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From 'risky choices' to 'risky contexts'? The state of play of UK child welfare responses to adolescent 'extra-familial harm'. National and international implications

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Abstract

In the UK, professional responses to abuse adolescents experience beyond their families have undergone transformation in the past 30 years. We present data from 40 local authorities in England, Wales, and Scotland to assess the 'state of play' of child protection responses to significant harm adolescents experience beyond their families, commonly referred to in UK child protection guidance as 'extra-familial harm'. Data were collected via a two-year multistrand mixed-methods research project between 2022 and 2024. The aim was to explore whether child protection systems in England, Wales, and Scotland are addressing the legal, contextual, and structural shortfalls of responses to extra-familial harm in adolescence. Data were analysed against the four domains of the Contextual Safeguarding framework; used here as an analytical tool for considering the extent to which child protection agencies and their partners are currently using child welfare legislation to address adolescent extra-familial harm. Findings indicate the social care sector has further to go to enact a child welfare

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response that enables the provision of support and not merely the imposition of statutory frameworks to young people's lives.

Keywords: adolescence; children's social care; contextual safeguarding; exploitation; extra-familial harm; peer-on-peer harm.

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Introduction

We present data from 40 local authorities in England, Wales, and Scotland, assessing the 'state of play' of child welfare responses to significant harm adolescents experience beyond their families, commonly known in the UK as 'extra-familial harm' (EFH). Across the UK, since 2018 (and increasingly in 2023), the English government (and later the devolved nations of Wales and Scotland), made EFH the responsibility of social workers in local government child welfare agencies (with other safeguarding partners, see HM Government 2023; Scottish Government 2021; Welsh Government 2021). The term 'extra-familial harm' is distinctly UK-centric, including harms like child sexual and criminal exploitation, trafficking, and 'serious youth violence'. They are defined as 'extra' familial in contrast to 'intra' familial (neglect and familial abuse that UK social work practice has traditionally focused on). Including these forms of harm in the responsibilities of child welfare agencies appears unique to the UK.

Internationally, young people experience interpersonal violence in their communities (Pinheiro 2006; Longobardi, Fabris, and Badenes-Ribera 2019; UN 2023). These harms play out differently internationally, however, a minority of young people internationally experience significant sexual abuse, physical violence, and psychological harm from peers and adults in their communities, and the drivers of this violence need to be addressed. Concurrently, communities are raising awareness of harm caused by polices and systems intended to reduce harm, including police (DeVylder et al., 2022), social care (Midgley 2011; Hyslop 2017), and schools (Parsons 2005; Gazeley 2010). There are international variations in how harm between and affecting young people is understood, and who is responsible for addressing it. In some European countries, responsibility for harm like child sexual exploitation and trafficking lies with Non-Governmental Organizations (e.g. Germany, Austria, and many Eastern European countries). Elsewhere, responses are led by youth-welfare services (e.g. Greece, Cyprus) or specialized services (e.g. The Netherland and Sweden) (Gregulska et al., 2020; Peace 2023). We explore how child welfare agencies, and their safeguarding partners, are responding to EFH, considering the implications for the global

response to significant violence experienced by young people beyond their families.

Background: UK case study

In the UK, professional responses to abuse young people can face beyond their families have undergone transformation in the past 30 years. In 1994, the British children's charity Barnardo's established the first programme to work with young people who were sexually exploited by adults outside their families, referring to these young people as 'child prostitutes' (IICSA 2022). It was not until 2009 that the Department for Education (DfE) in England published the first definition of 'child sexual exploitation' (CSE), recognizing that when children exchange sex with adults they are being exploited and abused (IICSA 2022).

Two years after the 2009 DfE guidance, a review of Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) (Jago et al., 2011) identified significant limitations in the CSE response from children's social care and statutory partners. In 2014, inquiries into CSE in two northern English towns echoed these concerns (Coffey 2014; Jay 2014), revealing significant failures to protect young people from exploitation by adults beyond their families. They found young people were not listened to by social care and police; that abuse was seen as a 'lifestyle' choice; and organizations with a responsibility for young people's safety routinely failed to protect them.

