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Are you being heard?

Key themes from our supervision of Designated Safeguarding Leads and their deputies.

March 2026

Introduction

Safeguarding Network is a leading provider of supervision services to education settings across England. These one to one and group sessions provide unique insight into the issues facing safeguarding leads today, with the supervision sessions providing dedicated spaces for discussions, led by the needs of those being supervised.

What is clear is the importance of supervision for safeguarding leads and their deputies, with this being evidenced by the first key issue of workload. The safeguarding lead role is one of the most important roles in the setting but can often remain an additional role for a member of the senior leadership team, with supervision showing there being an increasing number of primary heads who are also the Designated Safeguarding Lead.

We have asked our supervisors to provide us with the main issues that come up in their discussions in supervision and have identified 7 key themes impacting Designated Safeguarding Leads and their deputies in 2025.

Over 2,000 hours
of supervision provided in 2025

More than 5,000
DSLs and their deputies supervised

Over 215 settings
benefitted from our supervision services

7 key themes
emerging from the supervision sessions

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Executive summary

Looking at 7 key themes, this report highlights the significant pressures facing Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) and safeguarding teams across education settings in England. Rapid societal changes, increased visibility of child safeguarding through high profile cases, widespread technology use, and the long-term effects of the pandemic have intensified children's vulnerabilities and the complexity of safeguarding work.

While the responsibilities of DSLs have expanded, the support structures around them have not kept pace.

1. **Workload** - DSLs operate amid rising demand, stretched external services, and increasingly complex cases. Safeguarding often becomes a "catch-all," drawing DSLs into many different areas. Deputy DSLs who carry substantial safeguarding duties often report limited authority to enact change. Supervision sessions show that DSLs frequently experience emotional exhaustion, isolation, and decision-making pressures.

2. **Safeguarding and attendance** - Absence may not be a safeguarding concern, but all absence should be considered through a safeguarding lens. Absence can correlate with socio-economic disadvantage, mental health needs, and exposure to harm. DSLs often have to navigate the ambiguity between safeguarding thresholds and normal attendance fluctuation whilst interpreting risk accurately. We have more information and support on our blog.

3. **Special Educational Needs** - Although having special educational needs (SEN) is not a safeguarding issue in itself, schools and colleges in England face mounting pressure with rising numbers of children with SEN. Educational settings - from early years to universities - are struggling to provide adequate support, especially amid budget cuts. These pressures are reflected in supervision sessions, where DSLs frequently seek help managing complex needs, addressing gaps in safeguarding, for example around online safety and managing what seem to be overwhelming tasks.

4. **Behaviour** - With limited evidence about which behaviour strategies are most effective, conflicting information and guidance about the best ways to manage challenging behaviour, supervisees are using supervision to explore options. The landscape is further complicated by the fast-moving influence of social media, online trends, and harmful influencers, which can shape peer cultures, fuel misogyny, and create unsafe environments, with DSLs having to help steer the response with risk informed decisions.

5. **Relationships with Parents and Families** - DSLs report increasingly encountering hostility, especially during safeguarding conversations involving allegations, bullying, or family conflict. Digital communication has amplified aggression and expectations for instant responses, while misinformation in closed social media groups can escalate challenges. Acrimonious parental separation, threats from parents, and heightened emotional distress can also contribute to difficult relationships between schools and parents / carers.

6. **Multi-Agency Working.** Schools play a central role in safeguarding, yet DSLs report significant inconsistencies in local authority thresholds, rejected referrals, poor information sharing, and delays. Many feel they are left managing cases requiring statutory intervention. The 2023 changes to Working Together - allowing non-social-care professionals to lead Child in Need assessments - have also raised concerns about workload, expertise, and feasibility. This will be an interesting year with the introduction of multi-agency child protection teams (more information on our blog).

7. **Community-Based Issues.** Local and national events shape safeguarding challenges, from extremism, youth violence and gang activity to cost-of-living pressures, leading to issues for schools such as increased hunger, behavioural incidents, and absenteeism. Schools also frequently absorb the effects of community trauma, including unexpected child deaths, for which many feel underprepared.

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1. Workload

The last decade has seen significant societal change, along with changed understanding of the societies in which we live. This has been partly shaped by national events (for example the murders in Southport of three young girls by a 17 year old, the criminal trial of the father and step mother of Sara Sharif and political debate around whether there should be further enquiries into child exploitation), but also technological advances, such as the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence and the associated further blurring of boundaries between real and fake.

