the potential of this approach, based on our first attempts to develop this method (see Appendix 2). In 2023, we began a new project to increase our understanding of FGC methods used as a contextual response to harm beyond the home. This involved deepening our work with Kent FGC service and starting to work for the first time with an external provider of FGCs for Wiltshire County Council – an organisation called Daybreak. Over the course of a year, we worked closely together to extend the method. We piloted more FGCs and built a community of practice around community conferencing for regular reflection and peer support across the two areas to build expertise, knowledge and confidence.

We are very grateful to partners in Kent and Wiltshire for their participation, generosity, enthusiasm and courage in doing this work. This guide is a testament to their commitment to creating safer communities for young people using ecological, restorative and strengths-based approaches.

What is Contextual Safeguarding?

Contextual Safeguarding is a framework and approach for how children's service leaders and practitioners can create safety for young people, when harm takes place beyond their family contexts – e.g. in community, school and peer group settings. It presents a way to respond to exploitation, violence and abuse grounded in the idea that harm and abuse do not happen in isolation but should be understood and addressed in context. Instead of trying to change the thinking, motivation and behaviour of individual young people (as most safeguarding responses do), Contextual Safeguarding is about intervening with the relational, environmental and social dimensions that enable harm and abuse to happen.

The approach contains four 'domains'. These are elements that need to be in place for Contextual Safeguarding to be present. These are:

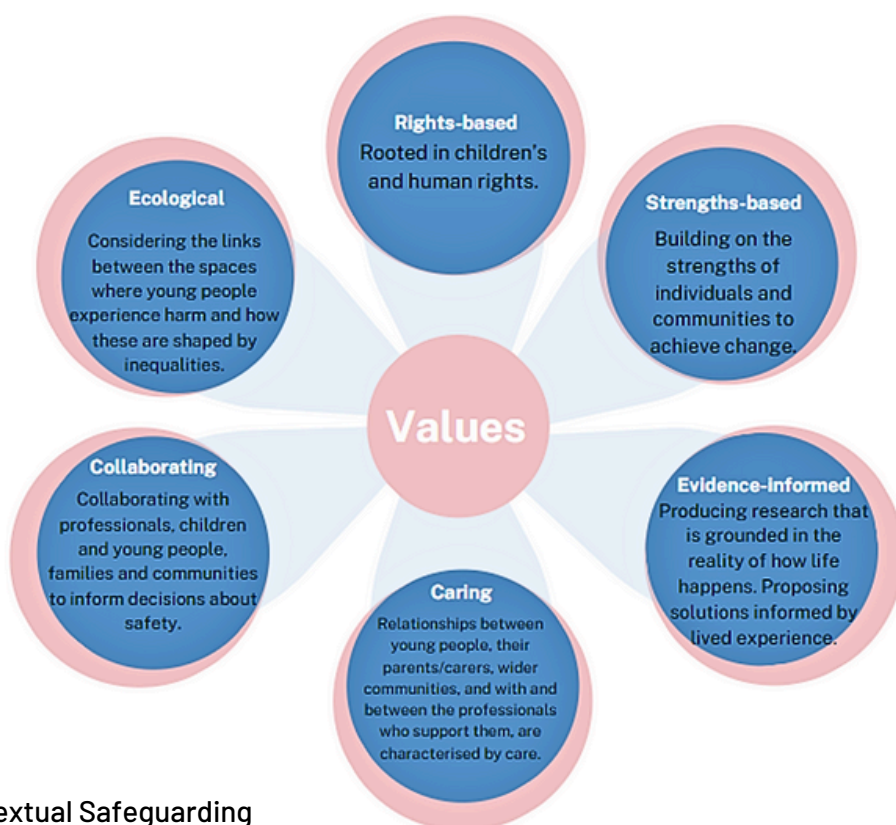
Domain 1: Target. We alter the context in which harm takes place, and not the behaviour of parents or children. By context we include its physical location, its relational dynamics and its structural features.

Domain 2: Welfare. Our responses enhance the safety and well-being of young people. They are not aimed at reducing crime.

Domain 3: Partnerships. We work with the people who can have a positive influence in a context by supporting them to change the context in line with young people's needs and wishes. This can include anyone at all, not just professionals.

Domain 4: Outcomes. We measure changes according to how much a context is safer for all the young people associated with it, not just how much individual children are safer.

The domains are underpinned by six values (see diagram). These are very important for guiding how these domains are achieved and making sure Contextual Safeguarding work is ethical.



The values of Contextual Safeguarding

Why this guide is needed

Since we began testing the implementation of Contextual Safeguarding in 2017, we've seen many areas develop child protection systems that can identify, assess and plan responses to harm in contexts. But many have struggled when it comes to developing new practice interventions. Because of this, services tend to rely on responses that focus on changing the behaviour of individual young people because these are well-established and available. Our research shows that responses to extra-familial harm that don't focus on context can lead to responsibilising and criminalising young people and disproportionately targeting minoritised young people. To support the shift to contextual responses, we need to develop new ways of working that focus on changing the conditions in a context. The Contextual Conference is an example of this new approach.

One of the barriers to developing new contextual responses is the fact that historically safeguarding work is measured according to outcomes for individual children, not changes to context. So alongside developing new context responses, we also need an outcomes framework against which services can measure the impact of their work. For this reason, this guide has been developed alongside a new Contextual Outcomes Framework, which can be found in the Responses and Outcomes section of the Scale-Up toolkit on the Contextual Safeguarding website (see Appendix 2).

Why FCGs?

FGCs are a popular and well-established method for addressing child safeguarding concerns. Their purpose is to place decision-making powers with the family network, rather than the state. Families taking part in an FGC are assigned a co-ordinator to facilitate the preparing and gathering of a network of people to a meeting (or conference).