Scholars, stakeholders, and survivors highlighted the importance of contextualizing these harms. Beckett's 'Interconnected Conditions for CSE' (Beckett 2011) flagged that whilst professionals need to identify and support vulnerable young people, this does not suffice if perpetrators and inadequate supportive structures are unaddressed. Melrose and Pearce (2013) warned about a foreshortened understanding of CSE that reduced it to innocent victims and predatory men. They argued that significant contextual factors—poverty, class, etc.—provide context to the exchange of sex for resources, and while child-level support (i.e. therapeutic support, care placements) can go so far, they must run alongside interventions that address the social conditions of harm—like the presence of abusers, young people's economic status, or depleted environments where young people have nowhere to go to seek help.

By 2021 government safeguarding guidance in England, Wales, and Scotland included reference to 'extra-familial harm', defined in statutory guidance for England as: 'exploitation by criminal and organised crime groups and individuals (such as county lines and financial exploitation), serious violence, modern slavery and trafficking, online harm, sexual exploitation, teenage relationship abuse, and the influences of extremism which could lead to radicalisation' (HM Government 2023: 67; see also

Scottish Government 2021; Welsh Government 2021). This required social care agencies and partners to coordinate plans to tackle harm in relationships and spaces beyond the family—a significant shift for child protection systems in the UK (and internationally) that focus on parenting capacity and safety/risk in the family home/unit. Welsh government policy notes traditional safeguarding responses have been limited to 'managing risks associated with the child' (Welsh Government 2021: 45) highlighting the importance of parental support as well as friend, school, and neighbourhood contexts in addressing EFH, noting that children experiencing harm in these contexts should be safeguarded. Scottish guidance similarly notes the significance of 'extra-familial' factors including family, peer, school, and neighbourhood contexts and the role for partnerships and interventions to address the 'social conditions' and environmental factors driving EFH (Scottish Government 2021: 80–81). The policy guidance, and accompanying scholarly literature cited above, signal the need for child welfare agencies to respond to EFH by considering contexts and conditions beyond the child and family.

The UK is unique in its inclusion of EFH into child protection frameworks as a matter for social workers in local government authorities (Shawar, Truong, and Shiffman 2022). But the inclusion of EFH in traditionally family-focused child protection systems is not straightforward. In 2024, the Jay Review into Child Criminal Exploitation (Action for Children 2024) continued to flag concerns about the UK child welfare response to EFH: a lack of coherent and cohesive practice, where young people are treated as criminals not victims; a lack of protective structures due to chronic underfunding; and flagging the importance of safety building in extra-familial locations and the need for the co-ordination of multi-agency partnerships in these responses. Concerns have also been raised about the discriminatory impacts of child protection and wider child welfare systems on Black and racially minoritized children (Ofsted 2023; Koch, Williams, and Wroe 2024; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel 2025); boys and young men (IICSA 2022; Ofsted 2023) and children with special educational needs (Franklin et al., 2024); who in different ways have been under-protected by welfare systems, and sometimes been hyper-visible by criminal justice systems (Ofsted 2023). This literature points to the continued legal, contextual and structural shortfalls of child welfare responses to extra-familial harm in which various biases are reinforced or exacerbated within services intended to protect.

'Contextual Safeguarding' (Firmin 2017) is one framework supporting the sector to respond to EFH, recognizing when young people experience abuse in 'extra-familial' relationships and spaces, responses must target and build safety in *those* relationships and spaces. Contextual Safeguarding considers how extra-familial contexts inform young people's vulnerability and safety and is cited in national policy and local government practice frameworks in England, Wales, and Scotland (HM

Government 2018; Scottish Government 2021; Welsh Government 2021). This article presents an approximation of the state of play of child welfare responses to adolescent EFH using the Contextual Safeguarding framework as an analytic tool. We review responses to EFH across 40 local government authorities in England, Wales, and Scotland between 2022 and 2024 making practice and policy recommendations for UK and international stakeholders.