Accompanying this are profile raising occurrences, such as last year's Adolescence on Netflix whose viewing figures put it into the top 10 of Netflix's most watched English language shows of all time. Alongside all of this, the lasting and significant impact of the global pandemic should not be underestimated, with this having ramifications through many sectors of society and impacting at the heart of how we function and interact as humans.

Whether the vulnerabilities of the children that we work with has increased, or whether we have a better understanding, the Designated Safeguarding Lead is the crucial to how these challenges are navigated.

Annex C of Keeping Children Safe in Education sets out the role of the Designated Safeguarding Lead, sitting at 7 pages in length, having grown from two pages in the first version in 2015. The role requires the post holder to ensure that students are safe acting as the main point of contact whenever anyone has concerns, that government policy and guidance is implemented, local policies and procedures are adhered to, multi-agency relationships are fostered and maintained and everyone in the setting is adequately skilled and regularly updated about safeguarding matters.

Designated Safeguarding Leads therefore need to be vigilant, empathic and able to take the lead in difficult, emotive situations, working against a backdrop of reducing services, all leading to an overstretched system which often has to pick up for collapsing external support services.

Within all this, safeguarding is emotional. Designated Safeguarding Leads not only need to work to keep children safe but also support the staff working directly with that child or group, often absorbing the emotional stress of others in order to support them. The role of the Designated Safeguarding Lead can therefore be isolating with limited people, if anyone, to turn to.

Supervision sessions are giving supervisors a first hand view of how these pressures are affecting Designated Safeguarding Leads and safeguarding teams.

1. Workload

Throughout 2025, our supervisors have helped supervisees recognise and manage the emotional demands of the role, understand the stress it creates, review their workload, and develop plans to make it more manageable. Many supervisors note that high workloads and resulting burnout rarely stem from a single issue; instead, they arise from a combination of factors.

One common example is where we see safeguarding and behaviour management issues going hand in hand, drawing Designated Leads into situations that could be handled differently, with safeguarding becoming a default catch all. As a result, many supervisees feel unable to see a clear way through the challenges they face. Supervision provides the space to step back, see the bigger picture, and break it down into manageable steps.

For some supervisees, issues stem from feeling that they lack authority or are not being kept in the loop by senior leaders. Keeping Children Safe in Education sets out that the Designated Safeguarding Lead should be "an appropriate senior member of staff, from the school or college leadership team" (2025, p.171), however in some cases whilst the named Designated Safeguarding Lead meets this requirement, a large amount of the day-to-day work is completed by Deputy Leads.

Individuals in these roles are often trained to the same level and undertake all the tasks of the Designated Lead, but are not necessarily in a senior role, and may be based within a wider pastoral team. There is nothing wrong with this approach, however there is a need for the individuals in this situation to be able to act with the relevant knowledge and authority so that there is a consistent approach to safeguarding throughout the setting or Trust.

Where individuals are in this situation, we have observed that there can be feelings of hopelessness and an inability to effect positive change (e.g. "I would like to do this but cannot get approval."). When this sits alongside the issues already noted in this section, it is an additional barrier to overcome.

A final theme in this section is the impact of budgets. School budgets are already stretched, with the TES magazine reporting in November 2025 that school funding is projected to fall by up to 4% in real terms.

Safeguarding comes with its own (mainly hidden) costs related to time and expectations, and often there is no specific budget for safeguarding. Supervisees tell us that there are often difficult decisions to be made - for example do they have supervision, or do they attend training to enhance their knowledge? And then there is the consideration of developing the wider school knowledge and culture around safeguarding.

1. Workload

Have you thought about?

Think about how you can manage your time effectively. Are there tasks that you do which are not strictly safeguarding, but you have ended up with over time? Can these be passed to someone more appropriate? A good way to think about such tasks is the raw cost to the school – what is the cost if you complete the task, compared to the cost if someone more appropriate completes the task?

Are you able to recognise when you are becoming stressed? Do you know what the symptoms of burn-out are? What would you do if you started experiencing any of these symptoms – would you carry on, or would you act on it?

