Applying Thresholds to Extra-Familial Harm

Learning from Hackney's Child Wellbeing Framework

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Background

The issue of 'thresholds' in relation to access to children's services presents particular challenges in cases of extra-familial harm, which require consideration and definition in a Contextual Safeguarding system. Research has identified varying responses to threshold decisions regarding cases of extra-familial harm – for example harm which takes place in peer group settings, schools, neighbourhoods or online (Firmin, 2017; Lloyd and Firmin, 2019 forthcoming). Child protection systems, that have been designed to intervene when parents/carers pose a risk of harm, or don't have the capacity to safeguard children, are challenged when referrals for support feature protective parents but a child at risk of significant harm in an extra-familial setting. The result of this mis-match can be that young people at risk in extra-familial settings are either not referred into social care, or when they are, do not always have access to social work intervention or statutory oversight of a plan to keep them safe, especially if the family appears to be protective at the point of referral or assessment.

When developing a Contextual Safeguarding approach locally, areas need to consider two things:

- How do they apply a threshold for statutory intervention with children and families impacted by extra-familial harm? If the nature of the extra-familial harm is assessed as significant, would that child and family receive support and oversight through a statutory response, or in order for that to happen does the family/parenting also need to be a concern?

- What is the area's threshold for initiating an assessment or further investigation of a context (peer-group, school, location, online setting) in which harm occurs?

The London Borough of Hackney is the first local authority to have developed a thresholds documents that relates to contexts in which harm occurs outside the family home. Their revised Children and Families Service Hackney Child Wellbeing Framework also considers how best to represent the needs of individual children and families who are impacted by harm in extra-familial, as well as familial, settings.

This briefing outlines how Hackney revised its Child Wellbeing Framework and shares learning from this process to support other local areas who are considering how to apply thresholds when responding to cases of extra-familial harm.

What is the Hackney Child Wellbeing Framework?

The Hackney Child Wellbeing Framework provides a framework for Hackney's Children and Families Service, partner services and agencies to determine the right intervention for a child and a family, including which services should respond and what is required for a statutory intervention. The document proposes three levels of intervention:

- **Universal**: a response by universal services, often working individually. Within an extra-familial scenario, this also includes ensuring safety for young people within universally available leisure and recreational provision.

- **Universal Plus/Universal Partnership Plus**: a response by universal services working together in universal settings and sometimes bringing additional targeted resources into a multi-agency partnership plan to both assess and address concerns.

- **Complex and/or High Risk**: a response that requires multi-agency and/or specialist services, often governed by statutory frameworks, to take the lead role.

The document considers these levels of interventions in relations to different domains including children's health, emotional health, wellbeing and behaviour; education; neighbourhood; family and parenting.

How does the revised document address extra-familial harm?

When revising its Child Wellbeing Framework, Hackney realised that the document had been predominantly focussed on individual risk factors to assess the needs of children and families. While there were some elements of extra-familial risk present, these were sometimes conflated with risk factors or vulnerabilities that were related to individual children. The revised document sought to differentiate characteristics or behaviours displayed by individual children from harm or protection they experienced within other contexts including their families, peer groups and locations.

Alongside the original framework for individual children and their families, a new framework was developed to help practitioners and partners consider their response to contexts in which there was a risk of harm – but those contexts were situated outside of the family. Whilst some elements of the new framework mirror the original, such as the levels of response (Universal; Universal Plus/Universal Partnership Plus; Complex and/or High Risk) there are also new elements, including consideration of the role of adults and procedural, systemic and structural factors to address some of the broader multi-agency issues identified within each context. Thinking about the role that adults and structures play in ensuring safety can also help local authorities to move beyond what can sometimes be a victim blaming position, in which all of the onus is on the individual child to change their behaviour, rather than focus professional attention on the context/s around the child The new framework therefore seeks to support managers and practitioners to assess and identify opportunities to intervene within the context themselves, alongside any particular individual needs that young people might have.

How did this document come together and who was involved?

