A Thematic Review of
Serious Youth Violence
For Bedford Borough Safeguarding
Children Board

Author: Dr Julie Harris, University of Bedfordshire.

Bedford Borough
Safeguarding Children Board

Contents

Acknowledgements

Section 1: Introduction and background

1.1 Arrangements for the thematic review and terms of reference

This review was commissioned by the Bedford Borough Safeguarding Children Board (BBSCB) following two incidents of serious youth violence (SYV) that occurred in 2018, resulting in the death of one young person and the serious injury of another. For both the young men involved, there were concerns about drug misuse and selling and potential involvement in gangs. Partner agencies were involved with both young men at the time and the incidents took place within a wider context of growing concern about youth violence in Bedford Borough.

As there was no evidence of abuse or neglect in these cases, they did not meet the criteria for serious case review. However, BBSCB was keen to ascertain if issues for vulnerable young people including county lines and other forms of exploitation, drug misuse, serious youth violence and involvement in gangs are being identified and responded to early enough by partner agencies. For the purposes of this review, the cases of these two young men have provided a lens through which to consider current service responses, informing a wider case audit of young people identified as vulnerable or at risk of SYV and being supported by services.

The aim of this report is therefore to explore how well the current system works in identifying and responding to the needs of vulnerable young people and to recommend the changes required to enable practitioners to engage them in services more effectively, whilst also informing a wider county response to SYV.

1.2 Terms and definitions

In reflecting its remit to explore particular issues around risk and vulnerability experienced in adolescence, this review refers to 'young people' throughout. Notwithstanding, the young people in this review were all legally defined as children under the Children Act 1989.

The review's definition of serious youth violence followed that adopted by the Bedfordshire Youth Offending Service Serious Youth Violence Panel[1] (BYOS SYVP) as follows:

> *A behaviour involving the most serious violence (including murder, attempted murder, GBH, death by dangerous driving, death by aggravated vehicle taking), any assault with injury, any weapon enabled crime or any sexual offences within a gang related context and where the perpetrator or victim is under 18.*

Young people can be exploited in multiple and overlapping ways (RIP, 2019). Research shows many overlaps between young people experiencing SYV and being vulnerable to other forms of harm or abuse including child criminal exploitation (CCE) including county lines, child sexual exploitation (CSE) and involvement in gangs. Definitions of these are included in appendix one.

---

[1] See Section 3 for more information on BYOS SYVP.
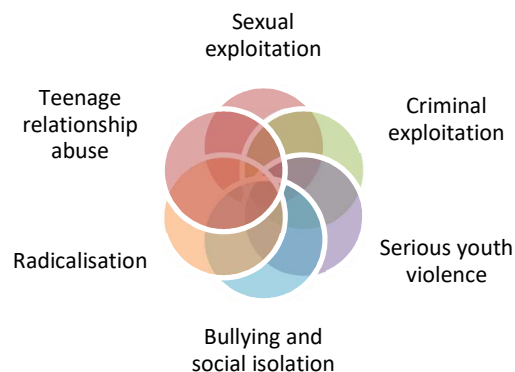
Bedford Borough recognises the following as types of CE: CSE, missing, gangs and county lines, criminal exploitation/risk of offending, peer on peer abuse, online abuse, radicalisation and extremism and forced marriage.

1.3 Scope of the Review

The process was overseen by the Thematic Review Panel who agreed the scope and terms of the review. This included an audit sample of 12 young people who had been referred to the SYVP to include:

- Young people aged between 13 and 19 years of age living within BYOS area who were involved in offending and/or behaviour which is related to serious youth violence and likely to cause a risk of harm or serious harm to others, or

- Young people aged between 13 and 19 years of age living within BYOS area and deemed to be at high risk of becoming involved in or are already involved in serious youth violence or exposed to its consequences. This included young people where there was a perceived need by professionals to safeguard the young person either from their own actions or from the actions of others *including activities related to gang involvement, gang related Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), county lines or other forms of child exploitation.*

It was agreed that relevant services for each case would be contacted and requested to complete the audit form. The sample hoped to achieve a range of experience including an out of area case, ethnic diversity, at least two young women and young people with SEND. It also aimed to explore the experiences of young people assessed as being at different levels of risk.

1.4 Methodology

In the event, ten young people were identified and, from those, a further five selected as meeting the criteria for inclusion in the sample. Emerging themes were highlighted by the Thematic Review Panel and four young people were further selected for consideration at a practitioners' event involving partner agencies with knowledge of the young people and their circumstances.

In addition, an interview was carried out with each of the four young people so that their voices and views of services' engagement with them would be central to the review and inform the

practitioner day. The interviews followed a set of questions prepared by the review author and were undertaken by lead workers with whom the young people had an existing relationship.

The practitioner day consisted of four consecutive roundtables, one for each young person with the relevant practitioners invited to each. The discussions followed a set of prescribed questions exploring the young person's circumstances, underlying risks and vulnerability, influential social contexts and the level and nature of services' engagement with them. Practitioners were asked to reflect on what had gone well, what the missed opportunities were and what were the key learning points that had emerged from the exercise.

A Contextual Safeguarding Approach

This review applied a Contextual Safeguarding[2] approach to the information gathering process and analysis (Firmin, 2017a). This means that it focussed attention on the social contexts outside of the family in which SYV occurs, recognising that young people may experience violence and abuse within their peer groups, schools, neighbourhoods and online.

This approach seeks to understand both the interplay between these contexts and how they might undermine relationships in the family home and inhibit the capacity of parents and carers to safeguard young people (Firmin, 2017b). The aim was to consider the implications for the child protection system and wider safeguarding partnerships, and identify how Children's Services practitioners and partner agencies might influence and intervene more effectively in reducing the risks that these contexts pose to young people.

Contextual safeguarding uses an ecological approach to understanding the importance of peer relationships during adolescence and how these determine young people's experiences, choices, relationships and behaviours and define their social status amongst their peers (Firmin, 2017b). These relationships influence and are themselves influenced by the settings in which they develop such as the school, local neighbourhood and online.

