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Public Lecture

**23rd Kilbrandon Lecture:
Why common-sense need
not be complicated:
Creating heartfelt, humble,
and humanising responses
to extra-familial harm**

27th November 2025

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Introduction

Good evening, everyone. It's a real honour and pleasure to be here with you all today to talk about contextual safeguarding and to focus in particular on the cultural reform that is needed to bring it to life. And before I start, while this lecture will predominantly focus on practices that try to build safety for children and young people, in order to do that, it will also include examples of harm that young people face from services, as well as from communities and in their interpersonal relationships. And so, if you do need to step out at any time, please feel free to do so. I won't take it personally or think that I'm boring you. Just take your time.

I also want to say, before I start, that there are a number of researchers who have informed what I'm about to share and have shaped my work over the last 15 years, including people like Jenny Pearce, Jahnine Davis, Claudia Bernard, Brid Featherstone, Anna Gupta and academics in my own team - Jenny Lloyd, Rachel Owens and Lauren Wroe - to mention a few.

When I was putting this lecture together, I was really conscious, having watched previous Kilbrandon lectures, that there really weren't many quotes from academics on my slides. I quickly hurried around thinking



maybe I should add lots of quotes in from researchers that have informed me. And then I took a pause and thought, I'm not going to do that. Because while the ideas of these brilliant colleagues are absolutely evident in the approach that I take, the quotes I will use are largely from children and young people, families and practitioners. These are the people who directly inform my work and whose words best help me explain what we're trying to do. I wanted to get that off my chest first, so I didn't feel concerned the whole way through the remainder of this speech that I was not quoting multiple academics to explain my argument.

I also want to thank the University of Strathclyde for having me here today, and particularly Fiona Dyer for inviting me to deliver this lecture.

So, when it comes to protecting young people from exploitation and other harms they experience beyond their family homes, why is common sense complicated?

Well, over the past 15 years we've been trying to grapple with a very particular situation. In multiple countries around the world young people come to harm in extra-familial contexts and relationships. They come to harm in their friendship groups. They come to harm in public spaces, in school environments, from peers and adults unconnected to their caregivers (de Vries, 2025; Radford et al., 2015; United Nations, 2022). But the child protection systems that have been increasingly drawn upon to protect these young people were designed to intervene with children and their families, and not the peer group, schools, or public spaces where such harm occurs (Firmin, 2017; Fong & Cardoso, 2010; Victoria Government, 2017).

When I was reviewing cases during my PhD thesis, I read statements like this from Sara:

...if you're rude to them then they'll beat you up and I've seen how they beat up people, how everyone's scared of them [...] I said no for something very little I've been beaten up and bottled and I realised if I did say no what would happen [...] I was pressurised and scared, I knew deep down I didn't want it cos I was still young but *I didn't have a choice.*



(Sara, age 13, witness testimony, case file 4, review 2011-2014)

Sara was very clear about the situation she was in. It was a situation in which she was being exploited by a group of young people from her local community, and that exploitation was happening in her school. It was happening at bus stops. It was happening in fast-food restaurants. And she felt unable to gain any sense of safety. But the professionals who responded to Sara largely assessed her and her parents, and the capacity of her parents to keep her safe. And when her parent was assessed as doing all she could, Sara was closed to children's social work completely and then re-entered the system due to consequential offending behaviour she displayed later down the line. Then she was taken into care. Then she was placed into secure accommodation. All as a result of the issues that she was grappling with outside of the home. She was experiencing harm in extra-familial contexts, but it was her and her family who were the subject of social work intervention.

While I was doing this early work, there had been gradual calls for a paradigm shift in safeguarding responses to extra-familial harm. In the Hansen and Holmes *That Difficult Age* report (2014), and then later, as a result of the cases I had reviewed (Firmin, 2015, 2017) - both bodies of work identifying the need for fundamental transformation rather than incremental service redesign in response to extra-familial harm. And that was what led to the introduction of the Contextual Safeguarding framework (Firmin, 2016).

The Contextual Safeguarding framework

The Contextual Safeguarding framework recommends four things. Firstly, systems need to be capable of targeting the context where children are harmed. That's the kind of common-sense bit, but I'll go on to explain why that is quite complicated a little later. So according to this first part of the framework, if a child is abused in their family, that context would be the subject of the assessment and the plan. If a child is abused in their peer group, or in a park, or in school, that context needs to be the focus of the response (assessment and plan). This is not just about seeing a child in context; it is about working to change that context, so that it becomes safer for that child (and other children) to be there.

