

# Social Care Responses to Children who Experience Criminal Exploitation and Violence: The Conditions for a Welfare Response

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## Abstract

This article explores social care responses to children experiencing criminal exploitation and violence. The article draws on data from two children's social care departments in England applying a Contextual Safeguarding framework to extra-familial harm. Using evidence from interviews, focus groups, meeting observations and two peer assessments, the article explores factors that facilitate welfare approaches when children commit crimes and those conditions that undermine welfare approaches. The findings outline five conditions which facilitate or inhibit welfare responses including: whether legal rights promote the best interests of the child, if harm reduction prioritises a child's needs, if language is underpinned by caring intention, the extent that systems harm is recognised and addressed and how practitioners gain knowledge of young people. The discussion introduces a welfare framework for social workers to define and describe what the conditions for welfare responses can constitute.

**Keywords:** adolescents, child criminal exploitation, contextual safeguarding, peer groups, violence, welfare

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## Introduction

What is the multi-agency response when a child or young person is being harmed but also committing offences? This article considers how social workers and safeguarding partners provide welfare responses to children experiencing child criminal exploitation (CCE) and violence. Violence and harm between children are issues of global concern. Whilst youth violence and exploitation amongst peers is an issue internationally, the types and manifestations of it vary regionally (Pinheiro, 2006; Kardefelt-Winther and Maternowska, 2020; UN, 2023). In the USA, fatal gun violence in schools via mass shootings continues to take children's lives prematurely (Kim *et al.*, 2021). Studies in Latin America have highlighted the issue of violent crime and homicide (UNICEF, 2021). In African and South-East Asian countries, research on peer harm has focused on gender-based violence (Postmus *et al.*, 2022).

In England, CCE and violence have received increasing public and policy attention in recent years (HM Government, 2018a; Home Office, 2018; The Guardian, 2022). Issues of youth violence such as 'knife crime' and criminal exploitation of children via drugs trafficking such as 'county lines' regularly make the headlines in England (BBC, 2022). Drawing on data from two children and families social care departments that are testing ways to develop welfare approaches to these forms of harm, we explore the conditions for welfare in these cases and the instances where crime prevention is prioritised instead.

Following the Children Act 1989 (The Children Act, 1989), we define 'welfare' as an approach that promotes a child's best interests, including their physical, emotional and educational needs, and that protects them from the harm they have suffered or are at risk of suffering. In this article, we draw on definitions and thresholds of harm as defined in the Children Act 1989 (i.e. children experiencing significant harm or children in need should receive a welfare response that is led by social care). However, our conception of harm also includes harms that directly undermine a child's welfare (e.g. neglect or violence) but also social harms such as inequality, structural harm or forms of harm reproduced or created by systems (Canning and Tombs, 2021; Wroe, 2022). Furthermore, following restorative justice principles, we include harm that results from instigating harm to others (Zehr and Mika, 2017).

Whilst we conceive of child harm in this way (based on the principles rooted in children's rights and research evidence) and despite policy now tasking safeguarding partnerships with actioning a welfare response to young people who have harmed and are harmed beyond their families, the legislative framework in England continues to separate children who are harmed (via the child protection system) from those who are harming (via the youth justice system). In this legal, policy and practice

context, the question of what welfare approaches mean in practice becomes harder to answer. Whilst providing a welfare approach might sound nice, what does this actually entail? The findings of this article are used to describe and define the components of welfare approaches in cases of youth violence and exploitation. It is our intention that social workers and safeguarding practitioners involved in the development of new interventions and system responses to these forms of harm can use this framework as a guide to consider new approaches against them.

