Safeguarding during adolescence– the relationship between Contextual Safeguarding, Complex Safeguarding and Transitional Safeguarding

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Background

During adolescence the nature of the risks faced by young people, and the way that they experience these risks, often differs from earlier childhood – as do their needs. Specifically, young people may be faced with a new set of complex risks – ones not posed by families, but instead by peers, partners and adults unconnected to families. These risks:

> often manifest in extra-familial environments including schools, public spaces and online platforms
> are informed by peer norms and relationships
> involve young people perpetrating, as well as experiencing, harm
> can present as the result of perceived 'choices' a young person has made and/or continues to make despite professional/parental intervention
> often feature grooming, coercion, criminality and serious risks of significant sexual and physical harm that create climates of fear and reduce engagement with services
> are beyond the control of parents and rarely instigated by parents
> can lead to large numbers of relocations including children over-12 coming into care for the first time and following a rapid escalation in risk and/or managed-moves across schools
> continue into adulthood and particularly for young people during the 18-25 transitional period

In response, practitioners, researchers and policy advisors have been developing and testing ways to advance child protection and multi-agency safeguarding practices to better engage with these dynamics of the adolescent experience. This briefing details how Complex Safeguarding, Contextual Safeguarding and Transitional Safeguarding engage with the challenges outlined above – and complement.

It is important to understand that these three terms are not mutually exclusive nor conflicting. Indeed they complement and overlap in a number of ways, and arguably adopting one approach requires attention to be paid to the others.

Put very simply, Complex Safeguarding is a different way of working with children and families to address non-traditional safeguarding issues, whilst Contextual Safeguarding offers and approach for working with the contexts themselves. Recognising the importance of working to safeguard young people across transitions is a feature of both Complex Safeguarding and Contextual Safeguarding.

Finally, these concepts are *not* blueprints / practice models / manualised programmes. Nor should they be understood as a list from which local areas select their approach. In fact, embracing any one of these concepts arguably requires us to engage with the other two.

Complex Safeguarding

Complex Safeguarding is an approach and term emerging from Greater Manchester (GM). It articulates GM's recognition that current child protection system, legislation and practice does not adequately address the extra-familial harm and risk facing many young people. Complex Safeguarding is a term that has been applied to encompass a range of safeguarding issues that adolescents face, in particular those related to criminality and exploitation. The definition of Complex Safeguarding is:

> *Criminal activity (often organised), or behaviour associated to criminality, involving vulnerable children / young people, where there is exploitation and / or a clear or implied safeguarding concern.*

This includes, but is not limited to, Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), County Lines, Modern Slavery and Trafficking, Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE).

Complex safeguarding is being developed within Greater Manchester using evidence from the Innovation Programme funded **Achieving Change Together project**, which was piloted in Wigan and Rochdale in 2015. As part of this pilot, the ACT model was developed based on 6 key principles, which arguably could also be applied to other forms of exploitation beyond CSE:

1. The young person should be at the centre
2. CSE is complex therefore the response cannot be simple or linear
3. No agency can address CSE in isolation, collaboration is essential
4. Knowledge is crucial
5. Communities and families are valuable assets and may also need support
6. Effective services require resilient practitioners

(Holmes & Webb, Research in Practice, 2015)

The term is also sometimes used to describe the structural hub and spoke approach to service delivery: A GM hub will be a centre of excellence for complex safeguarding, promoting consistency across GM Local Authorities and partners. Key elements of the hub are to establish; practice standards, a performance framework, provide up to date research, work force development and the framework to co-design services with young people across Greater Manchester.

Multi agency Complex Safeguarding teams (i.e. the 'spokes') are being established in each local authority area incorporating social workers, youth offending, police, health, education and voluntary sector partners. The teams will provide innovative, flexible approaches to working with young people who are at risk of significant harm due to complex safeguarding issues. The aim is to reduce the number of young people placed in high cost, out of borough placements by managing the risks, *with* young people, in their own communities. It also creates to opportunity to integrate approaches to safeguarding young people with local management of organised crime.

The Complex Safeguarding teams will provide a strength based, trauma informed and flexible model of working with young people based on the findings from ACT. This co-designed service worked with young people at risk of CSE not driven by statutory social work processes but instead the young person's needs. Key to this was focusing on the issues that young people felt were important to them, not just focusing on the exploitation. The ACT workers were social workers who worked flexible hours and they had maximum caseloads of 5, which enabled them to provide a more intense service offer to young people. The workers followed a model that was strength based and trauma informed. The evaluation from ACT found that for every £1 spent on the service £5 was saved on accommodation costs alone.

In keeping with the notion of Transitional Safeguarding, some areas of Greater Manchester Complex Safeguarding teams are working with Adult Services to develop an all age response recognising that the risk to young people does not stop when they turn 18 years old. These teams are in the early stages of development due to the challenges of having to navigate between the different legislative frameworks and thresholds for a service provision.

Contextual Safeguarding

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach and a term developed by Dr Carlene Firmin and colleagues at University of Bedfordshire.

Contextual Safeguarding provides a framework for local areas to develop approach that engage with the extra-familial dynamics of risk in adolescents. While it also engages in different ways with some of the other challenges outlined at the outset of this briefing, the primary focus is the need to assess and intervene with extra-familial contexts and relationships in order to safeguard young people during adolescence.