Do you have a supervisory space where you can offload, reflect and discuss areas concerning you?
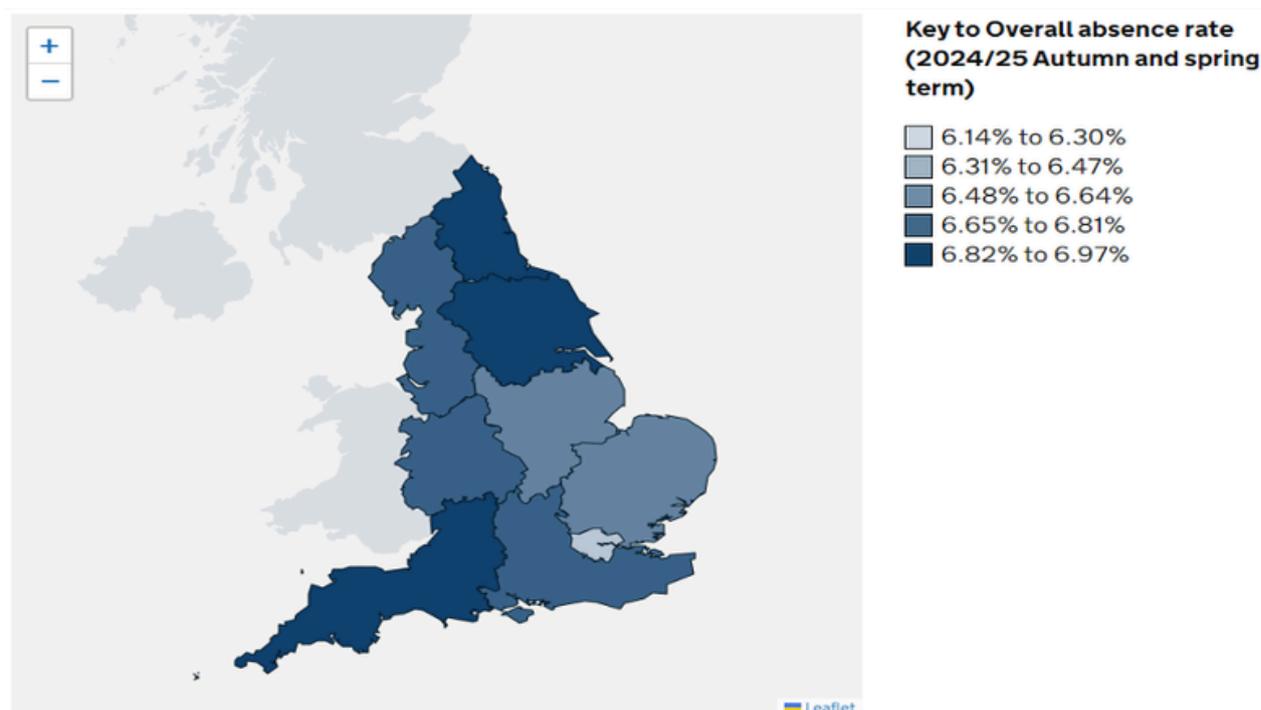
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2. Safeguarding and attendance

A key area of discussion within supervision session are the links between safeguarding and attendance. As Working Together to Improve School Attendance (2024) advises, "attendance is the essential foundation to positive outcomes for all pupils including their safeguarding and welfare and should therefore be seen as everyone's responsibility in school." (p.11).

However, particularly since lockdowns related to the coronavirus epidemic, absence, including persistent and severe absence, have remained a headline challenge for educators.

Government data shows that the headline figure is falling. The latest data suggests that 6.63% of all pupils across all setting types were absent in the Autumn and Spring Terms of 2024/25. However, with a total headcount of just over 9 million children in school in England in the last academic year, this represents around 600,000 children who miss school across the academic year, with the highest rates being in Year 9, 10 and 11.

Reasons for absence vary significantly. Over half of all absence in 2024/25 was attributed to illness, whilst around a fifth of those who were absent were classed as persistently absent (10% or more of school sessions missed) and around 2% of those who were absent missed 50% or more of available school sessions. As shown by the map below, there are also regional variations in absence:

Source: Department for Education.
Geographical Variations. Pupil absences in schools in England. 2024/25

2. Safeguarding and attendance

Pupils who are absent may fall into clear categories, helping you know how to assist. For example, there is growing awareness of a cohort of children who are experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), a severe anxiety or mental health issue tied to school attendance. The concept of EBSA moves from a traditional viewpoint of school refusal to an understanding that lived experiences can make school feel overwhelming or threatening. We've more information with free resources on EBSA on our blog.