## Background

In England, the duty and power to provide welfare and support to children in need, or to those who have experienced significant harm, is warranted to children's social services, whereas youth offending services are tasked with responding to children who commit offences. Until the introduction of 'extra-familial harm' (harm that happens to children outside of their families) in England's statutory safeguarding policy Working Together in 2018 (HM Government, 2018b), harms that were experienced or committed by young people in contexts beyond their families were generally viewed as criminal or anti-social, reflecting the legislative division dictated by the Children Act 1989 that sought to separate legal proceedings against parents from those against 'delinquent' children (Hale, 2019, in Firmin *et al.*, 2022a,b). The ratcheting debate about 'extra-familial harm' in the last decade has begun to locate child exploitation, and youth violence, in the language and practice of safeguarding and has made considerable achievements in doing so. Statutory safeguarding guidance in England now asks safeguarding partnerships to assess and respond to young people who experience harm beyond their families, including young people who harm others. However, whilst significant moves have taken place over this period to shift attitudes, policy and practice to a place that views youth involvement in crime and violence as a safeguarding matter (Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Firmin, 2017), evidence suggests that there is still a long way to go before practitioners are supported by the law, policy and statutory and practice guidance to approach violence and crime in adolescence as a safeguarding issue (Firmin and Lloyd, 2022).

This tension may largely be accounted for by the rapid adoption of extra-familial risk in safeguarding guidance, a move that requires a shift in attitudes, in workplace cultures, partnerships, resourcing, commissioning, outcomes measurements and more (Firmin *et al.*, 2022a, b). It is also likely due to a persistent contradiction in legislation that places a duty on different public bodies to safeguard children affected by violence and to pursue them as offenders. Nowhere has this tension played out more

clearly than in the collective response from the government, the media, professionals and the public to young people who are criminally exploited (i.e. via ‘county lines’) (Windle *et al.*, 2020). CCE has been likened to child sexual exploitation (CSE) (All Party Parliamentary Group on Runaway Missing Children Adults, 2017), an issue that has seen significant policy shifts in the past two decades. However, there are considerable and persistent differences in the law, and attitudes, surrounding these harm types. The Department for Education introduced the first definition of CSE in 2009, prior to which the Department for Health promoted youth offending measures to divert young people from ‘prostitution’ (Department for Education, 2017, p. 10). The introduction of ‘CSE’, and the updated 2017 definition (DfE, 2017), laid out a nuanced understanding of the circumstances in which imbalances of power are exploited to coerce or deceive children (under eighteen) into sexual activity in exchange for something they need or want (Department for Education, 2017). This required a shift in language and attitudes, changes to partnership arrangements for responding to CSE (including an increased role for social work) and importantly a legislative means by which children and young people who exchanged sex could avoid criminalisation (reflecting young people’s views that significant policy and practice change was needed, see Warrington *et al.*, 2016).

Whilst there is no statutory definition, CCE has followed a similar journey, with sector-wide consensus (Home Office, 2021) that children can be, and are, routinely coerced into criminal activity, from which they should be shielded and offered support. As such, children’s social care teams have been increasingly tasked with assessing and supporting young people who are criminally exploited (HM Government, 2018a, b); making threshold decisions about harm and actioning (and at times leading) multi-agency responses for young people who are at risk of or experiencing significant harm because of criminal exploitation. However, local authorities continue to be challenged in their response to young people who are criminally exploited, particularly when it comes to ensuring that young people who need help receive it (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). Many of these challenges could stem from this seemingly contradictory policy landscape; with no statutory definition of CCE and the unresolved problem that young people (as young as ten) who carry weapons, sell drugs or harm their peers, are committing punishable offences under UK law. This, in particular, weakens the demand that children who are criminally exploited should be treated as victims as those who are exploited sexually (APPG, 2017); with the caveat that class, race, gender and disability continue to play a role in identification, see for example, Brown (2019) and Wroe (2021), and associated issues such as ‘serious youth violence’ continue to come under the mandate of the Home Office and youth justice agencies. We may want to view these young people as victims, but there are limited legal mechanisms that allow us to do so.