The revised thresholds framework was produced through initial collaboration with a range of internal partners within children's services, including the 'front door', early help, youth services and social

care. In workshops and meetings, partners reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of the existing policy, and analysed how extra-familial harm was currently represented within it. A revised version was then drawn up, in which extra-familiar issues were separated out from familial issues, in order to ensure clarity in terms of responses to harm and need. A new framework was also developed for contexts. This involved devising new indicators to describe harm and need at the different levels within extra-familial settings, seeking to mirror the original framework as closely as possible, but with additional structural features. Partners asked themselves, for example – "what would 'significant harm', look like in peer-group settings, schools, locations etc.?" and "whose capacity to safeguard would be undermined in these contexts?" Internal partners reviewed draft versions and discussed the implications of the proposed changes. The draft framework was also tested in extra-familial safeguarding activity (i.e. location and peer-group assessments) to gauge its usefulness and relevance. Once a final draft was developed, multi-agency partners were consulted and provided feedback via the City and Hackney Children's Safeguarding Board.

Key learning from the thresholds review process in Hackney include:

- It is important as a first step to come to a shared understanding of what extra-familial harm is, as this may vary across partnerships and even within agencies.
- In order to reach a shared understanding about risk of harm and need, frontline practitioners, service leads and managers and multi-agency partners all need to be involved in the process of review and change.
- It is useful to see the review process as a journey, with unexpected turns in the road, in which the policy developed is just the start of a longer process of development. Although this will look different in each area, ultimately, discussing the value and purpose of a thresholds document in relation to extra-familial harm, and coming to an agreement on this, will provide a strong basis from which to have transparent, collaborative and sometimes challenging conversations across the multi-agency partnership about responses to harm and need.

What is the role of children social care in addressing extra-familial contexts?

Due to a lack of national guidance on this issue, the role of children social care in addressing extra-familial harm is currently opened to debate and there are significant differences across the country on what thresholds for extra-familial harm should be.

Hackney's position is that if there is significant harm or a risk of significant harm to a child or a group of children, then this require a safeguarding response and that social work services are best placed to oversee, and at times coordinate a plan for, this response. This does not mean that all interventions featured in a plan should be conducted by social work services. However, framing extra-familial harm as a safeguarding issue, and not just one related to criminal justice or public disorder, stresses the need for interventions to be welfare-led.

Strategically, this is key for local authorities seeking to embark on a contextual approach to safeguarding. While they may have policy frameworks in place framing extra-familial harm as a safeguarding issue in relation to individual young people, these may not necessarily be easily implemented when the context of harm sits outside a traditional safeguarding agenda; especially in

cases where families are protective. Likewise, safeguarding policies may struggle to address situations where harm is linked to a location (i.e. a particular stairwell on an estate) when the individual young people at risk are not known to services.

What is the role of partner agencies?

Hackney's revised Child Wellbeing Framework is an early iteration of a document that explores thresholds for social work oversight of cases of extra-familial harm. It provides a valuable platform for discussions with multi-partner agencies to help them consider what their role might be in ensuring young people's safety outside of their homes.

Once a decision is reached about whether a threshold is met, partners should consider who has the responsibility to intervene in a particular context and thus who should have statutory oversight for ensuring safety in this context. In addition to considering responsibility, partners should also consider who is best equipped to intervene in this context. For example, Hackney is fortunate to have a strong youth early help service, which often leads on direct work with individuals or peer groups, whilst other multi-agency partners may play lead roles when intervening in locations and other contexts.

Importantly, there can be considerable concern on the part of practitioners if they feel that this approach leads to them holding very high levels of risk without evidenced based interventions equivalent to those available for work with individuals and families. This can be anxiety-inducing for many practitioners and it is therefore important that risk in these cases is held by a multi-agency partnership – supporting individual practitioners or teams to build a contextual safeguarding approach.

Additional resources on Hackney's Contextual Safeguarding Implementation toolkit:

This document outlines key considerations relating to thresholds in a Contextual Safeguarding system.

For more information, podcasts are available on the toolkit's family and context thresholds page.

References

Firmin, C. (2017) *Contextual Safeguarding: An overview of the operational, strategic and conceptual framework.*