Another challenge for education is the rise of 'duvet days', with growing numbers taking a day off here and there (Bett, 2025) and research suggesting that 97% of parents see their child's mental health as being just as important as their academic success.

We know that absence can be a key indicator of potential harm. A serious case review in Oxfordshire published in July 2025 following the death of a 10 year old child as a result of neglect set the challenge around how professionals can work together to quickly spot signs which include poor school attendance in a way that make sure the child's needs are met.

We also know that it is not just risks within the family, a 2025 thematic review in Bradford in relation to exploitation of three boys identified that a significant feature of their education included high levels of absence, behaviour that was challenging to support, and difficult relationships with others.

In supervision sessions, much of the discussion in this area has been around when absence becomes a safeguarding matter. The complexity of this is evidenced by recent research (van Poortvliet, 2026) which used data from the Millenium cohort study and correlated this with data from the DfE National Pupil Database to consider the determinants of absence.

The research found that whilst socio-economic factors are strong predictors of unauthorised absence: "This paper demonstrates a wide range of factors that influence absence, including several previously untested factors. It shows that the amount and type of absence that a pupil accumulates is a signal of other factors within their life," (p.11)

The current Ofsted Framework reinforces the need for absence to be understood, requiring school leaders to not only know their attendance figures, but also understand what their figures mean - posing the question of why?

Supervision allows Designated Safeguarding Leads and deputies the space to think about individuals and / or cohorts of children - what is and is not known, and how, if possible, can we fill in the gaps of what we know.

2. Safeguarding and attendance

Have you thought about?

What does the student's experience look like day-to-day?

What is your hypothesis around absence for each student? Hold these lightly, recognising there may be factors you're not sighted on.

Is there anything in the home, school or the transition between that makes attendance difficult? Are these safeguarding issues?

How are we working with other agencies to address the issues we discover?

What are your routes for testing any hypotheses?

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3. Special education needs

The presence of identified Special Education Needs is not, in itself a safeguarding matter. However, education in England faces intense scrutiny as schools and colleges grapple with rising numbers of pupils with identified special educational needs (SEN), increasing numbers of incidents of behaviour that are challenging to deal with, and complex safeguarding challenges.

From early years through higher education, these issues have been exacerbated by funding shortfalls, staffing shortages, and the aftershocks of recent world events. School leaders warn that the system is at a breaking point: a parliamentary committee noted in 2025 that support for children with SEN "is reaching, or arguably has already reached, crisis point" despite increased funding. At the same time, safeguarding concerns - from online influences to extremist ideologies - are multiplying.

Supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities has become one of the most pressing challenges in English education. Nearly one in five pupils in England - over 1.7 million children - have identified SEN, including about 500,000 with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) that entitle them to specialised support. According to a 2025 report by the County Councils Network, EHCPs rose to a record 638,000 in 2024-25, and projections foresee as many as 840,000 EHCPs by 2028-29, roughly one in 20 young people (County Councils Network, 2025). EHCPs are also part of a wider political debate due to the ballooning costs and are set to feature in the Schools White Paper. In the last budget the Office for Budgetary Responsibility reported that without changes to the system there would be a £6 billion shortfall (Schools Week, 26th November 2025).

Across all levels - from nursery to university - this crisis poses a risk to educational equity. Early years providers report more children arriving with developmental delays or disabilities but without adequate support funding. Primary schools must balance learning for all while adapting curricula for pupils with complex needs, which can be especially challenging in larger classes. At secondary and further education, staff note growing numbers of adolescents with mental health conditions or neurodiversity (for example autism / ADHD) who need adjustments and support plans. Universities too have seen rising enrolments of students with disabilities and mental health needs, leading to expanded disability support offices and use of the Disabled Students' Allowance.

The complexity of managing SEND is echoed throughout our supervision sessions. Many supervisees report pressures in their settings relating to SEND, for example support being the victim of decreasing school budgets and teaching assistant time having to be reduced due to there being no other savings possible. This reduction in people on the ground then means increased demands on the remaining staff to meet the additional needs of children and whilst managing the behaviour in the class as a whole, with increased pressure on heads and designated safeguarding leads to come up with solutions.

