



# Transitional Safeguarding briefing for sector leaders

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## Introduction

This briefing note provides an introduction to the concept of Transitional Safeguarding. It outlines what Transitional Safeguarding is and is not as well as explaining the key principles. It is not intended to be a policy statement, nor does it detail the many ways in which local areas are experimenting and innovating in this space.

This briefing note can be used by anyone interested in, or responsible for safeguarding young people across the interlocking systems for children and adults. It has been drafted collaboratively to demonstrate joint leadership in improving the responses to the safeguarding needs of young people.

Reflecting the United Nations definition of 'youth' as 15 – 24 years<sup>1</sup>, this briefing uses 'young people' to mean people in their mid-teens to mid-twenties.

## The problem in a nutshell

The current binary approach to safeguarding has not always served young people well. The needs of many young people rarely cease upon turning 18. Many harms facing young people can in fact escalate at this point – not least because professional involvement or service support reduces or stops altogether. We also know that cognitive, social and neurobiological development continues well into our mid-twenties (Sawyer et al, 2018).

As a result of the disconnect between the safeguarding systems for children and adults, many young people face a 'cliff edge' and are left without support during this critical life-stage. This is not only damaging for young people, and those who care about them, but is also an inefficient use of public money.

## How did we end up here?

Safeguarding systems for those aged under 18 and over 18 operate to different thresholds, legislative frameworks, eligibility criteria and paradigms – although there are some common features (Cocker et al, 2021). The *Children Act 1989* places a duty on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are in need in their area. Section 17 states that a child can be considered in need if: (a) the child is unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision of services by a local authority, b) if the child's health or development is likely to be significantly impaired, or further impaired, without the provision of such services; or (c) the child is disabled. Additionally, Section 47 of the Act states that, where a local authority has reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, the authority must make enquiries to enable them to decide whether they should take any action to safeguard or promote the child's welfare.

In contrast, statutory safeguarding duties for over 18s rely on the person having formally defined 'care and support needs', as set out in the *Care Act 2014*. Ten types of abuse are described in the statutory guidance<sup>2</sup>:

- > physical abuse
- > domestic violence
- > sexual abuse
- > psychological or emotional abuse
- > financial or material abuse
- > modern slavery
- > discriminatory abuse
- > organisational or institutional abuse
- > neglect
- > self-neglect.

Safeguarding duties apply to an adult who:

- > has care and support needs (whether or not the local authority is meeting any of those needs)
- > is experiencing, or at risk of, abuse or neglect as a result of those care and support needs
- > is unable to protect themselves from this abuse or neglect as a result of their care and support needs.

There are good reasons to limit the bounds of state intervention in people's lives. However, the current binary approach means that many young adults face significant risks and harms without having formal 'care and support needs'. These two very different systems were designed before we knew what we now know about the types of harms facing young people, the impact of trauma into adulthood, and the nature of young people's development and maturation (Holmes, 2021).

## Why Transitional Safeguarding is needed

- > The current binary approach bears significant human and economic costs.
- > Harm, trauma and human development do not stop at 18. Abruptly stopping support at 18 does not align with available evidence.
- > The interconnectedness of harms and adversities requires a highly integrated system of support. Getting 'upstream' requires support that is as early, holistic and person-centred as possible.
- > The issues that undermine young people's safety do not exist neatly within service boundaries. Health needs (mental and physical), learning needs, family functioning, structural disadvantage, peer dynamics, environmental aspects and more intersect to create a young person's sense of safety and wellbeing. Joined up working across partnerships and policy agendas is therefore vital.
- > Statutory safeguarding partners are key leaders of this work. However, system change requires collaboration across partners. The wider health system, schools, colleges, alternative provision, youth sector agencies, the justice sector and the voluntary and community sector all have a key role to play in supporting young people to be safe and feel safe.
- > Safeguarding is a verb, not a noun. In its truest sense, Transitional Safeguarding is everybody's business, spanning prevention, protection and repair. It should be an act we collectively undertake, not a service we send people to.