Figure 2 Key contexts of harm for young people (Red line represents online contexts)
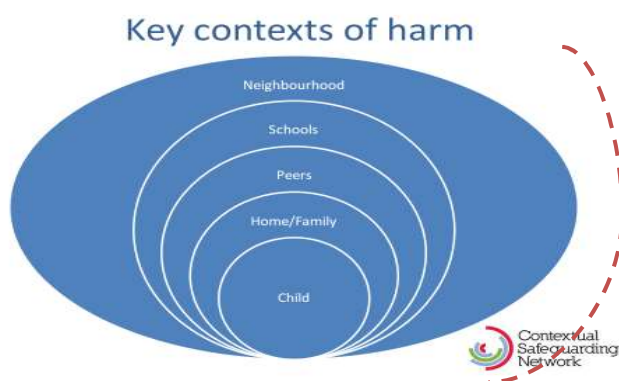
Contexts of Adolescent Safety and Vulnerability (Firmin 2013:47)

Firmin argues that if these relationships form within safe and protective settings within the school and community then young people are supported to form safe and protective peer relationships. However, if these environments are experienced as harmful or violent then the

---

[2] https://contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/

converse is likely to be true and "*These relationships too may be anti-social, unsafe or promote problematic social norms as a means of navigating, or surviving in, those spaces*" (Firmin, 2017. p1)

Violence, criminality and exploitation experienced in extra-familial contexts and amongst young people's peer groups may have a debilitating effect on family life, undermining relationships in the home and parental capacity to keep the young person safe.

It is also the case that young people's behaviours in extra-familial contexts can be informed and influenced by their life at home, either by forcing them to spend time away from home on the streets or in other settings (to escape domestic violence or physical abuse, for example), or by introducing harmful social norms learned in the home environment into their peer groups and relationships.
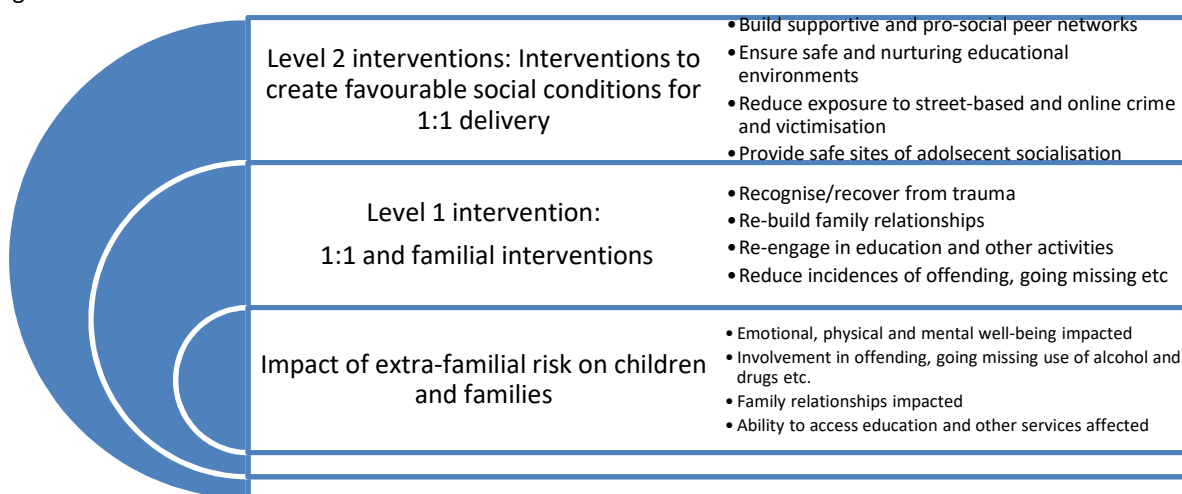
Thus a contextual safeguarding approach suggests that we need to understand and address the inter-play between these different contexts and dynamics if we are to learn how to identify the risks for young people and safeguard them effectively.

The weight of influence of different contexts

For each individual young person the relative weight of influence of these different contexts is likely to vary. For some the protective factors and positive peer influence of school might counter-balance or outweigh more negative or harmful influences in the immediate neighbourhood, for example. For others, harmful associations or violence and abuse taking place within peer groups will overwhelm and negate the protective influence of home. A key aim of contextual safeguarding is to understand where the weight of influence lies in order to target interventions that make those contexts safer for young people, reduce risk and increase the power of protective factors.

This model suggests that as well as recognising the importance of relational work 1:1 work with young people and targeted family intervention in addressing some of the impacts of extra-familial risk (Level 1 intervention), these risks can also undermine and act as barriers to intervention at this level. In order for work with young people and their families to be effective the extra-familial factors also need to be addressed. By targeting interventions at *contexts* as well as individuals (Level 2 intervention), contextual safeguarding aims to create favourable social conditions which support the work undertaken with individuals, as described below:

Figure 3 Role of Contextual Interventions

Level 2 interventions: Interventions to create favourable social conditions for 1:1 delivery	• Build supportive and pro-social peer networks • Ensure safe and nurturing educational environments • Reduce exposure to street-based and online crime and victimisation • Provide safe sites of adolsecent socialisation
Level 1 intervention: 1:1 and familial interventions	• Recognise/recover from trauma • Re-build family relationships • Re-engage in education and other activities • Reduce incidences of offending, going missing etc
Impact of extra-familial risk on children and families	• Emotional, physical and mental well-being impacted • Involvement in offending, going missing use of alcohol and drugs etc. • Family relationships impacted • Ability to access education and other services affected

(Firmin et al., 2016:47)

Pathways to Harm and Pathways to Protection

This review also referred to the model developed by Sidebotham et al. (2016) to consider the timeliness of interventions and specifically how intervening earlier by taking preventative action through identifying predisposing risks should precede and mitigate the need for protective actions once harm is already occurring (see appendix two). Thus, consideration was also given to those points at which anticipation and identification of early indicators might have counter-acted or interrupted the weight of influence of harmful contexts from developing.

This review sought to understand the circumstances of the young people within the context of extra-familial risk and its impact on them as individuals and their families. To this end, an audit tool was designed that captured information about risks that the young person might be experiencing outside the family home including locations (for example hotspots) such as schools, parks, fast food outlets or other businesses, streets or other local neighbourhood areas/public or online spaces that were associated with the concern. It asked for an assessment of the impact of these contexts on the parent or carer's capacity to safeguard the young person; the professionals' capacity to safeguard or intervene and the peer group or public's ability to intervene. The tool also asked practitioners to identify both risk and protective factors for the young person in the individual, family, school, peer groups and community spheres alongside service responses to those indicators.

1.5 National learning about safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation

The timing of this review coincided with the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's review of young people at risk from criminal exploitation which this author also participated in.

Some important themes and messages arise from this work that anticipate those emerging from this review and these are discussed in greater detail in section 2 below. However, there are also some areas of differences that are useful to highlight. Whereas all 21 young people in the national review were male, the Bedford Borough audit sample was deliberately selected to include young women. In the national review, known risk factors around vulnerability were not present in the lives of many in the young people (apart from being out of education), whereas there were clear identifiable risk factors present for these young people who have been known to services from a young age.