Method

This study is concerned with child welfare responses to harms defined as 'extra-familial' in policy guidance for England, Wales, and Scotland. 'Child welfare' and 'child safeguarding' responses refer to the definition used across child safeguarding policy in the three nations that describes policy and practice that 'safeguards and promotes the welfare of children' (Scottish Government 2021; Welsh Government 2021; HM Government 2023). This article presents one way of approximating the 'state of play' of responses to EFH by drawing on a large body of qualitative data collected across four distinct embedded research studies across England, Wales, and Scotland exploring local practice responses to EFH. We present findings from a two-year multistrand project (2022–2024) exploring the extent to which child protection systems in England, Wales, and Scotland address the legal, contextual, and structural shortfalls of responses to EFH discussed above:

- Strand A (Firmin 2024): Tested a 'risk outside the home' (ROTH) alternative child protection pathway for significant harm beyond the family in three English sites for young people experiencing risk of significant EFH and where there were no parenting concerns.
- Strand B (Wroe 2024): Co-designed a missing response for children in care at risk of EFH in one English site, addressing inequalities in service responses.
- Strand C (Lloyd 2024): Surveyed 17 sites in England and Wales to understand the education experiences of young people impacted by EFH.
- Strand D (Owens 2024): Engaged over 60 social care professionals to understand challenges and opportunities of working in new ways to address EFH.

Each strand was allocated a senior researcher to act as a research lead, overseeing and delivering stand-specific outcomes, these researchers provided collective oversight for the project.

The mixed-methods approach drew on a range of consultation, participation, and creative methods alongside traditional qualitative and quantitative methods including interviews, focus groups, and a survey (methodologies for each strand are published elsewhere, Firmin 2024; Lloyd 2024; Owens 2024; Wroe 2024). Each strand engaged with a specific set of questions related to social care responses to EFH and used different methods to do so. Rather than comparing these findings, the article presents themes that link the findings from each strand. This was achieved through a meta-appraisal of the large dataset (Table 1). Table 1 outlines the methods and data collected for each strand.

One hundred forty-six participants were engaged, including seven young people and nine parents/carers. The remaining 130 participants were professionals: education ($n = 11$), police ($n = 3$), social care ($n = 97$), voluntary and community sector ($n = 7$), youth justice ($n = 2$), youth work ($n = 4$), and other agencies ($n = 6$).

The project engaged 40 local authorities across England, Wales, and Scotland (referred to as 'sites'), all responding to EFH. Most strands primarily engaged the local authorities via children's social care (see Table 2). Sites' approaches to EFH varied: some had specifically developed a whole system change response in children's social care, others were new to addressing these issues.

Sites included:

- 31 sites across these regions of England:
  - Three South
  - Five Midlands
  - Nine London
  - Six North East
  - Four West
  - Two North
  - Two East
  - Six Scottish sites
  - Three Welsh sites

Sites varied in geographical location, population, and size with a mix of urban and rural areas. Six of the 40 sites had previously collaborated with the Contextual Safeguarding Research Programme.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval was granted by Durham University ethics committee which covered the four strands and all participating sites. Participant consent was gained separately by research leads during the recruitment process. In each case individuals were provided with written and verbal

Table 1. Research methods by research strand.

Methods and description	Strand A	Strand B	Strand C	Strand D	Total
Interviews: professionals, young people, parents and carers	12	6	10		28
Collaboration and consultation on processes and responses		13		30	43
Focus groups	12		3		15
Visual data—collages created with professionals				122	122
Observations of child protection meetings	10				10
Document review of policies and guidance	40	3			43
Case files for young people	35				35
Surveys on cases of young people			17		17
Digital diary entries of social work professionals				29	29
Research workshops—structured activities with professionals				4	

Table 2. Sites and participants via geographical location.

	Strand A	Strand B	Strand C	Strand D
Wales			2 social workers 3 education/ teaching staff	7 social workers
England	3 young people 8 parents/carers 23 social workers 2 youth justice workers 1 school nurse 3 education professionals 1 housing officer 2 voluntary and community sector workers 1 youth worker 1 community safety officer	4 young people 5 youth workers 1 foster carer 2 social workers 2 police/youth justice workers	22 social workers 7 teaching/education staff 1 youth worker 3 voluntary and community sector workers	44 social workers 3 youth workers 1 youth justice worker
Scotland				10 social workers

information about the research, its aim and the voluntary nature of involvement. All participants who took part in the research were given the chance to ask questions and chose to take part. Young people, families, and carers were financially remunerated for their involvement in strands A and B.

Where research involved active participation by sites to change processes and structures or provide sensitive data (as in strand A, B, and C), consent to participate was sought by a senior lead within children's social care.