At the conference, the family network is tasked with producing a plan in response to the safeguarding concerns put forward by a social worker. Whilst the plan often includes elements resourced by the state, it is owned by the family. Originating in Māori decision-making practices and principles, FGCs aim to harness and elevate the innate wisdom and care within a family and mitigate the disempowerment that comes from state intervention into family lives.

Family Group Conferencing is a method that is aligned in many ways with Contextual Safeguarding. In summary, both approaches are embedded in children and family rights and:

- are collaborative and democratic
- champion restorative and strengths-based approaches
- have a wide understanding of safeguarding as everybody's business, not focussed solely on parenting
- recognise the environment and social conditions experienced by children and young people

There have been many iterations of FGCs. They have been used for restorative meetings and in a range of settings, including community settings. The unique element that a Contextual Conference brings to this method is a shared sense of community guardianship to change a context to make it safer for young people. Whilst parents and families can be involved in this process, they are not the target of the approach. FGCs have also been used to address extra-familial harm. Sometimes this can involve a different range of network members, but they are not the same as the Contextual Conferences that we are describing here, because FGCs remain within an individual child pathway, with outcomes relating to individual children rather than for contexts. Both an FGC and a Contextual Conference can run alongside each other, but it is important to distinguish the difference.

How to run a Contextual Conference

In a Contextual Conference, community partners come together to create a plan that will increase the safety of a context. The focus shifts away from an individual child or sibling group at risk of harm to a context like a park, shopping centre, school or peer group, where several children may be experiencing harm. While an FGC aims to support parents and carers by galvanising the resources of a network of caring people, a Contextual Conference tries to do something similar with the people who are responsible for a context of harm – in Contextual Safeguarding we think of these people as potential ‘guardians’.

Who are ‘guardians’?

Potential guardians are people who live and work in the contexts where young people spend time. They are people who can exercise their adult authority and influence to create a caring, supportive and safe environment for young people, either through relationships with young people and/or through making strategic decisions (like deploying resources) that can help to do this. Guardians can be professionals, but, just as we think carefully about who to include and exclude from an FGC, likewise, we need to be thoughtful about whether someone is a good candidate to be a potential guardian. Just because a person has influence in a context does not automatically make them a good candidate for being a guardian. Not everyone will have the necessary caring intention towards young people. Someone who wanted to arrest or disperse young people would not be a suitable guardian within a Contextual Safeguarding approach. Guardians however, can include people who do not traditionally see themselves as having a safeguarding role, like bus drivers, park keepers, and shop keepers.

Parents are also partners within Contextual Conferences, but they are not there as the focus for change or because they are being held responsible for what is happening. They are there to share their experiences and gain support. An important role of the Community Conference Co-ordinator is preparing partners for the meeting and gaining a sense of who might be the right people to provide guardianship in the context. This doesn’t mean you can’t have people at the conference who have negative views about young people – often the conference is an important place for hearing these and trying to shift attitudes, but these aren’t the right people to have as guardians.

The role of young people

Contextual Conferences are focussed on making communities safer for young people. But we know that even the most well-intentioned professionals can get it wrong if they assume that they know what young people need and want. It is therefore very important that Contextual Conferences engage young people and that the plan and activities that come from the process is in keeping with their views, wishes and feelings. There are many ways of doing this. Current Contextual Conferences surveyed young people on their views and drew on the existing views of youth workers. There are a range of resources on the Contextual Safeguarding website for engaging with young people about Contextual Safeguarding, for example using animations and having discussions about what they think. You might be nervous to invite young people to come to a meeting with adults, especially if you think that there may be negative views shared about them. One solution would be to hold a conference with young people separately to adults, and then ask young people to agree the plan developed by adults.

Engaging young people, especially those who are impacted by harm beyond their homes, can be very challenging because services may have often let young people and their families down in the past.

If you have tried several ways to gain the direct views of young people in an FGC process and are still struggling, then engaging with local youth providers and asking them to represent local young people can be a compromise. However, remember that if you are doing this, you will need to deliberately build into the process moments to listen to and 'hear' the views of young people. A Contextual Conference can be a place where there are many 'voices'. This, along with the fact that adults and especially professionals hold a lot more power than marginalised young people can mean that young people's views and voices can be lost. This can be especially so if the focus of the meeting is on 'anti-social behaviour', and if people feel upset and angry towards young people and want to share this. It is therefore important to build in points throughout the meeting and processes to deliberately and overtly counter this culture of adult and professional power. In Contextual Conferences co-ordinators work in pairs, which provides the opportunity for one person to be particularly focussed on this (akin to an advocate in an FGC), whilst the other person facilitates the wider discussion.

What do we mean by harm?

In a traditional child protection FGC, the child/ren will be on a social care plan which is overseen by a social worker and guided by statutory welfare processes. Their social worker should explain what could happen if the plan fails and the risk of harm increases. In contrast, there is no such agreed process for Community Conferences, because social care responses to harm in extra-familial contexts are still in development: we do not have a shared understanding of 'thresholds' when it comes to harm in contexts. Likewise, although a social worker is usually the referer for a traditional FGC, in a Contextual Conference the referral can come from an agency whose primary function is public safety and not safeguarding/ensuring the welfare of young people.

These differences mean that in Community Conferencing we use a wide definition of 'harm' which includes exploitation and violence as well as the experiences of young people thought to be involved in so called 'anti-social behaviour' ('ASB').

When we include youth 'ASB' as a form of harm to young people, we are not dismissing the harm that adults experience through anti-social behaviour. However, we do recognise that existing categories for youth behaviour can often fail to take into account the context and can label young people unfairly. We also recognise that the division between 'harmer' and 'harmed' is much more fluid when it comes to young people's friendship groups. All of this means that we cannot treat 'ASB' as separate from the other experiences of harm that young people have in their communities.

