How Family Group Conferencing Can Support a Contextual Safeguarding Response to Community-based Youth Harm: Lessons for Practice from a Participatory Study

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Abstract

This article reports on a study that brought Family Group Conferencing (FGC) and Contextual Safeguarding together to create an innovative practice response to extra-familial harm. It took place as part of a wider research project into the implementation of Contextual Safeguarding—an ecological approach to creating safety for young people harmed outside the home. Whilst there is growing understanding in social care of the contextual dynamics of young people's safeguarding needs beyond their homes, many remain unsure about what it means, in practice, for them to create safety in a context. Using data collected via participatory and embedded research methods, this article considers how FGCs were adapted to create responses to youth harm that shifted the focus from 'family' to 'community'; addressed the 'social conditions of harm'; and drew on practitioners' existing FGC skills. It demonstrates conceptual alignment and practice benefits for bringing the two approaches together and argues that drawing on the value-base and skills of FGC coordinators has considerable potential. The article highlights three key elements that are needed to recreate similar responses, namely: organisational mandate/support; conceptual framework aligned to ecological theory; and skills and attributes that include facilitation, working restoratively and with authority in challenging situations.

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Introduction

What helps to create safety when young people are harmed in community settings? This question has gained increasing attention in recent years (Firmin and Lloyd, 2023). 'County lines', child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation are forms of harm beyond family settings, debated in the media and causing consternation for policymakers (Firmin *et al.*, 2022). Despite the lack of overarching guidance on responding to harm outside the home, social care organisations are investing in new posts and partnerships aimed at tackling adolescent risk and harm. Many have turned to Contextual Safeguarding (CS), a framework adopted by over seventy Local Authorities in the UK, to create safety in neighbourhoods, schools and peer groups. Based on ecological principles, CS requires child protection systems to identify and respond to the context where harm occurs.

Central to CS is the assertion that young people facing harm beyond their homes should be protected under welfare policy and legislation (Children Act 1989). CS requires multi-agency partners to identify those best placed to ensure community safety. Underpinned by Bordieuan philosophy (1984), CS focuses on the social conditions that create extra-familial harm (EFH), rather than individual behaviour. Practitioners apply Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1999) to change ecosystems—social, relational, geographical, cultural or institutional—to create safety. However, creating safety in a context represents a significant shift from traditional practice.

Early CS research has supported the sector in conducting contextual assessments, but questions remain about practical interventions that change social conditions. Responding to this, we present here learning from a participatory research study on a practice innovation using the Family Group Conference (FGC) method to deliver a CS response to community-based youth harm. Nested within a larger three-year project exploring CS implications in nine local authorities, this study stands out as the sole example of a practice innovation aimed at creating a new safeguarding response, making it particularly pertinent for social care settings implementing CS.

Approaches to EFH

Safeguarding services are increasingly concerned about safeguarding adolescents beyond their homes, with high-profile cases capturing policy

and public attention. Historically, behaviour-based responses have dominated inerventions in this area, focusing on individuals' thinking, motivation or knowledge (Carey and Foster, 2013; Owens and Lloyd, 2023). However, the contextual naure of EFH creates blurry lines between who is the 'harmer' and who is 'harmed', making it incompatible with responses that require young people to be defined as either 'perpetrators' or 'victims'. This is additionally problematic when categorising runs parallel to ethnic and gender stereotypes, leading to the over-representation of black young men in the criminal justice system, who might otherwise receive a welfare response due to exploitation (Wroe, 2021). The same is true for many minoritised young people labelled 'anti-social' rather than understood to be marginalised and vulnerable to exploitation. Lacking ecological responses, services often act as if individual young people can 'choose' their own safety (Owens and Lloyd, 2023), or hold parents responsible - as exemplified by a Labour Party plan to compel parents of children who commit crimes to attend parenting classes (Evening Standard, 2023). This is despite the well-researched influences of peers in adolescence (Firmin, 2017), the role of adult exploiters and wider cultural and structural factors that contribute to harm (Featherstone and Gupta, 2018).

CS asks practitioners to consider who cares about young people and can create safety for them in a community context. Behaviour is seen as contextual and socially derived, drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) understanding of social fields, habitus and capital to consider the 'rules at play' in a context and their influence on young people. The social rewards young people gain from group assimilation are taken seriously, alongside ecological ideas about peer and community context interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Practitioners are encouraged to work with peer group strengths (Firmin, 2017), shifting the focus from behaviour alteration to contextual dynamics, guided by specific domains and values (detailed in the methodology).