## What Transitional Safeguarding is...

- > A concept for whole-system change, underpinned by six key principles (Holmes, 2021), explored below.
- > A lens through which to address a multitude of issues relevant to older teenagers and young adults. These include mental ill-health, substance misuse, exploitation, care-experience, violence prevention, health inequalities and more.
- > “Early help for grown-ups” – in other words, it is about developing a multi-agency offer, alongside communities, to support older teenagers and young adults who currently are often not deemed eligible for statutory services.
- > About thinking beyond statutory duties and instead working across all partners to create an offer for young people that is holistic, flexible and person-centred, to help them make the transition to adulthood.

Transitional Safeguarding is defined as an approach to ...  
*‘safeguarding adolescents and young adults fluidly across developmental stages, which builds on the best available evidence, learns from both children’s and adult safeguarding practice and which prepares young people for their adult lives.’*

(Holmes and Smale, 2018).

See the Further Reading section for resources aimed at the health and justice sector, specific advice for those working in safeguarding adults and adults social work roles, and a Transitional Safeguarding curriculum for youth work.

## What it is not...

Transitional Safeguarding is not a set of defined activities or interventions to be delivered. It does not seek to dictate practice through the use of prescribed tools.

- > Transitional Safeguarding is not simply 'transitions' or 'service transfer'. As important as it is to ensure smooth transition between services, this affects the relative minority of young people who are eligible for statutory services as an adult (Cocker et al, 2024).
- > Transitional Safeguarding is not just about statutory safeguarding services working harder – many young people we are worried about will not automatically qualify for adult services. Indeed, many may be better supported by other parts of the local system, including community based and voluntary sector organisations.
- > Transitional Safeguarding is not achieved by creating a standalone service. This will likely create another silo – and Transitional Safeguarding is about trying to make the system more connected and less siloed.
- > Transitional Safeguarding is not just about exploitation (or care experience, or SEND, or mental health). It is about creating system change to defragment the siloes so that *all* young people who need support can get it as they make the journey into adulthood.
- > Transitional Safeguarding is not just about adult social care providing support; it involves all partner agencies and communities working together to enable young people to keep themselves safe and live the life they want to live.

*“Transitional Safeguarding refers to activity that has often fallen outside of the traditional notions of both ‘transitions’ and ‘safeguarding’, where these have sometimes been interpreted through a lens of eligibility, rather than in the wider sense of human experiences and needs.”*

(Department of Health and Social Care, 2021, p.10)



## Key principles of Transitional Safeguarding

*Six intersecting principles describe how a reimagined Transitional Safeguarding system must be:*

<b>Evidence-informed in its approach</b>	This means drawing on knowledge from a variety of sources – research and data, practice wisdom and the expertise of people with lived experience. It means adapting approaches in light of new knowledge and being curious and committed to continuous learning.
<b>Contextual*, or ecological, in its perspective</b>	This means recognising and responding to the harms young people face in a variety of spaces beyond their family and seeking to make these contexts safer rather than only focusing on the individual. It encourages a systemic approach to assessment, intervention and outcome measurement.
<b>Transitional, or developmental, in its design</b>	This means understanding the distinct developmental needs and strengths of this life stage and creating services and pathways that reflect the individualised nature of transition to adulthood. It encourages greater fluidity between children and adult safeguarding processes and requires an active effort to align systems to create a smoother more holistic offer for people being supported.
<b>Relational in its ethos</b>	This means being person-centred and trauma-informed in practice, recognising that meaningful relationships are an important aspect of any therapeutic support. It requires us to adopt a capacity building and empowering approach, so that young people are supported to build resilience and exercise positive control in their lives. It also means using language that is inclusive and respectful, avoiding terminology or expressions that could be victim-blaming.
<b>Actively attentive to issues of equity, equality, diversity and inclusion</b>	This means identifying where people's safety and wellbeing is affected by structural and/or interpersonal discrimination and robustly addressing these within local systems. People's safety and their experiences of support can be affected by racism, ableism, ageism, sexism, classism or other forms of prejudice, and these can occur in tandem with each other. This requires us to adopt an anti-oppressive stance at all times, and recognise the intersectionality of people's lives.
<b>Participative in every aspect</b>	This means adopting a strengths-based approach; respecting young people's expertise and enabling them to coproduce solutions and support rather than being treated as a passive recipient. This is as important at a strategic level as it is in practice and is a key means of promoting a person's sense of self-efficacy, by affording them autonomy and agency.