Our research shows that many young people experience considerable adversity and hardship, particularly in the wake of austerity and Covid-19. The significant cuts to youth services have only exacerbated the feeling of abandonment for many young people during the pandemic, leading to a feeling of disenfranchisement. These adversities, particularly when they intersect with racism, sexism and ageism and other forms of discrimination, mean that some young people do not have a strong sense of trust in the adult community to care for them and give them a good future. The young people who were part of our FGC study spoke about this. They said that they think that adults look down on them and that they fear for their safety when they are out in their communities. Likewise, adults said they noticed how unhappy and angry the young people in their community seem to be. Several Contextual Conferences in the study included young people thought to be exhibiting 'anti-social behaviour'. Within a Contextual Conference, 'ASB' is treated less as a crime to be punished and more as a strong communication that the bond of care and trust between young people and the adults around them is broken.

'ASB' is also included as a form of harm because we know that when young people experience, or get caught up in, 'ASB', they are more vulnerable to the exploitation of adults who are intent on harming them, or be hurt themselves through acts of violence. A Contextual Conference can connect responsible adults with their caring responsibilities for the young people with whom they share a community and therefore help to reduce some of the underlying reasons for 'ASB'. This can be by either shifting how adults see young people and what's happening and/or by shifting how young people feel about their local community and the adults around them.

Expanding the co-ordinator role

One of the main differences between an FGC and a Contextual Conference is that the role of the co-ordinator is expanded. In a traditional FGC, when a referral is made to an FGC service, the family will already be known to a social worker, who will continue to 'hold' the case throughout the period of the FGC. At the end of the FGC, the plan is held by the family who might come back for a review, but the social worker provides support throughout and continues to oversee the assessment of risk and harm. In a Contextual Conference, there is no standard equivalent role or process that takes the role of the social worker in a traditional FGC, by holding the context before and afterwards and has ongoing statutory responsibility for it. In a Contextual Conference different processes or roles will take the function of identifying and referring the case to the FGC service – for example, it could be a panel overseeing location-based harm or a social worker involved in overseeing Risk Outside the Home child protection meetings. This variation is due to the early stage of development of extra-familial harm and context-based responses within the child protection system. With no standardised approach set into national policy, one of the important things to decide before you get going with Contextual Conferences is who your referrers will be and what happens after the conferences.

It will be much easier to run Contextual Conferences if your area is already committed to implementing Contextual Safeguarding because it could mean that there is a pathway for when there are concerns about contexts. However, even with an established pathway in place, it is true to say that in a Contextual Conference, the co-ordinator takes on more 'holding' duties than they do in a traditional FGC, as we explain more in the table on the next page.

Another more literal expansion that takes place with Contextual Conferencing is the practice of working in pairs rather than individually. This is important because running a Contextual Conference is wider and broader than a traditional FGC and two people are needed to hold the complexity of this type of work. As we have said, having two people working together helps to make sure there is ongoing reflection and that the views and wishes of young people stay at the centre.



The stages of a Contextual Safeguarding Community Group Conference

A Contextual Conference, like an FGC, follows a series of stages. The co-ordinator remains neutral and does not take part in decision making. Their role is to help the network around a context to make decisions through supportive facilitation. Here is a step-by-step explanation of the stages of an FGC, which shows what is similar and different in a Contextual Conference.

Stage	FCG	Contextual Conference
Referral & initial concerns	FGC service receives referral from social care or other lead professional. The case is allocated to a co-ordinator.	FGC service receives referral from social care or from a panel/meeting overseeing extra-familial harm contexts. The case is allocated two co-ordinators.
Scoping & preparation	Co-ordinator meets with people in the network, as defined by parents/carers and young people involved, and discusses their involvement in an FGC, its purpose and their role within it.	The co-ordinators engage in activities to understand more about what is going on in the context. This may include discussing further with referrer, running surveys with young people, businesses, residents etc., having conversations with key professionals, finding out what young people think and feel about harm and safety in the area, and running community events in schools or local neighbourhoods.
Goal Setting	The specific goals of an FGC (beyond increased safety, well-being and support) are formed during the referral and preparation process, often described in relation to finding a plan that meets the social workers' 'bottom lines'.	The co-ordinators bring together the information they have gathered during the scoping process. They use the Contextual Safeguarding Outcomes Framework to select the specific goals for this work, using the first column to show the methods they have used to identify this goal.
Arranging the conference	Co-ordinators organise the date, time and venue of the conference and send out invitations and other practicalities.	After scoping and goal setting, the co-ordinators discuss whether a conference would be valuable to bring people together to make a plan. They consider who would be best to invite and whether to have one or a series of staged meetings. They organise the date, time and venue, send out invitations and other practicalities.

Stage	FCG	Contextual Conference
Conference	<p>A meeting is held with a family and their network. A small number of professionals are invited. There are three stages:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Information giving 2. Private family time (where the professionals leave) 3. Sharing the plan and agreeing resources 	<p>A meeting/or meetings are held with groups of people connected to the context. For example, a mixed group of residents, professionals and volunteers; a group of young people, or a group of parents. Broadly the meetings consist of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Outlining the reason for gathering and sharing the goals of the meeting 2. Sharing the views of young people and listening to different points of views about the safety of young people in the context 3. Developing a plan to address the goals and agreeing next steps. Developing the plan can be done with the co-ordinators facilitating the discussion or through them stepping away and then drawing the plan together at the end.
Sharing the plan	<p>The co-ordinators write up the plan and share it. If a review has been suggested they set this up.</p>	<p>The co-ordinators write up the plan and share it. If a review has been suggested they set this up.</p>

What happens at a Contextual Conference?