FGCs

FGCs are a voluntary, popular and well-established method for addressing child safeguarding concerns (Frost *et al.*, 2014). Originating in Māori decision-making practices, FGCs harness family wisdom and mitigate disempowerment from state intervention (Merkel-Holguin, 2004). An independent FGC coordinator prepares and gathers a family network for a meeting, which begins with information giving, followed by Private Family Time where the family network creates a plan that will meet their child's needs. Whilst the plan often includes elements resourced by the state, it is owned by the family.

Innovations in FGCs extend beyond family concerns to community-based settings (Jülich *et al.*, 2009) and youth justice, offering restorative alternatives to traditional punishment (Crow and Marsh, 2000). UK 'Victim-Offender' conferences use restorative justice with young people, social services and the community (Schofield *et al.*, 2014). Issues that might relate to EFH, like poor school attendance (Hayden, 2009) or harmful sexual behaviour (Anderson, 2018) feature in FGCs but focus on family networks, unlike the current study's emphasis on changing the broader community context. Globally, an interest in shifting FGCs to address community issues—as seen in Thailand (Roujanavong, 2005), Honolulu (Walker, 2002) and the UK (Anderson, 2018)—has focussed on restorative justice rather than safeguarding. The current study therefore makes a unique contribution to research and practice by using child protection FGCs to enhance youth safety outside the home by changing community contexts.

Whilst CS is a framework for social care systems and FGC is a specific intervention method, there are synergies in their value-base (Owens *et al.*, 2021; Owens, 2022). This article builds on previous theoretical explorations, to present empirical research on adapting the FGC method as a CS framework response to EFH.

Methodology

The study was designed to understand and explore the value of using FGC methods as a CS response. It was part of a larger collaborative research project (2018–2022) with nine local authority children's social care departments, into the implementation of the CS framework (Firmin and Lloyd, 2022; Lloyd *et al.*, 2023; Owens *et al.*, 2024; Wroe and Manister, 2024), The core methodology of the project was for each site to run two, co-created, discreet system or practice innovations, to learn about the possibilities and challenges of implementing the CS framework. This article reports on a study into one such practice innovation, which took place within a large council in the South of England, consisting of rural and urban conurbations between September 2020 and May 2021. It received ethical approval from Durham University whose review process complies with internationally accepted ethical guidelines. Additionally, individual participants provided their consent to participate via an information sheet and consent form.

The CS framework consists of four domains (Firmin, 2020) which require children's social care systems to, in respect of EFH harm:

- target the social conditions of the harm (Domain 1);
- provide a welfare-based response (rather than a criminal justice response) (Domain 2);

- work with partners who have influence in a context (Domain 3); and
- measure outcomes for contexts not only to individual children (Domain 4)

The domains are underpinned by core values (Wroe, 2020), namely: working ecologically; being strengths-based; centring the views and experiences of young people and working in collaboration with them. Implementation of CS into a child safeguarding system happens at two levels. Level 1 is about incorporating contexts into existing individual child and family processes (such as a child and family assessment). Level 2 is about making changes directly to a context for the benefit of multiple young people, which requires innovation and engagement with different methods and partners. Consequently, the first primary research question that the study sought to answer was:

1. Can the FGC method be utilised at Level 2 to address significant harm within a peer group, school or community location and if so, what enables this?

With sub-questions relating to the application of the Contextual Safeguarding framework and adaptation of FGC skills:

   a. Can FGCs shift their focus from the 'family' to the 'community' context?
   b. Does this method enable safeguarding responses to extra-familial harm that target the social conditions of harm?
   c. How are FGC skills utilised and developed in this adaptation for community responses to extra-familial harm?

A second primary question addressed the wider implications of the study:

2. What can we learn about this adaptation of FGCs that could be relevant for wider Contextual Safeguarding implementation?

The study design included embedded research methods (Lewis and Russell, 2011) (detailed further below), guided by the principles of participatory research, which values sharing power, pluralising knowledge and creating change (McIntyre, 2008). As such, the research team (a lead researcher and two others) set up fortnightly collaborative reflective meetings with the site FGC team (consisting of the team manager and ten experienced FGC coordinators). These meetings combined practical discussions about the adaptations needed with an emotionally safe space to share feelings associated with doing this new type of work (Ruch, 2011) in recognition of anxiety-provoking nature of innovation in safeguarding young people facing harm and abuse outside the home (Lefevre *et al.*,

2024). This enabled a supportive learning space for practitioners and researchers to learn iteratively through discussion and by drawing on our different knowledge sources and experiences. The ethos of the approach was to foster trusting relationships between researchers and practitioners, to facilitate reflection, honesty and collaboration (Kong *et al.*, 2023).