\* see Firmin 2020

## Challenges and enablers to developing Transitional Safeguarding approaches

Undertaking this kind of whole system change is not easy; a number of challenges face local areas.

Resource pressures can act as a barrier to innovation, affecting the services available and sometimes depleting the professional curiosity and bandwidth for collaborative working. However, it is equally true that the current disconnected approach represents poor value for money. Given the connected nature of harms and adversities facing young people, it is striking that the response to these issues (and the associated funding structures and policy remits) are often highly disjointed. This creates financial inefficiencies. Failing to support young people's recovery from harm and trauma can mean that problems persist or worsen in adulthood, creating higher costs for the public purse, and the resultant costs of young people's unmet safeguarding needs often fall to parts of the system beyond safeguarding services (see Holmes, 2021, for a discussion on this). The underpinning philosophy of Total Place and its successor the Whole Place Community Budgets pilot, is highly relevant here. By mapping the investment and expenditure across partnerships, local leaders can better identify opportunities to meet young people's needs in a more cost-effective way.

Another perceived barrier is the legislative frameworks. As noted above, the *Care Act 2014* articulates eligibility criteria. It is important to note that: "The national eligibility criteria set a minimum threshold for adult care and support needs and carer support needs which local authorities must meet.... Authorities can also decide to meet needs that are not deemed to be eligible if they chose to do so."<sup>3</sup> Put simply, and notwithstanding the resource constraint noted above, the *Care Act 2014* tells us who we must support, it does not limit who we can support. Indeed, the *Care Act 2014* prevention principle emphasises the importance of preventing or delaying or reducing the need for care and support and can be applied to young people whose experiences mean they may need support to live safely.

There are barriers to system change from a criminal justice perspective, as turning 18 marks a significant shift in how individuals are treated within the justice system – moving from a child-centred approach to a more punitive one across policing, courts, and prisons as well as probation. That said, there is a growing recognition of the distinct needs of young adults within the justice system and many existing regulatory and policy frameworks align with the key principles of Transitional Safeguarding (Holmes & Smith, 2022). Recent research highlights how Transitional Safeguarding can be more effectively applied within youth justice and probation, even within the current legal framework (HMIP, 2025).

A further barrier, or perceived barrier, relates to issues of consent, capacity and information sharing for young people aged over 18. These need to be thoughtfully navigated, and legal literacy is vital to defensible decision making. It is important to remember that: "A person cannot consent to abuse. Having capacity and 'making unwise decisions' is not consenting to be abused." (DHSC, 2021). Transitional Safeguarding activity should never undermine the rights of young people. As noted in the key principles, Transitional Safeguarding requires a highly participative approach, with young people's rights and expertise respected throughout, in order to afford them as much choice and control as possible (Cocker et al, 2021).

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3 Para 6.100 [www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-act-statutory-guidance/care-and-support-statutory-guidance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-act-statutory-guidance/care-and-support-statutory-guidance)



Whilst there is no definitive ‘blueprint’ for success, a variety of enablers are emerging from local areas seeking to develop a Transitional Safeguarding response. These include:

- Incorporating Transitional Safeguarding into workstreams focused on addressing health inequalities through Integrated Care Systems. The imperative to reduce demand on more acute health services lends itself to a focus on young people.
- Enshrining Transitional Safeguarding key principles into corporate parenting responsibilities, the Care Leaver Offer and the Care Leaver’s Covenant. Although Transitional Safeguarding is not only for care-experienced young people, they are a key cohort to focus on given evidence that the journey to adulthood can be particularly difficult for care-experienced young people.
- Strategic collaboration, for instance, developing a shared Transitional Safeguarding priority, collaboratively led by the Children’s Safeguarding Partnership, Safeguarding Adults Board and Community Safety Partnerships (Walker-McAllister and Cooper, 2021)
- Leveraging the violence reduction agenda as a vehicle for developing Transitional Safeguarding; learning from the work of Violence Reduction Units where activity is targeted at young people up to age 24.<sup>4</sup>
- Leveraging commissioning activity to proactively address the challenges created by the current disconnected system. Examples include joint commissioning; adapting commissioning frameworks to enable providers to respond more flexibly to gaps; and capturing data about unmet needs and gaps in provision (often held by panels and services) to inform longer-term strategic commissioning.
- Engaging education partners. Schools, colleges, and alternative provision are important players in identifying young people who might need support as they approach adulthood, and in contributing to a local offer for these young people.
- Drawing on the expertise of young people and those who care about them to understand which young people face an abrupt end to support, and to coproduce new approaches to practice and service design. Within this, it is important to engage young people who are less often heard.
- Developing professionals’ knowledge of legal literacy and in particular mental capacity, to support a nuanced understanding of fluctuating capacity and consent.
- Collaborative and creative workforce development. Bringing together professionals, at all levels and across a diverse range of agencies, to learn from each other. Knowledge and expertise exists across the local ecosystem, so tapping into this and creating structured opportunities for peer learning and knowledge exchange is a cost-effective way of strengthening professional skills and confidence. Thinking beyond traditional training can be helpful, such as action learning sets, group supervision, problem-solving panels, and team-based learning.