The second feature of the framework was its legislative basis, arguing that whether a child was abused within the family home or in an extra-



familial context, they should always receive a child welfare and, where required, a child protection response. Whereas at the time in England, what we had was: if you were abused within your family home, you received a child protection response; if you were abused outside the family home the system that was leveraged to co-ordinate a response to that risk was largely the criminal justice system. Not just the response to you as a child; community safety partnerships also coordinated the disruption and dispersal of those who were harming you without a wider accompanying plan to safeguard your welfare.

The third part of the framework were the partnerships which brought it to life. So, contextual safeguarding is only feasible if it's delivered in partnership with young people, with parents and carers, wider communities, and those that have an influence over the places and spaces where harm occurs - like those that run hospitality, retail, parks and recreation, youth workers, those that run schools. They are all key partners in the delivery of a contextual safeguarding system.

And finally, the system needs to measure its impact contextually. So, we wouldn't want to only know if Sara was safer as a result of our intervention. We'd also want to know if the park where she was being assaulted was any safer, or had Sara been taken out of that situation and other children had taken their place because the harm remained there - which is exactly what did happen in the case of Sara. A couple of the girls witnessed her being assaulted and knew she had then been taken into care and moved away when she told professionals what had happened. When they were later assaulted by the same group of young people, it took them a very long time to speak up about that, because they didn't want to be taken into care, and they thought that if they did tell, they would have to leave too. So, we want to know that the situation has been made safe, and not just the individual child that has been impacted by that situation.

That, in essence, is contextual safeguarding: any response to extra-familial harm that targets the context where that harm occurs, utilising child protection and child welfare legislation to centre children's needs, in partnership with those that can influence those contexts, and where you measure your impact contextually. In very many ways, that feels like common sense. And whenever I speak to parents in particular about contextual safeguarding, or just the friends I made on maternity leave, or



the guy that runs my local coffee shop, and they ask me what I do, they respond with, 'don't we do that anyway?' and 'surely that's common sense'. If a child's being harmed in a peer group, you'd respond to the peer group; if they're being harmed in a park, you'd respond to the park. And I say, 'yes, it does feel that way, but it's not how our system was designed'.

Contextual safeguarding requires you to target the context where this harm happens, but we're utilising systems designed to target young people and their families. Contextual safeguarding requires us to utilise child protection and child welfare legislation to co-ordinate those responses, when, actually, responses to public spaces are often underpinned by crime and disorder and wider community safety legislation. It requires us to work with people and organisations who are in the places and spaces where this harm occurs. Our system is designed to work with a key number of statutory partners, like social workers, police, health professionals, and educationalists. And contextual safeguarding requires that we measure change in context, and that we also measure individual change contextually; whereas our system is designed to measure change for individuals, abstracted from the contexts they are in.

To explain that: one young person who featured in a case I reviewed was truanting from school, and it was the only behaviour he displayed that suggested something was going wrong for him. The school had used sanctions to try to keep him in school, and those sanctions had been ineffective. So, children's services were contacted, and it turned out he had a sibling with a disability. It was believed that maybe things had got a bit chaotic at home, and that if more support was put into the family home, everyone would get out of home on time in the mornings and get to school on time; and this young man would be able to concentrate when he was there. The family said they didn't think that was an issue, but that was the plan that was put in place - and his behaviour didn't change. The school then threatened to fine his parents for not getting him into education, and within a couple of weeks he was in school on time every day and stayed in lessons when he was there.

If we're thinking about measuring impact individually, the most effective intervention was the threat to fine his parents, because before that he was truanting from school. And when that threat was made, he started to



attend school. And the goal was a reduction in truancy, or increased attendance at school. I was later asked to review his case because when he started to attend school, he was sexually and physically assaulted by a group of young people who were at his school - although the assault happened in the community after school. And it then turned out he had been coming in late every day because he'd waited for everybody to be in classrooms before he came into the school building. And then he waited for teachers to be in those classrooms before he'd go into them. And then if he needed to use the toilets, he'd use them during the lesson time, because if he used the toilets in the break time, he was assaulted in the toilets. So, the moment his truancy went down, his risk actually went up.

A reduction in truancy, a reduction in going missing from home, even a reduction in offending, is not necessarily an indicator of safety. It's often an indicator of compliance. And that young man complied because he knew his parents couldn't afford a fine, not because he was safe to go to school. So even when we're measuring individual change in children, we have to understand that individual change contextually. But at the moment, our system is really designed to measure individual change in isolation from everything else. Services are often commissioned on the basis that they will reduce offending by this much, they will increase education by this much, they will reduce missing behaviours by this much, not that they will create the conditions in which that type of behaviour change is possible and safe.

