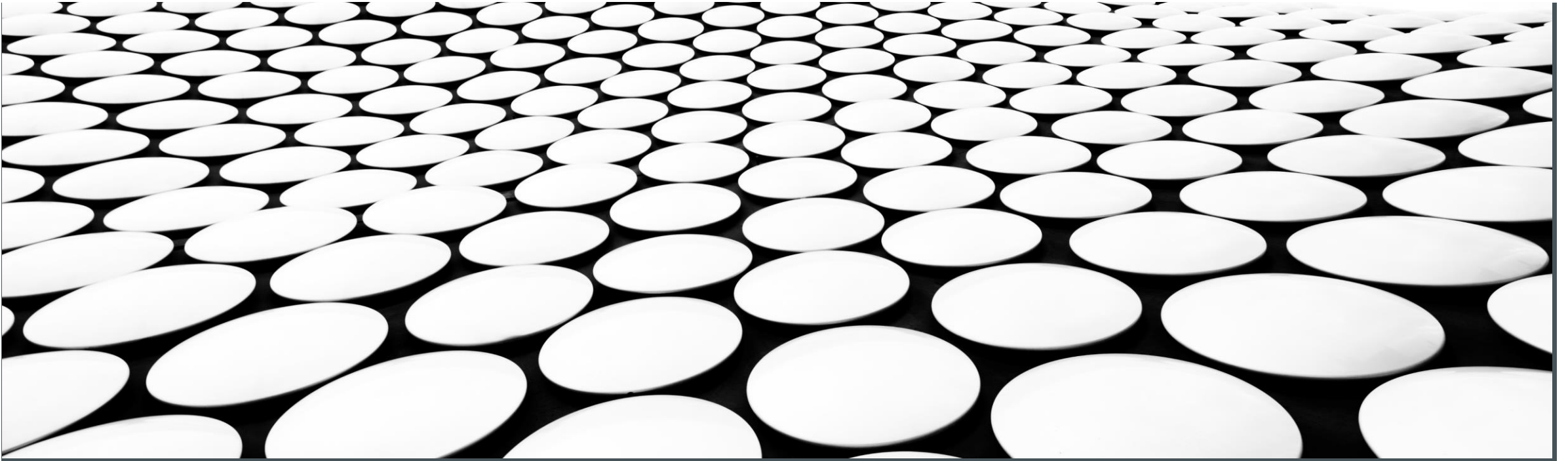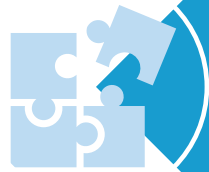# CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING: LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

CARLENE FIRMIN, PROFESSOR OF SOCIAL WORK, DURHAM UNIVERSITY

IN THIS KEYNOTE I WILL COVER THE FOLLOWING THREE AREAS:

Contextual Safeguarding – what it is and what it isn't

Key features of implementation

Key steps for alignment with the CS values and framework

THE IMPETUS FOR CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING

- Increasing awareness that extra-familial issues present a risk of significant harm to the welfare of children and young people

- Child protection systems, and social workers within them, had been called upon to respond

- Social workers assessed young people affected, and the extent to which harm was attributable parenting (in)action

- Social work plans targeted the young people, their parents, or proposed no further action when parents were protective

- The peer groups, schools and public spaces where the harm occurred remained unsafe or were targeted by community safety

- **The target of the social work response and the location of the risks were misaligned**

'if you're rude to them then they'll beat you up and I've seen how they beat up people, how everyone's scared of them….I said no for something very little I've been beaten up and bottled and I realised if I did say no what would happen…I was pressurised and scared, I knew deep down I didn't want it cos I was still young but **I didn't have a choice.'**
(Sara's (age 13) Witness Testimony, Case File 4, Review 2011-2014)

'Social services and other professionals describe her as '**difficult to engage with**', '**anti-police**' someone who '**places her friends and gang associates as a higher importance than her family**''

(Professional notes, Case File 4, Review 2011-204)

THE CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING FRAMEWORK (FIRMIN ET AL 2016)

Domain 1: Target

Seeks to prevent, identify, assess and intervene with the social conditions of abuse

