

Embedding Contextual Safeguarding in VCS organisations: enablers and challenges

In this document Delphine Peace, Research Fellow in the Contextual Safeguarding programme, draws learning from three VCS organisations – [Abianda](#), [Safer London](#) and [Redthread](#) – about the key factors that have enabled them to embed Contextual Safeguarding (CS), as well as some of the key challenges they face in implementing the approach.

Separate case studies and resources sharing how each of these organisations are using and embedding Contextual Safeguarding are available [here](#). Overtime, this initial set of resources will be expanded as contextual approaches continue to be adopted by a range of VCS organisations across the UK. If you would like to share examples of using Contextual Safeguarding in VCS settings, please get in touch with delphine.peace@beds.ac.uk

What has helped VCS organisations to adopt Contextual Safeguarding?

Support from the Contextual Safeguarding Programme

- **Accessing resources on the CS Network:** As members of the CS Network, each organisation can freely access tools, guidance, videos, research briefings and regular newsletter updates. All three organisations have lifted and adapted a range of material to assist with embedding Contextual Safeguarding at both a practice and strategic level.
- **Training:** All three organisations received training from the Contextual Safeguarding Programme – including organisational-wide training, training of champions, and access freely available webinars on peer and safety mapping.
- **Contextual Safeguarding VCS Collective:** The VCS collective is seen as a valuable space for peer-learning and the sharing of practice examples on how contextual approaches can be translated into the VCS sector.
- **Academic rigour underpinning the CS framework:** All three organisations highlighted the value and credibility of Contextual Safeguarding as an evidence-based approach that is being tested across Local Authorities and VCS organisations in the UK. This aspect, combined with the momentum of its take-up nationally, has facilitated buy-in from senior leadership teams and from funders.
- **Partnering with CS Programme:** For Safer London particularly, partnering with the Contextual Safeguarding Programme on a number of projects has fostered

collaborative relationships and shared learning. Additionally, one of Safer London's Organisational Leads, in charge of developing contextual systems across the organisation, is also seconded in the Contextual Safeguarding Programme 'Scale-Up Project' as a Youth Work Practice Advisor. This unique position enables them to bring research learning from other test sites directly into their practice.

Internal facilitators

- **Alignment of Contextual Safeguarding principles with organisational culture:** Contextual Safeguarding principles resonate with all three organisations' participatory ethos and commitment to providing holistic support to adolescents and young adults through 1:1 work. In all three organisations, Contextual Safeguarding has been embedded as an approach that supports and is complementary to existing practice rather than as an 'add on'.
- **Designated CS champions:** CS champions across the three organisations have been essential to embedding the approach and sharing knowledge across their organisation and with external partners. It is important to note that staff members across all three organisations take on this championing role on top of their jobs.
- **Support from senior leadership:** The approach has full strategic backing across all three organisations and staff members championing Contextual Safeguarding are given the flexibility to trial new approaches.
- **Flexible funding:** In Safer London, for example, the funding of new family, peer group and community worker roles has opened up a space for developing and testing new services that intervene within the context of harm.
- **Developing and delivering interventions in partnership with young people:** Abianda's peer-led intervention at a youth club, outlined in a case study and podcast available [here](#), represents a new way of working for the organisation. The intervention was suggested by women at the youth club, who drew attention to their younger peers' needs and offered to support them by acting as 'youth facilitators'. In this instance, working alongside these young women has helped Abianda to develop a meaningful and bespoke contextual intervention and to consider new ways of offering peer support to the young people it works with.

Key challenges and additional support needs

Internal challenges

- **Staffing capacity:** The absence of a funded role dedicated to championing Contextual Safeguarding means that embedding the approach is a slow process across all three organisations, and that it is dependent on CS champions having the capacity to do this on top of their role. For example, due to limited staffing capacity, Abianda currently

lacks the capacity to conduct an audit in order to improve consistency in implementing Contextual Safeguarding across its services and workforce development.

- **Short-term, restricted funding:** Many funding bodies tend to be driven by specified outcomes which can restrict flexibility for developing new approaches, leaving minimal room for failure. This limits opportunities for developing innovative interventions at Level 2 of Contextual Safeguarding, that target the contexts in which harm is occurring. Contextual interventions require substantial planning and relationship-building with key stakeholders and partners, which in turn necessitates long-term funding.
- **Limited opportunities for sharing learning:** In addition to limited resources and capacity, the 'firefighting' nature of these organisations' work further limits their ability to create spaces for reflection and learning and to evidence its use of contextual approaches in practice.

Sector-wide challenges

- **The limits of child protection systems in responding to extra-familial harm can curtail opportunities for developing contextual interventions:** There remains a general tendency across child protection systems to approach exploitation, and extra-familial harm more broadly, by focussing on the individualised behaviour of a child and using disruption techniques on individuals, groups and areas – and these trends tends to be reflected in commissioned service delivery. In this respect, it can be challenging to gain support and proactive engagement from external partners and funders. VCS organisations adopting contextual approaches can find themselves having to challenge existing professional cultures and practices – particularly if children social care partners and other statutory agencies with whom they work are less familiar with Contextual Safeguarding and/or primarily retain an intra-familial focus when responding to harm. As such, VCS organisations can find themselves limited by the wider child protection systems they operate within. Moreover, organisations like Redthread, which presently only operate at Level 1 of Contextual Safeguarding through 1:1 work with young people, have limited scope for building sustainable safety in contexts. While Redthread youth workers support young people to develop safety plans in relations to specific contexts, such as a local park or a route to school, they have limited capacity to increase the safety of this context for other young people, beyond information sharing or flagging concerns with statutory partners who have oversight over such contexts.
- **Developing contextual knowledge across the partnerships:** Sustaining a contextual lens and developing a good knowledge of communities when working across different local areas can be difficult. This challenge is heightened when larger statutory partners or larger organisations don't have the same level of localised knowledge, or understanding of contextual risks, as smaller local grassroots organisations might have. In this respect, it is all the more crucial for voluntary workers to be guided by young people's knowledge of their communities when developing safety plans with them.

- **Information sharing:** When conducting safety mapping or peer mapping with young people, organisations might gather information about their peers or other young people who are not involved with the organisation, and/or who might not be opened to statutory services. It can be difficult for organisations to ensure that this information is shared in a safe and ethical way with partners. Another challenge linked to this is often the lack of information shared with VCS organisations from statutory partners. This can make it difficult for VCS practitioner to build a holistic picture of the risks and vulnerabilities of the young people they work with, and of their communities.
- **Lack of practice examples from the VCS sector:** The three organisations emphasised the need to develop more tools and resources to support VCS organisations embed Contextual Safeguarding and to evidence what works to inform practice and bid development. There is currently a limited number of case studies about how Contextual Safeguarding has been adopted by the sector and evidence of its translation into practice.
- **Covid-19:** The pandemic restrictions have further limited opportunities for contextual interventions in the community and with peer groups. In some cases lockdown has contributed to certain forms of extra-familial harm within communities becoming more hidden, or has exacerbated online risks.