

Contextual Safeguarding and 'County Lines'

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Introduction

“children who are being exploited in gangs deserve a similar response to those who are being sexually exploited...children who are exploited and groomed for criminal purposes are equally as deserving of support. The language of criminal exploitation is rarely understood and therefore those affected are not offered the same response. All forms of exploitation should be considered in the same way, with an understanding of grooming and vulnerability” (APGG on Runaway and Missing Children, 2017:2).

Children and young people who are trafficked to sell drugs are being subjected to a form of extra-familial harm. Whilst there is no statutory definition of ‘child criminal exploitation’ (CCE), CCE and the trafficking of children to sell drugs on ‘county lines’ are named in Working Together 2018 (HM Government, 2018) as forms of child abuse and as such those affected are entitled to a child protection response.

This briefing will:

- Map the emergence of ‘county lines’ as a child welfare issue
- Introduce the four domains of Contextual Safeguarding
- Outline how a Contextual Safeguarding approach to assessment, planning, intervention and outcome measurement could offer an alternative response to young people who are affected by ‘county lines’
- Undertake all of the above from an ecological, child welfare and participatory perspective

‘County Lines’ is a policing term used to describe the distribution of illegal substances from urban to rural and coastal areas, operated via a branded mobile phone line. This model of drug distribution has become a concern for child welfare agencies as recent reports (National Crime Agency, 2019) have signalled that ‘county lines’ can involve young people as young as ten acting as ‘runners’ and selling drugs in ‘trap houses’ far away from their homes (Turner, Belcher and Pona, 2019). Safeguarding young people from the significant harm that can characterise involvement in cross-county drug distribution is now a priority issue for the UK government, although the extent to which this is a new or emerging trend is disputed (Spicer, 2018; Turner, Belcher and Pona, 2019). A 2018 National Crime Agency (NCA) briefing (NCA, 2019) reports that 11% of branded mobile phone lines used to distribute drugs across county borders featured the exploitation or trafficking of local ‘juveniles’ and 13% of branded lines featured the exploitation of out of force young people; 2% of these lines featured child sexual exploitation or abuse. For those young people who are identified (via the National Referral Mechanism) as having been trafficked via a ‘county line’, Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 lays out a statutory defence in line with national and international anti-trafficking frameworks to safeguard a young person from

criminalisation for activities carried out as a direct result of their trafficking experience. Recent increases in referrals to the NRM have been attributed to an increased awareness of 'child criminal exploitation' (Setter and Baker, 2019). However concerns remain about low levels of reporting and support (Setter and Baker, 2019) and that young people continue to be criminalised despite having been identified as victims of trafficking, as exposed by a recent Guardian investigation (Mohdin, 2019).

In the UK, despite the inclusion of extra-familial forms of harm in Working Together 2018 (HM Government, 2018) and a significant political, policy, media and sector commitment to safeguarding young people from some of these forms of harm, notably child sexual exploitation (CSE) and child criminal exploitation (CCE) via 'county lines' (Home Office, 2018), there is an absence of a national strategy for safeguarding those adolescents that do come to harm outside of the home (Firmin, Wroe, Lloyd, 2019). As such, local responses vary significantly (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2019). There is growing political concern about rising levels of 'serious youth violence', of which 'county lines' is considered a key strategic priority in the Government's Serious Youth Violence Strategy (HM Government, 2018b). However, there remains no clear strategic oversight of the issue; with calls to safeguard children from the harms associated with 'county lines' falling between youth justice, child protection agencies and the voluntary sector (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2019). As such, competing priorities complicate the policy and practice landscape. Amidst this noise there is an urgent question of what is required strategically to transform responses to adolescents from one that criminalises young people to one that safeguards them? Is the involvement of young people in 'county lines' primarily a matter for criminal justice and policing, or for child welfare agencies? If it is the latter, as the APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (APPG, 2017) and many others (Home Office, 2018; Setter and Baker, 2019) are currently calling for, what does this look like in practice?

As with all forms of 'significant harm' that warrant a child protection response only a minority of children and young people (NCA, 2018) will ever come to harm via the 'county line' model of drug distribution. Acknowledging this is crucial in ensuring that professionals remain focused on the realities of the lives of young people and that resources are distributed accordingly, and that child welfare agencies do not contribute to the profiling and 'risk management' of broad populations of young people who are not at risk of significant harm (Parton, 2019).

This briefing outlines what a Contextual Safeguarding approach may offer to this context. Current approaches to safeguarding young people who are involved in 'county lines', and associated forms of harm including 'knife crime' and other forms of 'youth violence', will be explored in the context of this emerging practice and policy landscape. The four domains of Contextual Safeguarding are proposed as a framework from which a safeguarding response to those young people who are affected can begin to be articulated, and against which current and proposed

approaches that seek to safeguard rather than criminalise young people can be gauged.

A Contextual Safeguarding Framework

“The provisions of the Children Act focus on risks within the family. A child from a stable family may not meet the threshold for support because dangers from the external environment (the county line) are not factored in. A contextual safeguarding approach would address this issue but requires a change in statutory service approach and specialist staff development. In addition, social services experience high demand on limited budgets, raising the level of support thresholds and limiting the amount of support that can be delivered”. (County Lines Scoping Report, 2017:3)

The exploitation of children and young people to traffic drugs on ‘county lines’ is a risk that primarily takes place outside of the family home. When young people are targeted, it is reported to be in their neighbourhoods, through their peer groups and at school (National Crime Agency, 2018; Home Office, 2018; Hudek, 2018) and as ‘child criminal exploitation’ is a form of child abuse, it is these sites that require child protection interventions in order to ensure young people receive the safeguarding response they are entitled to. Yet in England, as in many countries globally, child protection systems and the legislative frameworks that govern them have developed with a focus on individual children and their families. Child protection practice is problematically divorced from wider contexts (Firmin, 2017), from assessment to the interventions used to safeguard young people. Focussing on parental capacity and the family environment, as opposed to the spaces and places where harm occurs, reduces the ability of social workers to understand and engage with the socially contingent nature of abuse in cases of extra-familial harm. Increasing case-loads and bureaucracy further immobilise social workers, restricting their ability to engage with communities and to undertake face-to-face work (Holland, 2014).