The consequence of this somewhat conflicting policy landscape has real consequences for young people who continue to receive ‘no further action’ decisions from social care decision makers (Firmin *et al.*, 2022a, b), or to be relocated (Firmin *et al.*, 2022a,b) in lieu of an effective response to build safety around them. This results in cases where the slim provision available to protect criminally exploited young people from criminalisation in adjacent law such as the Modern Slavery Act are being used to pursue the same young people as both victim and exploiter (Koch, 2019). The Police Crime Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 has introduced unprecedented new police powers to stop and search young people thought to be involved in serious violence (with recognition from charities and the London Metropolitan Police that this will likely disproportionately impact racially minoritised youth [Liberty, 2021]) and the introduction of mandatory reporting by public bodies via the Serious Violence Duty. These moves, towards more entrenched policing and monitoring of young people, indicate that questions about how safeguarding partnerships should respond to extra-familial risk require urgent resolution.

This raises the question as to whether a social work or welfare response that is grounded in principles of children’s rights and welfare should, rather than mirroring criminal justice practices, look different to a youth justice one? This article seeks to explore these tensions as they play out across two social care departments in England.

## Methodology

These findings are a sub-set of data from a three-year multi-site project with nine children and families’ social care departments across England and Wales (the Scale-Up project). The project ran between May 2018 and June 2022. The aim of this overarching project was to create system change across children’s social care and other safeguarding partner agencies in their response to children impacted by extra-familial harm. Each children and families social care department (‘sites’ from herein) tested larger scale change through a number of pilots (twenty-two in total), for example, differing assessment approaches, child protection pathways and school and group-based responses. The findings presented in this article are taken from two pilots tested in two different sites. Data from these two pilots were analysed to answer the following research question:

- What conditions facilitate welfare responses to CCE and violence within children’s social care?

## Research sites and pilots

In this article, we focus on two of the research sites. Site A is a metropolitan borough council in England. Site B is a London borough. Both sites were impacted by significant forms of extra-familial harm including fatal violence of children by their peers and drugs trafficking.

In both sites, social care practitioners, alongside other agencies, were trying to develop welfare approaches for children that were experiencing CCE and violence. The pilots they were carrying out as part of the overarching project had the aim of testing a Contextual Safeguarding framework for responding to extra-familial harm (Firmin, 2020). This meant addressing extra-familial harm by targeting the context where the harm was occurring (rather than just individuals and their families), drawing on child welfare approaches (rather than crime prevention), working with a range of partners beyond those traditionally associated with safeguarding and measuring outcomes through changes to contexts and not just individuals. The two sites that are the focus of this article were testing peer group assessments. A contextual peer group assessment focuses on assessing and responding to needs identified within a peer group (rather than multiple individual assessments) when a group of young people are considered to be experiencing harm *together* (Contextual Safeguarding Network, 2022).

Several children involved in the pilots were experiencing, or were at risk of experiencing, 'significant harm'. Without delving into the details of these experiences, they had witnessed fatal violence, the use of weapons and were exposed to exploitation in the form of drugs trafficking. In this sense, and in alignment with English law and safeguarding policy, social workers were (as of 2018) required to provide a safeguarding response in these cases. At the same time, many of these children's experiences of harm intersected with serious crimes. Several of the children in both sites had been arrested for: possession with intent to supply of drugs, possession of weapons and attempted murder. Practitioners were faced with the challenge of how they could safeguard and provide a welfare response to these children within a context where they may also be pursued for criminal charges or cautions. Looking at two sites that were responding to similar issues and piloting similar approaches allowed one avenue in which to explore this tension.

## Analysis and data-set

The data in this article are drawn from a larger set of data. Data were analysed at two key stages. At Stage 1, the larger data set included data from nine children and family social care departments that between them ran twenty-two different pilots. Initial analysis of this data was

analysed using the project's broad analytic framework and findings are reported elsewhere (Firman and Lloyd, 2022). This process surfaced several themes, one specifically relating to welfare responses for children that commit crimes.

At Stage 2, a subset of data was chosen to explore this theme. Two pilots were chosen where the focus was specifically on addressing criminal exploitation and violence. The data from these pilots included:

- five interviews with practitioners;
- two focus groups with practitioners;
- twelve meeting observations; and
- two peer assessments (all case files and notes related to the assessment).