While contextual safeguarding feels like common sense, it's actually counter to the way our systems have been designed to operate. We observe this when working with organisations that start to implement the Contextual Safeguarding framework. These organisations often become stuck in a number of places when they experience the rub of a mismatch between the intention of the systems they use to respond to extra-familial harm (and how those systems were designed) and what contextual safeguarding is seeking to achieve.

The structural features of contextual safeguarding

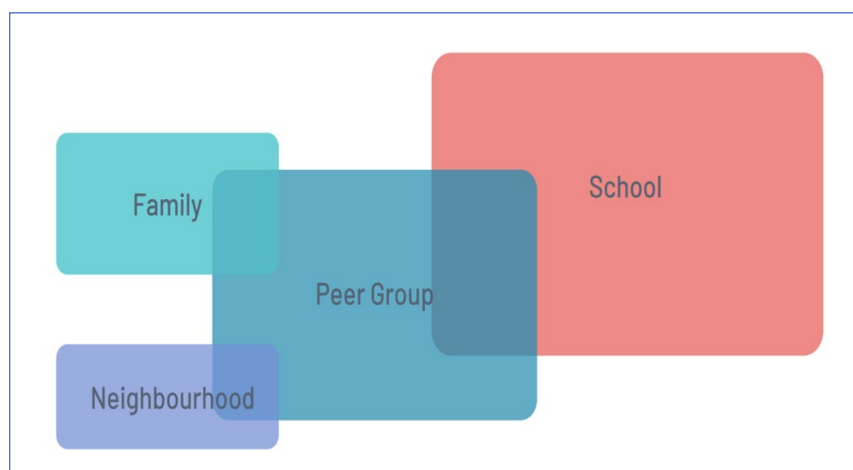
Over the years, particularly the last ten years, we've worked with a number of local authorities, including local authorities in Scotland, to assist with structural redesigns to their systems that would make contextual safeguarding more feasible. These have included contextualising the individual work that already happens with children and



young people. For example, introducing safety mapping activities to assessment processes that social workers and youth workers and others complete. Such activities support workers to identify: where young people feel safe or unsafe in their local community; what are young people's 'red zones' (where they feel unsafe), their 'green zones' (where they feel safe), and their 'amber zones' – where they might feel safe at 3 p.m., but not at 10 p.m. Practitioners can use the information (and associated understanding) they gather from safety mapping to develop a plan of support for that child; making sure practitioners are not requiring young people to attend an intervention that's based in a red zone, for example.

We've also seen the introduction of 'context weighting' into various safeguarding activities. Context weighing is the practice of weighing the influence that different contexts have on young people's safety. Using context weighting individual practitioners, or groups of multi-agency professionals, can ask themselves whether their proposed response to extra-familial harm is targeting the right things. For example, if an assessment identifies that, as in the image (Figure 1), the school is the most unsafe context for a young person, followed by their peer group, professionals can consider if the plan that they've put in place for the young person is targeting the school or the peer group. Or has the assessment told professionals that the school and their peer group are the contexts where this young person is most unsafe, but the plan they have developed is a parenting course for the young person's mum because that's the intervention that is available in their service? In such situations we can identify a mismatch between the services being offered and what a young person needs.

Figure 1: Example of context weighting



Structural redesign work has also included the introduction of safeguarding pathways for contexts themselves. Many local authorities can now accept a referral for a school environment, or a park where children and young people are unsafe, and social workers and youth workers will go into those contexts and assess them in order to identify what support is needed.

While this work has been underway in local authorities, we have worked in parallel to develop and shape policy reforms to facilitate and sustain that type of structural change. Contextual safeguarding went into the Scottish Child Protection Guidelines in 2021,¹ naming things like context weighting and the need to respond to contexts where harm was occurring in situations of extra-familial harm. Such policy changes have authorised local areas to move practice in the direction of contextual safeguarding.

This type of structural change has shown promise, and we continue to support it in local authorities across the UK, and increasingly internationally. But, in the wrong cultural context, such structural reforms have led to all sorts of practices that are not culturally aligned to contextual safeguarding. These have included: using dispersal orders to move children out of public spaces where they are unsafe; increased monitoring of children, particularly through the use of additional policing of those children or using CCTV to monitor where they are; mapping young people's friendships and then disrupting them, including using bail conditions to stop young people from spending time with each other; excluding children from schools or using managed moves to take children out of unsafe school environments; designing public spaces so that young people don't want to spend time in them, like playing classical music (because apparently young people don't listen to classical music - I used to, but apparently some young people don't). In one local area we saw an attempt to take a roof off a bus stop that young people were congregating under, so they got wet when it rained, and then they'd move on. And switching off the internet in public spaces to leave children and young people with unmet needs, with the mindset of 'they need the internet, they can't access it here, so they won't spend time here'. This has often been recommended to fast-food restaurants as a means of responding to what is considered antisocial behaviour.