In Bedford Borough, the two young people whose circumstances prompted this thematic review both came to the attention of services relatively late despite experiencing disrupted school careers with significant periods out of education. There was clear evidence that both were the victims of child criminal exploitation (CCE) through county lines and heavily involved in local gangs. In neither case was home and family able to act as a protective factor in counter-acting the weight of influence exerted by peers. In both these cases intervention was focussed on the individual or at family level and largely on the boys' offending behaviour rather than their status as victims of extra familial harm. This failed to recognise that harmful social contexts had disproportionate control over their lives which neither they, nor their families, had any power to change.

Section two: Case audit

2.1 Overview of the young people

This section provides a contextual analysis adopting the ecological model to pull out key themes across the experiences of the four young people included in the audit. This is based upon the information provided by multi-agencies who completed the audit tool for each individual young person, case discussion through the Thematic Review Panel, interviews with the four young people and roundtable discussions at a multi-agency practitioner event. The latter encouraged participants to discuss the circumstances and their knowledge of the young people through a contextual lens.

All four young people had been referred through the SYVP which co-ordinates 'appropriate, intelligence-led and evidence-based multi-agency partnership interventions with individuals who are involved in, at risk of involvement in or directly affected by serious youth violence and gang related activity across BYOS area.[3] The SYVP allocates a lead agency to co-ordinate support to a young person and monitors risks and interventions. The referral criteria for the SYVP are included at appendix three.

The sample, whilst small, provided a broad representation of experience, as follows:

- Equal representation of genders.
- The age range was from 16 – 18 years
- The ethnic origins were White British, White / African-Caribbean and British Asian.
- There were issues of SEN (Special Educational Needs) and ADHD (Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) for some of the young people.
- All of the young people were, or had been subject to orders including Referral Orders and Community Protection Orders and one was in a YOI (Youth Offending Institution) for armed robbery,
- For some of the young people they had had been on CP (Child Protection), stepped down to TAF (Team Around Family), on TAF, or subject to a CIN (Child In Need) Plan.

Home life and family

It is striking that all four of these young people come from family backgrounds characterised by extreme levels of violence and physical abuse experienced by these young people from a very young age. Domestic abuse is a feature in for each and for none of these young people does home represent a safe place. This is accompanied by a consistent theme of absent father/male figures. In three cases the father or mum's partner is in prison for perpetrating violence within the family. In another two close family relatives are in prison for crimes of serious violence and drugs offences. One of the young people lives with his father but practitioners voiced concerns about the lack of warmth and inability to set boundaries.

Relationships with mothers are also dysfunctional and for one young person there is a failure to establish a parental role, instead characterising a 'sister to sister' relationship; another mother is described as 'emotionally ambivalent'. Three of the cases describe physical abuse or chastisement from their mother and all are subject to emotional abuse. One young person was made subject to CP for neglect at 16 years, and another at age 8. CSE (Child Sexual Exploitation) is suspected within one of the family homes, facilitated by the mother.

---

[3] BYOS: Serious Youth Violence Panel (SYVP) Operating Protocol (DRAFT).

One of the young people has an underlying health condition which they believe has impacted significantly on their relationships with their peers, leading to bullying and social isolation. Two of the young people have diagnosed ADHD and one has unidentified SEN. All four young people have struggled with their mental health at different times with experiences of depression and anxiety. One young person has described themselves as 'damaged' and is of the view that nothing can 'mend' him.

For all of these young people, violence is normalised and early childhood experiences combined with these features in their home lives act as significant push factors towards harmful extra-familial social contexts. Missing episodes are also a consistent feature and three of the young people are described as habitually using cannabis.

Peer Groups

For all of four young people the influence of peer group is significant. All were involved in gangs some more significantly involved than others. Some were seen as enforcers for the gang and linked to another.

The intelligence picture for these young people includes;
- Exposure to a widening criminal network
- Significant drug running and involvement in different types of offending
- Clear indicators to being a victim of CCE.
- Involvement in county lines for a number of years.
- Found in cuckooed houses with drugs and money.
- Concerns about debt bondage
- Concerns about the distribution of sexual images that suggest being a victim of CSE.
- Missing episodes not reported by their family
- Victim of a stabbing and not taken for medical treatment nor was the incident reported to the police.
- In numerous fights
- Banned from local hotspots
- Relationships with gang members.
- Holding lots of information about gang activities
- Been witness to serious violent incidents.
- Concerns about the storing of weapons on behalf of gang members.
- Suspected victim of domestic abuse

At the time of this review one young person was under investigation for the supply of Class A drugs and subject to a YOS diversion programme and another young person was in detention for knife possession, affray and attempted robbery

Schools

All four young people had difficult school histories with multiple fixed term and permanent exclusions and attendance at the PRU. Starting at the age of 8 years old for one young person meant that they have had long periods of time out of school. Some parents brought about multiple school moves, often in order to avoid exclusion. There were relationship issues between some of the parents and schools which resulted in one young person being home schooled. Concerns were voiced about a gang culture at one of the schools.

It is inevitable that all four young people must have experienced a sense of dislocation, isolation and a separation from community as a result of multiple school moves. The recent National Safeguarding Review Panel (2020) report into children at risk of CCE identifies

exclusion from mainstream school as a trigger point for risk of serious harm. It concludes that permanent exclusion results in lack of structure or a sense of belonging and a subsequent, significant escalation of risk. The report recommends that any such exclusion from mainstream education should be accompanied by an immediate support package in order to mitigate these serious risks.

Neighbourhoods

Local neighbourhoods in Bedford Borough represented key contexts of harm for the young people and the same areas were named consistently as hotspots for violence and abuse including in and around the town centre. Several references were made throughout by practitioners to towns and cities further afield including Northamptonshire and Coventry and motorway service stations.

Online

Online contexts were also referenced and the distribution of sexualised images and gang violence was prolific through online platforms such as Snapchat, WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram.

2.2 Services' engagement with young people

In this section a summary is given of the young people's overview of services' engagement with them and then the views of those practitioners from the case audit and practitioners day. For this report the summary of the young people's views has been edited so that they cannot be identified.

Young people's overview of services engagement

One of the strongest messages from these young people was that help should have been given earlier to them and their families. They thought their life would have been better if they had received support earlier. If their families had been given the support they needed when they needed it then the young people would have felt supported properly too.

Engagement by the YOS was deemed by some of the young people to be the most successful of all the services working with them. Several talked about feeling supported by their YOS worker and that the YOS worker understood what life was like for them.