Domain 2: Legislative framework

Incorporate extra-familial contexts into child protection frameworks

Domain 3: Partnerships

Develop partnerships with sectors/individuals who are responsible for the nature of extra-familial contexts

Domain 4: Outcomes measurement

Monitor outcomes of success in relation to contextual, as well as individual, change

SINCE 2017 THIS FRAMEWORK HAS BEEN OPERATIONALISED AND TESTED AT NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS

Strategic groups have formed to consider the implications for policy, research and commissioning

- UK Advisory Panel
- Academics Network
- VCS collective

60 local areas in England, Wales and Scotland have committed to a CS approach

- Nine regional groups in England
- Groups in Wales and Scotland

25 meet as a UK implementation group

- They meet four times a year with Durham
- 10 are formal test sites involving the CS team

EFFORTS HAVE SOMETIMES WRONGLY INTERPRETED THE CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING FRAMEWORK

Dispersal orders

Increased monitoring by people (police) or CCTV

Extensive information sharing without consent

Exclusion from schools

Design changes (bus stop)

Unmet needs (switching off internet)

Mapping and disruption of friendship groups

PEER ASSESSMENT: A CASE STUDY
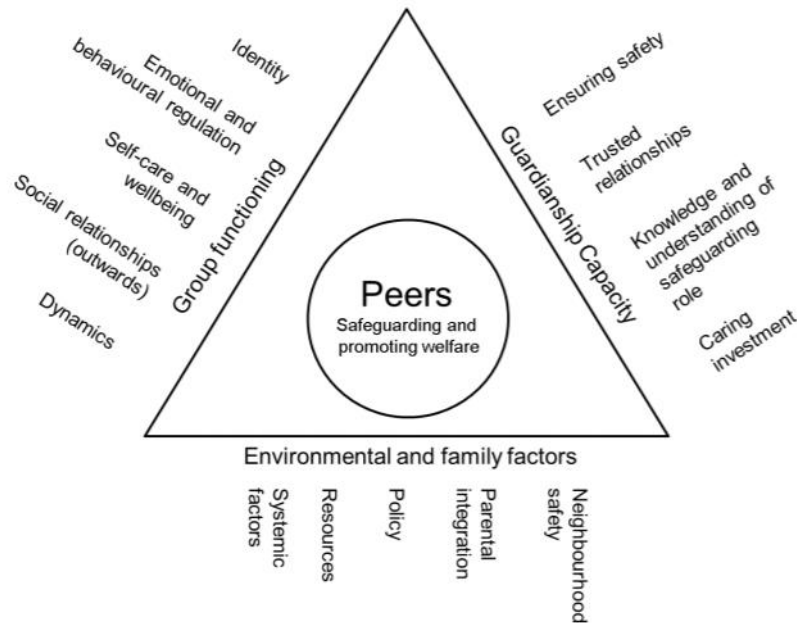
Figure one: Peer group assessment framework (Lloyd, Balci, Firmin and Owens, 2019)

Young people's friendships can provide protection and/or be a source of risk

Contextual Safeguarding promotes that these dynamics be considered

This has been interpreted as mapping and disruption rather than assessment and support

One individualises and risks criminalising young people

One recognises social conditions and promotes welfare

INCORRECT INTERPRETATIONS MOVE AWAY FROM WELFARE-BASED APPROACH

- Away from reflecting and planning towards tasking and finishing

- Merge of information gathering for assessment vs. intelligence gathering for investigations

- Risk-reduction rather than safety-creation focused practices

- Partnerships with statutory agencies ahead of partnerships with young people and families

CORE FEATURES OF THE APPROACH ACROSS TEST SITES

- Understand the varying weight of influence different contexts have and target accordingly

- Move from everybody making referrals to everybody building safety around young people

