



Neighbourhood Observations

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Merve Balci, Ciara Burke and Jenny Lloyd with the
Hackney Contextual Safeguarding Team



Background

Contextual Safeguarding (CS) is an approach to safeguarding that supports practitioners to recognise and respond to the harm young people experience outside of the home.¹ This neighbourhood observation guidance forms part of the *Contextual Safeguarding neighbourhood assessment toolkit* and has been developed by Hackney Children and Families Service with The University of Bedfordshire. This part of the toolkit has been designed to support practitioners to undertake a neighbourhood observation as part of a neighbourhood assessment.

Young people encounter harm in a range of neighbourhood contexts and sometimes in particular locations such as stairwells, takeaways, estates or parks. Research shows that there are factors about the physical landscape itself that can influence the harm young people experience or their feelings of safety, which may be mitigated by changes to the physical landscape. When young people experience harm at home or within the family, practitioners will visit the home and observe the family environment and relations between the young person and their family. When practitioners are carrying out a neighbourhood assessment, observations of the area under assessment can help practitioners to get a better understanding of how the area is used, what is happening there, any potential guardians and changes that might make the area safer. For example, if young people are experiencing harm in a stairwell, visiting the stairwell might highlight any factors that might make the area vulnerable to harm, for example, poor lighting or lack of CCTV.

This neighbourhood observation guidance has been developed to support practitioners to carry out observations in the neighbourhood. The observation form (Appendix A) has been developed based on the work of Reynald² and Smallbone et al.³.

The document includes:

- Guidance for carrying out observations
- Appendix A: an observation template

Reasons for observations

Visiting the area under assessment for the purpose of observation, as opposed to just walking through the area en route to a meeting, is important for building a better understanding of the location under assessment. While the reasons may vary between assessment there are several benefits of doing so. Neighbourhood observations help practitioners to:

- become familiar with the area
- identify aspects of the built environment
- engage community members
- identify potential guardians and place managers
- understand how young people interact with and use the space

¹ Visit www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk for more information.

² Reynald, D.M. (2009). Guardianship in action: Developing a new tool for measurement. *Crime Prevention and Community Safety*, 11, 1, 1-20. Doi: 10.1057/cpcs.2008.19

³ Smallbone, S. W., Rayment-McHugh, S., & Smith, D. (2013). *Preventing youth sexual violence and abuse in West Cairns and Aurukun: Establishing the scope, dimensions and dynamics of the problem*. Brisbane: Griffith University. <https://www.datsip.qld.gov.au/resources/datsima/programs/yvs-report.pdf>

In essence, neighbourhood observations involve visiting the area and observing what is happening there. This is likely to happen at several times throughout the assessment period. However, it is important to go a few times with the intention of observing the area rather than just as part of other assessment activities. The observation template (Appendix A) can support practitioners know what to consider. In addition to using the template it may be helpful to print out a local map and use this to take notes.

Using the template

The template can guide practitioners to consider different aspects of the neighbourhood – these may differ depending on location. The template is intended as a guide, it may need adapting for different assessments. Each section can help practitioners consider different aspects of the location.

- *Description of the location:* what is area under assessment? For example: a whole estate or a stairwell within an estate. Are there any particular aspects worth noting – such as the lighting, visibility etc. The checklist may serve as a prompt of things to consider. .
- *Use of location:* Is it possible to identify harm occurring or evidence of harm for example drug apparatus or evidence of sexual activity. If the referral was made for a certain concern, how does visiting the area put this into context? How are young people using the area, are there any positive uses of space?
- *Guardianship:* Guardians and place managers are people that have responsibility for the area and could provide a potential safeguarding role. This might be security and police or local community members, business owners or those that appear to have a potential positive influence in the area. It may be helpful to consider any opportunities to support adults in the area to become guardians such as providing training.
- *Suggested interventions/ changes:* during observations, practitioners may become aware of potential interventions or ideas that may improve the safety of the area. It is helpful to note these down to ensure they are considered during the planning stage.

Example observations

In Hackney observations were used within context assessments in a number of ways. In one assessment, a practitioner over a period of five visits was better able to understand how young people were using the area. While some partners were considering ways to change the physical landscape, observations allowed the practitioner to understand how these changes might inadvertently reduce the safety of young people. For example, while adding fences may reduce the number of entry points to the estate it may have also reduced the visibility of the area for young people and their ability to leave quickly.

Following a referral relating to concerns of sexual exploitation and drug use in a stairwell, practitioners visited the area and found that the stairwell had limited lighting, the windows were boarded up and there were no emergency exits. These observations formed the basis of the intervention plan.

Have you used the observation template? Please get in touch with any suggestions or comments: jenny.lloyd@beds.ac.uk

Appendix A: Practitioner observation form

Date (incl day):

Practitioner:

Time (to/ from):

Referral from:

Visit number:

Weather during visit:

Consider and provide details of the following:

- Secure doors/ entryways
- CCTV
- Accessibility of entry and exit routes
- Opportunities to access help
- Street lighting
- Location – close to roads, or isolated?
- Bushes/ trees blocking visibility
- Secluded areas
- Community activities/ opportunities (e.g. community centres, parks in use)
- General maintenance of area

Description of location

(e.g. park, stairwell. The size and what is there)

Use of location

Evidence of drugs: Yes No

Drug use or dealing in public: Yes No

Evidence of alcohol use: Yes No

Adults fighting/ arguing: Yes No

Evidence of sexual activity: Yes No

Sexualised behaviour: Yes No

Young people fighting/ arguing Yes No

Positive use of space: Yes No

Other/ details: (e.g. who is at risk of harm here, potential risk factors)

Police presence: Yes No

Security personnel: Yes No

Visible Guardians:
(Adults using the area, residents etc.) Yes N

Place managers
(Businesses, schools, park wardens etc.) Yes N

Did you engage with anyone during the visit? Yes No

Details of people engaged including their views and contact details if relevant:

Further details or map of area

Suggested interventions/ changes