Some of the young people felt listened to by practitioners while others did not. They said that Services could improve the way that they engage with young people by asking them where they would feel comfortable to meet and using more relaxed and informal venues, or making arrangements to meet half way.

Decision making was not always clear to the young person and for many they were not part of the decision making.

The young people raised issues about how and when they saw practitioners and if they did not get on with them they would just stop engaging - *"She was expecting to come in once a week and change my life and what difference is that going to make? Where was she if I wanted to talk at a different time?"*

What help the practitioner thought they needed differed from what the young person wanted help with "…*they come with their checklist and that's all they care about.*"

Trust was an issue for the young people and they valued those practitioners who were consistent in their lives and made a difference. Specifically, frequent changes of social worker meant for the young people that nothing was ever achieved and that the practitioners did not have any understanding of their lives. For some young people practitioners used creative methods and were persistent to engage with then effectively.

Domestic Abuse was a feature in the majority of these young people's lives from a very young age and they appeared to have normalised the violence they witnessed.

For one young person who was unable to live at home financial support was not offered by any service and this left them in a very vulnerable position and feeling bad about the additional financial pressure they were putting on the family they were living with. They felt let down so badly that they no longer wanted any help specifically from Children's Services.

Some of the young people wanted more help with things like going to college and finding somewhere permanent to live.

Practitioner's overview of the service engagement for the young people

There had been attempts to engage some of the young people and families including intensive family support (Early Help and Children's Services) and parenting support was implemented.

For some of the young people there was little success on behalf of any of the organisations in engaging with them. This was challenging for a number of reasons including their reluctance to accept support; the protectiveness of their parents which made it difficult to address issues and the frequency with which some of them went missing.

There were limited opportunities to get any feel for some of the young people's lived experience as the Practitioners appeared to be unable to move things forward or unpick the risks and understand the issues, including how desperate the young person felt when they were frequently missing from the family home.

By the time Early Help became involved with some of the young people their situation had escalated to a level where the success of interventions were limited. This lead to questions as to whether there might have been earlier recognition of underlying risks and vulnerability given the young people's experiences of serious violence.

Multi-agency communication appeared to deteriorate when the young person moved between mainstream schools and an alternative education provision.
Placements at alternative education provisions meant that the pull factors increased for the young person and the influence of their peers became increasingly significant for the young person.

Whilst on some cases there was information about the family network, etc. there was no detailed analysis of how the family functioned. However, one recent Single Assessment was highly detailed and analytical of one of the young people's early experiences and their impact on them now.

In general there is agreement that there was good multi-agency working and timely information sharing with key partner agencies but not always consistent. There was evidence of good

involvement between Education, Children's Services and YOS and regular joint meetings alongside parents through TAF, CIN and strategy meetings when necessary.

The intervention from the Police was focussed on disruption tactics such as stop and search, and these have been effective in the short term but had not reduced risks in the broader social context or prevented further offending.

Whilst individually targeted interventions are effective in responding to and supporting young people with the impact of SYV and gang involvement, individualised approaches are not effective in challenging the broader social contexts in which this harm occurs.

The experiences of trauma from a young age and gang life raised questions about how aware were practitioners of and received training about trauma informed approaches that recognise the impact of these experiences on young people.

Early Help described a number of interventions and engagement techniques including solution focused approaches, motivational interviewing techniques, strengths based interventions' risk reduction strategies and moments of good engagement where messages had 'landed' due to their persistence over time with some of the young people.

There was some evidence that practitioners understood the young people's lived experience.

Some practitioners suggested that the co-location of partner agencies in multi-agency teams might provide a more effective response to such complex cases.

Practitioners identified that it would be useful to have more clarity as to how the EHCP is being implemented and how schools can work with issues identified.

A question was raised as to whether there should be a stronger role for the voluntary sector, youth workers and practitioners with experience of gang involvement and exit strategies.

There is a question whether sufficient curiosity and challenge were shown or due attention given to some of the young people's needs and wishes.

Practitioners queried the safety of one of the young people's current living situation and what intervention should look like now across the partnership; also how housing and support needs are met for young people who are known but who fall outside the system.

There are broader questions about how services can work to mitigate and resolve early childhood trauma in order to counter-act the pull of harmful social contexts as young people approach adolescence.

Section Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

This concluding section draws out and summarises the learning that emerges when we apply a contextual safeguarding lens to this thematic review and also discusses key themes in light of the findings from the National Safeguarding Review. It concludes with a series of recommendations around how safeguarding strategy and responses might more effectively engage with the key contexts of harm for young people that are outside of the family home.

3.1 Systemic responses to SYV and CCE

The Contextual Safeguarding Framework was developed by the University of Bedfordshire in 2017. Originally developed to address peer-on-peer abuse, it is now being applied across a range of extra familial risks and abuse experienced by adolescents including harmful sexual behaviours in schools. The approach has rapidly gained traction across multiple local authorities and is referenced in the *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018*. Having been piloted in the London Borough of Hackney, it has been taken up by a further nine new test sites in 2019. Some 19 local areas in England and Wales have formed a Local Area Implementation Group, providing peer support to strategic leads and helping to develop the evidence base (Firmin and Lloyd, 2020). The Contextual Safeguarding Implementation Toolkit has been produced as a result of the learning from test sites and a full range of tools and resources to support this approach have subsequently been published and are available from the website.

In addition to working directly with young people and families, contextual safeguarding directs resources and interventions beyond the family in order to target, intervene in and change harmful social environments. It provides a framework within which referrals can be made for interventions in these contexts. In order to achieve this it must engage key partners who manage, have responsibility for or deliver services in those spaces including public transport systems, parks, shopping centres, schools and community centres etc. In so doing it extends the concept of 'capacity to safeguard' towards a much broader public responsibility for keeping young people safe (*ibid*). Extensive testing has shown that in order to be fully effective this approach needs to extend beyond the reach of child protection to be embedded within a wider contextual safeguarding system, characterised by the following four domains:

- Addressing the social conditions of abuse (i.e. targeting the nature of the contexts of abuse rather than just the individuals affected by it);
- Drawing extra-familial contexts into child protection and safeguarding processes;
- Building partnerships with sectors and individuals who manage extra-familial settings where young people spend their time;
- Measuring impact in relation to change in the nature of the contexts where young people were vulnerable to abuse or harm (rather than just focussing on the changing the behaviour of individuals who spend time in harmful spaces)