Joint reflective meetings and observational data were recorded using an ethnographic fieldnote-taking method to support us in making sense of the data through iterative interpretation (Eriksson *et al.*, 2012). Fieldnotes were collected using a standard table completed after each meeting. These recorded factual information (date, attendees' roles, etc.), a detailed record of the discussion; researcher reflections on how the data related to the overarching aims of the project (learning about the implementation of the CS framework) and a final section that guided a focused consideration of how the data exemplified or illuminated each of the four CS domains. The study followed these four stages.

Stage 1: Collaboration around concept development

Initial scoping within the wider project had surfaced that FGCs were being used to develop voluntary plans for young people affected by EFH (Level 1). The lead researcher partnered with the site's FGC manager to co-develop the concept of applying FGCs to extra-familial contexts at Level 2, using the CS framework. We produced a template to clarify the research aims, time boundaries and data collection methods. These focussed on learning about the implementation, impact, engagement and implications of the practice innovation to adapt the FGC method. Experienced FGC coordinators were recruited via the manager and fortnightly reflective meetings were established.

Stage 2: Planning and developing the practice method

The collaboration (FGC team and researchers) co-developed a referral pathway, criteria and scoped out the broad stages of the contextual FGCs. We co-developed new support documentation such as referral forms, surveys (for young people, parents, businesses and residents). Given how new and different this work was from the traditional FGC approach, we agreed that each contextual FGC would be co-worked by two practitioners. The study aimed to achieve four FGCs.

Stage 3: The FGCs

To generate referrals the FGC manager attended a local multi-agency EFH meeting, where contexts of concern were routinely discussed. She

supported agencies to identify contexts where (1) a number of young people were facing harm and (2) where the multi-agency partnership agreed that a coordinated approach to producing a community-based safeguarding plan could help to bring about safety for the young people who spend time there.

Contexts of concern were allocated to two coordinators and brought to the reflective meetings. Coordinators then set about scoping the case to find and engage people who had a stake in, and some influence over, the community context. They talked to young people, parents, professionals, residents and business owners, to understand the social conditions of harm for young people. They used observations, flyers, surveys, informal discussions and attended local meetings.

Next, coordinators 'weighed' the information, utilising 'Context Weighting' (Contextual Safeguarding, 2022), a method to help analyse what is most contributing to the harm and therefore, should be targeted to change. This helped to hone the focus for the FGCs that followed. Due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) restrictions, FGCs (and subsequent research data collection) were held online.

Six FGC took place during the study. Two FGCs addressed concerns about harm within a peer group (FGCs 1 and 4); two addressed harm within a specific extra-familial location (FGC 3 and 5); and two were aimed at wider community factors that combined location and peer-group concerns (FGC 2 and FGC 6). They were attended by professionals, residents and business owners, with young people represented via youth workers who were linked to the initial referral issue. The concerns that each FGC addressed and the roles of attendees are contained in Table 1.

Following the pilot, we held semi-structured interviews and focus groups with participants. These focussed on establishing what had happened, the challenges and opportunities and the implications for the development of a CS system. Alongside this, the research team also gathered documentation produced or provided by the FGC practitioners, including self-evaluation reflections and feedback questionnaires by attendees, as detailed in Table 2.

Stage 4: Analysis

The research team met on four occasions for group analysis. Each researcher was allocated data to analyse, and we then joined together to share reflections on our collective learning. Our analysis framework was structured on the CS domains and values (Wroe, 2020)—the headings of which can be seen in Table 3.

Each researcher manually coded each piece of data by completing a shared table. We read through the data with each of the domains and values in mind, looking for examples of whether this showed that the

Table 1. Concerns and roles of FGC attendees.

FGC1	Peer group of young people from a minoritised ethnic group at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation in town park	Meeting 1 FGC coordinators × 2 Resident and buisness oweners × 4 Neighbourhood watch × 1 Youthwork × 2 Police × 3 Community Safety × 2 Family members × 1 Town council director × 1 Meeting 2 FGC coordinators × 2 School A × 1 School B × 1 Educational psychology student Early Help × 2 Local Authority Education provider × 2
FGC2	Two boys subject to 'county lines' drug trafficking. One of the young people moved away, which cut the work short	Partners engaged in scoping: Social worker × 2 Early help × 2 Parent × 1 Youth Justice service × 1
FGC3	Historic concerns by business owners and residents about the behaviour of young people in a town centre	FGC coordinators × 2 Early Help worker × 1 Community Safety × 1 Rough sleeper worker × 1 Police × 1 Resident × 1
FGC4	A group of young people in a street—worries from the community about their safety and behaviour	FGC coordinators × 2 Local business × 2 Pupil referral unit × 1 Youth Voluntary sector × 1 Church representative × 1 Resident × 2
FGC5	A group of young people causing problems for adults in a suburban village and concerns about community cohesion	FGC coordinators × 2 Early Help worker × 1 Police × 1 School A representative × 1 School B representative × 1 Violence Reduction Unit × 1 Youth boxing organisation × 1 Youth Voluntary Sector × 1 Council officer × 1 (sent information only) Community cycle organisation × 1 (sent information only)
FGC6	Concerns about clashes between British young people and those from a minoritised ethnic group of young people in a town	FGC coordinators × 2 Resident × 1 Social worker × 1 Police × 2 Fire brigade × 1 Early Help × 1 Parenting support Voluntary Sector × 1 Drug agency × 1 School × 1