## Emerging examples

Transitional Safeguarding is an emergent and ambitious concept and each local area needs to develop their ideas based on local context. There are some promising examples emerging from local areas who have started the journey.

### Haringey

Following the death of a young person who had left care, a local multi-agency learning review suggested the need for a Transitional Safeguarding Protocol to be introduced across Haringey. The Council's Chief Executive brought together a range of Haringey partners at a local Transitional Safeguarding event to start their journey.

The Haringey Safeguarding Adult Board and Haringey Children's Safeguarding Partnership agreed to develop a Transitional Safeguarding programme of work as a joint strategic priority.

The local authority undertook an audit of 16 case files of people in receipt of care and support and other acute services, looking at their experiences of these services over time, including the contact that just over half of these young people had with services where they were deemed not to be eligible for ongoing support.

Young adults and family members have been engaged in leading events and coproducing ideas. Their feedback, along with the insights from the learning review and audit informed the development of the Transitional Safeguarding Protocol.

The protocol focuses on the following groups: care-experienced young people; young people with physical or learning disabilities, educational or mental health needs, autistic young people; and young people who have been sexually or criminally exploited, or who have been previously known to the youth justice services. The Protocol intentionally includes young adults at risk who may not meet service criteria.

The Protocol was developed jointly by officers from Children's and Adults' services and has included engagement with all partners through both Boards' representatives. The associated action plan and 'Partnership Pledge' sets out the commitment of partners to:

- > reduce the 'cliff edge' experiences for young people
- > move practice away from a concrete application of eligibility criteria based on age, to an approach that acknowledges vulnerability and unpredictability of human experience,
- > model strengths-based, trauma-informed, relational practice
- > consider structural inequalities.

A dedicated Transitional Safeguarding post has been funded within Haringey's Care Leavers service. Successes to date include joint commissioning of housing provision, and work with social housing colleagues to develop a shared housing resource with onsite tenancy support for vulnerable young people

Joint strategic leadership has ensured continuity and commitment across all partner organisations in Haringey working with young people to improve their safeguarding practice and processes. The independent Chair of the Safeguarding Adults Board and the Designated Strategic Partner (as chair of the Children's Safeguarding Partnership Board) have continued to ensure that both Boards meet together bi-annually to review the work undertaken and support and engage all partners.

(adapted from Cocker et al, 2024)

## Northumberland

At a strategic level, the Children and Adults Safeguarding Partnerships were integrated in 2022. Transitional Safeguarding was a strategic priority, aligned with a Think Family/Life course approach. Local drivers came from several joint (children and adult) learning reviews, which identified areas of improvement such as:

- > the need for a Transitional Safeguarding Protocol
- > the need for people to understand each other's roles and responsibilities
- > improving legal literacy of practitioners
- > early identification and response to trauma.

There were several initiatives already available within Northumberland to support good transitions planning. This includes: an all-age Strategic Exploitation sub-group; a range of shared CPD across children's and adults' services; a transitions policy; and a transitions panel that reviews the support for young people aged 14+ who may require care post-18.