Contextual Conferences, like FGCs, are highly influenced by the people who come and what they are able to contribute. As with a traditional FGC, there are often strong feelings in the room which the co-ordinators need to deal with using their skills in diplomacy and empathy. Coordinators who have run both FGCs and Context Conferences describe working with adults (professionals and community members) as often more challenging than working with family members. In Contextual Conferences not everyone will be aware of Contextual Safeguarding as an approach. They might have misconceptions about it – for example, that it's all about surveillance of young people and sharing information about them. One way to manage this is to have an extended 'ground rules' section at the beginning of a Contextual Conference where you explain what Contextual Safeguarding in the simplest of terms, for example:

- That Contextual Safeguarding is about meeting the welfare needs of young people who face harm outside the home
- Contextual Safeguarding is not about increasing surveillance over young people
- That we want to build on strengths and increase trusting relationships and not monitor young people's whereabouts
- That everything we decided today must be aligned with things that young people see as good and positive (which is based on evidence)
- That we are here to work together to create safe conditions for young people to be together in their communities, where they have the right to be.

This could lead into a discussion about the way you want to run the conference and make an agreement to work within these parameters together.

What happens next?

After a Contextual Conference, like with a traditional FGC, everyone involved implements their part in the plan within the agreed time. There may be a review of the plan and this runs on similar lines to traditional FGCs, with the co-ordinator convening a meeting to look at whether the plan is working. Aside from a review, it is important to agree locally a process for who is responsible for what happens once the conference is over. The Contextual Outcomes Framework (see Appendix 2) guides practitioners to re-run their initial scoping methods, once they have worked in an area to create safety, to see what changes have taken place. For example, if co-ordinators ran a survey initially and found that young people felt that adults looked down on them, then after doing some work to increase community guardians, they could re-run the survey and see if they get different results. This would help them to know whether their work was reaching the goals they set. You will need to agree locally who will have this monitoring role: it could be the co-ordinators, or it could be the social worker who made the initial referral, or someone representing the multi-agency panel/meeting where the concern came to initial notice. As we have mentioned, there is not one statutory role for monitoring contextual outcomes, so this is something that local areas will do differently, but it is important to have this in place, so that you can demonstrate the effectiveness of your work in contexts.

Workforce Considerations

We present four other areas that are important for workforce preparation if you are planning on developing Contextual Conferences: a shared conceptual framework; the right organisational conditions; skills and training; and practicalities and tools.

A shared conceptual framework

One of the most important things to have in place is a conceptual framework – basically a way of seeing things – that is based on an ecological understanding of society, rather than one that is based on holding individuals to account for their behaviour. FGCs are rooted in an ecological understanding of things: in an FGC a ‘nuclear’ family is seen within their network of people who love and care for them, and the purpose of the meeting is building on these strengths to create a good environment around the family, for the safety of a child/ren. If FGCs were not ecological, they might be meetings where mothers were asked to be different, regardless of their context, and a plan would be formed around trying to bring this change about (like a parenting programme for the mother).

Like FGCs, Contextual Safeguarding is also an ecological approach. Here though, instead of a family, we work in contexts outside the home to change them to make them safer. Often in multi-agency settings we find that people come with very different frameworks for seeing problems. Some think that we need to do things to change how young people think and act (an example of this is a knife crime programme aimed to get young people to ‘choose’ not to carry a knife). But in Contextual Safeguarding it’s important that when we set out to work together, everyone is clear that we are using an ecological model.

Contextual Safeguarding research has shown that even people who are rooted in ecological work can find it hard to spot when other people suggest interventions that are not ecological and are behaviour-based. So before you begin, we suggest that you build your knowledge and confidence in working in an ecological way, and practice noticing and challenging ideas that focus on young people’s thinking, ‘choices’ and motivation. We have developed resources to help with this which can be found in the Scale-Up Toolkit on the Contextual Safeguarding website, under the section on Multi-agency panels.

The right organisational conditions

It is important to consider, before you start, whether you have the right organisational conditions to develop Contextual Conferences. Firstly, you need to have the mandate from your organisation to undertake this adaptation. The FGC manager and co-ordinators doing the work need to be clear on their role and purpose and have organisational permission to try new things and go beyond the traditional model. They need senior people around them who can see the significant value in having a skilled, neutral facilitator who can act as a conduit within a complex network around a context. This should be seen for its unique value and incredible potential to bring about change for young people.

Secondly, you need access to safe, reflective spaces with peers and supportive managers. Ask yourself: ‘do we have a culture of people meeting regularly to reflect, without feeling pressured to ‘solve’ a problem?’ and ‘is there a safe atmosphere where people can share their feelings?’ You need these things if you’re going to get this work off the ground because doing this work can initially feel overwhelming and stressful. So you need emotionally containing spaces to support you/your team to do good, ethical work.

Finally, you need to have the resources that allow you to do this work. This includes having the funds to have two co-ordinators assigned to the work and having the space to learn as you go. Your first Contextual Conference is likely to take much longer than those that come afterwards, as you are learning the new approach. So you need to not be under too much pressure to work at speed. This requires funders who value contextual work and understand that it is in development and senior managers who see the safety of young people in communities as their responsibility. Sometimes you may need to help senior managers and funders to see the value of working in contexts. You can use the Contextual Safeguarding Outcomes Framework to support you with this to argue for a slower pace and a different set of measurements. Of course, you need to be given the resources to do the work in the first place, before you can evidence its value, and this is where visionary funders and managers come in.

Skills and training

FGC co-ordinators are trained in a range of skills that are very relevant to Contextual Conferences. Primarily they need the skills to facilitate social change in contexts in a way that is honouring of children's rights. These include being able to work in a strengths-based and restorative way; having strong facilitation skills; and being able to work authoritatively with powerful people and strong feelings. They also need to be able to have sometimes challenging conversations with professionals and engaging conversations with young people and everything in between. Contextual Conferencing tends to suit people who are able to tolerate a certain amount of uncertainty and who enjoy doing things differently and feel stimulated by a different way of working. Co-ordinating traditional FGCs follows a fairly consistent process, but Contextual Conferences are in the early stages of development and so a certain amount of flexibility and adaptability is required.