Table 2. Study data.

Data type	Details	Data set
Documentary review of self-evaluation	The ten FGC coordinators created a table for their learning and self-reflection, which they sent to the research team. The table headings were: initial anxieties; tools used; gathering people; barriers and solutions; comparison with traditional FGC meetings; perceived impact; next steps; participant feedback.	$n = 10$
Documentary review of FGC plans	At each FGC meeting, a plan was co-produced with attendees to address referral concerns. FGC coordinators facilitated this using a Signs of Safety template with headings: 'What are we worried about,' 'What's working well,' and 'What needs to happen.'	$n = 6$
Embedded research meeting fieldnotes	These were fortnightly reflective meetings with the ten FGC coordinators and team manager, where the study concept was co-developed with the research team and practicalities and methodological issues were discussed.	$n = 25$
Documentary review of feedback from participants	FGC coordinators collected participant feedback using a standard questionnaire. It asked about participants' preparedness, conference experience and post-conference reflections on the plan's impact. Questionnaires were completed by: Social worker Resident Landlord Early Help worker Voluntary Sector youth representative	$n = 5$
Interviews with FGC coordinators	Interview with a coordinator who had worked on FGC 2 and FGC 6	$n = 1$
Focus groups with coordinators	Focus group 1: three coordinators discussing FGCs 1, 2 and 4. Focus group 2: two coordinators discussing FGCs 3 and 5.	$n = 2$
Interviews with other involved professionals	Interviews were with the following professionals who had participated in FGCs: • Open Access Youth Manager • Youth worker who made a referral	$n = 2$

Table 3. Analysis template.

Data source	Description (what they did)	Domains	Values	What were the enablers and barriers?	What are the questions it raises?

system was able, for example, to target the social conditions of harm (Domain 1) or whether for specific evidence of, say ecological practice. We completed the table by writing in our analysis and pulling through exemplar quotations and used this to support the local site in the

development of their CS system. For this article, a secondary analysis then took place around the question of the broader practice application of this study for innovation in ecological approaches to extra-familial harm. Working with the original table, we reviewed the data for themes around the key adaptations that supported this practice innovation's success relevant to a wider social care audience. This led to the three headings presented in the findings, namely (1) what it means to shift from family to community, (2) what it means to address the social conditions of harm and (3) the skills required to do such adaptation.

Limitations

The study is limited by being unable to directly quote the voices of young people who were the focus of these FGCs. The main factor in this was coordinators being anxious about exposing young people to the unfiltered opinions of adults coming to the FGCs. COVID-19 restrictions were also a factor here, as well as a lack of prior relationship between the coordinators and the young people. Instead, the coordinators asked trusted adults to engage with the young people and shared their voices in the meetings that way. Additionally, despite sincere attempts to do so, we were unable to gather data directly from community members involved in FGCs, although some sent feedback questionnaires which were included. These factors led us to focus the article on coordinators' experiences and on what enabled their adaptation of practice. We were also limited by COVID-19 in collecting in-person data. Future testing of this method will prioritise addressing these limitations to diversify the voices and viewpoints on the adaptation of this method. Finally, as a small-scale study taking place in one site, the study does not provide statistical validity which translates into generalisable findings. Rather, our qualitative methodology explores the conceptual generalisability (Yin, 2009) of using FGCs for a Contextual Safeguarding response and as such provides a good platform for further testing.

Findings

To begin with we present the findings according to the three subquestions, before responding to the overarching primary questions in the discussion section.