Figure 4 Contextual Safeguarding Framework (Firmin and Lloyd, 2020)
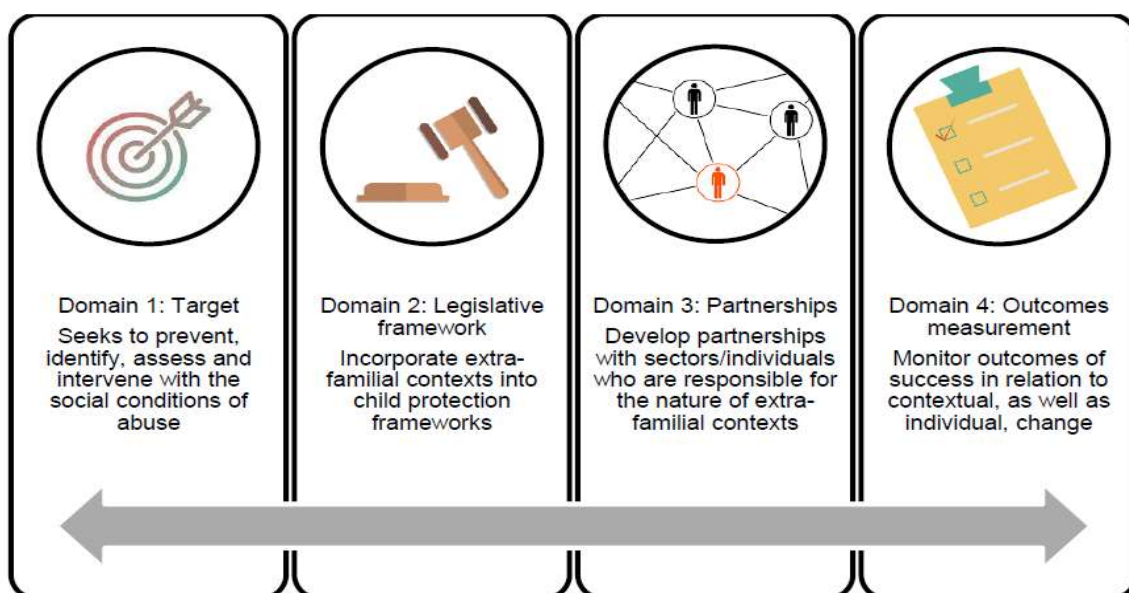
A contextual safeguarding approach for Bedford Borough Council (BBC) would inform and enhance work to address SYV and CCE at local level and support the co-ordination of regional responses to young people at risk. This would require a policy framework for SYV and CE that recognises a) the weight of influence of different contexts in young people's lives and how those shape the behaviours of young people and b) the impact that extra-familial contexts can have on the ability of parents and carers to be protective.

3.2 Regional Strategy and widening partnerships

A pan Bedfordshire strategic group for CE has representation from key partners at senior level and provides the opportunity for developing consistent contextual safeguarding responses across Bedfordshire to extra familial harm. A number of shared resources including a CE screening tool and accompanying guidance to support identification and response have been developed. These have been disseminated through training and awareness raising campaigns in local areas. A Multi-Agency Information Sharing Form provides a means for sharing information about key contexts, groups and behaviours of concern with the police across county. Bedfordshire is also the first county to adopt the Home Office Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit providing guidance and support to practitioners in disrupting perpetrators and safeguarding children. A strategic response to violence and exploitation is also being driven by the Bedfordshire Violence and Reduction Unit (VERU) which is funding a number of county wide initiatives to respond to the issues.

Strategic developments are mirrored at operational level through the Pan Beds Exploitation and Missing monthly meeting which has the overview of the nature and patterns of CE across the county and provides the opportunity to respond to geographical concerns. Other forums for information sharing and co-ordinated responses include the SPOC (Single Points of Contact) meetings involving the three local authorities' Children's Services, Police and Youth Offending Services. [4] A pan Bedfordshire Exploitation Lead is located in the VERU and co-ordinates activities as well as developing policy to include responses and services across the three boroughs.

There are proposed developments in BBC with regard to the widening of partnerships beyond the traditional range of partners involved in safeguarding children, in order to ensure a full response to CE. These should include Community Safety, Sports, Parks and Leisure, Licencing, Housing, and Transport and the voluntary sector. Guidance and good practice examples are available from the Contextual Safeguarding website.

These developments provide the structure and opportunity for a regional application of the Contextual Safeguarding Framework.

Recommendation 1: The BBSCB assures itself that the local policy framework adequately addresses the risks of extra familial harm, SYV and CE, and requests regular updates with regard to the progress of regional policy and the partnership's contribution to it.

Recommendation 2: It is recommended that the BBSCB seek a progress report on the widening of partnerships (beyond traditional partners engaged in children's safeguarding) in spring 2021. Examples of local emerging good practice in this regard should be shared on a regional basis.

---

[4] For further details see *A Response to Child Exploitation – Bedford Borough Children's Services June: An outline of Strategic and Operational work in relation to a Contextual Safeguarding approach in addressing extra familial risk. June 2020*

3.3 Working with key contexts of concern

The Contextual Safeguarding Framework determines that intervention should be directed at the individual and family level (Level 1) and at the community level where interventions are made into places, social spaces and contexts that are harmful to young people (level 2) (see figure three above). Achieving the latter involves extending the reach of traditional child protection and broader child welfare and safeguarding processes to incorporate extra familial settings in which young people are at risk.

During the course of the review, practitioners were asked to identify risks that young people were experiencing outside of the family home as they arose in particular hotspots or locations, in schools, amongst peer groups or online. They were also asked for an assessment of how those risks impacted parents or carers' capacity to safeguard or intervene. Whilst practitioners were able to provide details of individual risk factors and protective factors at home there was less confidence in describing extra-familial contexts. This was also evident through the audit forms where little information was provided by services on key contexts of concern outside of the home. Discussion at the practitioners' day also focussed more on parental engagement and capacity alongside young people's behaviours rather than focussing on extra familial risks. Participants were provided with an update of local developments with regard to the extension of the police Bosun team across the county and new initiatives being developed through VERU (Violence and Reduction Unit). Many participants had been unaware of these and other local police actions targeted at gang activities and county lines.

An effective flow of information with regard to local police strategies and activities to disrupt CCE to practitioners on the ground would support increased confidence in reporting, soft intelligence gathering and direct work with young people around these issues. CP, CIN and TAF planning meetings provide a forum for information sharing about harmful contexts and can support practitioners to implement explicit approaches such as place and peer mapping within individual (Level 1) contextual interventions (see fig. 3 above). The Multi-Agency Information Sharing form provides the vehicle for sharing information with the police and contributing to the local intelligence picture in order to inform localised Level 2 contextual interventions.

Recommendation 3: The Board should assure itself that there is rigorous promotion and routine use of the Multi-Agency Information Sharing Form by professionals across partner agencies.