- Achieved through two levels of implementation
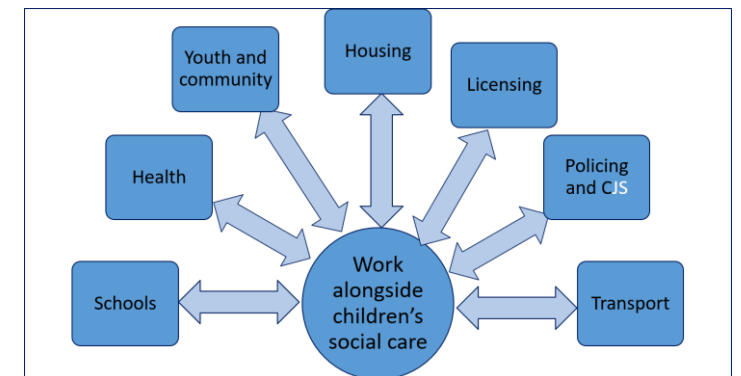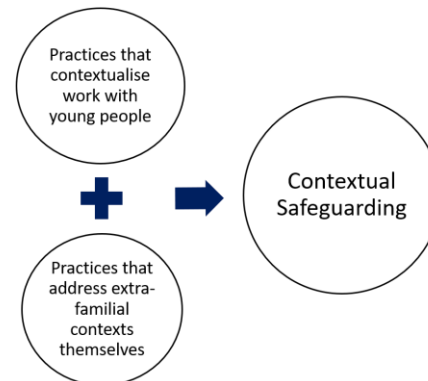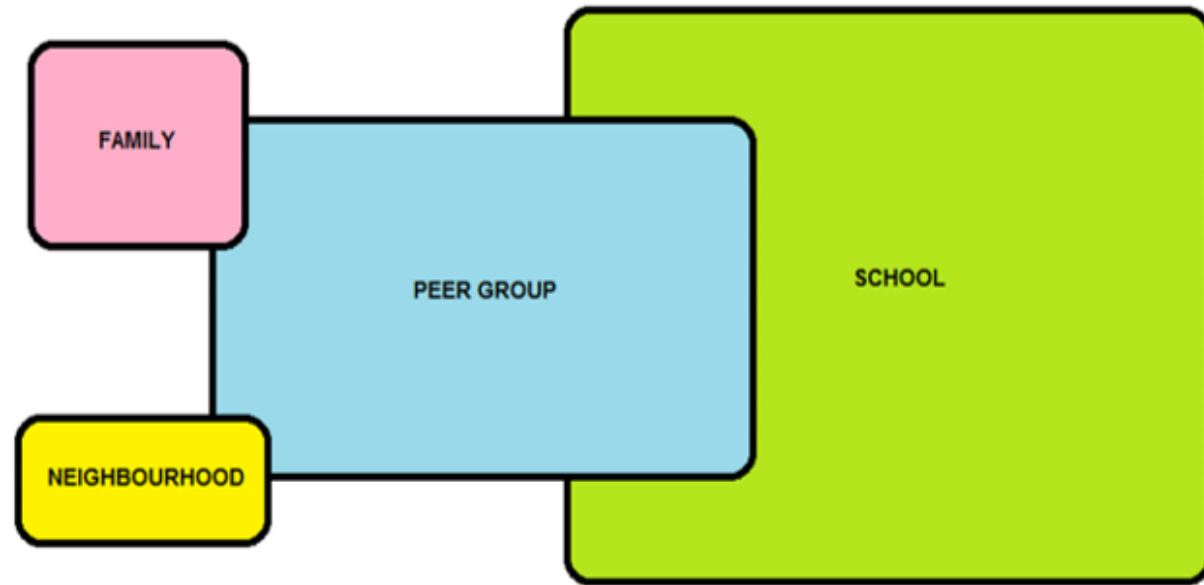
LEVEL 1: ASSESSMENT
