



Practitioner Briefing #3: Peer-on-peer abuse and exploitation The role of youth offending services in building a local response

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Introduction

Youth offending services throughout England and Wales are at the forefront of working with and supporting young people who have been abused by, and/or who abuse, their peers.

This briefing paper highlights the role of youth offending services in building responses to peer-on-peer abuse, and is the third in the series published by the MsUnderstood Partnership¹ (MSU) to assist the development of local practice. Following briefings on the [nature of peer-on-peer abuse](#) and [ways to audit local practices](#), this document draws upon work underway in the eleven MSU sites, in addition to wider research, to explore:

- a) approaches being taken by youth offending services around the country to map and intervene with peer networks affected by peer-on-peer abuse
- b) ways in which the new assessment tool 'AssetPlus' can assist in the identification of young people affected by peer-on-peer abuse
- c) how intervention plans can adopt a contextual approach to safeguarding young people from peer-on-peer abuse

Peer-on-peer abuse

For the purposes of this briefing, and our work more broadly, the term 'peer-on-peer abuse' refers to all forms of abuse and violence between young people aged 10–18 years, including teenage relationship abuse, child sexual exploitation, serious youth violence, bullying and harmful sexual behaviour. Informed by [research](#) and practice, we know that young people experience peer-on-peer abuse in a range of social environments, including schools and neighbourhoods. As children move into adolescence, and spend a greater amount of time in environments outside of the home, risks within these environments pose an increasing threat to their wellbeing.

Therefore, local responses, including those of youth offending services, need to identify, assess, and intervene in all of the social environments where peer-on-peer abuse occurs – in essence to take a 'contextual' approach to the phenomenon. This includes reflecting on:

¹ MsUnderstood is a partnership between the University of Bedfordshire, Imkaan, and the Girls Against Gangs Project to improve responses to young people's experiences of gender inequality. <http://www.msunderstood.org.uk/who-we-are/>

- How much is **known** about the social environments where young people spend their time and to what extent do the norms in these spaces promote abusive behaviours?
- How much **consideration** is given to vulnerability and resilience factors in these environments, the impact they have on a young person's behaviour and ability to achieve positive change - particularly when compared to the consideration given to risk and protection within the home?
- How does AssetPlus support practitioners to **identify and record** contextual information that can inform interventions in social environments? For example, with a peer-group or at a location or 'hot-spot' in the neighbourhood associated to a young person's abusive behaviours.
- How to **plan** and monitor interventions in social environments as well as with the individual and their family?

Local youth offending responses

While auditing local practice in eleven local authorities, MsUnderstood identified practices within youth offending services that exemplified contextual approaches to peer-on-peer abuse - including the examples below.

Example 1: A youth offending service recognising the specific needs of young women

A partnership between the youth offending service, probation and the violence against women and girls sector resulted in a gendered response to girls and young women involved in the criminal justice system in one local authority. The women-only service offers individual and group based interventions that include support related to gangs and sexual violence, the provision of peer mentors, therapeutic support and group sessions to support young women. The gendered and holistic nature of the service ensures that young women can participate in youth offending interventions in a safe environment, designed to meet their specific needs as both victims and perpetrators.

Example 2: The importance of understanding and responding to peer-groups

Concerns about a peer-group in a local authority area, all of whom were assigned to different youth offending practitioners and social workers, resulted in a multi-agency strategy meeting that focused on the nature of the peer-group, rather than the individuals within it. The meeting initiated a process that:

- Identified links and associations between cases and the young people affected by peer-on-peer abuse
- Mapped the associations between the young people, to establish who were the leaders and who were the followers
- Reflected the new peer-group information in both youth offending and children's social care assessments
- Designed a package of complimentary 1:1 interventions, that when brought together created a co-ordinated, multi-agency response to the peer-group

A contextual approach to assessment and intervention

In order for youth offending practitioners to adopt a contextual response, information about norms, trends and risks within a range of social environments associated with adolescent development and peer-on-peer abuse should be reflected in assessment and intervention, including the use of AssetPlus.

For example, a contextual approach to understanding risks associated to peer-groups, a social environment that youth offending services traditionally hold substantive information about, would include questioning:

- What is the role of the young person you are assessing within their peer-group?
- To what extent is the peer-group of concern being impacted by, or responding to, risk in other social environments, such as the school or neighbourhood of which it is a part?
- While a young person is being supported by a youth offending practitioner, can partner agencies intervene with other environments that

are informing the nature of their peer-group? Such as detached youth workers or safer neighbourhood policing?