Recommendation 4: The Board should assure itself that the Pan Bedfordshire Disruption toolkit is used as appropriate in strategy meetings, CP, MARM (Multi-Agency Risk Management), CIN and TAF.

Recommendation 5: An appropriate Bedford Borough forum should be identified to hold the overview of local contexts, groups or networks in which young people are at risk of significant harm and undertake local place and peer mapping exercises. This is in order to inform local Level 2 interventions and evaluate their effectiveness /outcomes.

3.4 Assessment

A contextual safeguarding approach contends that traditional child protection and safeguarding processes are culturally, procedurally and organisationally focussed on the context of home and family without engaging or seeking to change those environments that present the actual source of harm for many vulnerable adolescents (Firmin, 2017a).

At individual level this can be reflected in the nature of risk assessment processes and practice that focus on parental capacity to safeguard rather than on the external factors that, in themselves, act to undermine that capacity. In respect of the cases reviewed here, the weight of influence of peers and external contexts overpowered any protective factors in the family environment.

For this reason, assessment should recognise that young people play different roles in a range of social contexts and that the perception of a young person as an offender should not inhibit identification as victim or the instigation of safeguarding plans. Assessments should focus on sources of risk outside the family home as well as inside so that it is not just the existence of harm that is recognised but its location. For the young people in this review, it is clear that harmful social rules amongst peer groups outweigh both home and school environments. However, in addition to the relative influence of contexts, it is also key to assess the interplay between them so that it is understood how and why they interfere with and undermine the efforts of both parents and professionals to safeguard.

Assessments should therefore incorporate both:

- *Context weighting* to enable practitioners to identify the contexts in which a young person is most at risk at harm, alongside those that represent safe spaces for them. This approach will support the practitioner in identifying those contexts which should be prioritised for intervention.
- *Interplay* between the different relationships in a young person's life. For example, how does their role within a peer group influence and impact their relationships at home. (Firmin, 2017, Firmin and Lloyd, 2020). This approach recognises that young people's significant relationships include association with peers and friendships and that these should be included in the welfare response.

The Bedfordshire Child Exploitation Tool accompanied by guidance has recently been piloted and evaluated. This aims to support identification of exploitation and the support needs associated with it whilst also describing a clear pathway to services.

Recommendation 6: The Pan Bedfordshire Exploitation Screening Tool and practitioner guidance to be rigorously disseminated and accompanied by training that explores the complex and overlapping vulnerabilities of young people and risk as it occurs in different environments. This should be included as an element of new starters/induction training.

Recommendation 7: The Board should seek assurance that its Section 11 responsibilities with regard to safeguarding training include a response to CE from Partners' training programmes for professionals who come into contact with children and young people.

3.5 Thresholds for harm

We have seen in this review that key indicators of harm can be missed or overlooked by professionals in contact with children and young people. In some cases, the indicators of CE were identified but not acted on or young people were deemed not to meet thresholds for harm, despite being at very significant risk. In some circumstances, this was because young people were seen to be making their own choices but this interpretation fails to take into account the weight of influence that harmful social contexts can bring to bear or the interplay between relationships in young people's lives. Young people may often be acting within a context of constrained choice as evidenced in this review where it was clear that the young people concerned were at high risk of significant harm from their peers.

Recommendation 8: The current Bedford Borough multi-agency threshold document should be reviewed to incorporate SYV and CE and ensure consistency with the development of a *Pan Bedfordshire Threshold Document.*

3.6 Predicting factors and the timing of intervention

Given the prevalence of ACEs in this sample the impact of cumulative harm from early childhood is also significant here. There is a growing evidence base that shows the negative influence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on outcomes for young people. In contrast to young people who were part of the National Safeguarding Review for the young people, family life and home for these young people did not represent either a safe or protective context. The young people's backgrounds are characterised by domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse, absent father figures and normalised violence. Despite these strong predicting factors and having been known to services as young children, intervention appears to have come relatively late in their lives and school careers. By this time, the outward indicators of being at risk, such as missing episodes, disruptive behaviour, drug use, and fixed term and permanent school exclusion were already firmly established. This underlines the importance of all partners recognising and accounting for the range of behaviours that might be expected from young people with ACEs and experience of trauma, when considering thresholds for harm.

Recommendation 9: The Board should assure itself that early risk indicators arising from ACEs (such as DV and other forms of violence, absent parents, substance misuse) are being identified and responded to in a timely way through early help assessments.

3.7 Child protection processes

The National Safeguarding Review considers the use of the child protection process for young people at risk of CCE, weighing the benefits of utilising a formal, independently managed structure against the disadvantages of a process that can feel threatening, alienating or inaccessible for young people and their families. The findings call for a review of this issue as part of a wider review of Working Together 2018.

The review also notes that whilst some local authorities are using the child protection conference route, others are using less formal arrangements or developing their own local frameworks for addressing extra-familial harm such as *safety planning* or disruption and safety planning. These are more appropriate where the weight of risks are located outside of the family home, beyond parental control and where family intervention is either misdirected or undermined by external pressures, relationships and influences.

In this thematic review, S.47 strategy meetings were held for the young people in the sample however child protection conferences and plans were not used. This sample was too small to determine routine practice. However, recent developments in BBC indicate the MARM as the appropriate vehicle for young people where there is an identified risk of extra familial CE.

3.8 Schools

All of the young people in this review had extremely troubled school histories which resulted in placements in the PRU. Permanent exclusion from school was a significant feature of concern to emerge in the National Safeguarding Review which acted as a trigger for the acceleration of risk of criminal exploitation and a dangerous tipping point for young people,

particularly if alternative provision was not found quickly. In the review, parents talked about the impact of being out of school, leading to loss of structure and control, the isolation from peers, damage to friendships and a sense of rejection experienced by young people.

It was clear in this review that schools attempted various management strategies including internal isolation and fixed term exclusions in order to regulate the young people's behaviour. One school described how they felt the forces in the young person's external environment were too strong to counteract. Schools failed to act as protective factor with young people going missing from school and, on occasion, the suspected perpetrators of CCE waiting outside school premises in cars.

All of the young people in this thematic review were placed in alternative education provision at various points in their school careers (one young person having their first placement at the age of 8). The literature review for the National Safeguarding Review identified that alternative education provision can, in itself, represent a dangerous context for young people, providing an arena for gang rivalries. The findings raise concern about young people who are gang involved and at risk of SYV being placed together in the same environment. Whilst the staff in alternative education units are skilled and experienced at engaging and supporting these young people, they are also fighting against the weight of influence in young people's lives of harmful social contexts. This would suggest that these should be the focus of targeted contextual safeguarding interventions to work with peer groups in reducing risks and providing positive alternatives to gang involvement.