For Contextual Safeguarding to be identified in a local area, the safeguarding systems must be able to:

a) Target extra-familial contexts and relationships: proactively identify these contexts/relationships; accept them as referrals, assess them and intervene with them in accordance with a plan. This work runs alongside any direct work with children and families

b) Reduce extra-familial risks through a child protection lens: in this sense policing disruption or community safety work may feature in interventions, but they are overseen by social work and driven by a primary goal to safeguard the welfare of children (rather than sole reduce crime) – as they would do when working with families

c) Demonstrate active partnerships with those agencies who have reach into extra-familial settings: this includes partnerships between children's social care and sports/leisure, parks and recreation, licensing, private businesses, schools, youth clubs and young people/parents themselves

d) Measure success by a reduction in contextual risk: outcomes are monitored not solely on behaviour change in young people but in reported sense of safety in extra-familial settings or wider datasets (such as behaviour logs in schools or crime/survey data) that suggest safety is increasing in contexts where young people were encountering harm

When operationalised a Contextual Safeguarding framework allows an area to do two things which feed into one another:

1) Recognise contextual risks during child and family work: record contextual issues related to referrals for children and families; collect information about extra-familial risks during child and family assessments, and; where extra-familial concerns are identified refer these in for their own consideration (as per tier 2 below)

2) Address contextual risk: Accept referrals for peer groups, schools and public space; screen these referrals against contextual thresholds; subject them to assessment (and identify if they are a context in which children are in need of support or experiencing significant harm); discuss this assessment at a multi-agency safeguarding meeting, and; action a plan to reduce the risk in these contexts. These actions feed back into the individual child and family assessments/plans for young people affected by that context.

The way a local area achieves this will differ related to local demographics as well as the partnerships and operating systems used by children's social care and their partners. As such Contextual Safeguarding is not a model. It is an approach that extends the parameters of traditional child protection systems, and its methods of referral, assessment, planning and intervention, to extra-familial settings and relationships. A system-change exercise in the London Borough of Hackney and practices shared by over 2,000 members of the Contextual Safeguarding practitioners network are both producing a suite of resources/tools that brings the above framework to life – such as tools and methods that can be used to assess schools or public places; engagement activities to discuss extra-familial risks with young people during assessment, and; peer mapping processes. 50 local authorities have applied to be one of three to apply the learning from Hackney on Contextual Safeguarding over the next four years via a Big Lottery grant.

Transitional Safeguarding

Transitional Safeguarding is not a model, nor a prescribed approach – but rather is simply a term is a term that has been used by Research in Practice to highlight the need to improve the safeguarding response to older teenagers and young adults in a way that recognises their developmental needs. This argument is made in a briefing for LAs, published in 2018, that draws on both Contextual Safeguarding and Complex Safeguarding as well as emerging evidence that adolescence extends into the early/mid-twenties (Sawyer et al, 2018)

There are several reasons why a more fluid and transitional safeguarding approach is needed for young people entering adulthood. These are summarised as:

> Adolescents may experience a range of distinct risks and harms, and so may require a distinctive safeguarding response (as highlighted in both Complex Safeguarding and Contextual Safeguarding).

> Harm, and its effects, do not stop at the age of 18.

> Many of the environmental and structural factors that increase a child's vulnerability persist into adulthood, resulting in unmet needs and costly later interventions.

> The children's and adults' safeguarding systems are conceptually and procedurally different, and governed by different statutory frameworks, which can make the transition to adulthood harder for young people facing ongoing risk and arguably harder for the professionals who are trying to navigate an effective approach to helping them.

> Young people entering adulthood can experience a 'cliff-edge' in terms of support, exacerbated by the notable differences between thresholds / eligibility criteria of children's and adults' safeguarding.

There are a number of areas that sector leaders can explore when considering how to strengthen their local safeguarding response to adolescents and young adults. These include:

> Learning from local areas who are adopting a more fluid transitional safeguarding response. Examples include the Newcastle Sexual Exploitation Hub and Rochdale's vulnerable adults work that operates within adult care but works closely with the Specialist children's service.

> Learning from other services and parts of the wider system, such as SEND and mental health services, where transitional approaches are more embedded. Examples include the 0-25 team in Hertfordshire and the Norfolk's work to redesign a 0-25 mental and emotional wellbeing system.

> Considering which elements of best practice within safeguarding adults might be 'drawn down' into safeguarding adolescents. Examples include the strong emphasis on participation and personalisation within Making Safeguarding Personal, which align well with adolescents' increasing agency and independence, and the emphasis on wellbeing enshrined in the *Care Act 2014*, which allows a broader safeguarding lens than the focus on 'welfare'.

> Considering how innovative approaches to safeguarding adolescents, such as Complex Safeguarding and Contextual Safeguarding might inform the safeguarding of young adults.

An important lever for change, and one that would enable local areas to work innovatively to develop a more fluid and transitional safeguarding response in spite of divergent policy frameworks, is the need for local analytical capacity. Providing more effective and fluid support for young people as they enter adulthood not only supports their safety and wellbeing, but may also enable later cost-avoidance by reducing the need for specialist and statutory services and criminal justice involvement. Local areas will be better able to demonstrate the financial case for innovation in this area by working collaboratively to capture and analyse cost data, and developing creative approaches to shared or pooled resourcing arrangements. Local areas implementing innovative approaches in adolescent service design have shown it is possible to demonstrate cost-avoidance and therefore make a case for sustainability, though this is acknowledged to be challenging, particularly where analytical capacity is not embedded within the innovation (Rees et al, 2017).

Summary: How the three relate to each other

A summary table outlines the differences and commonalities.

	Contextual Safeguarding	Complex Safeguarding	Transitional Safeguarding
Specific term meant to define activities	✓	✗	✗
Specific term to define types of harms	✗	✓	✗
Defined set of tools, practices, methods	✓	✓	✗
Recognises of distinct adolescent safeguarding needs	✓	✓	✓
Requires cross-service / non-siloed approach to delivery (inc governance)	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓
Recognises evolving needs as young people enter adulthood	✓	✓	✓ ✓
Recognises role of community in safeguarding young people and young adults	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓
Foregrounds a participative, person-centred approach	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