Analysis

Data were analysed with reference to national policy frameworks and literature cited in the background and discussed with the Contextual Safeguarding National Advisory board, including stakeholders from England, Wales, and Scotland. Researchers from all strands met monthly, discussing emerging findings relevant to the whole project. Our research involves working with participants to co-design and test new child welfare systems and practices. Because of this we had regular strand-specific review meetings with participants to share emergent learning and sense-check findings allowing for diverse meanings and interpretations to arise.

For this article, secondary analysis was undertaken to synthesize the collective data from all four strands to draw out common themes and cross-strand learning. The framework used for this meta-appraisal was as follows:

- What is the state of the child safeguarding sector response to EFH? To what extent it can:
  - Target the social conditions of harm?
  - Adopt a child welfare approach?
  - Form partnerships with those who have oversight of extra-familial contexts?
  - Create and measure change in contexts?

These questions were formed from the Contextual Safeguarding framework (Firmin 2017) as they reflect the guidance from policy and the literature that a child welfare approach that can engage contexts beyond the child and family can support an effective response to EFH. The Contextual Safeguarding framework, thus, provides a useful analytical tool for considering the current state of play of the child welfare sector response to adolescent EFH. Data from each strand was summarized under each questions, along with exemplar data, following a manual coding process to build a collective picture of cross-strand themes. Research leads met for three reflective analytic discussions to clarify and draw together the common themes.

Limitations

The article approximates the direction of practice in relation to extra-familial harm drawing on a large body of qualitative data from professionals who are operationalizing these responses at a local level in England, Wales, and Scotland, as well as including the voices of a small number of parents/carers and young people. Individual research strands

employed different methods and worked with different participants. Our aim was not to employ a standardized evaluation framework to assess and compare sites, but to explore the range of ways EFH is addressed across multiple sites. The findings are not representative of all approaches to EFH, but bring important insights about the progress or challenges emerging since EFH was raised within UK policy The research team did not have research sites in Northern Ireland.

Findings

Targeting the social conditions of harm

The policy guidance for England (HM Government 2023) places an expectation on child protection agencies to assess and intervene in problems faced within and *by* families. 'By families' is significant, it introduces an expectation on child protection agencies to respond to harms children face beyond their immediate families and for which their families were not deemed responsible (Firmin and Knowles 2020). Welsh policy (Welsh Government 2021) notes the significance of friend, school and neighbourhood contexts when young people experience EFH and Scottish policy guidance notes the importance of interventions that can 'address the social conditions/environmental drivers of extra-familial risk and harm' (Scottish Government 2021: 80). As discussed, a growing body of research indicates that safeguarding responses should address the 'social conditions' facilitative of safety or harm in children's lives (Beckett 2011; Melrose and Pearce 2013; Featherstone et al., 2018), differing from traditional safeguarding approaches with individual children and families that support and monitor behavioural change, noting that significant 'social conditions' can include poverty and (gender/race/class) inequality, as well as a lack of protective structures around young people.

However, research indicates that initial attempts to address the 'social conditions' of EFH have resulted in the transference of individualized and behaviour-change interventions to extra-familial spaces and relationships (Owens and Lloyd 2023). Here, all but one site referenced the intention to target their responses to EFH to contexts beyond the child, but there were significant variations in their ability to target not just the individuals in those contexts but the social conditions of the contexts that were facilitative of harm. Many sites identified and assessed *places* outside of families where harm occurred, but support that changed the social conditions of these places was weak. For example, many sites had 'panel meetings' to discuss harm in contexts like parks or transport hubs; assessed places or peer groups of concern; and formed multi-agency partnerships focussed on safeguarding locations. But this did not lead to

activity, or the commissioning of activity, that sought to change the social conditions of these spaces (i.e. supporting inclusion of young people or tackling inequality). Professionals were often unsure about how such safety could be achieved, defaulting to interventions with young people to change their behaviour or decision making:

> A lot of our conversations we're having is about actions that relate to what we expect the child to do, or the parent to do. And I'm just like, all of this should be about us shifting that weight of responsibility on to us doing something about the context.
>
> (Social Care Professional, Focus Group, Strand A)

Social workers in Strand D, drawn from 33 different authorities, flagged organizational pressure and expectations to practice in a traditional way:

> I think one of the tensions and challenges has been the kind of pressures of kind of traditional social working expectations from managers and all that kind of core stuff, versus the kind of creativity and freedom you need to do this [ecological] sort of work.
>
> (Social Worker, Interview, Strand D)

Work that attempted to address social conditions was facilitated by local organizational conditions that gave professionals freedom and capacity to work differently. One professional described responding creatively to a group of young people referred to social care by the police following complaints about 'anti-social behaviour'. Workers created a new youth space in their local area, arranging activities and inviting young people in. Through building relationships, workers heard how the young people regularly saw negative comments about them by local people on social media, contributing to their sense of disenfranchisement, in turn increasing their risk of harm in the community. Workers targeted social conditions by running a community event where the perspectives of the young people were shared, and agencies considered how to create a more inclusive and welcoming context for them, including volunteering to become 'community guardians' (agreeing to look out for young people and challenge negative stereotypes about them).