An audit of case files concerning young people with Transitional Safeguarding needs was carried out, to explore how unresolved trauma could increase risks in later adult life if not responded to appropriately in early adulthood. The learning from the audit showed that trauma and adversity needs to be considered in assessments and planning at every stage. For young people moving between children and adult services, separate assessments and plans were not always joined up at the point of transition. Restrictive interpretation of Care Act eligibility around 'care and support needs' can result in 'screening out' young people.

Key learning includes the need for strategic 'buy-in', as this enables access to resources and to build capacity. Starting with small steps is important. Transitional Safeguarding requires creativity, collaboration, and culture change; it is an ongoing journey.

Northumberland Adolescent Services now works with young people to age 25. The 14+ social work team uses a multi-agency transition protocol to ensure smooth transition at 18 where young people are identified who need adult support, who are at risk of harm or abuse and continue to be at risk into adulthood. Key meetings include quarterly Transitions Panels and individual transition meetings with children and adults' staff. Substance misuse services hold monthly consultation meetings to identify young people who require ongoing support and treatment after 18 and the assertive outreach worker engages with the young person. Probation has a direct link with the Youth Justice Service and have a 'transition discussion' about who is best placed to work with young people on offending orders after 18. Adult Housing services attend Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Protocol meetings or Joint Housing Protocol meetings to explore accommodation and support needs for care-experienced young people post-18.

(adapted from Cocker et al, 2024)

## Kingston

The Vulnerable Adolescents Supported into Adulthood (VASA) Panel operates as a multi-agency partnership within the Kingston and Richmond boroughs. It focuses on young people who remain at risk of contextual harm despite prior intervention efforts. The panel provides support during the transition into adulthood, extending up to the age of 25, to ensure that individuals facing complex challenges receive appropriate safeguarding and intervention. Local data shows a notable reduction in Kingston's Integrated Offender Management (IOM) cohort of 18-25-year-olds since the VASA became operational.

Kingston Community Safety Team commissioned a research project to build upon the VASA Panel, in order to understand what is working well and what could be developed in relation to their emerging Transitional Safeguarding approach. Focus groups and development days were held with multi-agency professionals, from strategic leaders to colleagues in practice roles. A comprehensive document review alongside observations of VASA and IOM panels provided an analysis of commonalities, differences and gaps between these panels.

Four key development areas emerged:

- Further strengthening the VASA infrastructure, revising referral processes, raising awareness of the panel and its benefits.
- Monitoring and evaluation – strengthening the voice of young people in monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of VASA, enhancing data collection and sharing, and ensuring local strategic boards are holding agencies accountable for their contribution and engagement.
- Strategic commissioning and problem-solving – ensuring rich insights about young people's needs and any gaps in local provision, directly inform strategic commissioning activity and strategic leaders' long-term planning.
- Boundary spanning. The inter-agency chairs group is a good example of boundary spanning strategic leadership, this needs to be mirrored at every level of the partnership, and across geographical boundaries as well as professional boundaries. Shared learning events, shared strategic priorities, developing shared action plans, and developing shared vision statements are all mechanisms that support collaborative working across boundaries.

In taking forward to recommendations, the community safety teams in Kingston and Richmond, along with Achieving for Children, are developing a theory of change for the VASA. Immediate changes underway include:

- Flexing the age group further to better support young people as they transition into adulthood.
- Creating platforms for young people to share their views and provide feedback and inform continuous development and improvement.
- Exploring new collaborative case management platforms, to improve the system infrastructure and information sharing across panels.

Adult Social Care colleagues discussed this work and VASA as part of the recent CQC inspection, where the borough received a 'Good' rating.

## Further resources

- > The LGA's one-stop shop for Transitional Safeguarding resources
- > Original *Transitional Safeguarding* briefing (Research in Practice, 2018)
- > A *short animation* explaining what Transitional Safeguarding is and why we need it
- > *Bridging the gap – Transitional Safeguarding and the role of social work with adults* (DHSC, 2021)
- > *Transitional Safeguarding and justice* (HMIP, 2022)
- > *Transitional Safeguarding and health* (Research in Practice, 2023)
- > *National Youth Work Curriculum: Transitional Safeguarding* (NYA, 2023)
- > *Transitional Safeguarding in youth justice and probation services: A scoping study* (HMIP, 2025)

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