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to safeguarding adolescents from harms that occur outside of the family home and that targets the social conditions of abuse; that is the spaces where young people come to harm and the social rules at play in these spaces (Firmin, 2017). While Police and Community Safety Partnerships are mandated to protect young people in public places, these agencies are principally tasked with crime prevention and reduction – as opposed to safeguarding and abuse prevention. Current policy and practice responses are struggling to articulate and operationalise a safeguarding response to young people affected by ‘county lines’ (ALDCS, 2018). Contextual Safeguarding, acknowledging extra familial harm as a form of child abuse, proposes a child welfare response to young people who are subject to harm outside of the home. Specifically, a Contextual Safeguarding approach is scaffolded by four domains: it targets

the social conditions of abuse, includes extra familial contexts in child protection legislative frameworks, utilises partnerships with individuals and organisations responsible for the spaces where young people spend their time, and measures contextual outcomes (Firmin, 2017; see figure one).

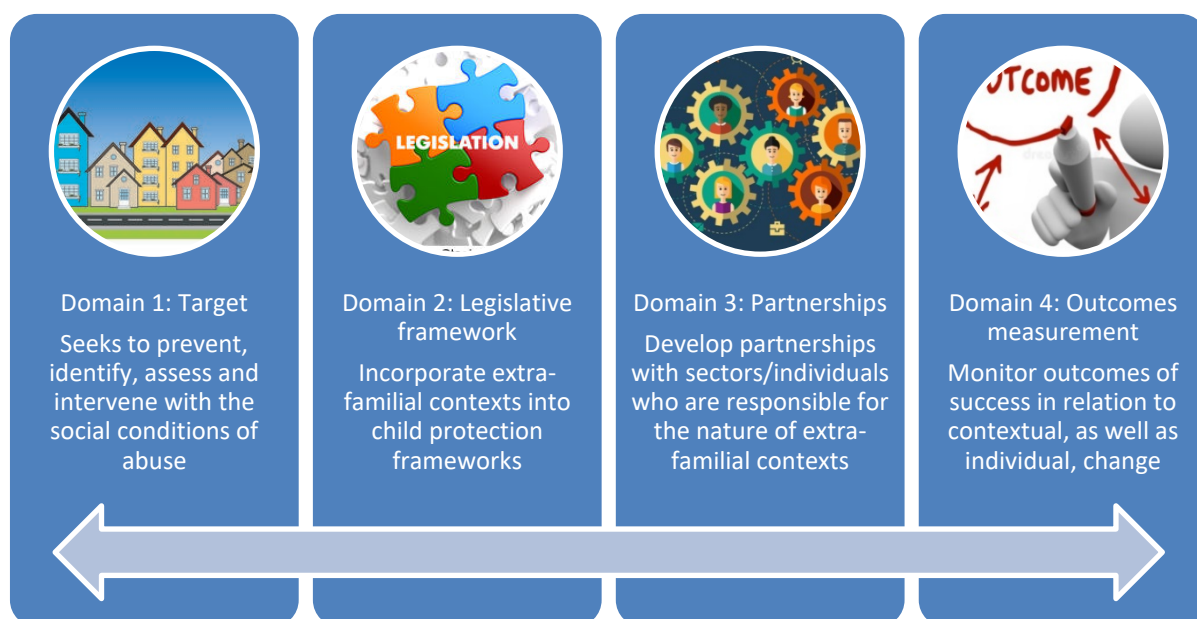


Figure One: The Four Domains of Contextual Safeguarding (Firmin, 2017)

Where we were

Despite the recent emergence of ‘county lines’ as a political priority, it is acknowledged by experts in the sector (Turner, Belcher and Pona, 2019) and many young people, that the trafficking of drugs across county borders is not a new model of drug distribution. ‘County Lines’ can be located as entering the UK policy agenda as a culmination of programme activities relating to the Government’s *Ending Youth and Gang Violence* programme (HM Government, 2011). In 2011, responding to the unrest that spread across London and other major UK cities following the police shooting of Mark Duggan¹, the UK Government announced its plans to eliminate what it saw as a propensity for violence located within disadvantaged youth subcultures (HM Government, 2011). Established in 2011 the account of young people’s role in youth violence was blaming and individualised:

¹ Mark Duggan was a 29 year old British man shot and killed by the police in Tottenham, UK in 2011. His death sparked ‘riots’ across London and the UK <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/aug/09/london-riots-mark-duggan-inquest>

“The proportion of rioters known to be gang involved may be low - so too are the numbers of young people involved in gangs - but we must not let that distract us from the disproportionate and devastating impact they have on some of our most deprived communities” (HM Government, 2011:4) going on to propose “this summary report sets out a cross-government plan to reduce gang and youth violence by targeting people like Boy X and the damage they do to themselves, their families and the communities in which they grow up. (HM Government, 2011:9).”