3. Special education needs

Feedback suggests that discussions in supervision regularly look at how to address the complexity associated with supporting children with additional needs and helping them understand how they can keep themselves safe. One recent example involved looking at how to use online tools to help and support a cohort of children with additional needs, whilst also providing them with the skills they need in order to keep themselves safe online. Arguably, online safety is part of the wider curriculum, however it was noted that for some students, their knowledge of computers outstrips that of those who are tasked with teaching them about keeping themselves safe online, leading to a disconnect between what is taught and the lived reality for the child.

Supervisors report that for some Designated Safeguarding Leads it can be difficult to know where to start, the enormity of the task proving overwhelming. In such cases, supervision is used to break down the overall issue into smaller chunks, which are more manageable and as a whole then help to make the overall situation less daunting. Taking a task centred approach also aids the formulation of an action plan which is achievable and can then be revisited at the next supervision session and built on, as well as any barriers identified.

Have you thought about?

How you manage the competing issues of additional needs and resource availability?

How do you address competing needs from a number of sources whilst ensuring that the impact on the senior leadership team and staff team is manageable?

How increasing online risks, extremism, and behavioural challenges intersect with the needs of children with SEND, and what training or systems may be required to keep them safe?

How you can manage the gap between children's digital abilities and staff knowledge?

How you ensure pupils with additional needs receive effective, realistic online-safety education?

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4. Behaviour

Student behaviour has been widely reported as deteriorating in the wake of the pandemic, with a report in the Guardian in 2024 quoting the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders as saying school systems are on the brink of collapse because of funding and support shortages.

Whether the situation is as dire as the headline suggest, the management of behaviour is a complex path to walk, with possible solutions being the subject of debate in a variety of forums. In 2024 the Nuffield Foundation reviewed available literature and found that there was only weak evidence on which behaviour strategies are effective. In a separate report, the Education Endowment Foundation found that both targeted interventions and universal approaches have positive effects, meaning there is no one size fits all approach. Reinforcing this view, 2023 research by the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition found that parents reported that for their children, experiencing behaviour management techniques made existing mental health difficulties worse.

There have also been differing views on the use of exclusion, for example research published in the British Educational Research Journal (2025) concluded that "internal exclusion is a very widely used but likely discriminatory and harmful practice." A DfE blog in January 2026 however suggested that internal exclusion can be used as part of behaviour management whilst sending a child home can risk further disengagement from education. Coming into force in April 2026, the revised guidance on restrictive interventions, including the use of reasonable force, in schools is clear that more emphasis should be on support, prevention and de-escalation.

A complex field is further complicated by the real time impact of social media and influencers. We are likely to have all seen the clip of the Prime Minister joining in with the viral 67 hand gesture in a primary school late 2025 (which led to him being told off).

Although some crazes are harmless and without meaning, and others have a positive aim (for example the #MeToo movement), yet others are more sinister in nature. Influencers like Andrew Tate glorify a hyper-masculine lifestyle where women are demeaned; pornographic content (often violent or degrading) is easily accessible to adolescents; and peer cultures can normalize harassing girls. This can quickly contribute to creating an environment in which female students and staff can feel unsafe or belittled, whilst male students can develop distorted ideas of gender relations.

Some crazes can be fast moving and fade away relatively quickly (e.g. the 67 hand gesture), whilst others have more longevity, and often supervision is used as a forum to discuss the latest issue (be that a harmless craze or something more serious, such as a rise in misogynist incidents), looking at appropriate management plans, but also discussing the impact on the school culture, and how this can be effectively monitored, responded to, and managed.

4. Behaviour

Specific events on a local, national and international level can also have a noticeable impact in school populations, with supervisees discussing how children's behaviour can reflect these events, again requiring adaptability and rapid planning. Such events can be individualised to one specific setting (for example managing the fall-out of gang related serious youth violence in the immediate local area), whilst others can see the same issues replicated across settings throughout the country (for example increases in racially motivated incidents).

In all cases, the value of supervision is significant – providing a safe place for the supervisee to consider not only practical responses which help to keep children and young people safe in the long term, but also the emotional impact of managing often difficult and stressful situations.

Have you thought about?

How do you review your behaviour management policies and procedures to ensure that they remain effective, yet fair and proportionate?

How are behaviour policies communicated to children, staff and parents / carers?

What capacity is there in the setting to share the responsibility for behaviour management?