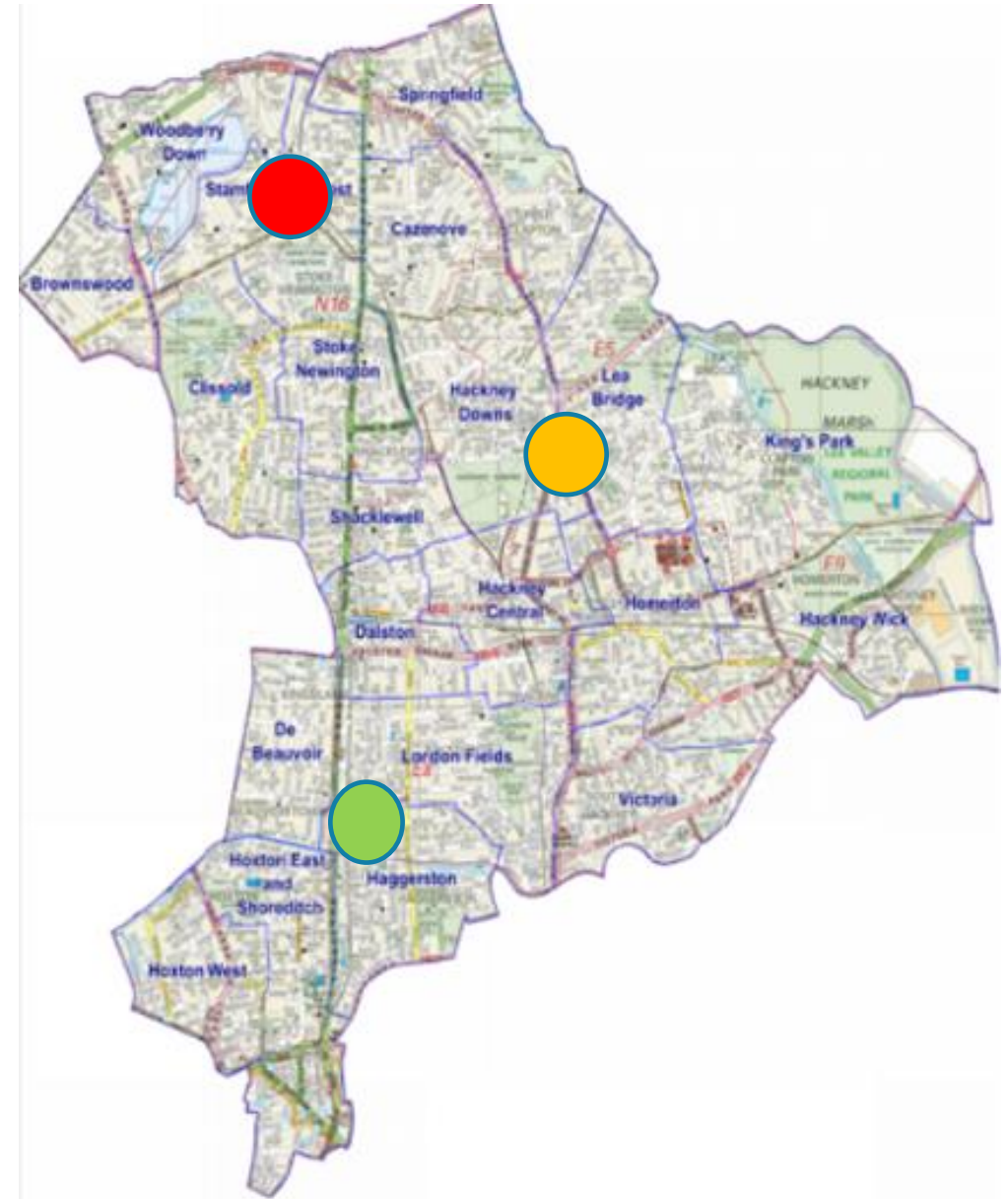
LEVEL 2: ASSESSMENT
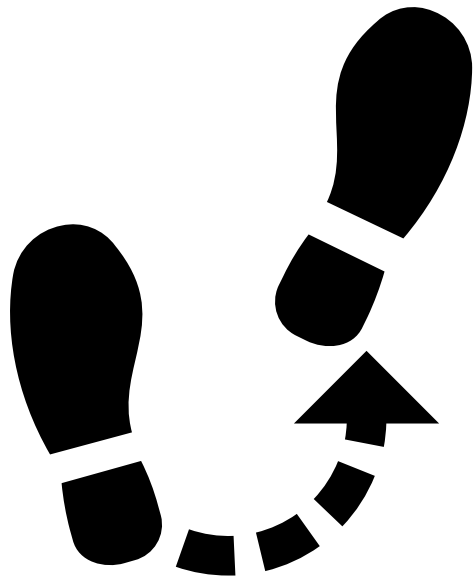
THREE STEPS TO MAINTAINING AN ALIGNMENT WITH THE CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING FRAMEWORK