Local problem profiling and mapping work conducted by the 2012 EGYV local authority cohort was evaluated as ‘highly significant’ in understanding the criminal exploitation of children via ‘county lines’. A specialist team of experts was seconded into EGYV to map the issue using data sets across local authority areas and to conduct interviews with frontline practitioners to build a picture of this ‘emerging pattern of youth violence and drug trafficking’ (Ford, 2018). Citing the findings of the profiling process as imperative in the emerging intelligence picture around ‘county lines’, the NCA conducted a base line assessment in 2015 (NCA, 2015) to establish the extent of the issue for police force areas across the UK. This assessment warned that ‘county lines’ ‘almost always’ involves the exploitation of vulnerable people (although later statistics report that 11% of police forces identified young people being exploited via a ‘county line’; NCA, 2019), citing that some forces observed the exploitation of young people as a means of ‘running drugs’; with care experienced young people and those known to Children’s Service and Youth Offending Services being particularly vulnerable.

Acknowledging this emerging trend the Home Office re-branded its EGYV programme in 2016 to centre the exploitation of children as a major policy and practice concern. The Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation (EGVE) Programme reflected this shift in focus (HM Government, 2016) with ‘tackling county lines’ topping the six key priority areas for the programme. The change in title and focus of the programme intended to highlight the fact that young people are exploited into criminal activity and in doing so muddled the picture of who is exploiting and who is exploited. Are young people responsible for the damage caused to their communities, or are young people being exposed to harm in their local areas?

This policy and practice trajectory locates the emergency of ‘county lines’ in the Government’s anti-gangs strategy. This EGVE programme shifted its language from one that blames and criminalises young people, responding to evidence that young people were being criminally exploited (HM Government, 2016). The relationship between ‘gang’ suspects and those involved in ‘serious youth violence’ is disputed (Williams, 2018), noting also that gang interventions disproportionately target and criminalise young Black boys and young men with significant implications for their experiences of criminal justice interventions (for example Joint Enterprise), safety, access to employment and support (Amnesty, 2018, Williams, 2018). Whilst the NCA

opted to avoid 'gang' terminology in their 2015 baseline assessment into 'county lines' (NCA, 2015:2), EGVE locates a 'hard core of gang members' as responsible for the exploitation of vulnerable people (HM Government, 2016:2). In order to conceptualise the young people "*who are being exploited in gangs*" as "*equally as deserving of support*" (APPG, 2017:2) as young people who are subject to other forms of harm, on-going reflection on the language used to describe the contexts and relationships that make up young people's experiences of violence is required.

Mapping the emergence of 'county lines' as a child welfare issue in this way is crucial to understanding the current state of play, from one that seeks to criminalise to one that seeks to protect and the significant barriers that must be overcome in order to realise a child welfare approach for this cohort of young people.

Where we are now

The Office for National Statistics recorded 285 knife homicides in 2018, the highest recorded since the Home Office homicide index began in 1946 (Office for National Statistics, 2019), figures that particularly affect young males aged 16-24 and 25-34. The rise in violent incidents involving knives has been linked to 'county lines' and is a major and 'significant' theme in the government's Serious Youth Violence Strategy (HM Government, 2018b). The Serious Youth Violence strategy continues the funding of EGVE, and in September 2018 then Home Secretary Sajid Javid announced the launch of a Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), acknowledging that tackling violence amongst young people is not simply a law enforcement issue, laying out a public health approach to tackling 'serious youth violence'.

A public health approach is a population-wide method that maps violence as a communicable disease, with a focus on primary, secondary and tertiary prevention delivered through joint commissioning and a multi-agency approach. The VRU is based on Glasgow's Violence Reduction Unit, established in 2005, which adopted a public health approach 'diagnosing and treating' the causes of violence through the establishment of cross-agency interventions ranging from social enterprise, hospital based issue specific teams and 'navigators' and school mentoring programmes (VRU, 2010). This investment in local services has been lauded for the significant reduction in 'knife crime' in the city over a period of ten years (Scottish Government, 2019). In the current climate of austerity and budget cuts to local authorities, learning from the Glasgow experience suggests that re-investment in local services and infrastructure can have significant results on violence.

However, the implementation of a public health approach, has proven to be difficult due to

competing policy priorities. In some respects there are evident moves towards a welfare-based approach to harm reduction: the Supporting Families Against Youth Crime fund (Gov.uk, 2019b) will invest £5 million to support communities and parents working with violence-affected young people and a further £35 million of government money will support the establishment of 18 Violence Reduction Units across England and Wales (Gov.uk, 2019c). At the same time, Contextual Safeguarding has been adopted in Working Together 2018, acknowledging a need for place-based interventions that move away from the responsibilising and criminalising of young people, and look instead to the social conditions and contextual drivers of harm that impact multiple young people (HM Government, 2018).

Yet criticism of the government's proposed 'public health' strategy notes not only the implementation barriers posed by significant de-investment in public and community services required to operationalise the strategy, but significantly, that many of the proposed interventions continue to adopt an enforcement approach. Awareness raising programmes on the consequence of knife crime, alongside the de-regulation of stop and search via increased Section 60 powers, mandatory reporting of young people in possession of knives and the continued enforcement of knife crime prevention orders (KCPOs) seek to deter young people from carrying weapons by tackling their decision making and behaviour through education and enforcement. A 2018 report by the Centre for Crime and Justice argues that such approaches fail to address the significant social, economic and political drivers of violence by defaulting to criminal justice interventions grounded in notions of risk and threat to public safety (Grimshaw and Ford, 2019). Underscoring these approaches is an individualised approach that locates individual choice as the target of intervention, often devoid from the contexts in which those choices are made. For example, the Supporting Families Against Youth Crime fund proposes to:

"help [young people] develop the personal resilience to withstand peer pressure and make their own positive life choices. (Gov.uk, 2019b)"

A continuation of the focus encapsulated in the EGYV quote from 2011; locating responsibility for social damage in the choices, actions and behaviours of young people:

"this summary report sets out a cross-government plan to reduce gang and youth violence by targeting people like Boy X and the damage they do to themselves, their families and the communities in which they grow up. (HM Government, 2011:9)."