The data were entered into Nvivo12 and two researchers coded against three broad themes: evidence of welfare approaches, barriers to welfare approaches and evidence of crime prevention. On completion of this, the third researcher joined to sense-check the findings against each code. Final analysis involved interrogating each code to consider the conditions that contributed to welfare/crime-prevention approaches. We drew from the data coded at Stage 2 and situated this within the broader ethnographic data from Stage 1 and research literature in this area. This process led to the research findings and [Figure 1](#) below.

## Ethics

Ethical approval for the research was granted by two university ethics boards. Consent for individual sites to participate was granted by the Director of Children Services and a multi-agency partnership in each site. Individuals provided consent for interviews, focus groups and observations. The peer assessments were provided in redacted form. To protect the anonymity of sites we do not distinguish the findings by site.

## Limitations

The data from this article were captured as part of two pilots and not specifically in relation to the research question in this article. From the pilot analysis and the overall project, however, the question of welfare responses emerged. As such, the data are partial in some respects and do not aim to provide a total picture of the use of peer assessment.

## Findings: the conditions for welfare

Data from both sites evidenced conditions facilitating welfare approaches and those that supported crime prevention. We present five conditions below.

### Needs outweigh crime prevention

As outlined in the Introduction section, a challenge when children experience criminal exploitation and violence is that they may also be involved in activities that involve serious offences (e.g. fatal violence). Whilst these critical incidents may signify a particular trajectory for the young person down a criminal justice route, they were the minority of issues that affected the children in these assessments. Most of the children in the assessments, if not all, were involved in ‘minor misdemeanours’. Data analysis suggested a division across the two sites in how the crime was perceived. Whilst perceptions may differ across individual practitioners, overall, the site culture set the tone and direction of welfare efforts. Conditions that facilitated welfare were rooted in an understanding of crime that recognised its significance but where children’s needs outweighed crime prevention:

Extract 1: [young person] seems to have a flair for business. He can be organised, focused and determined. [...] As concerning as that may be in terms of risks to his welfare, it indicates that if his energies could be diverted into other (legal!) things, he has the potential to be high-achieving. (Peer assessment)

In opposition to this was a focus on the idea that preventing crime was the ultimate root of reducing harm. In the other site, a dominant focus was the idea of disrupting the ‘perpetrators’ of exploitation:

[We are] Pushing to disrupt with adults as much as possible to make their lives as uncomfortable as possible. (Meeting observation notes)

In this site, practitioners hoped that disrupting crime could reduce harm to children. This resulted in significant sharing of information with the police. In one meeting, social workers were advised to input information gathered from young people into a police website and told that young people that did would be provided with more protection. Whilst there were ongoing police investigations in both sites, this site specifically aligned its assessment alongside the police investigation and felt that this was fundamental to the success of the assessment. This site had the additional benefit of police funding.

However, analysis suggested that practitioners, social workers, youth workers, teachers, community safety officers, housing officers, etc. did



have a certain amount of discretion when confronted with evidence that young people might be involved in some forms of crime. It appeared that practitioners applied different thresholds for what was reported and what was not. In one site, a Community Safety Officer (partnerships of crime prevention organisations) noted how they predominantly wanted to divert children away from criminal justice routes:

These young people aren't just being exploited. The vulnerable young people that are going in the shop [being arrested], what can we do to divert them away from that. (Community Safety Worker, Focus group)

In the other site, the assessment identified that the orders being used by Community Safety played a role in creating divisions between the young people and services. The assessment plan sought to 'repair' this damage:

Extract 2: CBO [Criminal Behaviour Order] [...] appear to have contributed towards a sense of mistrust and opposition between Safer Communities and this group. [...] the next steps from this assessment might involve the managers in Safer Communities and suitable partner agencies sitting together and considering the best possible future strategy and what could be referred to as 'repair'. (Peer assessment notes)

In both sites, practitioners were alive to the topic of the flexibility they could use.