STEP 1: FOREGROUND THE VALUES OF THE APPROACH

Collaborative

Rights-based

Ecological

Strengths-based

Rooted in young people's lived reality

STEP 2: REASSERT A SOCIAL WORK CONTRIBUTION TO PARTNERSHIP RESPONSES

- How does a social care contribution differ to that of other partners?

- Working together is not the same as doing the same thing

- Social care offers are far more unique than a focus on parenting

- Holding a child's welfare as paramount is critical

- Using assessments and direct engagement to understanding need

Beach location where young people were at risk of substance misuse and sexual harm

- Assessment of the beach by social workers and outreach youth workers to understand young people's needs in the location

- Engagement with business owners to better understand adolescent development and build guardianship

- Liaison with groups of parents in respect on young people in the beach area

- Enabled plans for proactive work around the beach in the following year

STEP 3: REFRAME SOCIAL WORK RELATIONSHIPS

Young people
relationships of trust rather than surveillance

Parents
as partners in safety planning and assessment

Reframing relationships with

Traditional partners
to look inward at their own services and the contexts they create

Non-traditional partners
As potential guardians through relationships
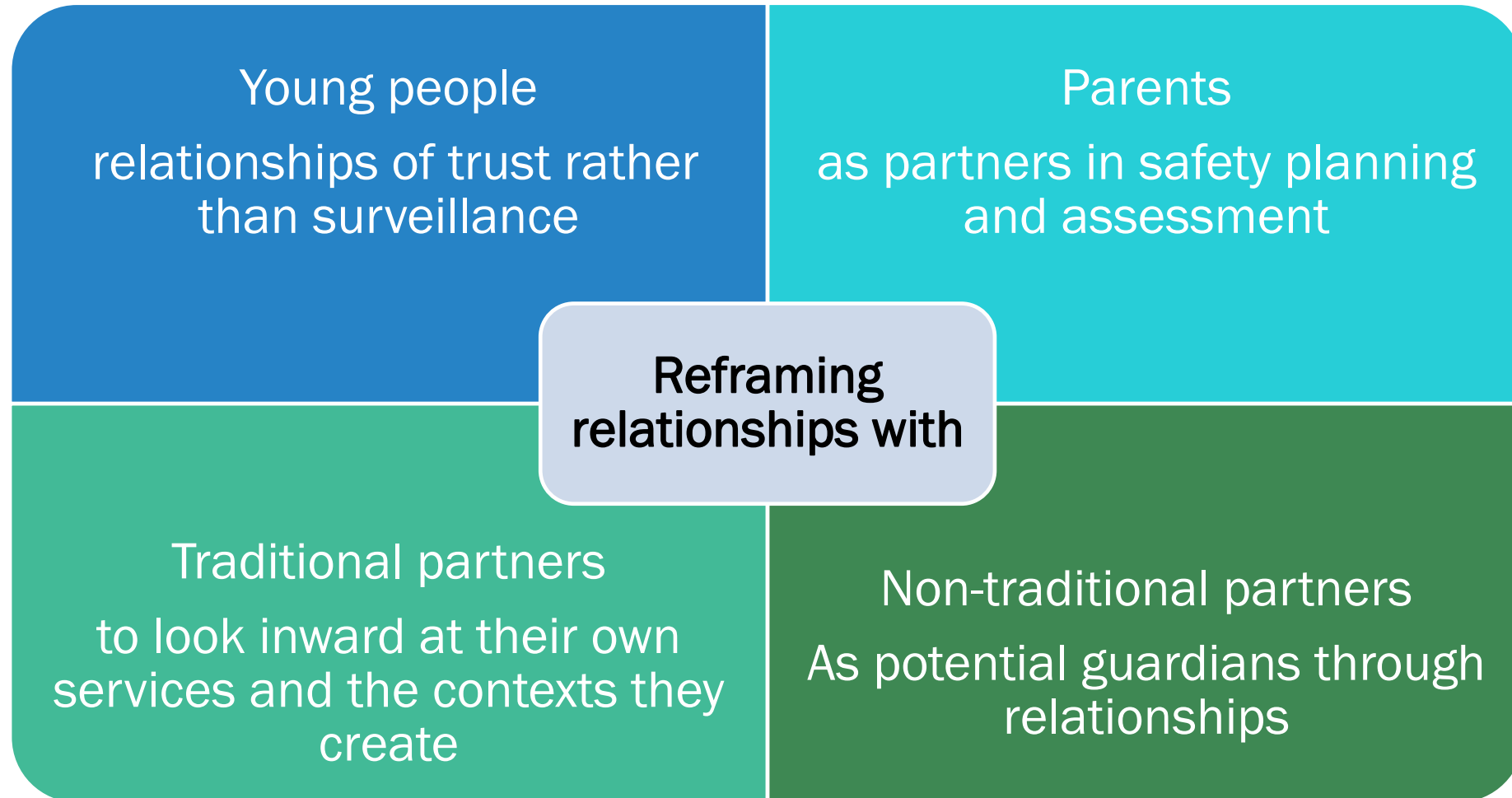
WATCHING OVER OR WORKING WITH? (WROE AND LLOYD, 2020)