Practicalities and tools

There are a few practical issues related to running Contextual Conferences. One is the question of time. Whilst the first few Contextual Conferences can take a long time to get off the ground, we have found that they take a similar amount of time as FGCs. As an approximation, Kent FGC service works on the idea of a traditional FGC taking 25 hours and a Contextual Conference taking 40-50 hours based on the combined hours of 2 co-ordinators. When they work together, co-ordinators don't do everything together, but tend to share out tasks, coming together for regular reflection and to shape the next steps. Over time we have found that co-ordinators working in the same local area have built relationships with people and community organisations, which also makes work swifter because they are not having to scope out who is involved in an area from scratch every time.

Conclusion

This guide is certainly not the final word on Contextual Conferences, but it does represent the learning from the Contextual Safeguarding Programme to date about the method and how it works. Measuring the outcomes of Contextual Conferences is in its early stages, but to date, there have been promising 'green shoots' in the form of shifts in the attitudes of professionals; greater co-ordination between services; young people invited into free recreational events; increases in communication between parents and wider marginalised communities; young people invited to 'train' adults in how to provide for their needs; public arts projects; and new sports opportunities taken up. We believe that there is much potential for the future development of this approach. We hope that you will be part of this, and that this guide gives you a concrete and inspirational place to begin.

Appendix 1a

Case study 1: Focus on a school and parents

<p>Referral and initial concerns</p>	<p>This Community Conference began because professionals became worried about a friendship group of 16 young people. The police had begun to describe them as an 'emerging street gang' and they were all open to social care due to worries about exploitation. The young people all went to the same school, which was a large secondary school with a relatively high number of permanent exclusions compared with other schools in the area. There were assaults, violent behaviour and criminality happening inside and outside of school, and the school was struggling to deal with these issues. Some of the young people in the group were in the exclusion unit and some refused to go to school. The group had high numbers of missing episodes. The referral was made by an Early Help worker who was involved with some of the young people. They explained that there was a breakdown between the school, the young people and their families, as well as a breakdown between the school and wider support services. They hoped that an FGC could help to restore these relationships for the benefit of the young people.</p>
<p>Scoping and preparation</p>	<p>Two co-ordinators, Sophie and Remi, were assigned to the case. Their initial feelings were that this was quite a daunting situation, and they felt a little overwhelmed. But, guided by their supervisor, they began to work out what their purpose was, what questions they needed to ask, and how they could break it down into digestible, achievable parts. At their weekly team meeting they discussed the case and gained advice from more experienced colleagues, which lead to a plan to contact young people, their families, the school staff and the relevant agencies and services within the area.</p> <p>Sophie contacted the families to explain what she and Remi were hoping to do. She asked if they would be happy for her visit them at home to get to know them and to better understand things from their point of view. During these meetings the young people and their parents talked about how they felt about their own safety, what they felt they needed from the school and why some of them were refusing to go to school. Overall, the parents felt that the school wasn't trying to support their children and just wanted to get rid of them (i.e. by exclusion).</p> <p>Remi visited the school to talk to some of the pupils (beyond those who were in the group) about their views about safety. He also spoke to school staff and also some parents. The parents he spoke to also felt their children were unsafe in school, in particular due to assaults, and some said they regularly contacted the school about their feelings. The school blamed the group of young people and their families – they felt that one small group was causing all the trouble. School leaders felt there was nothing they could do and that the families were impossible to engage. The school was worried about the next Ofsted visit, as parents had been ringing Ofsted to report their safeguarding concerns.</p> <p>Sophie and Remi realised this was a huge task and that they were going to have to work hard to keep the case focused on the context rather than on individual young people and their families, and to deal with a lot of negativity from the school and professionals. They were also aware of 'meeting overwhelm'; given that there were already lots of multi-agency meetings about these young people, Sophie and Remi had to 'sell' the community conference to them, stressing that this wouldn't be more of the same or a replication of other meetings.</p>

<p>Goal Setting</p>	<p>Sophie and Remi met together with their supervisor to think about the next steps. They worked with the 'Context Weighting' tool where they wrote in each of the context boxes what they knew about the safety or harm associated with each one. For the neighbourhood context they had found out about a local park where the young people often spent time when not at school. This was not a very safe place because there were concerns about criminal exploiters targeting the young people there. But the information was leading much more strongly to the school as the most significant context because if this was a space that was safe and where the young people could be engaged then the neighbourhood space would become much less relevant.</p> <p>So Sophie and Remi decided to focus on the school. Included in this was addressing the attitudes of the school staff who had located all the problems within these young people, all of whom were from a minoritised ethnic group. They wanted to support the school to take up their role in engaging with the needs of the young people and their families and see that they were currently being let down and ignored. They also wanted to support a renewal in the relationship between the school and the wider social care services, as this had broken down. Again, the purpose was to overcome blame and finger pointing so that adults could share resources to meet the needs of young people.</p>
<p>The Conference</p>	<p>Sophie and Remi decided that due to the sensitive nature of the feelings involved and breakdown of relationships, it would be better to arrange two Community Conference meetings. The first was with parents of the young people in the peer group and some professionals, including Early Help. The aim was to get the families' views and come up with a plan of what support they needed from services. At this meeting Sophie and Remi also presented the views of the young people that had been collected during the home visits. As tensions were running high, both parents and the co-ordinators had agreed it would be better that young people didn't attend on this occasion. It was the first time some of the parents had met each other and they discussed some of the challenges they were experiencing. The meeting helped parents to feel reassured that other parents were going through similar things and this built a sense of camaraderie. The discussions between the parents revealed that during many of the missing episodes, the young people were staying at each other's houses but that their parents didn't know this because they weren't in contact with each other. Once these issues had been shared, Sophie and Remi left the room to provide the parents with the equivalent of 'Private Family Time'. During this time they had space and time to together come up with a plan (see below).</p> <p>The second conference was with professionals and the school. Alongside the school leaders and Early Help, the meeting was attended by the police, the local youth hub, a local drug and alcohol charity, specialist teaching agencies (such as those using trauma-informed practice), and other local services. Sophie and Remi presented the views of the families and the young people, alongside the parent plan. The aim was to come up with a professionals' plan that would meet the requests of the parent plan.</p> <p>The meeting was quite challenging for the co-ordinators. At first, there was a lot of negativity with feelings that the problems were too difficult to surmount. Sophie and Remi kept the focus on what could be done and what was possible, trying to bear in mind the strengths of the parents, services and young people. Thinking about changing the context rather than the behaviour of individuals was a new approach for many people. Sophie and Remi had to keep refocusing the meeting and bring it back to the context of the school and community, rather than discussing individual young people and families. Because of this, and the need for strong guidance, Sophie and Remi stayed in the room while a plan was made.</p>