From family to community

The mood in the FGC team was open and excited when we first discussed shifting from a family to a community focus—but there was also

considerable trepidation. Soon, however, they developed a language for what this meant for them. One coordinator talked about how it was about being 'focused on the area and making it better for everyone' (FGC1). Another is that they 'love the fact we're looking at the pull factors alongside the push factors' (FGC 3). Others spoke about how the work tried to tackle the root cause of the issue, in a way that was not possible in traditional work. This sentiment, and their positivity about it, is reflected in the following extracts of coordinators discussing their work:

> By the time [coordinator partner] and I picked it up, the immediate concerns of those young people .... they'd all moved on ... But the consensus was that void is going to be filled by another group of young people because that's what's been going on since forever, that happens. (Focus Group, FGC coordinator, FGC3)

> I love it. I do, I love it. ... I love the concept of community-based work. I love the concept of kind of bringing every possible person involved together. (Interview, FGC coordinator, FGC6)

The coordinators were also persuaded that they needed to shift to a community focus due to the nature of the harm faced by young people. This ranged from issues of 'anti-social behaviour' to overt exploitation and harm linked to racism, as discussed by a youth worker in the following extract:

> Now there have been some huge issues and clashes between the cultures that have led to young people really being harmed physically, and we had nine to eleven year-old young people carrying knives, walking around with knives and threatening people, and holding them for protection. There was a couple of young people really hurt. (Interview, FGC coordinator, FGC6)

Despite the coordinators' enthusiasm, it was challenging and anxiety-provoking work. The many unknowns were heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Coordinators described needing the courage to work and think differently—to 'actually challenge ourselves to come at it from a completely different angle' (FGC2). Regular reflective meetings were important for the learning process, helping both researchers and coordinators to feel our way together. Looking back the FGC manager described their mix of emotions having led her team through this shift:

> Thinking about this journey, when we started we didn't know what this would look like and it felt really big, but I feel like we're starting to see through that cloud now—it's starting to emerge and how it's going to formulate itself .... (Interview, FGC manager)

How the traditional FGC method would translate to context-based work raised many questions. Should young people be at the meetings? If so, which ones? What/who is the 'network'? What/who are 'the community'? Within traditional FGCs, power is shifted from professionals to families—what happens if participants are adults and families are not the focus? At each point there were new discoveries, including, the need to work with political power:

> If you're a district councillor you want to win votes and if winning votes means that there's no young people on the street then that's the agenda, isn't it? That's the challenge. (Interview, Youth Work Manager, FGC1)

Although the study did not resolve all our questions, ways to define the parameters of engagement emerged. In FGC4, the coordinators considered the geographical boundary of a context by plotting 'on a map where the young people lived and where the incidents with the police were taking place'. Parameter setting was also aided by Context Weighting (referenced above) which helped coordinators feel less overwhelmed and 'pinpoint.what our priorities are ... what our actions are and ... what we need to go and do'. (FGC4). This led them to have in-depth discussions about the social conditions causing harm—which we turn to next.

Changing the social conditions

The second sub-question related to whether FGCs could identify and address the social conditions of harm. With the same openness that they showed when shifting from family to community-focussed work, the coordinators entered earnestly into discussions with us about the dominant rules at play impacting the safety of young people. This led to the somewhat confronting realisation that a prevalent social condition undermining the safety of young people was the negative attitudes of adults towards them.

In FGC1, young people were being blamed ubiquitously for anti-social behaviour by people living around the park. Alongside this, the young people—who were from the same minoritised ethnic background—were largely absent from school (due to very low-hour timetables):

> I became very aware quite quickly that a lot of those young people weren't getting the education they deserved and that school didn't really understand that the school was a safeguarding factor for those young people. It was more about these young people are a challenge in our school so let's try and kick them out of it. (Interview, Youth Work Manager, FGC1)

Two contexts emerged in FGC1, requiring two FGCs but with a shared target: the attitudes of adults towards a group of young people. In the park, the focus was on getting people to 'see these young people through a positive lens' so that they would 'accept/know about how teenagers and young people behave' (FGC1). The youth worker manager explained that they wanted to create an environment which sent a strong message to the drug dealers exploiting young people that they were not wanted. This would happen if adults saw young people not as a threat, but as people, who (completely legitimately) wanted to spend time with their friends in safety. In the community meeting, they focussed on:

> What can we do to get residents, businesses, to understand that these young people have got some vulnerabilities and that there are risks if people aren't looking out. (Interview, Youth Work Manager, FGC1)

At the school meeting, the focus was on the underlying racism of professionals as a barrier to young people engaging with school. The coordinators held two meetings, and the following emerged:

> It was really quite brave, I think, because the education providers looked at things like their unconscious bias which was really interesting about the racial issues in school and how these younger people felt. (Focus Group, FGC coordinators, FGC1)

The coordinators' careful preparation and restorative approach made it possible for people in both meetings to talk in a non-defensive way about their need to change their attitudes towards young people. They then participated in producing plans to address these—which included taking part in cultural competency training (school) and inviting young people to be part of an art project (community). Overall, there was a sense of adults connecting with a sense of care and respectful guardianship towards the young people in their contexts.