Recommendation 10: Schools and alternative education providers should carry out assessments where there are concerns about peer groups or harmful behaviours and develop plans for intervening in these contexts in order to change the social conditions in which these behaviours occur. Assessments should result in enlisting support from Early Help where appropriate to provide bespoke and targeted support.

Recommendation 11: The board should seek assurance that schools are preventing exclusions at the earliest opportunity and when young people are permanently excluded from school and being placed in alternative education provision they are provided with immediate wrap-around support for the transition aimed at mitigating the stigma, anxiety and social isolation associated with permanent exclusion for children and young people.

3.9 Working with vulnerable adolescents

It was noticeable in this review that often the first professionals to successfully engage these young people were their BYOS workers who employed a range of engagement techniques in developing effective, influential and important relationships with them. Sadly this was only *after* they were already in the youth offending system. The testimony of the young people themselves suggests that they would have welcomed help from a consistent adult who understood their lives much earlier, and this may have mitigated the negative outcomes for them.

Relational and youth work type approaches are increasingly understood to be effective in working with young people at risk and the way has been blazed particularly by specialist interventions in CSE over the last thirty years. These services typically work with young people as young as 10 years upwards and use skilled engagement techniques based on strengths based, trauma-informed or therapeutic approaches and persistence. The work is developed at the young person's pace, establishing trust over a period of time and overcoming some of the barriers to disclosure that are routinely faced in work with vulnerable young people. Through this work young people can be supported to recognise and recover from harmful

experiences, develop positive and protective relationships with families and with peers in schools and wider community settings.

Whilst the National Safeguarding Review suggests that children's social care should continue to carry statutory responsibility, given the high level of risk for young people involved in CE, specialist workers might effectively work as lead professionals supported by a social worker where they don't hold statutory case responsibility.

Perceived non-engagement in services led to inappropriate case closure for some of the young people in this review at times when they were identified at very high risk. Rather than placing the onus on young people to engage, these kinds of approaches locate the responsibility for effective engagement with services. Research in CSE, suggests that a range of techniques can be effective such as assertive outreach, and that replacing harmful relationships with positive attention is key. Reduced caseloads allow for more intensive and reactive intervention when necessary, combined with longer interventions and flexible, out of hours working which responds to the young person's needs and wishes.

Another issue for consideration raised by the National Safeguarding Review and arising for the young people in this review is the perception of the use of electronic tagging, curfews and community orders as having a positive effect in changing young people's behaviour and curtailing the activities of the perpetrators of CCE. However it is the responsibility of the system to safeguard rather than criminalise young people who are highly vulnerable and acting in circumstances beyond their control. Therefore the use of these as safeguarding strategies is not appropriate.

Recommendation 12: Interventions with young people and families to address the impact of SYV and CCE should include be evidence based and sensitive to ACEs and experience of trauma. These will be characterised by flexible, persistent and relational working. The Board should seek assurance that young people are no longer being closed to services for reasons of non-engagement.

Full list of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The BBSCB assures itself that the local policy framework adequately addresses the risks of extra familial harm, SYV and CE, and requests regular updates with regard to the progress of regional policy and the partnership's contribution to it.

Recommendation 2: It is recommended that the BBSCB seek a progress report on the widening of partnerships (beyond traditional partners engaged in children's safeguarding) in spring 2021. Examples of local emerging good practice in this regard should be shared on a regional basis.

Recommendation 3: The Board should assure itself that there is rigorous promotion to and routine use of the Multi-Agency Information Sharing Form by professionals across partner agencies.

Recommendation 4: The Board should assure itself that the Pan Bedfordshire Disruption toolkit is used as appropriate in strategy meetings, CP, MARM, CIN and TAF.

Recommendation 5: An appropriate forum should be identified to hold the overview of local contexts, groups or networks in which young people are at risk of significant harm and undertake local mapping exercises. This is in order to inform local Level 2 interventions and evaluate their outcomes.

Recommendation 6: The Pan Bedfordshire Exploitation Screening Tool and practitioner guidance to be rigorously disseminated and accompanied by training that explores the complex and overlapping vulnerabilities of young people and risk as it occurs in different environments. This should be included as an element of new starters/induction training.

Recommendation 7: The Board should seek assurance that its Section 11 responsibilities with regard to safeguarding training include a response to CE from Partners' training programmes for professionals who come into contact with children and young people.

Recommendation 8: The current Bedford Borough multi-agency threshold document should be reviewed to incorporate SYV and CCE and ensure consistency with the development of a Pan Bedfordshire Threshold Document

Recommendation 9: The Board should assure itself that early risk indicators arising from ACEs (such as DV and other forms of violence, absent parents, substance misuse) are being identified and responded to in a timely way through early help assessments.

Recommendation 10: Schools and alternative education providers should carry out assessments where there are concerns about peer groups or harmful behaviours and develop plans for intervening in these contexts in order to change the social conditions in which these behaviours occur. Assessments should result in enlisting support from Early Help where appropriate to provide bespoke and targeted support.

Recommendation 11: The board should seek assurance that schools are preventing exclusions at the earliest opportunity and when young people are permanently excluded from school and being placed in alternative education provision they are provided with immediate wrap-around support for the transition aimed at mitigating the stigma, anxiety and social isolation associated with permanent exclusion for children and young people.

Recommendation 12: Interventions with young people and families to address the impact of SYV and CCE should include be evidence based and sensitive to ACEs and experience of trauma. These will be characterised by flexible, persistent and relational working. The Board should seek assurance that young people are not being closed to services for reasons of non-engagement.

Bibliography and References

Children's Commissioner (2019) *Keeping Kids Safe. Improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation*. Children's Commissioner for England.

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020) *"It was hard to escape". Safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation.* HM Government.

Firmin, C., Warrington, C. & Pearce, J. (2016) Sexual Exploitation and its Impact on Developing Sexualities and Sexual Relationships: The Need for Contextual Social Work Interventions. British Journal of Social Work, 46 (8), pp. 2318-2337

Firmin, C. (2017a) Contextualising case reviews: A methodology for developing systemic safeguarding practices. Child & Family Social Work. 2017; 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12382

Firmin, C. (2017b) *Contextual Safeguarding. An overview of the operational, strategic and conceptual framework.* University of Bedfordshire: Luton.