<p>The Plan</p>	<p>Parent plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents committed to creating a parents' WhatsApp group – so that they can let each other know where their children are, especially if someone is staying at a friend's house and hasn't told their family • They asked for resources from Early Help for youth workers to spend time with young people in the park, to develop relationships with them and help them meet their aspirations • They asked for the school to reach out to them as families to listen to them and hear their perspectives • They asked for the school to find more creative ways to engage their young people and not to give up on them or assume that this is happening because of their 'culture' <p>Professional and school plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold a whole school safety fair where local support agencies can share their service and build connections with young people and families • Seek feedback after the event (from young people, parents and professionals) about the nature of safety and harm in the school • School to bring in a new pastoral role to work alongside the head and work with the young people who need support and to build better relationships with the families • School to engage in training that addressed their racial biases that had led them to label these young people and stereotype their behaviour as 'disengagement'
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Appendix 1b
Case study 2: Focus on community relations and youth activities

<p>Referral and initial concerns</p>	<p>This FGC was triggered by concerns about a group of young people living in a small town called 'Woodmont' – a place with a relatively low crime rate. At a multi-agency safeguarding meeting, professionals shared their worries about the young people being criminally exploited in a 'street group'. The police cited reports of 'anti-social behaviour', rising reports of crime, violence and concerns about rivalry with another group of young people from a nearby town, 'Lakeside', where a small minority of the young people went to school. Some adult residents of Woodmont were worried about violence and were afraid to go out on an evening. So the FGC service were asked to bring together the residents, young people and their families, as well as professionals, local businesses and schools, with the aim of increasing the accessibility of safe spaces and feelings of safety for everyone.</p>
<p>Scoping and preparation</p>	<p>The two co-ordinators assigned to task were Angela and Pete. They decided to try to connect with the young people and their families to identify their needs and concerns. They followed the following four steps: 1) Home visits to the families of the young people identified in the 'street group'; 2) Identifying local services, businesses and stakeholders that could be involved; 3) Holding a meeting with families as a formal way to collate their concerns and 4) Holding a meeting with professionals and services.</p> <p>Home visits:</p> <p>Most of the young people were open to social services so their assigned workers contacted them and their families to ask if they would be open to being visited by Angela and Pete and potentially involved in a community FGC process. Most families and young people consented to this, and Angela and Pete then went to visit them, explaining the reason for the professional concerns and to invite them to be involved in the FGC process. Angela and Pete wanted to understand how the young people and families felt about the way they were treated by statutory agencies and how they would feel about working with them. They found out that the young people and their families were unhappy about a number of social media groups that posted photos and 'nasty' comments about young people, 'ASB' and crime. Sometimes, young people were named whether or not they were involved in the incident in question. As a result, these families and young people felt isolated by these unhelpful, unfair and negative actions. Angela and Pete wanted to find out from the young people about their point of view on the concerns that were raised at the multi-agency meeting. Did they feel unsafe? Were they bored? Did they need somewhere to go and something to do? The overall aim was to gather information about the families and young people's needs.</p> <p>Identifying community partners:</p> <p>Next Angela thought about who could be involved in the FGC process, alongside the young people and families. She wanted to think beyond the most obvious statutory professionals, but it took creativity and tenacity to find and engage these people. She researched local charities, agencies, and businesses who could be involved. Once they were mapped out, Angela and Pete went about contacting and meeting each one, enthusiastically explaining how they could have a role in helping to make the community safer for young people.</p>