Another social condition targeted by the FGCs was a lack of opportunities for young people to be young people—to have fun and safely socialising together. Many of the FGCs found:

> [Named local authority] aren't offering anything. What's overriding with all of these young people is there is nothing for them to do. (Interview, FGC coordinators, FGC4)

They realised that bored young people were vulnerable to exploitation. Having nothing to do and nowhere to go also created a feeling amongst young people that adults did not care about them, making it hard to foster good relationships between them. The coordinators identified a vicious cycle whereby young people were blamed for 'anti-social behaviour', leading to their disenfranchisement. Feeling forgotten-about and stereotyped, (understandably) angry young people would be more likely to join in with damaging an already uncared-for environment, thus attracting more blame and alienation.

Consequently, several FGCs focussed on building a shared commitment by those involved to improving the environment and opportunities for young people, as discussed here by a coordinator:

> So we've got a local football club … they're going to start coming across … They're just going to set up in the local green and they'll do bits and pieces around football for the young people, although they're on the streets, to try and engage them in other things.
>
> I've been to [hardware shops] in the local area, saying, "How about would you be prepared to give us five to 10 sheets of boarding a month?" So we can do this work and stop the young people graffitiing on all of the housing that's around the area, and maybe we can have a specific area. And then once a month, the boards could be hung up in the local town, down the high street, and kind of people seeing the artwork. (Interview, FGC coordinator, FGC6)

Having done this preparation, the FGC meeting that followed was used to confirm the collective plan and agree with community oversight. The coordinators were genuinely surprised by how willingly people got involved and regretted not inviting them to attend (which had come from worries about young people being further blamed by adults):

> The residents and business owners that came wanted to make a difference. They wanted to understand these young people. They weren't blaming these young people. They knew the kids were bored and had fewer opportunities and it was really quite a positive experience. (Focus Group, FGC coordinator, FGC4)

Sometimes generating positive outcomes was not this easy, however. One coordinator, when comparing two FGCs, reflected on the impact of geographical and historical factors saying that in one place they only needed to 'sprinkle a few things and everyone's like "Yeah!"' (FGC5) whilst in other, poorer and more historically neglected neighbourhood, it was much harder to get people to participate in changing the context. Either way, finding the right people to attend and facilitating meetings took considerable relational and organisational effort by the coordinators—in the words of one, it was a 'mountain of work' (FGC4). This was reflected in the decision for coordinators to work in pairs, which was one of the most distinctive methodological differences between the context conferences and traditional FGCs. There were, however, many similarities, not least in how coordinators drew on the skills they had developed through traditional FGCs. We conclude the findings with an exploration of these.

FGC skills

Which skills and attributes did the coordinators draw on to make their practice innovation a success? This was the focus of the third

sub-question. Firstly, they drew on their positionality as neutral and in-dependent and used this to exercise diplomacy. In one FGC, a historical impasse between education and social care had led to a breakdown in their relationships and was preventing young people from receiving the services they needed. Being independent of social care enabled the coor-dinators to take a conduit position, and facilitate the repair of this relationship:

> The education providers were able to see things from everybody's perspective and that they weren't being scapegoated. The dynamics changed on the day, which was really, really good. [Coordinator] and I had to work really hard to get to that point. (Focus Group, FGC coordinators, FGC1)

Maintaining neutrality, however, did sometimes prove challenging. In the following extract, a coordinator discusses their feelings about sug-gesting to a community group that they could change their name from the 'Anti-Social Behaviour' meeting to something more positive:

> What we were thinking is if you changed the name, you might capture a different audience really. [My colleague] kept me in check there. It's not for us to go around renaming other people's meetings. (Focus Group, FGC coordinators, FGC1)

In fact, the group did change their name, of their own accord. The study highlighted the importance of holding this neutral position, so that, as with a traditional FGC, the plan could be generated by those impli-cated within it. The coordinators were then able to give the responsibil-ity for maintaining the plan back to the 'network', asking them to monitor and make adjustments as necessary.