¹ Updated in 2023.



None of these things are actually aligned to contextual safeguarding at all. What they represent are often interventions with individuals in contexts; they are not interventions *with contexts*, and, for the most part, they are not intended to produce safeguarding outcomes (instead they are measured in terms of reductions in crime or behaviour considered antisocial or problematic). For both of those reasons, they often don't align to contextual safeguarding.

To explain one of these examples in more detail let's look at the example of switching off the internet in public places. Over the years we have seen a number of fast-food restaurants being advised to switch off their internet to stop young people congregating in them, particularly where there are concerns that those young people are being approached and groomed into criminal exploitation. When the internet was switched off young people did stop congregating at fast-food restaurants. However, on some occasions, as a result of this action, adults offered their flats to those young people to come and use the internet. They were then exploited by those adults in return for the internet; in return for their needs being met. Leaving children with unmet needs does not create safety. When the restaurants switched off their internet it looked like the intervention had been a success: 'there had been lots of complaints about antisocial behaviour - we switched off the internet and now there's no complaints about antisocial behaviour'. Meanwhile the children who had been congregating in the restaurants were now being given internet by unsafe adults in private homes; out of sight of any professionals who were concerned for their welfare. Simply responding to individuals in extra-familial contexts is not contextual safeguarding. As we became aware that the approach was being interpreted in this way, we recognised a need to much better articulate the *cultural* change that is needed to adopt this type of approach, and not just the *structural* one.

From what to how: Needs, collective-capacity and context-orientated systems

In 2019, we would often go into local organisations and ask them very structurally focused questions. We would say things like: what's your pathway for referring and assessing friendship groups? What structures do you use to organise the services you provide for adolescents? What recording systems are you using to measure your impact on context? – and based on the answers to the questions we would work with organisations to co-produce very structural, procedural interventions to



align their local systems with contextual safeguarding. Three years into this process across multiple areas, and we started to see varying levels of success (Firmin & Lloyd, 2022). Some local areas and organisations were really successful in aligning to contextual safeguarding, and in other areas progress was far slower; despite them all implementing similar structural reforms.

As a consequence, we started to change the questions we asked of organisations. and instead of asking '*what* is your process for assessing peers?' we asked '*how* do you involve young people in conversations about their friends in your work to assess peer relationships?' '*How* does your workforce even view adolescents?': a pretty fundamental question because many people don't actually like young people (an issue that is rarely named), which is a real challenge when you're trying to implement a contextual safeguarding approach. We hear professionals say, 'oh, don't give me a teenager, I don't want a teenager, just give me the babies'. We need to understand that attitude within the social work workforce, in terms of ensuring any organisation or team is a cultural fit to do this type of work.

And *how* do you measure your impact on contexts? Are you looking for evidence of safety or are you just measuring risk? Are you speaking to young people to understand impact or are you looking at crime data to reach conclusions? Because data on rates of crime and antisocial behaviour often reflects adults reporting young people for being antisocial, and less young people's experiences of harm (which often go unreported). If we want to know where children and young people are unsafe, we can't always rely on agency data. We have to go directly to children and young people to ask them.

To understand organisational cultures, and their alignment to contextual safeguarding, we've needed to move beyond asking *what* people are doing and move towards asking *how* they are doing it (Firmin, Peace & Wroe, 2026). When we begin to do this, we start to notice certain things that are integral to the culture of contextual safeguarding.

The first thing we see is that to be culturally aligned to contextual safeguarding organisations need to be orientated towards meeting children's *needs* rather than solely focusing on reducing *risk*; something that is really difficult in the space of extra-familial harm. Services are under pressure to reduce the risks that children face; something that is



completely understandable. But when consideration of risk is not balanced appropriately with consideration of need, or when young people's needs are not foregrounded, they are often left unmet (Firmin & Wroe, 2021; Wroe, 2025). When we look at what children and young people impacted by extra-familial harm actually need, we see things like time and space with people who care about them. They need safe access to education. They need housing. They need internet. They need food. They need to be able to take risks safely because they're teenagers and that's what teenagers often like to do. And they need some privacy. They also need a sense of psychological safety and wellbeing in terms of their mental health and emotional stability. These things are developmentally normal behaviours.