Adopting the health metaphor, an approach that targets individual behaviour, whether that is the behaviour of those who perpetrate harm or are victimised, locates violence and exploitation as an individual rather than a social disease. There is an acknowledged risk here (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018) of responsibilising young people for the hostile contexts in which they are growing up and

forced to navigate. Discussing the link between ‘county lines’ and ‘knife violence’ the Centre for Crime and Justice insists:

“Interventions which do not seek to address wider social issues such as inequality, deprivation, poor mental health and drug addiction are unlikely to provide long-lasting solutions to knife violence”. (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018:10).

Locating the emergence of ‘county lines’ as a child safeguarding issue against a background of criminal enforcement and offender and gang management strategies, helps us to understand how these lineages intersect to create a number of barriers, both conceptually and strategically, to adopting a child welfare approach to those young people who are involved in ‘county lines’.

The findings of a 2019 report by Volteface and Mentor UK (McCulloch and Furlong, 2019) speaks to the continued targeting and criminalisation of young people by UK drug policy and intervention. Convictions of 14-18 year olds for possession with intent to supply rose by two thirds between 2012 and 2017 and school exclusions for drug and alcohol related incidents rose by 57% in the same period (McCulloch and Furlong, 2019). UK prison population statistics published in July 2019 (Sturge, 2019) reveal that there are a higher proportion of under 18’s in prison for drug offences than there are adults in prison for sexual offences. This trend continues despite College of Policing evidence that stop and search, tougher sentencing and custodial sentences have a minimal impact on levels of associated weapon carrying and violence and in some cases increase the likelihood of re-offending (McNeill and Wheller, 2019). And there is widespread agreement that permanent school exclusion increases young people’s risk of poor outcomes and harm (APPG, 2017; Hudek, 2018; Turner et al, 2019), by exposing young people to part-time timetables with little adult supervision or meaningful activity. These enforcement strategies, to manage ‘serious youth violence’ including ‘county lines’, have occurred at a period in which national policy in the UK is set to ensure that these young people, who experience harm, receive a child welfare response as opposed to criminalisation.

Contextual Safeguarding, ‘county lines’ and associated harms: case study

Contextual Safeguarding is built on the premise that context matters, as multiple young people often come to harm in the same locations and the behaviours and actions of young people cannot be understood without an understanding of context. From 2018 onwards then, with the inclusion of extra-familial forms of harm in Working Together, and a move toward a public health approach to violence, the government was indicating acknowledgement of the relationship between the contexts of abuse and abuse itself. One example of a Home Office attempt to address context is

the ‘knife free’ campaign. This campaign attempts to target locations of harm by distributing awareness raising interventions printed on ‘chicken boxes’ to takeaway shops. However, rather than intervening in locations of harm the campaign targeted individual children in those locations. The following section evaluates the #knifefree campaign against the four domains of Contextual Safeguarding, and demonstrates the ways in which a contextual approach can begin to transcend the limitations posed to safeguarding those young people who are harmed via ‘county lines’.

Chicken boxes #knifefree campaign

On the 14th August 2019 the Policing Minister announced a Home Office campaign to tackle ‘knife crime’ amongst young people. 321,000 food packaging boxes were distributed to chicken shops across the UK printed with messages telling ‘real life’ stories of young people who have ‘chosen to pursue positive activities, such as boxing or music, instead of carrying a knife’ (Home Office, 2019). A Home Office press release on gov.uk stated:

“These chicken boxes will bring home to thousands of young people the tragic consequences of carrying a knife and challenge the idea that it makes you safer”.

“The government is doing everything it can to tackle the senseless violence that is traumatising communities and claiming too many young lives, including bolstering the police’s ranks with 20,000 new police officers on our streets.” (Home Office, 2019)

Mapping the Home Office #Knifefree chicken box campaign against the four domains of Contextual Safeguarding

Target

The Home Office #knifefree chicken box campaign targets individual behaviour change through the use of consequential thinking structured around case studies of young people who have ‘chosen’ a positive lifestyle over weapon carrying. This element of the campaign champions engagement in positive activities such as music and sport. The assumption underlying this campaign is that reward or deterrent is sufficient to effect a young person’s thoughts and behaviours in relation to weapon carrying – if young people know the alternatives to, and consequences of, carrying weapons, they can and should adapt their behaviour accordingly. Contextual safeguarding is premised on a situated understanding of young people’s choices and actions: that young people’s choices are influenced, encouraged or restrained by the spaces in which they spend their time.

For example, the 2018 London Young Voice survey reported that approximately 1 in 10 young people were victims of crime in the previous year, the majority of which were theft or burglary (Ramshaw, Charleton and Dawson, 2018). These numbers are likely to be higher given that

evidence persistently suggests that young people are far less likely to report incidents of crime, including theft and violent offences, due to a lack of confidence in statutory services ability to support them (they are far more likely to disclose to a peer; Beckett and Warrington, 2014). This is compounded for some young people by a reported mistrust in policing due to experiences of institutional racism and over-policing (Williams, 2018; Grimshaw and Ford; 2018). If a young person is subject to a theft and reports this to the police and nothing is done, that young person may find ways to create their own sense of safety, for example by establishing a protective peer group (and therefore increasing their social capital) or carrying a weapon to stay safe.

Educating a young person about the consequences of carrying a knife will be ineffective if that young person is navigating a violent or hostile environment where they feel that carrying a knife is the only way to stay safe. That environment, whether it is a neighbourhood, a peer group or school might feature low levels of adult supervision, harmful norms about gender and violence, or the absence of supportive youth services resulting in poor protective structures for young people. It is therefore the environment in which the harm occurs, and the social rules and human relationships that make up this environment, that must become subject to assessment and intervention in a contextual safeguarding approach.