Evidence from Strand B suggested youth workers are better equipped for creative, location-based work. In social care contexts, where risk-management lay heavily on individual workers, it was harder for professionals to be creative in their thinking and actions, leaving little room to address the social conditions of harm. Within all four strands sites faced challenges working with schools as locations of harm. In Strand C, participants discussed challenges of addressing interpersonal harm between young people in schools, alongside limited resource to support safety in schools, leading to high rates of exclusions of young people impacted by violence (Lloyd 2024). Across all strands we saw a reliance on removing

young people from families, schools, or communities, rather than creating safety in those places.

Adopting a child welfare approach

Statutory guidance in England and Wales relating to children's social care responses to EFH require that they: (1) Recognize EFH as a child welfare and (where required) child protection issue; (2) Draw extra-familial contexts into child welfare systems; (3) Situate EFH within welfare-orientated frameworks. Similarly, Scottish guidance notes that 'child protection includes recognition, assessment and reduction of risk of harm from outside the family home where this is relevant' (Scottish Government 2021: 80). Here, we focus on situating responses to EFH in welfare-orientated frameworks. Research indicates that framing responses to EFH as principally a welfare, as opposed to criminal, matter have two key implications: an increased focus on 'meeting need' over 'reducing offending', and an increased recognition of service/system harm (Koch, Williams, and Wroe 2024).

Data from Strand A illustrated that child and family social work responses to EFH, coordinated via an alternative 'risk outside the home' (ROTH) child protection pathway can focus professionals on meeting the needs (health, housing, education, and relational) of individual young people impacted by EFH, as opposed to solely reducing their offending behaviours in the context of their abuse. When developing plans to meet young people's needs professionals in Strands A and D sought to understand young people beyond the issue of EFH; something that felt less imperative in the risk or offending-orientated planning observed. However, data from Strand D indicated that this goal remains challenging to realize, with reports that advocating for 'needs-focused' responses to EFH can be seen as 'soft' compared to 'tough' or 'robust' policing ones.

Reorienting EFH within a welfare-lens appeared complex across sites, requiring strong social care leadership to clearly articulate the difference between welfare (and needs-focused) and criminal justice approaches.

In addition to amplifying need, where sites embraced welfare-orientated approaches to EFH this created space to recognize harms caused by punitive and/or criminal focused services and interventions. All strands featured examples of young people, parents and social workers raising concerns about policing practices that exacerbated risks associated with EFH. Young people engaged in Strand B identified how important it is for professional agencies to be accountable for the harms implicated in their practice, and seek to address, rather than replicate system harms, particularly harms caused by statutory intervention. Data from Strand A indicated that ROTH pathways, which focused planning

on need, are to some extent facilitative of an environment where system harm can be recognized and addressed. In the below, harms caused by the police were raised by a parent and considered at a ROTH meeting:

> Youth Justice worker saying that [the police] do what they want and mum feels like she has been kept in the dark on this and frustrating that they are taking a heavy-handed approach to [the young person]—the social worker asks for these discussions to be taken forward as an action.
>
> (Observation Notes, Strand A)

Likewise, in Strand A, social workers used ROTH pathways to identify when a school exclusion escalated the risks young people faced. However, in Strand C social workers and wider interagency panels they participated in often knew little about school exclusions when planning support. Variability across our datasets indicated that despite a consistent policy position that a welfare-oriented approach to EFH is required, the implications of this were less understood, and consequently inconsistent practice emerged.