Yet, what we often see commissioned for these young people are 12-week knife crime awareness programmes, six-month healthy relationships programmes, or a one-year mentoring service: responses that may, to varying degrees, address risk, help them understand risk, see risk, and/or reduce unsafe, risky behaviours, but don't give young people any time with their friends, don't ensure they have a safe place to live, don't ensure they have food to eat, and don't give them internet access. Often, we restrict things young people need in situations of extra-familial harm: we restrict their phones, we restrict their privacy, we restrict their time with their friends. We don't want them to take any risks at all. We create the conditions in which a young person is left with multiple unmet needs, because a fixation on risk-reduction has overwhelmed our response to them. When an organisation's cultures are aligned to contextual safeguarding, those operating in it can hold both need and risk; and you see that in this quote from a social worker who when writing to a young person said:

...you have witnessed a significant assault on your best friend, whereby he was stabbed last year. There's been ongoing concerns for your safety since this time both in school and outside of school in the community. It is clear that everybody around you is finding it increasingly difficult to keep you safe from the risk of serious youth violence [...]
You were really open with me about how this is impacted on your mental health and how you were struggling to remain on track and not retaliate. (Excerpt from Young Person Assessment)



When young people see their needs being recognised, and see risk being held in a system rather than creating anxiety in the system, conditions are created for them to open up about what they need. What this young man needed was help with his mental health, and he needed the space to be able to say that before everyone panicked and sought to put restrictions on him, like securing him for example. He needed to be able to be open, and for the system to be able to hold that risk with him. His social worker, and the organisation they worked in, was capable of this, and that young man was able to access mental health support and remain at home with his family as a result.

When the cultural fit is right, we also see a move towards building our *collective capacity* to protect young people. We're not just thinking about *parents' capacity*. Of course, that remains important, but we're also thinking about what we as a collective, all of us in this room and others around young people, can provide in terms of their safety. We all have different ways of influencing safety, different ways of meeting needs, different ways of influencing the contexts where young people spend their time.

So instead of focusing on what a parent's capacity is to protect a child, we first have to ask whose capacity - or even capability, to utilise the work of Gupta et al. (2016) and Sen (1999, 2005) - whose capacity to protect is being undermined when a child is sexually abused by peers at school? Who is unable to protect them? What is undermining their capability to do that? What is getting in the way? Because then when we respond, we try to build the capability of those that run the school, or run the high street, or run the fast-food restaurant, or utilise the park. We build their capability to be protective, rather than solely fixating on what an individual child or their parent can do to create safety in contexts that are way beyond their control. And parents experience this shift in culture, as we see from this quote from a parent who was supported via a Risk Outside of the Home child protection pathway in England (a child protection pathway developed as part of a contextual safeguarding approach):

... I was really worried, I thought oh no, like we've got a social worker, that's what I'm [...] you know, this is not what I wanted; what have I done wrong? [...] but then as I was introduced to all of this, it sort of came to my attention



that actually people really trust me as a parent and they're just looking at what's going on for my boys outside and how they can help. (Parent)

Considering our collective capacity to safeguard created the conditions in which this parent could come alongside professionals and work with them in partnership to build safety for her children.

And finally, when we see greater consideration of our collective capacity to safeguard young people, we can then move towards really focusing on how we create safe *contexts* and not solely focus on how we create safe *individuals*. To be culturally aligned to contextual safeguarding, efforts to create safe contexts have to move away from prioritising dispersal, disruption, invasion of privacy, and restrictive interventions. Instead, organisations create safe contexts by meeting the needs of young people in those contexts, building the collective capacity of the adults in those contexts to be protective - building their guardianship capacity - and addressing environmental factors that get in the way of safety. Such an approach is very similar to what we do in terms of a child and family social work assessment. We would normally assess what children need, assess the capacity of their families to meet those needs, and identify environmental factors that undermine the family. And you may recognise this as very similar to Getting it Right for Every Child in terms of the Scottish framework.² The only difference being that in contextual safeguarding we apply this framework to an extra-familial context and not just to an individual young person and their family.

And when we apply that lens to extra-familial contexts, we see that shift from restriction to welfare, as illustrated in this quote from a social worker who said:

...everyone was having strategy meetings about how do we disperse this group? And the assessment helped us understand what that friendship group meant to each other. They all have shared lived experiences [...] These are friends. These are people who see each other as family. Their core need is to be loved, to be needed, to be wanted, to belong [...] Peer mapping before that had been very much, let's share intelligence. And this was all about risk.