Another important skill transferred from traditional FGCs was the coordinators' ability to offer constructive challenges. This is discussed in the first extract below, whilst in the second, a coordinator reflects on the challenges of doing this within the new iteration of context conferences, where this is more likely to involve professionals than family members:

> We would always try and—for want of a better word, I don't like the word "educate" that person. But we would, in our role, if we had a grandparent really anti-social worker, anti-social services, anti-this, anti-that, we would try and work with them to find out why: "Why have you got that opinion? What does that look like for you? What caused that? What can we do to make that different?" Using our restorative and solution-focused training that we had, use all of those skills to break that down. (Interview, FGC coordinator, FGC2)

> I just think it's harder to do that professional to professional ... I think it's harder to challenge a professional than it is to challenge a family member. Especially someone that's a lot elder, a real public spokesman, it's really hard. (Interview, FGC coordinator, FGC6)

This practice adaptation of FGCs involved coordinators working with a completely new set of professionals. Disgruntled and fearful residents; law enforcement/crime prevention officers; and politically motivated politicians—all of whom thought that increasing the criminal surveillance of young people was the answer—were part of the 'network'. Whilst the coordinators sought to treat them as they would recalcitrant family members in a traditional FGC, advocating for the rights and safety of young people in a way that was restorative and strengths-based, this was often difficult, as discussed in this fieldnote extract:

> The young people want to feel safe in their local environment and have somewhere safe/dry/well lit to hang out, however coordinators are seeming to grapple with the role that community safety/police and residents play with this, ensuring it does stay welfare based and not about crime. (Research fieldnote, FGC1)

Primarily, however, the coordinators, kept meetings focussed on the 'here and now and going forward' (FGC1), and found robust ways of challenging or diverting the discussions away from negativity about young people.

Discussion

FGCs and CS share many common values, including a commitment to collaboration; being restorative and strengths-based; seeing safeguarding as 'everybody's business'; and having an ecological understanding of children's lives within a wider network/context (Owens *et al.*, 2021). Despite this, practitioners nevertheless felt intrepid, especially during a pandemic, to embark on this work. Over Microsoft Teams, researchers and practitioners grappled with big questions. Who should come to the meetings? Whose job is it to change politicians' minds about young people? How to include 'Private Family Time'?

Whilst many of these questions remain live, the study provides important practice and conceptual learning, which can be the subject of further testing and development. Returning to the overarching research question, the results provide foundational evidence that contextual FGCs *can* support an ecological and community-based response to extra-familial harm at Level 2. Initially anxious, coordinators were transformed into absolute enthusiasts. Within the wider study's aims, this innovation aligned closely with CS domains and values (Owens *et al.*, 2021) providing a rare example of a social care practice that changes the social conditions of harm. It shows the potential for community collaboration to address issues affecting youth and confirms FGCs as a viable CS approach, with elements applicable to broader social work practice.

What enabled the successful adaptation of FGCs for contextual?

Returning to the second clause of the first question—we can ask, what made this successful adaptation possible? The shift was facilitated by an ongoing discursive and reflective process within a culture of openness and support. In one meeting, for example, two coordinators were uncertain about how to proceed, due to having been unable to engage young people directly. Through discussion with the CS research lead, they realised that whilst young people's views and rights should be central, their safety need not depend on them forming new relationships with the coordinators and that the onus should be on the actions of other responsible adults. This was a 'penny drop' moment which led to them partnering with a trusted youth worker to include young people, while they facilitated work with adults. Thinking about the community as they would a family within a traditional FGC, with collective responsibility for creating a safe environment, was crucial in clarifying the coordinators' purpose, role and mandate.

After shifting from family to community focus, the coordinators effectively addressed social conditions of harm, which is particularly challenging due to the dominance of behaviour-based ways of framing social problems within human services in the UK (Owens and Lloyd, 2023). This success was enabled by the FGC method's ecological framework. In FGCs, the emphasis is on the entire network providing shared support to create a safer context for at-risk children, rather than focusing solely on parental behaviour. Coordinators, trained to view problems and solutions as socially derived rather than based on parental motivation or capacity (Featherstone and Gupta, 2018), used this ecological perspective to address issues like professional racism and interagency breakdowns. For example, when young people were blamed for anti-social behaviour, instead of increasing CCTV surveillance, coordinators encouraged the community to offer fun and engaging activities, fostering a caring response. Their ecological grounding allowed them to identify and act on harmful social conditions, believing this approach was both ethical and effective for child safety.