Forming partnerships who have oversight of extra-familial contexts

Statutory guidance stipulates responses to EFH be multi-agency, 'cross sector' and led by children's social care (Scottish Government 2021; HM Government 2023), with support from a range of partners, including nontraditional safeguarding partners and 'community engagement' (Welsh Government 2021; HM Government 2023). Partnership arrangements reflected in the 40 sites evidenced three key challenges. The first: moving beyond traditional partnerships. Partnerships varied widely between areas, from standard safeguarding partners to more creative partnerships, the former being most common. Creative partnerships were often enabled by a small, dedicated body of workers committed to doing things differently. Where traditional safeguarding partnerships were the norm, some partners lacked clarity about their contribution to safety planning. This limited their effectiveness, contributing to confused planning, with limited outcomes. Partnerships struggled with competing objectives, specifically between social care and police; partners involved in the same plan were approaching young people in very different ways—i.e. with a focus on need versus crime-prevention. This lent confusion and inconsistency to plans:

> Not a happy bunny with police this weekend one bit… they have been putting curfews on kids and checking in on them—especially looked after young people and it's driving me mad… one child had his curfew checked at 2/3am… that is … a blatant infringement of his human rights.

(Social Worker Digital Diary Entry, Strand D)

Additional challenges emerged when safety planning included nontraditional partners, like grassroots community organizations or young people's informal networks of friends and family. This was due to resource and capacity issues, and issues with trust and relationship building:

> I struggle quite a lot when I go, right, I wanna bring in a community organisation to do this piece of work. And there's still a lot of negativity and mistrust from people quite high up within the council when we're talking about grassroots community organisations.
>
> (Workshop participant Strand B)

Professionals across sites highlighted difficulties of building trusted relationships with young people within multi-agency networks. They described challenges with breaking out of traditional partnerships to work with community organizations that are less known to the local authority but have longstanding relationships with young people.

Statutory guidance notes the important of parents are partners in addressing EFH (Scottish Government 2021; Welsh Government 2021; HM Government 2023). Strand A highlighted opportunities and challenges of working with parents and young people as partners in child protection meetings. Whilst some 'green shoots' were seen with parents, young people often did not want to engage, and the focus on parental responsibility in traditional child protection processes shifted to young people when professionals and parents' safety planned together.

The second challenge was the type of 'guardianship' these partnerships provided for young people. Professionals and young people discussed the importance of young people having a range of professional and non-professional adults and spaces to look out for them and whom they could turn to for safety, however, this was often absent due to resource and capacity. Specialist and targeted support were described as stigmatizing, whereas visible and accessible youth workers and youth spaces were found helpful. In the absence of guardianship there was a reliance on traditional safeguarding partners not always desired by young people:

> there should be not actually police picking you up … They should be like in town nowadays they have the suicide people going out instead of the police coming around on the docks and stuff. They should make a thing up for missing people.
>
> (Workshop Participant, Strand B)

The third challenge for partnership was system-harm. Data indicated persisting biases in policing, social care and education, particularly in relation to age, gender, ethnicity and (perceived) social class:

> When people report the black person, it takes time [for the police] to put on the system. But when the white person is, the next day you see

> on the paper or you see on the television, you see the Twitter, the police Twitter, and then it's quick respond. But sometimes you see the black person is missing, but it's not on the system.
>
> (Workshop Participant, Strand B)

There was curiosity and a commitment from sites to tackle inequality and discrimination in services, however, there was some distance to travel towards responses to EFH rooted in young people's trusted networks that provide universal and accessible guardianship in the spaces where young people (want to) spend time.

Creating and measuring change in contexts beyond the child and family

In addition to the references to 'extra-familial' harm in policy guidance for England, Wales, and Scotland, and the accompanying advice about directing child protection efforts to contexts and environments beyond families, statutory guidance for England was revised in December 2023 with an updated Assessment Framework that includes reference to 'extra-familial' contexts (HM Government 2023). This guidance requires social workers to assess the safety of peer groups and expects them to build an understanding of the contexts where harm occurs. This continues a turn in recent policy; pivoting familial child protection methods towards EFH—as seen for example, in Strand A's alternative child protection pathway. Additional policy guidance for Wales also notes that responses to EFH can default to 'managing risks associated with the child' (Welsh Government 2021: 45) and calls for greater work with families that is not victim blaming. However, the question remains as to whether such pivoting has led to new safeguarding outcomes. In this section, we report on how sites created and measured outcomes for contexts beyond individual children and/or their families.

