

What is the Risk Outside The Home (ROTH) pathway?

Briefing for multi-agency partners

Since 2019, members of the Global Centre for Contextual Safeguarding (GCCS) have been tracking the development of Risk Outside The Home (ROTH) pathways. ROTH pathways have been developed to coordinate responses to situations of extra-familial harm that reach the threshold for a child protection (CP) response under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989.

What is the ROTH pathway? CP vs. ROTH

Background

ROTH pathways mirror elements of a traditional child protection framework, for example, a social care-led assessment followed by a multi-agency meeting to agree a plan and a core group to review the progress of the plan. The main difference, however, is that the ROTH pathway is primarily concerned with harm that is happening outside the family home/ relationships, and crucially it is used build the collective safeguarding capacity of a network (which includes parents/ carers) to build safety in contexts outside the home rather than solely build the safeguarding capacity of parents or carers.

Traditional child protection pathways have been primarily focused on abuse and harm children face from their families or in their home, and therefore the plans they produce mostly focus on the (in)action of parents and carers. Child protection pathways have been informed by assessments of a parent/ carer's capacity or capability to meet their child's needs and to keep them safe, and have been used to implement/ review plans that, consequently, primarily require parents or carers to take action to keep their children safe.

When children and young people are relatively safe with their families but at risk of significant harm beyond their home, they have often been excluded from child protection processes (Lloyd and Firmin, 2019; Firmin et al., 2021; Hood et al., 2023). This has created a system-gap for coordinating responses to young people who are facing significant harm that is not attributable to parents or carers. ROTH pathways were developed to address this gap and are being used to coordinate child protection responses for young people impacted by various forms of extra-familial harm, including exploitation, street-based violence, and peer-on-peer abuse. They hold the same statutory and legal weight of traditional child protection pathways but re-focus plans toward the contexts where harm is happening instead of towards parents and carers.

Key differences: what multi-agency partners need to know

Multi-agency working in ROTH pathways, much like in traditional child protection pathways, is required in the assessment, planning, and implementation stages of responding to significant harm. Multi-agency partners need to be aware of some crucial differences in how ROTH pathways operate, however. By being aware of these differences, partners will be better equipped to contribute to the ROTH pathway. Some of these differences include:

Parents and carers

Parents and carers are partners in the delivery of a ROTH pathway, whereas they are often the subject of a traditional child protection pathway. This means parents/ carers will be active participants in ROTH conferences (while also being supported by the pathway): contributing reports to the meeting, assisting in the development of safety-planning, and reaching decisions about thresholds alongside professionals. It is vital that professionals reflect on what this means regarding how they approach and work with parents/ carers prior to, during and following meetings convened in a ROTH pathway, including the levels of information they make available to parents/ carers to assist in their active participation in safety-planning.

Targeting contexts

ROTH pathways are used to target the contexts – meaning the places, spaces, relationships and so on – where extra-familial harm is happening. As a result, multi-agency partners might be required to bring information to ROTH conferences, or share information during assessment processes, that are about these contexts and not just the individual young person impacted by them. Moreover, partners may be asked to consider what steps they can take to create/ build safety in those contexts to inform plans, and to intervene where possible.

Common challenges

Cases of extra-familial harm that reach the threshold of ‘significant harm’ are often highly complex. The risk levels, situations and even harm types can change very quickly, as well as the contexts in which harm is happening. Bringing together multi-agency partners to respond to this kind of harm has the potential to be a dynamic and effective way of targeting the contexts in which young people are at risk and making them safer. However, the complexity of the cases, combined with the differing goals and approaches of multi-agency partners, can make this harder to achieve. Common challenges include:

- Professionals may struggle to engage young people who are impacted by extra-familial harm. Young people may not trust them, the situation they face may make it unsafe for them to speak to professionals, they may have been let down in the past, or risk being punished for offences they have committed in the context of their abuse if they speak to someone. It is really important for multi-agency teams to consider who has the best relationship with the young person – this won’t always be the social worker – and for them to take the lead in communicating and advocating for the young person where necessary. It is also important not to overwhelm young people and their families with the number of professionals in their lives.

- Some partners, depending on the nature of their role, may want to prioritise disruption or activities focused on reducing criminality, but this should not take priority over a young person's wellbeing and safety. Creating a set of shared values, goals and aims for a ROTH pathway will help mitigate this. These should always be grounded in child-welfare principles.
- Young people who are subject to ROTH plans can sometimes also be harming other young people or members of the community. When this happens, there is the potential for plans to solely respond to the young person through punitive measures alone – targeting the risks they pose but not the risks they face. Partners must focus on targeting contexts. Sometimes in these contexts young people are both at risk, and a risk to others. Partners must therefore also think about identified needs and vulnerabilities which, if addressed, might mitigate these risks. This will mean they maintain an ethic of care throughout the ROTH pathway.

To learn more about effective multi-agency working, please visit our website (www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk) with resources based on learnings from each iteration of the ROTH pathway project.