### Language evidences caring intention

Social workers worked with crime prevention partners at both sites. Sites were set up in ways that meant that their systems were structurally integrated to facilitate multi-agency working with the police. Evidence of this included: police officers attending meetings related to the assessment, police providing 'intelligence' in the assessment, funding from the police, information from the assessment being shared with the police and 'disruption' activities such as arrests made by the police as part of the welfare plan. These activities were not, however, the same in both sites. The extent of police involvement appeared to inform how sites responded to criminal exploitation and violence both structurally and culturally. Culture and language appear crucial for creating the conditions for welfare approaches. Take for example the following two extracts where the 'peer groups' are described in the two sites:

Extract 3: YP1 has been stop checked with YP2. YP1 does not talk about his peers/associates. YP1 has links to YP4, as they were arrested for Burglary offence together. YP1 is also linked to YP8 and they are close friends at present. [...] Professionals have not been able to engage with YP6 and YP3 their peers and associates. (Peer assessment)

Extract 4: They are all talented with many positive core values and a capacity for kindness and, to use one of their favourite words, love. It is my opinion that they all have the potential for successful life outcomes if they can receive and make use of the best possible support. (Peer assessment)

What do these two accounts tell us about the young people, their friendships and their needs? And what do these accounts tell us about who knows these young people? The first extract suggests that the information is derived almost entirely from police ‘intelligence’ via ‘stop checks’ (where the police can stop a person they think is linked to criminal activity) and information held on arrests. The second extract paints a very different picture of the young people—it talks about their strengths and likes and is optimistic about their future.

If alignment with a police operation led to the language of crime prevention dominating the assessment, what can be said of welfare? Language rooted in welfare appeared to lean towards young people’s needs, likes and loves—it evidenced caring intention. This was described by the social worker who led the assessment in one site:

And I think my values really came across in the assessment. It got gushy. [manager’s name] had to rein it in and was like, ‘I can tell you really like these kids’. (social worker Interview)

Love was reflected in the language used in the assessment itself to describe the passions and interests of the young people:

Extract 5: When thinking about what the word ‘love’ means to them, this group have referred to family, their friends and have linked the word to ‘stress’ which may indicate that with love also comes obligation and responsibilities. It is a working hypothesis amongst professionals at [youth club] that ‘love’ as a concept (and perhaps as it ties in to other feelings and drivers such as loyalty, protection and devotion) may be at the heart of gang disputes. (Peer assessment)

Extract 6: Until five years ago there was a basketball court where the group played football ‘almost constantly’. This group love football. If they had access to another such resource locally, this would undoubtedly be helpful for them. (Peer assessment)

It is difficult to emphasise how unique the style of writing used in these two extracts is. Case reviews and meeting observations across these two sites and the whole project rarely evidenced language that described—in writing—the likes and loves of children that were involved in criminal activities. Whilst a love of football may seem trivial, this second extract encourages the reader to see this group as children. A second element is highlighted here—systems harm. We consider this further in the following section.

## Recognition of systems harm

Central to understanding extra-familial harm, is situating it within a broader understanding of structural harm such as poverty, racism, patriarchal structures, ableism, etc. (Featherstone and Gupta, 2018). At the same time, it is important to consider how systems—such as social care—can replicate and inflict those harms. Both sites evidenced recognition and reinforcement of systems harm. In one site practitioners acknowledged that when police disruption takes place children become vulnerable. However, this knowledge did not appear to influence whether they intervened (punitively) with parents, as seen in the second extract from a different meeting:

When [police] disruption of adults takes place, kids become more vulnerable. [We] Need to make sure safeguarding is in place. If something significant changes within the group then get in touch with [multi-agency team] immediately. (meeting observation, notes)

We need to now look at the theory we have and change the interventions with the parents and whether we need to use more enforcement on the parents we know are criminal families. (meeting observation notes)

In the other site, the assessment process surfaced structural harms (racism) that were acted out through systems. These were addressed as part of the assessment plans, described by the person leading the assessment:

The language used in the documents that community safety had used was deeply offensive. They had described these males physically [...] They were referring to the shape of their lips. There could have been absolutely inadvertent racism there. [...] I shared with their operations manager [...] he seemed to understand it immediately. I didn't have to labour the point or give examples. And ever since then they've been coming to us so much whenever they're planning anything really, and they send me drafts of injunctions and when they've got stipulations. (Social worker Interview)

Finally, an extract from one assessment evidenced both recognition of the impact of systems harm—the basketball court had gone (austerity and cuts to youth provision) and whilst recognising the challenges of the request, noted how important this could be in tackling the harm.