² See: <https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/>



But we started changing the conversation to what strength does this group bring to young people? (Social worker)

Adopting a culture of contextual safeguarding enabled this social worker to develop a collaborative plan about a friendship group *with* the young people affected, rather than without them.

Contextual safeguarding using a care-ethic: Humanising, heartfelt, and humble practice

When we respond to extra-familial harm in a way aligned to the culture of contextual safeguarding, we are foregrounding an ethic of care in our practice over and above an ethic of justice. Gilligan's (2023, p.106) work to develop care ethics has been transformational to me in naming the relational, contextual, philosophy that is too often absent from our responses to extra-familial harm, as she says:

I gather up what I have come to know. The different voice (a voice of care ethics) is a human voice. The betrayal of relationship is a betrayal of what's right. The ethic of care is an ethic of resistance to moral injury.

I really like what Gilligan is saying here. Contextual safeguarding feels like common sense because it brings a human voice into systems that too often dehumanise children and young people: that describe young people as a risk-rating, or a colour (red, amber, or green), or a high, medium, low ranking, or a number on a 'cohort sheet', or as a 'nominal' – any terminology we can use apart from 'child'; and this is particularly true for those impacted by extra-familial harm. And what an ethic of care does is bring humanisation back. When talking about contextual safeguarding, people often say to me that once you see it you can't unsee it. You think, 'oh gosh, yeah, I wouldn't have noticed that. But now I'm noticing that. And now that I'm noticing that I can't tolerate what we are doing'. That's why this idea about moral injury in Gilligan's quote is so important. Too often our systems require practitioners to do things that they know are not right for that child, family, or community, but are right in terms of being in accordance with the framework against which they are measured or inspected. And that creates moral injury for a workforce and for the communities who that workforce serves.

Central to a care ethic is the argument that we need to think about things in context and in relationship; to recognise the interdependence that we



have on each other, and the contexts in which we spend our time. These need to be front and centre in the grounding and the cultural development of our practice. When we apply this to organisations who are culturally aligned to contextual safeguarding, we see this alignment expressed through practises that are *humanising* of children and families, *heartfelt*, and *humble*.

In terms of humanising practice, which I have outlined previously, we really have seen this, and I've learned a lot about this, from practice in Scotland. From observing professionals like Nicole Savage from North Lanarkshire, who I know is in the audience today, chairing meetings in a humanising way. To develop and understand contextual safeguarding I've observed hundreds of meetings, including multi-agency panels, in which plans to safeguard young people impacted by extra-familial harm are agreed. This is because these panels are a structure people have come to associate with responses to extra-familial harm: 'we've identified an issue, we'll get a panel together, and that will build some structure into our response, and we'll develop a plan using this panel'. Five years ago I would observe these types of meeting and the chair would introduce a child by saying 'okay, we're here to talk about Carlene, she's currently scoring a 26 out of 30', or 'she's currently a red, which is a high risk, she's been missing this many times in the last three months, she's committed this many offences, what are we going to do for her?'. And yet no one knows Carlene. No-one knows what I'm worried about, what keeps me up at night, the fact I really care about my brothers, I used to have a really good relationship with my mum, but it's falling apart and that scares me, I used to be into art, but I haven't got the headspace for it; no-one in that panel knows that about me. So, the plan is then all about the missing episodes and the offending. Not about the art, not about my mum, not about my brothers. I'm not a human anymore: I'm a set of figures, risks and statistics. Whereas, in the last 24 months or so we've been observing meetings where I am hearing Carlene introduced and chairs are saying 'we're here to talk about Carlene', and then talking about what matters to me and who matters to me. This in turn changes the nature of the plans that are being produced - they are more needs-orientated.

To take this more humanising approach, we really have to be heartfelt. We have to love and care for our children. And I definitely noticed that in Scotland. Obviously, it helps that you actually use the word 'love' in some



of your policies, like in *The Promise*.³ But I also have questions about how things like racial inequality may or may not impact the capacity of professionals to care for young people impacted by extra-familial harm. In some services we often see distance between professionals and the young people they are supporting, when they don't all come from the same place. And often when we interview social workers in Scotland, they're often Scottish, and they know the communities that they serve; they're close to them. Whereas when we interview professionals who are trying to support children who are seeking asylum in the UK, and in that context there is cultural distance, the commitment to love and social justice is still there, but it takes more work by professionals (and active work to be anti-racist in practice), to demonstrate love to young people who feel more distant (Firmin et al., 2024). We see this play out in lots of different ways beyond extra-familial harm. As a society we often get really upset when there's a natural disaster in a country that feels closer to us, but we struggle to connect to that same level of disaster in a country that feels further away. In terms of extra-familial harm, we see that same pattern in practice, and it's something to really watch for and address to truly display heartfelt approaches to support.