How does your setting respond to new crazes? How do you keep staff informed? Is this a shared responsibility or does this just sit with the Designated Safeguarding Lead?

How does your setting's culture and curriculum address longer term issues such as misogyny and harassment?

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5. Relationships with parents and families

Parents and carers are broadly recognised as key partners in education. A review of government and Ofsted data suggests that overall, parents have become more involved and vocal in their children's education than ever, but trust and alignment between families and schools have been strained by new challenges, leading observers to debate whether the parent-education partnership has improved or deteriorated in recent years.

Parents engage in various ways across the different educational phases from regular, if not daily communication in early years settings through to more distant and formal communication as children progress through secondary school and beyond. The pandemic catalysed new modes of engagement: schools and parents alike grew accustomed to digital communication and remote involvement, and this continues to influence the relationship.

Effective communication is the bedrock of trust in the parent-school relationship. Surveys suggest that most parents feel able to communicate with their child's school and trust their teachers, but there are nuances. According to a 2025 Department for Education panel survey, 78% of parents agreed that there are staff at their child's school with whom they feel comfortable discussing their child's mental health or other concerns. This indicates a generally high level of trust in school staff approachability and suggests that most parents know whom to turn to at school if issues arise. Consistently, around 77% of parents said the support provided by their child's school was helpful when it came to wellbeing or mental health needs. These figures have remained stable since 2024, showing that a strong majority of parents continue to have confidence in their school's supportiveness and the openness of communication channels.

The COVID-19 crisis initially saw a remarkable display of trust and goodwill between parents and schools – families were suddenly thrust into supporting learning at home and generally expressed appreciation for teachers' efforts in an unprecedented situation. Many teachers reported feeling more valued by parents during remote learning, and parents of younger children, in particular, noted improved parent-teacher relationships during that period. Yet, as schools returned to normal operations, some strains in the parent-school "social contract" emerged. By late 2023, Ofsted's Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman observed a "disturbing shift" in some parents' attitudes, noting that the "unwritten agreement" between parents and schools had weakened since COVID.

Whilst the suggestion is that home school relationships are generally positive, Designated Safeguarding Leads and their teams can face higher levels of hostility, often linked to the nature of the conversations that they have to have with parents and carers. Supervisees tell us that they are often having to support angry and upset parents and carers who do not agree with what the staff member is saying to them or feel that they or their child have been wronged in some way and so are looking for resolution.

5. Relationships with parents and families

Common themes include parents refusing to engage with plans that may indicate that their child needs support or may be accountable for what has happened (for example in cases of bullying and sexually harmful behaviour) or supporting work with their child that will repair relationships with peers.

With some conversations being about child protection matters and the school having concerns that children are potentially being harmed, on occasions we hear of supervisees being threatened with repercussions for their actions, with this being of particular concern for supervisees if they live in the same area that the school is based. In these circumstances, supervisors provide support to look at what the threat may be, help the supervisee to risk assess and make decisions based on that assessment.

Our training on 'courageous conversations' with families explores these dynamics in some depth, recognising the levels of anxiety that occur for families and also school staff and modelling approaches towards more effective engagement and work.

Designated Safeguarding Leads also look for advice and support around working with parents where there has been an acrimonious separation. Often the main point of contact between the separated parties is their child, and it can be the case that the parents will attempt to get the school on their side, going against the other parent. Education law and guidance is clear that unless there are specific reasons for not doing so, both parents have equal rights to information about their child, and schools cannot and should not get drawn into taking positions. This however can serve to frustrate the parents further as they are not being successful in getting others onside.

Finally, the ever-increasing use of social media and apps continues to have a noticeable impact. Supervisees tell us that parents and carers can message through social media and apps at any time and often expect an immediate response, regardless of the time of day or day of the week. When this is not forthcoming, this can lead to increasingly heightened messages. As is often seen across wider social media channels, supervisees tell us that they often receive angry and aggressive emails and texts, whereas there is less anger when approached face to face, as though the medium of technology removes internal filtering about what is and is not acceptable to say. Supervisees also tell us that social media can hamper management of the spread of information, particularly if there is a serious issue being dealt with, as often there are active closed groups on social media (for example WhatsApp and Facebook) which can end up being a source of misinformation, amplifying rumours making it difficult to counter and potentially escalating already difficult situations.

Have you thought about?