## Confidence in legal rights

How do you protect children from harm in ways that do not contravene their rights? In doing so, practitioners may be struck by tensions between different rights. For example, right to private family life, freedom of association and data protection when protecting young people from harm may require seemingly going against these rights. Questions like this

were present in both sites as practitioners grappled with this tension. This surfaced a condition for welfare: ensuring that practitioners have confidence in the legal rights they are drawing upon. Within both sites practitioners appeared to have differing views on upholding rights to privacy:

there was very little of it [the assessment] that really felt sharable if I'm honest, [...] I could have probably suggested, let's just not share the assessment so much as the recommendations, [...] it wouldn't have felt like an invasion of people's rights, because it did feel almost like a human rights issue in terms of like private home and family life. (Social worker interview)

Balancing how much information you share and when you share it is really difficult to get right and I think I've probably always trended towards where there is a safeguarding concern, whether there are any risks to a young person or a vulnerable adult, you overshare and you live with the consequences if somebody says, "Well you shared my sensitive data" because if you overshare, if you trend towards oversharing, you're less likely to find yourself in a situation where you've missed an opportunity to save somebody's life, protect somebody from harm. (Community Safety partner interview)

In the first extract, the social worker took the decision not to share the assessment. This is different to the Community Safety partner who appears to more expansively share 'where there are risks to a young person'.

In the site where practitioners were asked to share information via the police website information sharing was not part of live conversations. When we asked the social worker leading the assessment at this site why social workers were asked to share information in this way, they noted that it was so that they could triage the information and ensure that the sources were credible as they often receive 'intelligence' that is not true. It appeared that information as part of a social work assessment was treated as police 'intelligence' and that the validity of it was defined only in its association with a crime.

## Knowing young people

What would the response of a child protection chair be if they were presented with a child and family assessment where the social worker had never met the family or the child? The elephant in the room of both assessments, but much more in one than the other, is that those leading the assessment had never met the children involved. Having the resources for practitioners to know and build relationships with young people is a fundamental condition to creating approaches that hold their welfare at the centre. Such relationships allow professionals to really know young

people, beyond their perceived criminality, through to what really drives them, worries them and how they experience the world around them. Professionals in one site prioritised getting to know the young people:

She (police officer) had so much care and time for these boys and she'd spent so much time with them and been round and spoke to their parents, and really seemed to understand their hopes and fears and what was difficult for them. (Social worker interview)

Structures and resources were needed to enable professionals to really build trust and subsequently 'know' young people. Factors that allowed for this included time, safe and accessible physical spaces, and willingness from professionals to prioritise young people's needs over what other professionals might think:

Extract 7: When this group feel unsafe, they defer to attending [youth club]. [practitioner] being there isn't the only reason for this – [youth club] is in a good location geographically for this group, it provides some physical comfort and shelter and they get on well with other staff there. (Peer assessment)

In the other site, relationships and the difficulty professionals faced in developing them were at the heart of how well professionals were able to understand young people and the social dynamics at play in their worlds. 'Engagement' from those who were suspected to have been involved in criminality was seen as a central issue with the peer group and their families, not just limited to this peer assessment, but as part of a bigger picture of mistrust between professionals—including police and social care—and families in this community. Aiming to understand the dynamics of the peer group with limited resources and opportunities to build relationships, combined with the perceived resistance of young people to share information about their friends, meant practitioners were left with a peer assessment that was solely informed by information held within professional systems:

It's been really difficult with this group as a whole for a number of reasons really. But the main one being um, I guess, the level in which they are potentially entrenched in, you know, gang culture, criminality exploitation, whatever you kind of want to label that as [...] now they're extremely cautious about services, you know, they don't engage, so we've had to rely on information from, you know, systems and our own knowledge to work out the dynamics of the group. Which you can obviously do, but um, I think it'd be a lot better to get a better understanding of things from, from that young person's point of view. (Focus group)

The implication here is not only that knowing the young people well is crucial to understanding how they navigate their communities (and what might be worrying them, why they might be afraid, etc.), but that this is

only possible with resources and facilities that enable professionals to spend time building relationships and getting to know young people holistically—as was seen in the youth club.