The chicken box campaign does not engage with the location of harm. If there are concerns that young people are coming to harm locally due to involvement in 'county lines' and associated behaviours such as carrying weapons, a contextual assessment and intervention might consider the following:

- Safety mapping: Can young people be engaged in safety mapping to establish where they feel safe and unsafe in their local area?²
- Business and resident surveys: Can resident and business surveys³ be used to identify community guardians whom young people trust and will go to if they feel unsafe?
- Context weighting and commissioning: Has contextual risk been weighted to establish where locations of harm are and who has capacity to safeguard in these locations (Firmin, 2017: 2-4)? For example, have locations of harm been identified and can this form the basis of local commissioning to situate a pro-active and engaging local youth offer, providing the kinds of positive activities outlined via the #knifefree campaign, in the spaces where young people feel unsafe? Can resource be directed toward individuals and organisations that have existing trusted relationships with young people?
- Contexts are physical spaces and the human relationships that shape them.: Are features

² Contextual Safeguarding: Safety Mapping Exercise. Available at <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/en/publications/safety-mapping>

³ Contextual Safeguarding: Neighbourhood Assessment toolkit. Available at <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/en/publications/neighbourhood-assessment-toolkit>

of the environment increasing young people's sense of unsafety? Is the space poorly lit? Are young people forced into marginalised spaces such as dark parks and transport hubs due to a lack of young-person friendly spaces? Do young people feel the local police offer them protection?

A context assessment would target the environments in which young people come to harm and subject these environments to assessment and intervention in consultation with young people. As such, a population-wide approach can be achieved that creates safety for multiple young people, without young people who are not at risk of or experiencing significant harm becoming the target of statutory interventions.

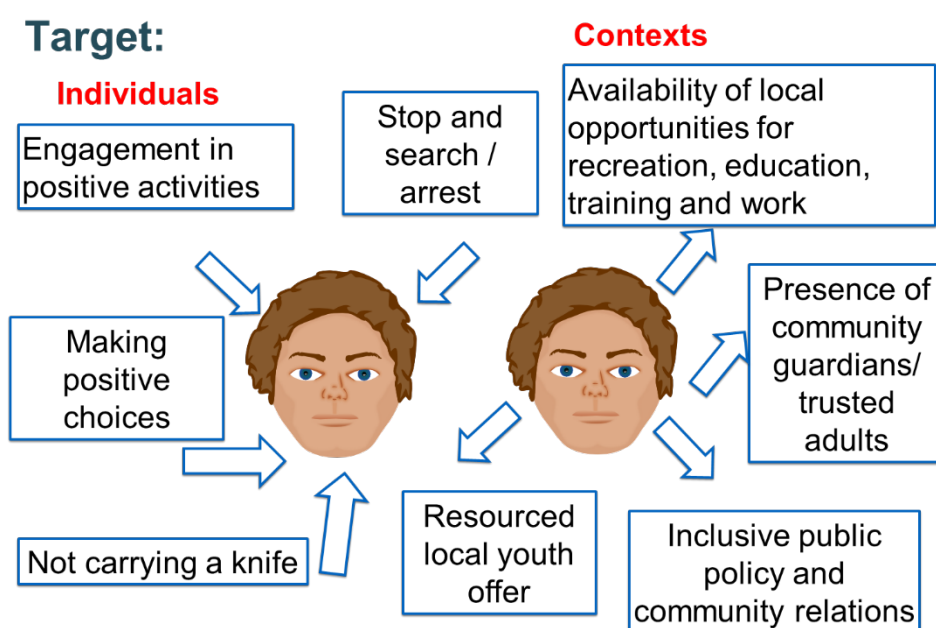


Figure Two: Domain One 'target'

Legislative frameworks

In doing so, the spaces in which harms occur are scrutinised through a child welfare lens that is scaffolded by child protection legislation. This legislation promotes the best interests of children and dictates that the welfare of children and young people should remain paramount (Legislation.gov.uk, 1989; HM Government, 2018) over other commercial, enforcement or political objectives. Assessment and intervention in these spaces must, therefore, promote the centrality of young people's voices, and their participation in decision making, and must promote children and young people's right to live lives free from violence, abuse and neglect (article 16, CRC) whilst

maintaining their right to privacy (article 19, CRC⁴). These articles alongside Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights⁵ and GDPR requirements are crucial considerations in any local strategy to safeguard young people. Given the extended reach of child protection systems under a public health or Contextual Safeguarding approach, serious consideration must be given to protection of privacy and civil liberties (Parton, 2019) to ensure that broad populations of young people are not profiled and targeted without consideration for thresholds of harm, consent, GDPR and confidentiality.

Currently, competing priorities mar attempts to safeguard young people from criminal exploitation and associated harms contributing to a discord in local responses. The Mayor of London and the London Association of Directors of Children's Services (ALDCS, 2018) call for a '*child first, offender second*' response to young people involved in 'county lines' and carrying weapons. Sector experts, parents and young people tell us that stop and search has criminogenic effects on young people (Williams, 2018), that custody increases re-offending (McNeill and Wheller, 2019) and that permanent school exclusion significantly increases a young person's vulnerability to harm (APPG, 2017; Hudek, 2018; Turner et al, 2019). Yet, in 2019, government policies supported the de-regulation of stop and search, and proposed the building of secure schools alongside increased rates of convictions and school exclusions for drug related offences (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2019; Voltface, 2019). The Home Office #knifefree campaign scaffolds it's warning to young people about the dangers of carrying knives with a promise of increased policing on the streets. If these young people are children first and offenders second, what will the nature of this policing be?