Is a wider level of SLT / governance support available to you when a closed social media group targets you or a colleague? Does this include legal support?

Have you a defined step by step model of working with parents and the emerging trend of expressed entitlement by parents - often this is not grounded in the real-life situation?

Have you set clear boundaries with parents on communication and when to expect a response to a request or message?

Have you set clear boundaries about contacting staff on via social media channels?

Do you have clear policies for staff to reinforce the boundaries on social media and parental contact?

What support is available for staff from SLT / the wider Trust (where applicable) when approaches are made in the community.

What ways does your setting seek to bridge relationships with families and local communities to encourage student-focused responses?

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6. Multi-agency working

Safeguarding and child protection in England operate within a complex multi-agency framework designed to prevent harm and promote children's welfare. Schools are uniquely positioned within this system due to their universal reach and sustained contact with children and young people. Legal reforms and guidance have reinforced the expectation that safeguarding is a shared responsibility, requiring effective collaboration between education and statutory safeguarding partners.

National statistics show that schools and educational settings are consistently one of the largest sources of referrals to children's social care. However, the system is not perfect. The most recent Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Annual Report (2024) reflects that there remain systemic and cultural challenges around multi-agency information sharing. The report continues that "Equally, if not more critical, is the importance of practitioners having sound professional relationships that enable good and challenging conversations about their work." (p.19) Systemic challenges include delays in communication and uncertainty around thresholds.

Multi-agency working is a common theme in our supervision sessions. Within this there is a significant discussion about thresholds and not only variation between local authorities and other agencies, but supervisees frequently report variations within the same local authority about what they will and will not accept. Schools invariably hold significant information about the children in their care, and are well positioned to see changes over time, however we are frequently told that referrals are rejected, with these at times including referrals that supervisees consider to be clear cut cases where the involvement of the local authority is necessary.

Our Effective Referrals to Children's Services training seeks to empower DSLs to communicate most effectively: linked evidence of their concerns to the local and legal frameworks and utilising escalation to align communication between children's social care and their local settings. Safeguarding Network members also have access to our helpline to discuss and reflect on concerns they have with one of our highly skilled team.

Supervisees also report that even when the local authority Children's Services are involved, there is often drift, multiple changes of social worker and poor information sharing. Supervisees have reported that information flow can often feel as though it is one way - with schools providing significant amounts of information but getting little in return. Supervisees tell us that often they are left managing situations that traditionally would have had the involvement of a social worker. The reduction / delay in access to services for the child can result in schools having to manage higher levels of risk than perhaps they should be within their context. This can lead to complex and challenging decision making about next steps. This leads to frustration with Children's Services and an increasing disillusionment.

6. Multi-agency working

Coupled with this is an inherent risk of a sense of "what's the point" creeping in, whereby information is not passed to the local authority as the thought is that nothing will happen. Our supervisors therefore find that they spend a lot of time working with supervisees to consider what they do and don't know and ways in which there can be safe and consistent engagement with the local authority.

There is also a lot of apprehension amongst supervisees as to how the local authorities that they work with will embrace the changes made to Working Together in 2023. Although the changes have been made to reflect the law as it has stood for some time, the impact of the amendments was to reinforce that child in need assessments do not need the involvement of a social worker. This can potentially mean that the lead practitioner can be a teacher or other professional. Supervisees however highlight that whilst they accept it is important that the person completing the assessment has a good relationship with the child and their family, child in need assessments are time consuming requiring assessment of a number of different areas and home visits. This then leads naturally to the question of when such work will be completed (as this would be in addition to staff members current workload), and whether there is the right skill base within the school environment to undertake such an in-depth piece of work. At present, application of the revised guidance is piecemeal, however for Children's Services departments which are struggling with overloaded staff, this is clearly an interesting proposition and one that is likely to be increasingly adopted.

The introduction of multi-agency child protection teams through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill in 2026 is a significant opportunity to improve multi-agency working and one in which schools and colleges will want to have a significant voice in their local safeguarding children partnership arrangements. We will be watching and reporting on the developments as they happen.

Have you thought about?

Effectiveness of referrals and how they can be improved to ensure they are taken seriously? For example, providing concise information, triangulated and written in an effective way with impact with all relevant information included but with no subjective statements.

Do your referrals include the potential outcome for the child should the referral not be taken?