Sites struggled to measure outcomes in relation to change in extra-familial contexts. In Strand A, for example, practitioners could identify and describe the effects of extra-familial contexts of harm but were less able to identify how those contexts needed to change—as exemplified by this Child Protection Chair:

> It would be really helpful for examples about … how you would envisage it moving beyond the individual plan and helping us get to the point where we're having community-based plans and group plans … We have got clear connections between groups of our young people. We're getting to a point where we can conference a group or an area. We're kind of doing that inadvertently but there's a lot of barriers.
>
> (Social Worker, Focus Group, Strand A)

Similar barriers were experienced in Strand D. Social workers described their anxiety-when working in local systems that did not support them to work towards outcomes of change beyond the individual child and/or their family for young people at risk, leading to workers feeling personally responsible for their safety. Chronic underfunding; lack of coherence within the multi-agency partnership; and the prioritization of familial harm contributed to their inability to set outcomes for changing extra-familial contexts:

> I think sometimes it's kind of the systems in place within social work. So … if you're doing a child and family assessment … it's very much kind of focused on safeguarding and safeguarding within the home, rather than what's going on outside. So, there's still kind of quite considerate concerns for the young people. But we're closing down [cases], and there's not going to be any support from social care, because parents are doing everything they can.
>
> (Workshop participant, Strand D)

Social workers painted a picture of a fatigued workforce with a staff high turnover which caused considerable organizational constraints and limited creativity. Some described how greater access to police-led rather than social care resources had led them to side-step welfare and strengths-based outcome goals for those around crime-reduction, by focussing almost exclusively on removing perpetrators. Others, feeling unsupported in tackling contextual issues, had devoted themselves to individual relationship-based work with young people—a positive intervention but unlikely to address wider issues affecting harm its own.

Across the strands, participants described a social care system that lacks a consistent approach to planning, creating, and measuring outcomes of change beyond the individual child and/or their family. In Strand C, information held about young people affected by EFH was organized around their individual rather than contextual features, like their school experiences. This systemic neglect of extra-familial contexts was compounded by structural discrimination: social care systems were less likely to collect information about racially minoritized children's educational experiences than those of other children.

The question of how equipped systems are to deliver outcomes that address the dynamics of extra-familial contexts was extended in Strand B. Here, a consortium of young people and practitioners discussed how safeguarding responses aimed at addressing extra-familial harm should involve services addressing their own biases and practices which young people experience as harmful. This was seen as just as important as seeking to reduce violence or exploitation. A professional reflecting on this said:

> We've got the same number of boys and girls from care who go missing. So, it's nearly fifty-fifty. But the boys who go missing or are reported

> missing go more. So, once they've gone missing, whatever we're doing as professionals isn't making a difference in their lives in the same way we can make a difference to girls and young women.
>
> (Workshop Participant, Strand B)

When it comes to creating and measuring outcomes in a way that supports and captures change in young people's extra-familial relationships and contexts, therefore, the collective data shows a gap between aspiration and reality.

Discussion

Legal frameworks in the UK differentiate responses to children who are harmed in their families (child protection) and children who are harmed and harming in the community (youth justice). So, the inclusion of EFH in child welfare guidance in England, Wales, and Scotland has required a re-orientation of local government social care practice. We explored these changes via 40 local government authorities in England, Wales, and Scotland. Seven years after the first introduction of EFH to government child welfare guidance, research indicates an increase in young people entering the child welfare system due EFH, now the third most frequent category of harm (after domestic abuse and mental health) for children on 'Child in Need plans' (a social care plan for children in need of support to maintain a reasonable standard of health or development) and children in out of home care in England (Hood et al., 2024). This, alongside the volume of activity taking place across the three countries in relation to EFH as evidenced in the research data reported here, indicates that an increased awareness of EFH is significantly altering the child welfare landscape. Given the unique position of England, Wales, and Scotland having integrated EFH into child welfare guidance and systems there is important learning for international audiences and policy makers faced with similar challenges in relation to violence against and between young people (Pinheiro 2006; Longobardi, Fabris, and Badenes-Ribera 2019; UN 2023).

This dataset evidenced significant action in local government authorities to formulate a response to EFH. There are specialized teams and professionals within social care, and new meeting structures and protection pathways. However, there is still some way to go to a system that can provide services that meet the welfare needs of young people facing EFH in a way that builds safety with and around them and their families.