Relationships of TRUST | Relationships of SURVEILLANCE

FOCUS/RATIONALE

Relationships of TRUST	Relationships of SURVEILLANCE
• Right-based including rights to privacy	• Focus on anti-social behaviour and crime overiding rights to privacy
• Risk sensible	• Focus on future threats and risk
• Focus on young people's needs and wishes	• Targets marginalised groups (gender/race/class)
• Targets structural causes of harm	• Focus on individual harms detached from structural factors
• Working with with young people/families and communities	• Doing it to young people/families and communities

METHOD

Relationships of TRUST	Relationships of SURVEILLANCE
• Proportional, secure and consensual sharing of information between agreed partners and for intended purpose	• Large amounts of intrusive data shared across informal or electronic systems, without option to consent. Intention and purpose unquestioned and drifts
• Grounded in relationships with families and emotionally aware	• Practitioners are adversarial and focus on discipline and management with a lack of reciprocity/listening and empathy
• Strengths-based and confident practitioners open to uncertainty and complexity	• Practitioners rely on certainty, risk aversion and are outcome driven
• Practitioners have humility amd recognise impact and limit of interventions	• Assessment and monitoring outweighs provision of support

IMPACT

Relationships of TRUST	Relationships of SURVEILLANCE
• Families understand concerns and are supported to use own strengths and networks to resolve problems	• The provision of services or support are contingent on young people's/families engagement or compliance
• Interventions ease stress and dispels shame	• Young people are pushed away into marginal spaces reducing likelihood of help seeking and disclosure
• Relationships are built and repaired (families, young people and professionals)	• Punitive or security-based interventions are the norm
• Increases feelings of safety for young person	• Safety/reputation/finances of statutory organisations and/or private companies prioritised over young people's rights and safety
• Maintains no order principle	

ASSESSING RESPONSES AND SYSTEM AGAINST THE CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING FRAMEWORK

Numerous young people are identified by the police and schools as carrying and selling drugs in and around a local fast food restaurant. In response the restaurant disables its WiFi connection.

Young people stop spending time at the fast food restaurant and instead start to spend time at the library – sometimes up to 80 young people after school. Complaints of anti-social behaviour in and around the library increase. There is a concern that young people are using and selling drugs in and around the library and that some unsafe adults have been seen approaching young people in the library space. Some fights have also broken out in the library. The library seeks help from the local authority and the police about what they should do

RESPONDING IN LINE WITH THE CS FRAMEWORK

Domain 3
Partnerships

Domain 2
Welfare

Domain 1
Target

Domain 4
Outcomes

Response: Pop-up youth club in the library to co-create ideas with young people. Training for library staff on bystander intervention and adolescent development. 1:1 support for a small number of young people from substance misuse service

Practitioner Reflection: '...responding to young people in this situation through a contextual safeguarding lens... led to a decrease in anti-social behaviour and helped to form a stronger relationship between the young people and the library staff, ultimately, creating a safer space for young people to socialise. This in turn has had a longer impact on safeguarding young people engaging in this space....