<p>Scoping and preparation</p>	<p>Family meeting:</p> <p>Angela and Pete decided to hold a small meeting with some of the families (including grandparents and siblings) they had spoken to and any others who were keen to come along. The purpose was to more formally gather the families' thoughts and feelings so that they could be presented at the professionals meeting and the conference, and then used to inform the plan. One of the main things to emerge was that there wasn't much for young people to do.</p> <p>Professionals' meeting (held at a local youth hub):</p> <p>The next step in the scoping phase was to bring the professionals together and present the families' concerns to them. Initially, some of the services/professionals couldn't see the relevance of the meeting (for example Lakeside school didn't think it was relevant for them because they had fewer pupils implicated). Angela and Pete worked hard to persuade professionals to understand their part in the collective responsibility for this group of young people and the context. The meeting was attended by the police, Early Help, schools, the local youth centre and other youth services, voluntary and community organisations, the local Violence Reduction Unit, and the town mayor. The meeting was quite heated. Some of the services were quite defensive and some were protective over what was 'their' job. There was a lot of blaming language and racial discrimination about the young people involved. Angela and Pete realised they would have to raise this with the professionals and set out some ground rules at the beginning of the community conference. It was apparent that some services were not known to each other and what they each offered, so it was helpful to share this information. The co-ordinators realised that better communication between services and professionals could be part of the plan.</p>
<p>Goal setting</p>	<p>Angela and Pete met with their manager and looked at all they had learnt during the scoping phase. From the families and young people they learnt that there was a big need for young people to have positive activities and spaces to go to, that would build on their strengths, rather than punitive measures such as dispersal orders. So one of the goals of the next stage of the work would be to identify services and community members that could be involved in this and to see what could be offered to young people and their families.</p> <p>They also learnt that there was a need for better understanding and connection between the young people and families, professionals and other people in the community, which was currently being undermined by negative stereotypes and causing families and young people to feel isolated and let down. So a second goal of the FGC process would be to address these attitudes and foster better connections.</p>
<p>The conference</p>	<p>Angela and Pete arranged to have a community conference in a safe, neutral space: a community centre, on an evening (after office and school hours). All the people and services who had been involved in the scoping stage were invited, as well as residents, councillors, churches, leisure services, local shops and businesses, the local football club, and a local radio station. The co-ordinators set out ground rules at the beginning of the meeting with regard to discussing individual young people, blaming language and racial discrimination. Throughout the meetings Angela and Pete had to steer away from these and remind the conference members of the rules.</p> <p>Angela and Pete presented the families' concerns with the aim of the group collectively coming up with a plan to meet these. This way people did not have to speak, identify themselves or re-raise</p>

<p>The conference</p>	<p>concerns, which meant it was more neutral. Local services, businesses and residents were asked to think about what they could offer in response to specific issues. For example, one of the concerns was that young people were socialising in a graveyard on a Wednesday night, where they were potentially unsafe. It transpired that there was nothing else to do on a Wednesday night in the area, so someone offered to run a footballing activity, which was one of the ideas that young people had said they were interested in.</p> <p>The meeting was not all plain sailing. At one point there was a clash of perspective over crime rates and feelings of safety. Some people pointed out that Woodmont was relatively safe and had low crime rates compared to most places in the UK, but other members nevertheless felt unsafe. Angela and Pete managed this exchange by highlighting the validity of all perspectives, but ultimately bringing the perspective back to the needs of young people. When the question of using of social media groups to share images and suppositions about young people was raised, Angela and Pete highlighted how divisive this was. They asked the group to only post things or name people when it is a 'good news story'.</p> <p>Angela and Pete facilitated the drawing up of a joint plan which was sent to everyone after the event.</p>
<p>The plan</p>	<p>The plan was as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Woodmont school to put in place some free after-school activities • Leisure centre to put on sports activities • Youth hub to run daytime courses for parents and grandparents, such as support in parenting a teenager - something the whole group deemed 'the hardest job in the world' • In response to the young people's interests the youth hub will hold a scooter/bike school, where young people can go to learn to fix bikes and scooters. A local resident who does this as a hobby will help • A local charity will offer digital skills, music and singing classes • The local radio station will look into ways of providing young people who are interested with radio skills • Angela and Pete will hold a 'market day' of services and agencies, where young people, families, and residents and professionals can learn what is on offer • Agreement to not post negative things on Facebook <p>Alongside this, Angela and Pete fed back to the multi-agency meeting that raised the initial concerns that there was a need to address the use of blaming language and racial discrimination by professionals.</p>

Appendix 1c

Case study 3: Focus on cross-border professional networks and safe spaces

<p>Referral and initial concerns</p>	<p>This FGC was a collaboration across two county borders in a rural area. In the first county – ‘Aberseen’ – there was a group of young people on Child Protection Plans due to extra-familial harm. Their social workers knew that many of the young people would travel across the border to ‘Belmark’ – a nearby city, to socialise. Sometimes the young people struggled to get home safely and, in Belmark itself, there were often tensions, with young people being arrested or apprehended by security guards. Belmark started being mentioned as a place where a few young people went ‘missing’. Then, a tragic event happened, leading to the death of a young person in Belmark city centre.</p> <p>A lead social worker decided to refer Belmark as a context of concern to Aberseen Council’s independent FGC service. They hoped that a contextual FGC could help concerned professionals to understand the social conditions in Belmark so that they could increase young people’s safety there. To do this, the FGC co-ordinators would need to bring together networks from both Belmark and Aberseen in the context of trauma, loss and fears about retribution – no mean feat!</p> <p>The agencies named in the referral as involved or implicated in the safety of Aberseen young people included: social care and youth justice workers, train and bus personnel, taxi companies, fast food outlets, and the neighbourhood police – from both Aberseen and Belmark.</p>
<p>Scoping and preparation</p>	<p>Two FGC co-ordinators, Ray and Jo, were assigned to the case. They began enthusiastically, but quite quickly came across a stumbling block. Some professionals in Belmark were confused and suspicious about their intentions, thinking that their work was being criticised by Aberseen agencies. So Ray and Jo’s first task was to build alliances of trust and to clarify the facilitative and supportive nature of their role. To help with this, Ray designed a questionnaire, and, rather than just sending it out, tried to meet with the agencies and businesses to explain what they were trying to do and allay their worries about their intentions.</p> <p>For anyone they were unable to meet with, the questionnaire started with a written explanation of their role: “We’re here to support solution-focussed decision making for families and communities. We want to find out about the experiences of the young people travelling from Aberseen to Belmark, what’s happening when they’re in Belmark, and what could be done to increase their safety”. This was followed by a set of 5 questions to find out about the experiences of young people coming from Aberseen to Belmark. They asked about what was working well to keep young people safe and what ideas people might help to improve their safety.</p> <p>The questionnaire was given to local businesses, transport agencies, youth workers, etc – anyone who may be connected in some way to the things that had been happening with young people in Belmark centre. At the end of the questionnaire, they were asked if they would be willing to attend a community meeting.</p>