It is imperative, therefore, that a local policy review is carried out to establish how extra familial contexts are brought consistently and coherently under child welfare legislation and practice frameworks, both locally and nationally. A local policy review would bring together stakeholders from across sectors and might consider:

- Does local public policy promote the presence of young people in public space?
- Are opportunities provided for young people to shape and contribute to their neighbourhoods?
- Are local services and agencies invested in positive and inclusive relationships with young people?
- Does local school policy default to exclusion and managed moves? Is there a robust local PSHE offer that responds to local need?
- Is there a detached youth work offer to engage with young people in the spaces where

⁴ As stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Available here: https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_united_nations_convention_on_the_rights_of_the_child.pdf?_ga=2.3262640.1067908600.1569499117-788285101.1569499117

⁵ Full guide available here: https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Guide_Art_8_ENG.pdf

they spend their time? Who are the trusted community organisations that can be resourced to deliver these services?

- What is the local youth offer for education, employment and training?
- Are the objectives of local policing initiatives aligned with child welfare initiatives?
- Is there a clear legal and ethical basis for the work being undertaken (including consideration of child protection, data protection and human rights legislation)?

Legislative frameworks

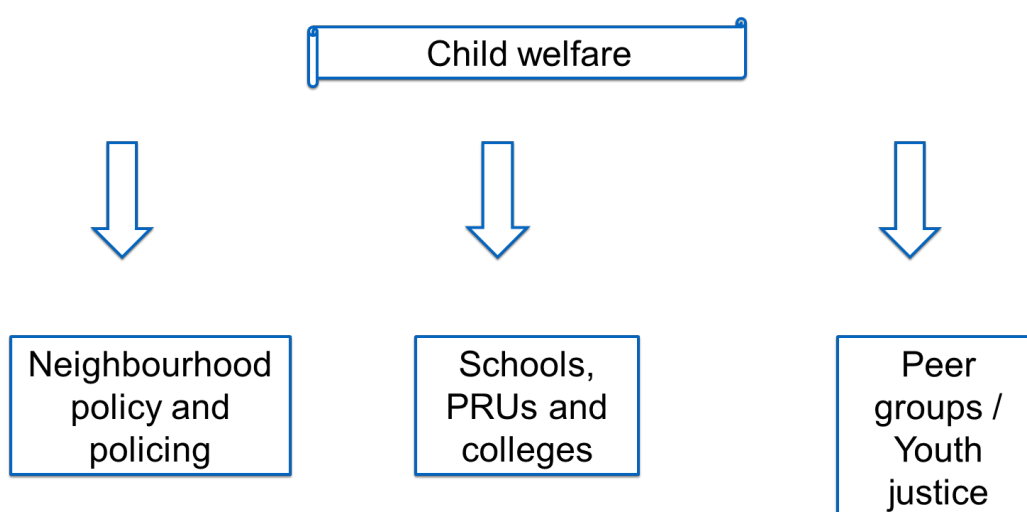


Figure three: Domain Two 'legislative frameworks'

Partnerships

Assessment of extra familial contexts, and the legislative frameworks that govern them, requires communication and partnership with a broad range of individuals and agencies that are responsible (in line with Section 11 of Children Act 2004) for creating safety for young people in the spaces they oversee. Context weighting (the assessment of contextual risk and the weighting of resource and intervention accordingly – Firmin, 2017:2-4), local safety mapping with young people and resident and business surveys should inform which partners need to be around the table and who is most appropriate to lead on an intervention.

Young people can come to harm in a range of extra-familial contexts beyond 'chicken shops' and takeaways and local safeguarding decisions should be made on the basis of local knowledge and realities. Similarly, 'chicken shops' and takeaways, *if they are* places local young people are

frequenting, may be staffed by potential community guardians who can build relationships with and provide safe spaces for young people.

For example, if young people tell us that they feel unsafe on the high street, because local businesses do not allow them to access their space, or that they feel monitored and harassed by local police, or are being approached by unsafe adults, the local partnership may decide to engage with local business owners to develop young-person-inclusive policies or to divert resource from policing to detached youth work or community wardens who can engage with young people in the spaces where they spend their time. Similarly, if a high number of local young people are school excluded, a school context assessment⁶ might be required to establish what support and resource can be provided to schools/colleges and PRU's to minimise permanent exclusion, or to ensure meaningful and well-resourced alternative provision is accessible.

Engaging young people, families and local businesses in commissioning will help to divert limited resources to the areas of harm and safety that require them. For example, earlier this year a public symposium on youth violence, masculinity and mental health was held in Sheffield resulting in ten recommendations for Sheffield Council, the local voluntary and community sector (VCS) and schools to prevent violence in the city. Recommendations included supporting local families to maximise incomes and claim benefits and to reduce school exclusions (Mason, Brasab, Stone, Soutar, Mohamed, Mwale, 2019). Consulting and working together with local partners is essential to establish where resource should be levelled and to operationalise a local response that will actually impact the spaces where young people come to harm.

⁶ Contextual Safeguarding: School Assessment Toolkit. Available here:
<https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/en/publications/school-assessment-toolkit>

Partnerships

‘Everyone’s business’ = creating safe spaces

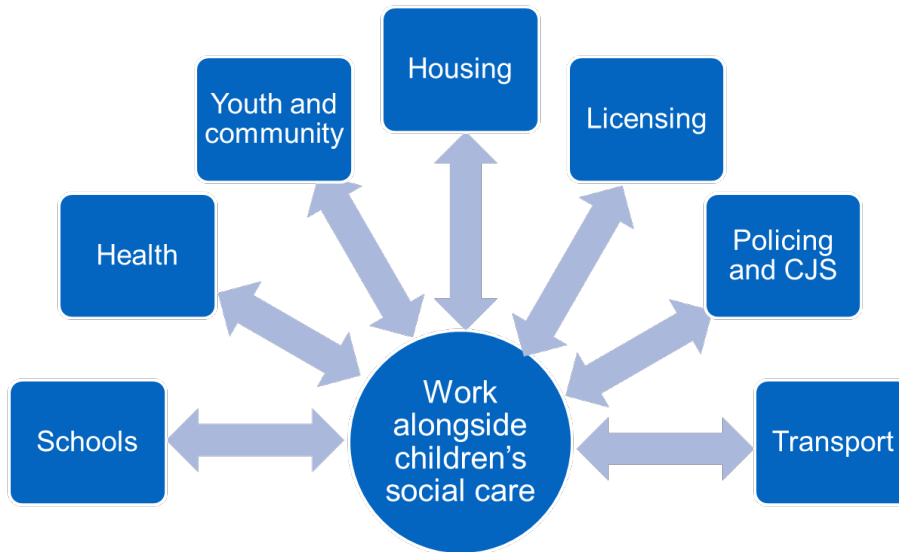


Figure Four: Domain Three ‘Partnerships’