Finally, contextual safeguarding requires a good dose of humility; but it is hard to be humble when everyone is under pressure to know what to do. In safeguarding systems, you can't possibly say you don't know what to do when faced with a really dangerous situation; you must have a plan. But in reality, sometimes it is really hard to know what to do in response to extra-familial harm, as was exemplified in the earlier quote from a social worker who stated everyone was 'finding it increasingly difficult' to safeguard a young person. In this way, being humble means acknowledging when we are finding things difficult rather than entering a situation with a certainty that is not real. It requires us to work in a way that reflects the reality of the situation a child, family, their community, or professional network has been confronted with. Humility also requires that we recognise where things have gone wrong, and where services have made things worse, rather than assuming the only harm children encounter is interpersonal. Some of the harm they encounter comes from

³ See: <https://thepromise.scot>



services, comes from systems, historically and presently. Humility needs to be there to hold that tension if we're going to provide authentic support to children and families impacted by extra-familial harm.

This quote from the social work manager, who we were working with to develop alternative child protection pathways for extra-familial harm, really reflects that posture of humility:

Difficulties in really trying to change people's thinking about how you [understand] context [...] and when I say change people thinking we put ourselves in that group as well cos it's really pushed our way of thinking. It's pushed us massively outside of our comfort zone because I think your child protection stuff, you- you kind of had a really clear pathway, don't you? You don't deviate from that because it protects the children we think. It protects you as a worker, so it's really trying to come out of that comfort zone and think a little bit differently and it's left us feeling quite vulnerable at times. (Social work manager)

When I read this quote I thought – 'Good. You should feel vulnerable in those situations because how can you be certain in situations that are so uncertain, that change so dynamically, that present so much pressure on children and families?' This feeling of vulnerability demonstrated a healthy engagement with the complexity of what this manager was working with. Whereas presenting with certainty in responses to extra-familial harm suggests, for me, that something is being oversimplified in terms of what the children and young people who are impacted need from services.

The cultures of contextual safeguarding and Kilbrandon

I couldn't close this lecture without reflecting on Kilbrandon. In preparation of this lecture, it was a real pleasure to go back to the Kilbrandon report - and it's a real honour to have Lord Kilbrandon's family representatives here in the room today - because so much of what contextual safeguarding calls for is aligned to the principles first introduced through the Kilbrandon report. Contextual safeguarding is a mechanism for both embedding those principles and extending them; and there are three ways I'd like to reflect this.



First, in Kilbrandon, we move away from a justice lens towards a care lens when we view young people. This lens applies to young people in conflict with the law and those who need support. Achieving this shift in Scotland places you further ahead than approaches taken in many other countries. However, over the ten years of implementing contextual safeguarding we've come to learn that taking children who were in a justice system and putting them into a welfare-orientated system doesn't magically create needs-focused practice. Many of those welfare-orientated systems are dominated by risk: risk management, risk dispersal, and risk disruption (Featherstone et al., 2018). I naively thought that if you switched extra-familial harm from criminal justice into child protection systems all would be well; when in reality it has meant that we have stopped criminalising some young people but are seeking to control them in a different way. Control is often still prioritised over care; and this is a consequence of risk-reduction being the primary focus of child protection systems, and need being over-shadowed. So even when paperwork directs practitioners to consider need and then risk, in reality their approach will consider risk and latterly need, if at all.

For contextual safeguarding to be the guiding approach to responding to extra-familial harm risk needs to be in the background of a child welfare response, still there but pushed back a bit, and context needs to be foregrounded. In this sense we require an extension of the Kilbrandon principles. A lot of the focus in children's hearing systems,⁴ for example, is on the individual child's needs and the extent to which their parents understand what is required, not on the context in which that child is coming to harm. To extend those Kilbrandon principles for children impacted by extra-familial harm, in way that enables a contextual safeguarding approach, we need intentional mitigation of how risk-orientated child welfare systems have become, and an intentional attempt to foreground context in the responses such systems offer.

In doing so, therefore, we also need to not only recognise the child in their family, but also recognise them in their friendship groups and wider communities. We cannot protect children from extra-familial harm by intervening with them and their families in isolation from the other contexts where they spend their time. We will only reach a certain number of young people in need of support if we seek to identify them one at a time; and every time we take a child out of an unsafe extra-

⁴ See: <https://www.chscotland.gov.uk>



familial context, we potentially create a victim vacuum that other children fill. We need to, of course, respond to individual need, but we need to have the capacity to move beyond solely seeing children in a family context, and consider them in every context in which they are spending their time.