One challenge is that child welfare agencies are increasingly able to identify the places where harm happens—i.e. a school or community context—but less able to deliver responses that address harm *in* these places, often defaulting to dispersing or removing young people rather

than engaging positively with them. This resonates with large-scale children's social care data in England which indicates that children known to children's social care services due to EFH are less likely to be on a child protection plan (than young people known due to other harm categories) but more likely to have an episode of out of home care (Hood et al., 2024). We can conclude that when child welfare agencies fail to address the root causes of harm in young people's families or communities, they continue to displace them into the criminal justice, or now, child welfare system.

What does this tell us about the integration of EFH into child welfare systems? Further guidance and system-change is needed to: shift from a focus solely on parenting capacity and towards extra-familial contexts and relationships; foreground welfare responses that reduce criminalization; and orient the system towards the systemic and structural drivers of harm. The increasing use of out of home care, particularly reported for Black boys experiencing EFH (Hood et al., 2024), signals the need to resource partnerships equipped to build safety around young people and their families, and to address patterns of discrimination, so young people can remain in their families and communities.

Integrating EFH into child welfare legislation intends to foreground a welfare response prioritizing young people's needs and best interests. However, when social workers lead responses to EFH, there is a continued deferment to policing, with workers expressing confusion and distress about what is needed of them in this new realm of work. The dominance of policing is exacerbated when professionals are anxious about high levels of risk faced by young people, for whom they feel individually responsible. We saw cultures whereby policing is invested with greater power than welfare agencies, leading to its dominance and influence within partnerships. This raises a question about how welfare-based professional cultures can be fostered, and the conditions needed for social work to confidently lead partnership responses that foreground children's needs.

It was evident that young people want and need access to universal provision, to have access to safe spaces, and to trusted relationships often with voluntary sector agencies that do not overly professionalize or control their lives. Given the challenging funding landscape for local authorities in the UK and the large sums of money spent on out of home care (Holmes et al., 2024), there is an urgent need to review how services are commissioned and delivered. This should uphold the principles of domestic child welfare legislation (the default of which is family-based care) and international children's rights conventions (including young people's rights to family life and privacy). Children should not be removed into care at great cost if those funds could be used to support their safety in their communities. Currently, there is a contradiction between the responsibility on local areas to address harm faced by families

in the community and the individualized outcomes services are evaluated against that continue to locate change at the level of individual children and their parents rather than in harmful environments. These findings indicate that in the UK context, the commitment by governments to include EFH in child welfare guidance is insufficient. We need a whole-system commitment to addressing the contextual nature of EFH that injects resource into the places and relationships where these harms happen, and measures change accordingly.

These findings have implications for global responses to EFH, and the challenges and limitations of safeguarding structures and systems. Internationally, there is a recognition of the social determinants of serious violence affecting young people, including the impact of poverty and low levels of social protection (WHO 2023). Whilst governments are responsible for providing the legal and policy frameworks to tackle violence and abuse in the community, the delivery of violence-prevention and youth protection services vary considerably between countries. England, Wales, and Scotland appear unique in attempting to integrate responses to EFH into child welfare systems and findings indicate that doing so can seed some culture and practice changes when it comes to adopting a welfare response to EFH. However, whilst there are green shoots, the extent to which the inclusion of EFH in policy alone has achieved this is limited and further guidance and resource is required. Importantly, when young people and families ask for higher levels of resource, care, and support alongside lower levels of professionalization and control, we must ensure that such changes enable the provision of support to young people and communities not merely the imposition of statutory frameworks to control their lives.

At very least, the current state of play of children's social care responses to EFH approximated by the 40 local authorities studied, indicates the importance of national and international conversations about ensuring young people affected by violence beyond their families have their needs and rights upheld. Reflecting on where the UK was in relation to these issues three decades ago, we can optimistically conclude that it is possible to begin to change the conversation about young people who are harmed and harming in their communities from one focused on policing and crime to one focused on welfare and need. It is possible to ignite the imagination of the social work workforce towards work that is about building safety in communities through caring relationships with young people. But where will this conversation go? Continued consultation with young people and those they trust must be at the forefront of on-going attempts to reduce violence in adolescence, alongside transnational conversations about violence against and between young people as a *child welfare* issue. The objective should be to build safety around young people rather than controlling their lives with the statutory frameworks of either the criminal justice or care systems.

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