The findings highlight the coordinators' skills in neutrality, diplomacy and conducting restorative conversations that challenged professionals' attitudes and actions towards young people. This proved harder than in traditional work, revealing the often invisible use of power by professionals and the value of restorative challenges. Coordinators' were supported by their strong commitment to welfare-led, caring responses, which gave them the ability to remain neutral and diplomatic. As a research team, we reflected on the courage needed to address racist attitudes or engage adults in community meetings about young people. The apparent simplicity of facilitating meetings should not be underestimated. Their experience with strong emotions helped them overcome trepidation, working non-directively alongside communities and serving as conduits for positive change.
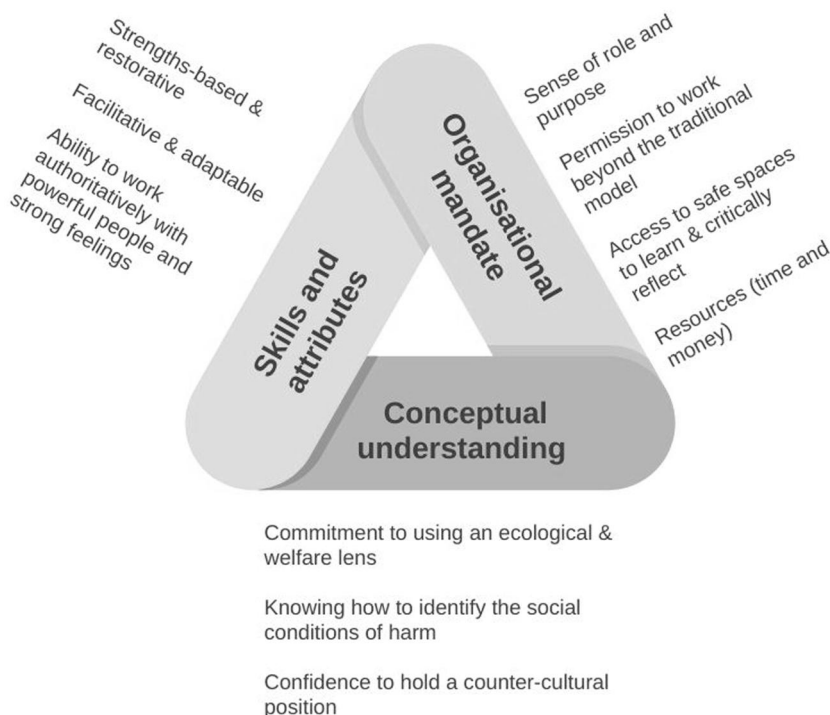
Figure 1. What practitioners need to deliver contextual responses.

Implications for wider contextual safeguarding practice

Finally, the second research question centres on what we can learn about the adaptation of FGCs for wider Contextual Safeguarding practice. What would practitioners need, if were to develop contextual responses that replicate the spirit of this study? Synthesising the findings, we suggest that they need three things: an organisational mandate; a conceptual understanding; and certain skills and attributes (Figure 1):

Organisational mandate

Practitioners need a sense of role and purpose within their wider organisational context. They need space to work iteratively, to learn, reflect and adapt their practice. This requires time and patience. In the study, a manager who provided this was crucial in anchoring the team and securing local funding for the work. Likewise, practitioners need local organisational permission to do work that looks and feels different, which is valued. In short, practitioners need an organisational context that values community and context-based work and is prepared to resource this.

Conceptual understanding

Practitioners need a theoretical framework that frames harm as socially and contextually derived. Given the ubiquitous nature of behaviour-based approaches in social care (Owens and Lloyd, 2023) this is a considerable challenge. Social workers cannot deliver alignment with CS without a grounding in ecological theory. This means viewing and responding to social problems in a way that is counter to most human services. Understandably, achieving such a conceptual shift requires significant time and support.

Skills and attributes

Practitioners need to be grounded in children's rights and to be able to facilitate social change in community contexts. To do this, they need a strengths-based stance alongside having the authority to work with professional power. This work involves engaging a wide variety of people in discussions about what young people need and having the confidence to take up a conduit role and to work with strong feelings. This requires considerable flexibility and adaptability. These skills and attributes are compatible with social work; however, they cannot be harnessed for contextual work without the organisational mandate and conceptual understanding—as shown in Figure 1.

Conclusion

Contextual Safeguarding is an ecological and rights-based framework, increasingly used to address extra-familial harm. FGCs are a popular method for challenging Eurocentric practices that punish, blame and individualise harm. However, both can be misused to marginalise communities already structurally minoritised, for example by criminalising young people (Cunneen, 1997; Lloyd *et al.*, 2023). In conclusion, we suggest that the combined effect of these two approaches could strengthen our ability to resist the pull towards individualised, punitive outcomes. Using FGC principles and Contextual Safeguarding together could help us replace adult-centric ways of interpreting the world with practice that is characterised by care, compassion and respect for 'problem' young people on our streets, in our parks and in our towns. The article offers a pathway for contextual youth-centred safeguarding practice that is fundamentally ecological in its conceptualisation and application.

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