Outcomes

The Home Office ‘chicken box’ campaign engages partners in the delivery of an individualised intervention that seeks to address behavioural change in young people through the use of consequential thinking. Rather than addressing the contexts in which some young people come to harm (in order to make them safer for all young people), the campaign responsabilises young people for making risky choices. The consequence of such individualised notions of risk have already been well scrutinised following reviews of serious regional failures to protect young people who were being sexually exploited. A contextual approach measures outcomes contextually, not only at the level of individual behaviour change.

In measuring the outcome of an intervention intended to mitigate the risk to a young person or group of young people from ‘county lines’ and ‘serious youth violence’ we might ask: have significant adjustments been made to the spaces in which young people come to harm to sufficiently mitigate risk and future risk to young people?

For example, multi-agency risk panels, in which multiple young people who are at risk of child criminal exploitation and related harms are discussed, should be child welfare led and should seek to assess and intervene in the social conditions of abuse (the physical spaces and relations that make up those spaces where young people experience harm) and develop, deliver and

monitor child welfare plans that seek to effect contextual change⁷. The resulting plan should be measured against changes in the environment where harm occurs, for example the school, the park, the train line, in addition to individual welfare plans for multiple children and young people.

Outcome Measurement

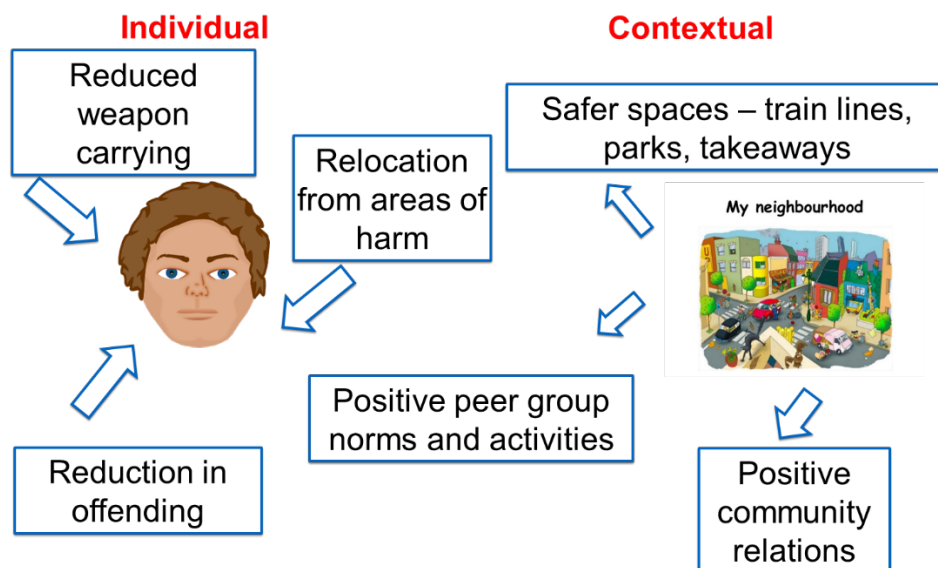


Figure Five: Domain Four 'Outcome Measurement'

⁷ Contextual Safeguarding Implementation Toolkit: Planning. Available here: <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/en/toolkit/planning>

Conclusion

This briefing has outlined how a Contextual Safeguarding approach might address some of the barriers, and resolve some inconsistencies, as we seek to develop a child welfare approach to young people who are affected by 'county lines' and associated forms of harm. We are continuing to test the extent of this resolution through our Contextual Safeguarding test sites and ongoing evaluation of a pan-London safeguarding response to 'county lines'. Mapping the policy trajectory, that has led to the emergence of 'county lines' as a child welfare issue, suggests that a reconsideration of priorities and partners involved in the on-going delivery of this work is required. A Contextual Safeguarding approach is proposed and mapped against four domains: target, legislative frameworks, partners and outcomes, in order to bring to life what a welfare response, which does not blame, responsibilise or criminalise young people for their experiences of harm, might look like.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Runaway and Missing Children (APPG, 2017) echoes a call from across sectors to realise a safeguarding response to those young people who are exploited to sell drugs, carry weapons and, in some cases, carry out violent acts toward others. However, mapping a transformation of the language and response to child criminal exploitation to the policy and practice changes that were realised for young people who are sexually exploited, faces a number of conceptual and practical barriers. Whilst child criminal exploitation and related harms can happen to any young person (Home Office, 2018), young boys and men, and particularly young Black, Asian and minority ethnic boys and young men, are frequently over-represented in services that seek to address 'county lines' and associated harms (Ford, 2018; Hudek, 2018). We know that young boys and men have been persistently under-identified as victims of other forms of exploitation (Barnardo's, 2014) and this is compounded for young Black, Asian and minority ethnic children who are over identified as perpetrators and under identified as victims (Berlowitz et al, 2013), often engaged through youth justice services rather than being supported as victims (Berlowitz et al, 2012). This signals the persistent disproportionality in the identification of young people involved in criminality (Lammy, 2018) and calls for close consideration of the interventions and services that are engaged to respond to these young people. Cross-sector evidence confirms that young Black, Asian and minority ethnic children are over-represented in school exclusion figures (at three times the rate of white pupils; Gov.uk, 2019), in the youth justice estate (Lammy, 2017), particularly in relation to drug policing which intersects also with class (Warde, 2013), in stop and search statistics (Williams, 2018) and on police matrixes that record and monitor 'gang' affiliation (Amnesty, 2018). One of the first things we need to do as policy makers, stakeholders, practitioners and parents, is to ensure that the structures and systems we have in place to respond to children who are subject to harm have

safety and welfare as a priority and do not perpetuate inequalities that create blaming and hostile environments for the young people we are ostensibly seeking to safeguard.