And the other thing we need to be able to move beyond is black and white thinking. There's no better example, I don't think, than children impacted by extra-familial harm, to demonstrate why our binaries are unhelpful: our binary of victim and perpetrator, protector and harmer. They do not work for children impacted by extra-familial harm. This is not even just about recognising an overlap in who we identify as 'victims' and 'perpetrators'. To make sense of either we have to recognise the way they bleed into, and characterise, one another. You can't understand a young person's victimisation without understanding the offending, and you can't understand the offending without understanding the victimisation. They are one and the other. It's not about understanding them both. It's understanding how they impact each other. For children who are being exploited into drug distribution, for example, or who are being sexually exploited, many of them will represent a bleeding of those identities while being responded to by systems that still try to pull those identities apart. Kilbrandon provides space for us to recognise that intersection by creating a process for children who are both in need of care and support, and children who are in conflict with the law. And we need to think far more about how we work in that grey.

So ultimately, I think that going back to the Kilbrandon principles enables us to think about how far we've come, to develop responses to extra-familial harm that are built on care, rather than built on risk or justice. I would say for the most part, in most countries I've visited, we still have a (criminal) justice-orientated response to these children and young people that we've tried to make a bit kinder. So, these systems will still try to control young people; restrict them; but practitioners in those systems will be kinder in how they describe those young people or how they attempt to engage them in support. Whereas what we need is a care-orientated system in which (criminal) justice plays its part, where justice slots into a caring system rather than overwhelms it. I think this quote from a parent really exemplifies that for me, and I often get a bit tearful when I read this quote, because this is a mother who experienced a child



protection response to extra-familial harm and then experienced a contextual safeguarding one.

They were saying: We want to make this work so you can have the best life. We're not here to take you away [...] not [...] telling us how stupid she is or what horrible mistakes she's making. And it's all her fault, and she should know better. We haven't had any of that this time. It's been very understanding, very calm. (Parent)

There is a lot in that one quote; you could do a whole lecture just on it. But the thing that stands out to me the most is 'it's been very understanding, very calm'. This parent has not experienced a response that has been panicked, risk driven, or overwhelming; where professionals chuck every resource they possibly could at a family (all the interventions that they have not asked for) so that if something goes wrong they can demonstrate they did something. Where they take her away from a family who loves her, and secure her, because they're panicking. These professionals did not just want the bare minimum for her daughter. They did not just want her to survive. They wanted her to have 'the best life'. They wanted her to thrive.

This approach to support meant their response was going to go beyond interventions to help her daughter understand what a healthy relationship is. I've interviewed tens of young women in custody over the years and they could all tell me exactly what a healthy relationship was; they had done all the programmes. But not one of those young women had access to a healthy relationship. The contexts they were in were unsafe. You can't teach someone into finding a healthy relationship. Sure, as a result of the interventions they had received, they could then recognise they were in a really difficult situation; but being able to recognise a bad situation did not change that situation for them. So, when this mother explains how professionals had broader ambitions for her daughter to live a full life, we can see how important that is.

Conclusion

So that's really why common sense is so complicated. To adopt a contextual safeguarding approach we have to like young people, and we often respond to extra-familial harm using systems that don't.



The three-H's introduced in this paper provide a way out of this quagmire of complication. Foregrounding ways of working that are heartfelt, humble, and humanising just might be a way to make common sense that little less complicated; in short, reframing *how* we respond to extra-familial harm rather than simply introducing another policy, process, or partnership into an already cluttered landscape.

To achieve this, we have to challenge a preoccupation with risk, which is really difficult when we're under pressure to demonstrate action.

We have to look beyond interpersonal harms to recognise system harm and structural harm and contextual harm in systems that literally isolate harm to being things that happen just between individual people or groups of people.

We have to be willing to give up our binaries. We have to be willing to work without the safety that binaries often provide: you put the victims over here and the perpetrators over here, the protective responses here and the harmful people over there. You have to be willing to move beyond these binaries, even though that feels destabilising, and respond instead to what people need.

And we have to believe that all of that is actually possible. We have to be hopeful in a pretty cynical world. So, I'm not really surprised that contextual safeguarding is complicated and the common sense of it all feels hard. But I do want to know if you're ready to join me. Thank you.

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About the Kilbrandon Lecturer

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