Firmin, C and Lloyd, J. (2020) *Contextual Safeguarding. A 2020 update on the operational, strategic and conceptual framework.* University of Bedfordshire: Luton

Firmin, C., Wroe, L and Lloyd, J. (2019) *Safeguarding and exploitation - complex, contextual and holistic approaches.* Strategic Briefing. Research in Practice. Dartington.

HMIC (2015) *In Harm's Way: The role of the police in keeping children safe.* ISBN: 978-1-78246-819-6

HM Government (2018) *Serious Violence Strategy*

House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2019) *Serious Youth Violence. Sixteenth Report of Session 2017-19.*

Sidebotham, P., Brandon, M., Bailey, S., Belderson, P., Dodsworth, J., Garstang, J., Harrison, E., Retzer, A. and Sorensen, P. (2016) *Pathways to Harm, Pathways to Protection: A Triennial Analysis of Serious Case Reviews 2011-2014.* London: Department for Education

Appendix one: Definitions & Guidance
(Excerpt from Bedfordshire Child Exploitation Tool)

Child Criminal Exploitation

CCE is not defined in law but is a term that has come to be associated with 'county lines'. The government definition of county lines is set out below together with the Home Office definition of child criminal exploitation, which is increasingly used to describe this type of exploitation where children are involved.

Child criminal exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity:

- In exchange for something the victim needs or wants.
- For the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator.
- Through violence or the threat of violence.

The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact, it can also occur through the use of technology. The criminal exploitation of children is not confined to county lines but can also include other forms of criminal activity such as theft, acquisitive crime, knife crimes and other forms of criminality.

Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines guidance

County lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of 'deal line'. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.

Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines guidance
Children and Young People Trafficked for the purpose of Criminal Exploitation

Child Sexual Exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact, it can also occur through the use of technology. Definition taken from Department for Education's Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation (2017)

Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit - Perpetrators of child sexual exploitation (CSE) and child criminal exploitation (CCE) can share patterns of behaviour in respect of coercion, violence, intimidation and the power imbalance inherent in them and many other offences.

This toolkit is primarily aimed at frontline staff working to safeguard children and young people under the age of 18 from sexual and criminal exploitation. This includes law enforcement, social care, housing, education, the voluntary sector and related partner organisations.

Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit

Appendix Two: Pathways to Harm and Pathways to Protection
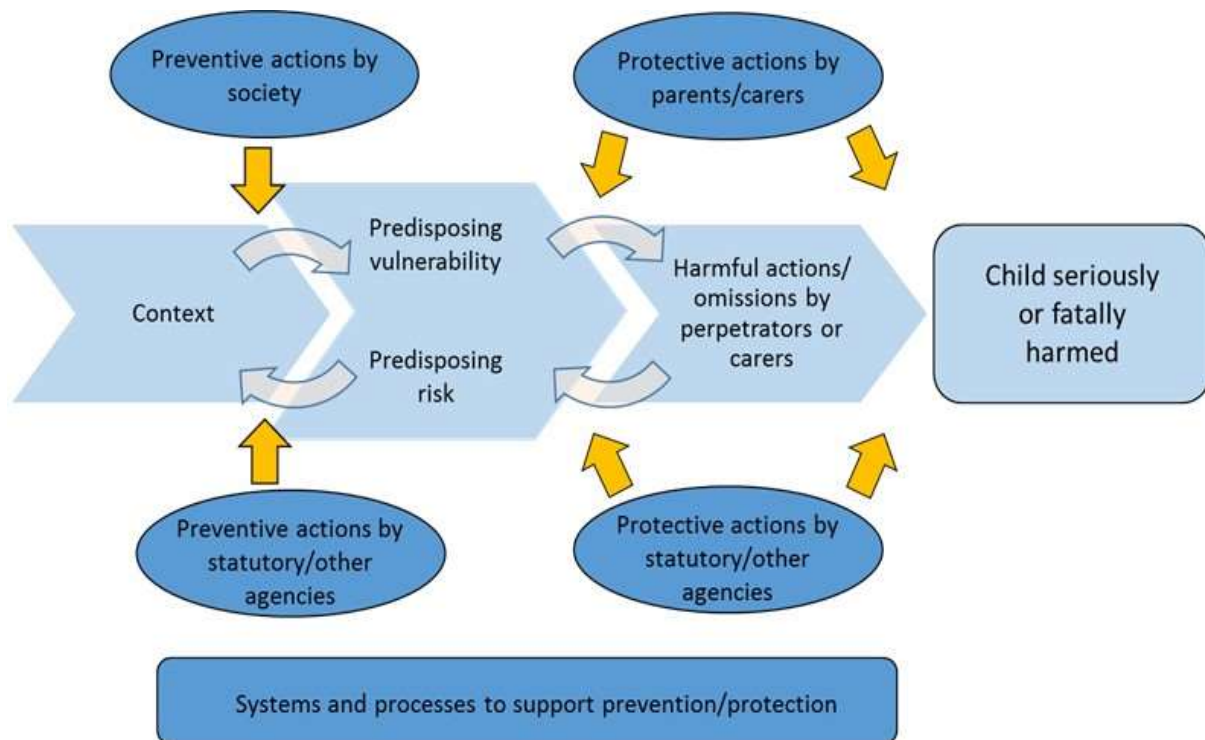
Sidebotham, P., Brandon, M., Bailey, S., Belderson, P., Dodsworth, J., Garstang, J., Harrison, E., Retzer, A. and Sorensen, P. (2016) *Pathways to Harm, Pathways to Protection: A Triennial Analysis of Serious Case Reviews 2011-2014.* London: Department for Education

Appendix Three: Serious Youth Violence Panel Referral Criteria

[Excerpt from BYOS: Serious Youth Violence Panel (SYVP) Operating Protocol (DRAFT)].

Criteria for referral / acceptance into SYVP

Individuals are the central focus of the SYVP process. An individual can be accepted into the SYVP if they are:

a. Anyone aged under 18 years of age who is involved in offending and/or behaviour which is related to serious youth violence and likely to cause a risk of harm or serious harm to others. Any referrals into SYVP will need to clearly demonstrate the association with serious youth violence **OR**

b. A child or young person under 18 years living within Bedfordshire YOS area and deemed to be at high risk of becoming involved in or who is already involved in serious youth violence or exposed to its consequences. This may include perpetrators or victims where there is a perceived need by professionals to safeguard the young person either from their own actions or from the actions of others. Referrals should clearly demonstrate the association with serious youth violence **OR**

c. Any person, of any age, directly affected by serious youth violence that is deemed to be at risk from its consequences. This could include a victim, family, family member or neighbour of a gang-member. Referrals should clearly demonstrate the association with serious youth violence and the impact/effect of serious youth violence on the affected person.