For those young people who are trafficked and exploited to sell drugs the level of harm they face is often significant. Contextual Safeguarding proposes an approach to safeguarding that makes threshold decisions based on the significance of harm, not solely on the location of harm (i.e. the family home). If we take into account abuse that happens outside of the family home, thresholds for significant harm should always be met for young people who are trafficked or who have experienced violence (etc.), yet in many cases referrals are closed because parents are protective, or there isn't an appropriate child welfare response, and young people and their families are left without support. Whilst thresholds for significant harm should be met for those young people who are exploited via 'county lines', a traditional child protection response may not have the reach to address the contexts and sources of this form of harm. Piloting of the Contextual Safeguarding approach in Hackney has mirrored traditional child protection processes, and the Hackney Implementation Toolkit⁸ provides a useful starting point to consider how child protection interventions can be contextualised, and how contexts can be brought into child protection frameworks locally. However, embedding this approach is likely to require new partnerships with a broad range of individuals and organisations who are responsible for the spaces where young people spend their time. This requires the child protection process to work with a broader, non-traditional, range of agencies to 'hold' significant risk under child protection frameworks. Whilst statutory agencies will continue to assess and monitor significant harm in line with their duties to children and young people, they may not be best placed to deliver interventions. Local commissioning would need to establish which organisations are best placed to work with young people in the spaces where they spend their time, those that have established and meaningful trusted and protective relationships, and to resource these organisations accordingly.

⁸ Contextual Safeguarding Implementation Toolkit: Planning. Available here: <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/en/toolkit/planning>

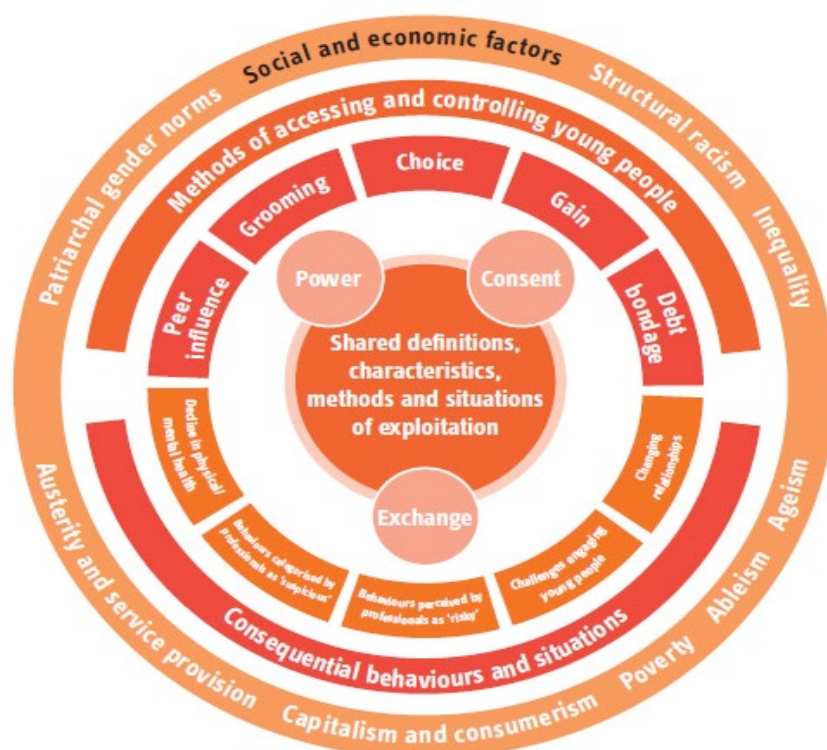


Figure Six: A holistic model (Firmin, Wroe and Lloyd, 2019)

It is pertinent to note the uncertain economic and political contexts that young people today are navigating, and indeed the significant financial restraints facing child welfare agencies and their partners. Taking an ecological approach that targets the social conditions of abuse can help us to position the young person in their broader context, made up of their family relationships, their peer-groups, their schools, their neighbourhoods. It also locates young people in the wider socio-political climate, the relations of which mediate risk in the lives of young people via poverty and cuts to services, simultaneously escalating their vulnerability to harm (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris and White, 2018). Interrogating the interplay between poverty, racism, service cuts, the presence of abusive adults, the absence of protective adults and service cultures of blame (see figure six) can help us to understand why and how grooming and debt bondage, for example, operate so successfully as mechanisms of exploitation for the young (mostly) boys who are exploited via 'county lines'. Such an approach can help us to position these young people as children first, children who are often navigating depleted and hostile contexts and help us to consider how child welfare services can mitigate risks, such as debt, and to work with adolescent agency as it interacts with these complex contexts.

It is time we moved away from the idea that young people are responsible for the 'damage caused to themselves', each other and 'their communities' (HM Government, 2011); understanding and responding to the contexts in which harm occurs offers a conceptual and practical framework from

which to make this shift.

To join the Contextual Safeguarding Network please visit:
www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk

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