<p>Goal setting</p>	<p>After a few weeks and speaking to a number of partners working in Belmark, Ray and Jo met with the referring social worker from Aberseen, to reflect on what they had learnt and what a community conference could achieve. These were the main themes:</p> <p>Firstly, Ray and Jo had found out from a local youth service survey with young people that some young people felt unsafe in the area. They also found out that the fast-food restaurant where young people liked to spent time had made changes to discourage young people being there. Along with the recent violent events, this led Ray and Jo to plan that one of the goals for the FGC could be to increase safe spaces for young people.</p> <p>Secondly, Ray and Jo had also found out that in Belmark there were several professional meetings where young people at risk of harm were discussed, but that these were chaired and attended by different agencies, and that the connections with Aberseen agencies were not always very strong. They wondered if a second goal could be facilitating more connections between these processes. As these meetings tended to focus on individual young people, another goal would be the chance to think about Belmark city centre as a context.</p> <p>Thirdly, Ray and Jo found that an important social condition impacting agencies' ability to work together was their funding history. Services that used to be council run had been put out to tender, creating a competitive 'marketplace'. Consequently, agencies understandably felt protective of their patch and reluctant to increase or change their work if it was not being properly remunerated. These conditions contributed to the sense of suspicion that Ray and Jo encountered when they first started working in Belmark. Ray and Jo thought that this was a structural problem which impacted the work that agencies were able to do, and could therefore be included in the FGC, even if this was a very long-term goal.</p> <p>So, Ray and Jo planned an in-person meeting. They invited all the agencies they had contact with during their scoping phase, to make a plan that would target the following issues:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Safe spaces - young people knowing what's available, where they would go if they need help 2. Inter-agency communication - how to support a more joined up approach to responding to extra-familial harm in a way that protects children's rights 3. Supporting professional development: information sharing, signposting, training and funding to support a network of people who know each other and know who to contact if they are worried about young people in Belmark city centre and, in the longer term, are supported to intervene in contexts as well as with individual young people
<p>The conference</p>	<p>The meeting was held in a youth centre in Belmark from 10am – 2.30pm. Ray and Jo greeted people with refreshments and invited them to sit in a crescent shape. Approximately fifteen people came - mostly agencies from Belmark - including youth workers, public health, a drug and alcohol service, social workers (from both Belmark and Aberseen), police, business, security agencies, transport and the Violence Reduction Unit partnership.</p> <p>To begin, Jo explained the purpose of the meeting and gave a short introduction to Contextual Safeguarding. Ray then shared a PowerPoint of the survey findings, including the young people's survey. Next, Jo invited people to form two groups to discuss the following questions, over lunch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will we work together to improve communication and information sharing regarding young people's experiences?

<p>The conference</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's already working? • Is there anything we can do differently? • What support will we offer to help workers and officers to know where to signpost any young people's safeguarding concerns? • How will we work together to help young people find and access safe spaces? What's already available? • How will we promote this? Is there anything else we can do? What training do those facing vulnerable young people need? What is available? Can we offer additional training? <p>In the afternoon, the group joined back together to share and develop a plan. The initial misgivings that people had when they had first met Ray and Jo had reduced, but there were still questions about whether this was a process that would demand more of agencies without providing more resources. Ray and Jo responded openly to this, not defending but listening and acknowledging the difficulties the funding structure had created.</p> <p>The conversation was also an opportunity to clarify the values that underlie a Contextual Safeguarding approach. For example, a town manager offered to use an information-sharing system to share information about young people. A youth worker raised questions about this, but was unsure about whether Contextual Safeguarding was an approach that encouraged this type of information sharing. Jo explained how Contextual Safeguarding is grounded in children's rights and relationships, and that the focus was not on sharing information about individual children but on creating a safer environment through care and guardianship, not surveillance.</p> <p>The meeting raised important questions about who is responsible for the safety of young people in Belmark city centre – safeguarding services or community safety and the police? Although this could not be resolved in one meeting, by the end of the conference, a set of actions had been agreed which Ray and Jo wrote up and shared with the group.</p>
<p>The plan</p>	<p>The plan was as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Help and detached youth service to share details of their service to the group • Co-ordinators to share contact details of the group for future networking • Social care in both areas to collaborate on a flow chart that shows the responsibilities and decision-making processes when there are concerns about young people in contexts which affect both areas • Transport representative to share information about an upcoming action that could impact young people • Contextual Safeguarding resources and information to be shared with the group • A review meeting to be set up in 3 months' time

Appendix 2: Tools and resources

There are various tools on the Contextual Safeguarding website which coordinators have adapted for use in this work. Here is a list of helpful resources that you could use to support this work and with links to the Contextual Safeguarding website.

Resource	What it is
<u>Context Weighting Tool</u>	A tool to use at the end of the scoping phase to weigh up what is influencing the harm experienced by young people to help you set goals and target the context of the harm
Surveys	We have sample surveys for young people, businesses, community/residents within the relevant sections of the <u>Scale-Up Toolkit</u>
Animations about CS	We have <u>animations</u> for young people to help stimulate a conversation about Contextual Safeguarding. We also have <u>animations</u> about what is a community guardian and taking a welfare approach which could be used to share with potential guardians.
<u>Singing from the same hymn sheet</u>	A range of resources to support you if you're working with partners who might not be trained in ecological approaches
<u>Watching over, working with</u>	These are a range of resources to help you to work in a way that is about 'working with' young people not 'watching over' them.
<u>Outcomes Guide and Framework</u>	These resources help you to measure changes contextually and to assess outcomes
<u>FCG & CS Briefing</u>	Sets out the compatibility of the two approaches and provides two case studies.
<u>Scale-Up Toolkit</u>	This toolkit provides resources you need to start thinking about for creating a Contextual Safeguarding system.