RESPONDING IN LINE WITH THE CS VALUES

Collaboration

Evidence informed

Ecological

Strengths

Rights

Response: Pop-up youth club in the library to co-create ideas with young people. Training for library staff on bystander intervention and adolescent development. 1:1 support for a small number of young people from substance misuse service

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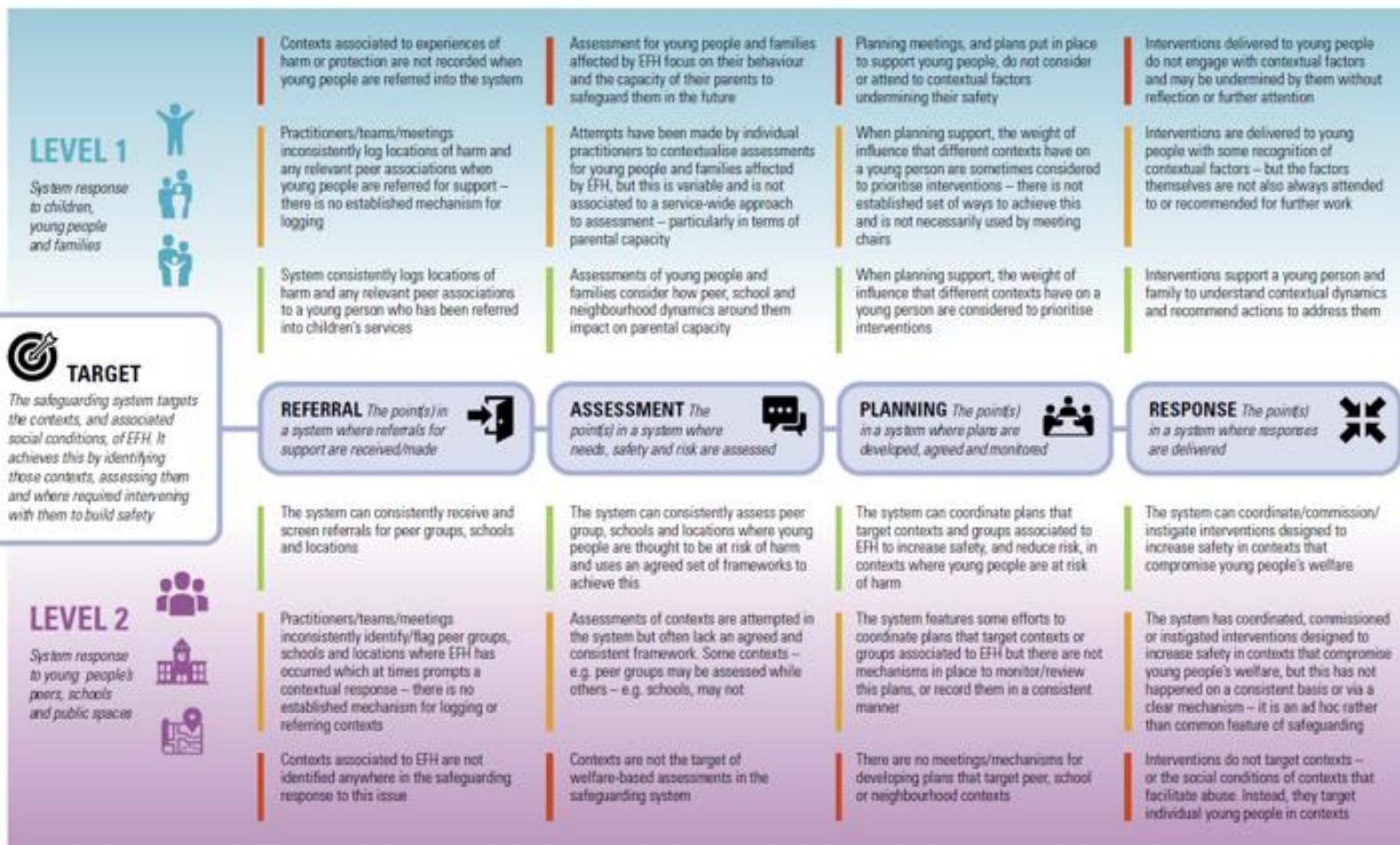
CONSIDERING YOUR PROGRESS AT A SYSTEM LEVEL (FIRMIN ET AL 2021)