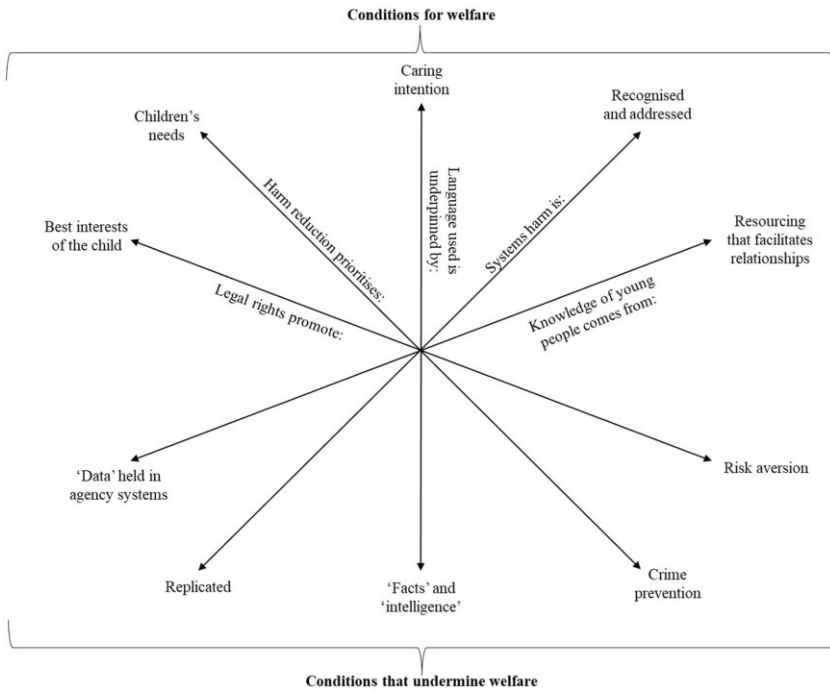
But what do they mean by ‘information’? In the case of one site, relying on information within systems and ‘own knowledge’ meant seeking information from partner agencies, mainly the police:

I would say [information has come from] predominantly police systems, you know, stop checks, stop search, arrests, any associations that are on their systems as well as, you know, our knowledge of that area. (Focus group)

This approach led to building a picture of perceptions from practitioners based on previous work with young people and their families—and police intelligence—including the criminalisation of young people in the community. The language used within this assessment (shown in Extract 3 earlier) reflects the lens through which practitioners are building a picture of extra-familial harm, that is one focused on the disruption of crime and prevention of perceived anti-social or ‘bad’ behaviour. It is arguably a stark comparison to the assessment in the other site (see Extracts 2 and 4) whereby, through their capacity and capability to know young people holistically, the youth club are working with the idea that ‘love’—and the feelings of ‘loyalty, protection, and devotion’ that come along with this are at the heart of why young people might be experiencing violence in their communities.

## Discussion

Changes to England’s statutory safeguarding policy since 2018 mean that when children experience extra-familial harm there is now a requirement for social workers to take a welfare response (HM Government, 2018b). The evidence in this article, from two children and families social care departments in England who tested approaches, shows just how difficult an ask this can be. The findings show that setting out with the intention of providing a ‘welfare’ approach, and having this as a key underpinning element of the Contextual Safeguarding approach, was not enough for this to happen in practice. Whilst social workers and safeguarding professionals found this ‘hard’ to do for several legal, policy, cultural and systemic reasons (listed previously), it appears it was hard to do because very few people could accurately define or describe what a welfare approach means and looks like in practice in these cases. To respond to this gap, we have drawn together the findings to outline specific examples of the conditions for welfare responses and those which may undermine such opportunities (Figure 1). Figure 1 outlines, in greater detail, elements that make up ‘welfare’ approaches. It is our intention that,



**Figure 1:** Conditions that facilitate welfare.

drawing on specific examples from the findings, this can support practitioners by providing tangible examples of the types of practice that can support or undermine welfare in these cases. We turn now to three key points.