- How is the above information documented within assessments and intervention plans?
- How does the youth offending service share this information internally and with external agencies regarding the nature of peer-group influence and the interventions that are required? For example, how are peer-groups mapped between practitioners and how is this information shared with workers from other agencies?
- Do any youth offending service interventions engage whole peer-groups? If not, can any partner agencies develop such an approach? For example, can harmful sexual behaviour interventions be carried out with a peer-group of concern, rather than just with individuals of concern?

The same contextual approach can be applied when youth offending practitioners are assessing an individual's experience of education. A contextual approach would look beyond the individual's record of attendance, attainment and behaviour at school and consider how the wider school environment is informing a young person's behaviour and impacting upon the other social environments in which he/she spends their time. For example:

- Is the school/education placement a safe place for the young person?
- Is the school culture impacted by negative factors, or risks, in other social environments, for example a high rate of serious youth violence, gangs or sexual exploitation in the neighbourhood?
- How is the school responding to risks outside of the school and those within it? For example what support is offered to gang affected young people and what is the school policy and response to sexual bullying and/or the recruitment of young people into exploitative peer networks?

Developing a contextual approach to management and quality assurance

Management and quality assurance processes provide an additional route through which to support youth offending practitioners in adopting a contextual approach to assessment and intervention. Regular supervision should be used to review the extent to which assessments identify the contextual nature of

peer-on-peer abuse, and whether intervention plans seek to address any contextual risk that has been identified. For example:

- If the assessment identifies that parental capacity is being undermined by influences beyond the family home, are plans for parenting support twinned with actions for partner agencies to address that which is impacting parental influence? For example, is there an action to engage the youth service with a peer-group that is impacting upon a young person's relationship with their parent/carer, while that parent/carer also receives parenting input?
- If harmful sexual behaviour is a concern, has it been associated to any particular social space, for example school, and if so are there plans to establish and address the links between that environment and a young person's harmful behaviour?
- If a number of individual risk factors associated with child sexual exploitation are identified at different points in the assessment, such as going missing, appearing with physical injuries or having repeat concerns about sexual health, are they drawn together to demonstrate a cumulative concern about abuse?
- Does the intervention plan identify the partnerships required to intervene with the contextual nature of a young person's vulnerability? For example, are park wardens or safer neighbourhood teams engaged if risk is identified in local parks or high streets? Are housing involved if peer-on-peer abuse has been identified in stairwells? While these services may not work directly with the young person being assessed, they will need to form part of a wider team if interventions are to be targeted where risk has been identified.

Additional questions for auditing your service response to peer-on-peer abuse

While the assessment and planning process provide critical avenues for building a response to peer-on-peer abuse, there are additional questions that youth offending services can consider when auditing the sufficiency of their response to this issue. These questions will assist service managers in establishing whether their workforce has the knowledge, skills and resources to identify and

respond to peer-on-peer abuse. The following questions can be used to assess current strengths and identify areas for development:

- 1) Does the workforce know its local peer-on-peer abuse profile and the young people currently being affected by the issue?
- 2) What are the local forums in which peer-on-peer abuse is discussed, and is the youth offending service linked in with them?
- 3) Do you have trusting partnerships with community safety, housing, the youth service, local schools and others who are responsible for the environments which may be subject to contextual assessment and intervention?

Concluding summary

This briefing paper provides a foundation for building contextual responses to peer-on-peer abuse within youth offending services. It has been developed following a seminar delivered for London's youth offending services, in partnership with the Youth Justice Board, and is intended to share messages with those who were unable to attend on the day. Participants from 18 London boroughs attended the seminar, using the information to begin to develop contextual safeguarding practice, and enhance their responses to peer-on-peer abuse in the process.

Participants stated that as a result of the session they would:

“remember to use a holistic assessment, eg. risks when looking at – child/home/peer-group, school and neighbourhood ... identify contexts, not just people”

“(recognise) the importance of gender specific resources/interventions”

Participants also suggested how they would implement learning from the session in their practice, stating that they would:

“look out for contextualisation/linking environments when quality assuring with greater emphasis on identifying trends and escalation”

“ensure assessments look more closely at safety for young people, in the different areas of their lives”

“consider a ‘girls only’ space for YOS clients and to run our girls group from an external and safe venue”

“improve staff knowledge of local community – most live out of borough and don’t know locality as much as assumed” and
“ensure staff liaise with our anti-social behaviour team when they complete the neighbourhood ASSET section”

“change things for our young people to make it a safer place to live and grow up”

The MsUnderstood Partnership will continue to engage with the YJB to identify opportunities for youth offending services to adopt contextual approaches to adolescent vulnerability. For further information on this work, or to ask questions about this briefing, please contact info@msunderstood.org.uk.

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