KEY
- **EFH** — Extra-familial harm
- **CSE** — Child sexual exploitation
- **CCE** — Child criminal exploitation

CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING SYSTEM REVIEW TOOL

CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING
SCALE UP PROCESS

LEVEL 1
System response to children, young people and families

- Contexts associated to experiences of harm or protection are not recorded when young people are referred into the system
- Practitioners/teams/meetings inconsistently log locations of harm and any relevant peer associations when young people are referred for support – there is no established mechanism for logging
- System consistently logs locations of harm and any relevant peer associations to a young person who has been referred into children's services

- Assessment for young people and families affected by EFH focus on their behaviour and the capacity of their parents to safeguard them in the future
- Attempts have been made by individual practitioners to contextualise assessments for young people and families affected by EFH, but this is variable and is not associated to a service-wide approach to assessment – particularly in terms of parental capacity
- Assessments of young people and families consider how peer, school and neighbourhood dynamics around them impact on parental capacity

- Planning meetings, and plans put in place to support young people, do not consider or attend to contextual factors undermining their safety
- When planning support, the weight of influence that different contexts have on a young person are sometimes considered to prioritise interventions – there is not established set of ways to achieve this and is not necessarily used by meeting chairs
- When planning support, the weight of influence that different contexts have on a young person are considered to prioritise interventions

- Interventions delivered to young people do not engage with contextual factors and may be undermined by them without reflection or further attention
- Interventions are delivered to young people with some recognition of contextual factors – but the factors themselves are not also always attended to or recommended for further work
- Interventions support a young person and family to understand contextual dynamics and recommend actions to address them

TARGET
The safeguarding system targets the contexts, and associated social conditions, of EFH. It achieves this by identifying those contexts, assessing them and where required intervening with them to build safety

REFERRAL The point(s) in a system where referrals for support are received/made

ASSESSMENT The point(s) in a system where needs, safety and risk are assessed

PLANNING The point(s) in a system where plans are developed, agreed and monitored

RESPONSE The point(s) in a system where responses are delivered

LEVEL 2
System response to young people's peers, schools and public spaces

- The system can consistently receive and screen referrals for peer groups, schools and locations
- Practitioners/teams/meetings inconsistently identify/flag peer groups, schools and locations where EFH has occurred which at times prompts a contextual response – there is no established mechanism for logging or referring contexts
- Contexts associated to EFH are not identified anywhere in the safeguarding response to this issue

- The system can consistently assess peer group, schools and locations where young people are thought to be at risk of harm and uses an agreed set of frameworks to achieve this
- Assessments of contexts are attempted in the system but often lack an agreed and consistent framework. Some contexts – e.g. peer groups may be assessed while others – e.g. schools, may not
- Contexts are not the target of welfare-based assessments in the safeguarding system

- The system can coordinate plans that target contexts and groups associated to EFH to increase safety, and reduce risk, in contexts where young people are at risk of harm
- The system features some efforts to coordinate plans that target contexts or groups associated to EFH but there are not mechanisms in place to monitor/review this plans, or record them in a consistent manner
- There are no meetings/mechanisms for developing plans that target peer, school or neighbourhood contexts

- The system can coordinate/commission/ instigate interventions designed to increase safety in contexts that compromise young people's welfare
- The system has coordinated, commissioned or instigated interventions designed to increase safety in contexts that compromise young people's welfare, but this has not happened on a consistent basis or via a clear mechanism – it is an ad hoc rather than common feature of safeguarding
- Interventions do not target contexts – or the social conditions of contexts that facilitate abuse. Instead, they target individual young people in contexts

NEXT STEPS AND ONGOING QUESTIONS

NEW RESOURCES COMING SOON

Updated toolkit with 180 resources

Case study bank tracking implementation across the country

Responses catalogue showing various interventions that align with the CS Framework

Updated website to access existing resources on relocation, training materials and research briefings

CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING THE NEXT CHAPTER

Alternative planning in cases of significant extra-familial harm

Co-production with young people to create systems capable of addressing structural as well as contextual drivers of harm

Further developing responses to schools, and education systems, and their connection with extra-familial harm

Understanding workforce experiences and needs in implementing Contextual Safeguarding

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