First, social work and social workers do not necessarily a welfare response make. Situating responses to CCE and violence within policy and systems ostensibly required to 'promote a child's welfare' (p. 22) do not inherently facilitate welfare approaches. The reasons for this are perhaps, glaringly, obvious. Within the terrain of 'bread and butter' English social work (i.e. intra-familial harm) research repeatedly calls into question the effectiveness of child protection (Bilson *et al.*, 2017). Others have noted that work with families is punitive, policing families along classed and racialised lines (Roberts, 2021). As Parton (1997) notes, the increasing drive towards interventionist social work has meant that elements of the Children Act 1989 concerned with protecting 'at risk' children, and families have been adopted much more readily than those that provide support to families.

This raises the question then of what do we mean by welfare approaches? If we take welfare to mean approaches that uphold a child's

best interests as the basic principle, would the social workers in these assessments target different issues? In one site, for example, many of the families involved were impacted by poverty, a lack of welfare around housing, access to employment and youth provision. Would arrests and police investigations be held so highly if instead the focus was on supporting families with resources? Whilst one assessment was slightly more able to articulate systemic and structural forms of harm, it was limited in its ability to tackle them.

Secondly, crime is not a proxy for harm. The assumption that crime prevention will lead to harm reduction and safeguarding children rests on the assumption that crime (whether it be young peoples' involvement in it, or their exposure to it) is what is causing harm to young people. This means that crime becomes a proxy for harm, and so a focus on harm reduction must by its very nature be centred on disrupting and/or reducing criminal activity. Whilst some of the harm the children in these assessments experienced was the direct result of 'crimes', much of the harm was not considered as such.

Canning and Tombs' (2021) expansion of Social Harm Theory through 'zemiology' is helpful when thinking and framing how we understand harm and criminality. Zemiology considers the paradoxical nature of how harm is understood. For example, not only are many crimes not harmful, and many harms not criminalised, but system responses themselves may be ineffective at reducing risk or even exacerbate or directly cause harm to young people (Wroe, 2022). In the assessments evidenced here, a zemiological analysis could support practitioners to consider the tensions evident in promoting a crime prevention approach. In one site, professionals were so focused upon disrupting potential perpetrators of crime to reduce harm to young people, they appeared limited in seeing how this could negatively impact their safeguarding efforts—for example, reducing the likelihood of children trusting them by potentially criminalising their parents. When central to the approach is the assumption that crime is the root of harm in a community, increased arrests become seen as a necessary, if unfortunate, consequence of 'harm reduction'.

Thirdly, So what? Whilst the findings outlined different approaches in sites to similar issues, they both arrived at a similar point. There is limited evidence to suggest improvement to the welfare of the young people directly involved in these assessments. Whilst practitioners noted that they found the assessment process 'very helpful' in allowing them to understand and come up with a 'hypothesis' about criminal exploitation, this did not appear to translate into tangible benefits for the young people. Whilst the approach in the other site was arguably more rooted in welfare, and facilitated tackling systems harm, practitioners noted the assessment had not changed anything directly for the young people. We are left with the question then of—so what? Is it ethical to draw children's lives into such a high level of sensitive and resource-intensive



scrutiny when the only benefits appear to relate to improving the hypotheses or systems of practitioners? And if Contextual Safeguarding is premised on the idea of providing welfare responses to extra-familial harm, is this even possible in the context of a harmful social care system?

Changes to the policy landscape in England (namely *Working Together*) require social care responses to extra-familial harm. This policy shift may have laid the groundwork for increasing social care oversight of cases of CCE and violence where they previously may not have done so. However, evidence in this article from two sites' efforts to embed a Contextual Safeguarding approach (which holds welfare at its core) to extra-familial harm show just how difficult an ask this is for cases of CCE and violence. It raises further questions about what it means to provide 'welfare' to these children and who (and with what resources) are most suited to the task.

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