Do you ensure staff know how to make effective and credible challenge? Are the right staff members involved in this process?
• Is the safeguarding governor / Trust lead notified of a professional challenge?

Does the DSL only speak with social care, or do they individually discuss matters with health/police/other partners?

If information is not forthcoming, does the DSL have the confidence to ask individual personnel?

Do you exercise professional curiosity with other organisations and not just parents?

Do staff attend training with other practitioners from the multi-agency arena and talk to them about these difficulties and try to find a way to encourage better working together?

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7. Community based issues

Schools are not islands in their communities, and children's school experience is closely intertwined with their life outside the classroom. As we have seen already in this report, national and international issues can impact on children's behaviour, with the examples used earlier being around misogynistic incidents and racial harassment.

Some of these issues lead to national policy and associated guidance, however this can also come with its own issues, for example our supervisees have spoken about the impact of having to keep both themselves and their staff up to date about latest developments, or ensure that previous knowledge is refreshed, for example in relation to Prevent and the school's duties under the Prevent and Channel programmes.

Many supervisees talk to their supervisors about local issues that are affecting their settings, with a key question being around whether things are getting worse, or as professionals we are becoming more adept at recognising issues and identifying them for what they are. One such example is youth crime and gang activity. Research by the Youth Endowment Fund shows that 85% of the children that they spoke to felt school to be a safe space, but for others the fear of violence keeps them away, with the research identifying that the proportion of children who had skipped school in the preceding year increased in the free school meal cohort, and increased again if the child was allocated a social worker or involved with a Youth Offending Team. This however is not just a school related issue and requires a multi-agency response to address it, which supervisees report can be akin to a postcode lottery.

A common theme is the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. One example is that many more families are living in food poverty, leading to children being hungry in school. Data from the Trussell Trust supports this, suggesting that in 2024 there were 14.1 million people living with food insecurity, equating to 1 in 6 households. However, a 2023 report from the National Foundation for Educational Research shows that the crisis is not just limited to food poverty, suggesting that at least 90% of settings are subsidising extra-curricular activities, providing uniforms and clothing to children or providing food. The common view expressed to researchers was that there was an attributable link between the cost-of-living crisis and an increase in safeguarding concerns, behaviour incidents and absenteeism.

A further area where supervisees look for support is if they, or their local community experience an unexpected death of a child. For many settings this is fortunately a rare occurrence, however this does mean that if it does happen, senior leadership teams can be left with a number of different aspects to consider, including supporting staff, students and the wider community, working within the local frameworks which may include supporting police enquiries and going as far as having to give evidence in coroner's court. In our experience, many settings are unprepared for such an event, and there are some practical steps that can be put in place to ensure that if such an event were to happen there are foundations present that can provide support and be built on.

7. Community based issues

Have you thought about?

Map out the issues in your local community. Are there any area specific issues (e.g. widescale deprivation, poverty, homelessness, gang violence, etc.)?

Are staff confident in their local knowledge about what services are available in the community and how to tap into them?

Are you aware of any barriers to getting support (for example a service may only accept referrals from social care, but there is no open referral with social care, and they will not accept a referral)?

What training and support is available to your setting to help prepare for an unexpected death? What processes do you have in place already (for example, who to contact, forms to complete, requirements of social care / police / coroner's courts and the information they may require)?

Have all the necessary staff had training around what is expected from them if a child dies, or has it been limited to one or two?

What training have you had in relation to serious case reviews from direct involvement to implementation of recommendations?

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So what? So, supervision

Supervision provides a space for the supervisees to reflect on the issues that are affecting them, on either a personal or organisational level. Many of the themes that come out of supervision are arguably not new, but the fact that they are experienced across so many different settings and safeguarding teams / leads of varying levels of experience and knowledge shows that these issues are ingrained and often beyond the scope of the one Designated Safeguarding Lead or safeguarding team to address.

Does that mean that we are powerless to change the outlook? In short, no. The other thing that we see in supervision is that supervisees enjoy most aspects of their role, and there are many different areas where innovative thinking coupled with a "give it a go" approach means that some of the presenting issues are being addressed. We see supervisees who acknowledge the power that they have to change the lives of the children and young people that they work with and also recognise when things are getting difficult.

The trick is not reinventing the wheel - as of June 2025, there were over 24,000 schools in England, each with a Designated Safeguarding Lead and in some cases safeguarding teams. Each will have examples of work that they are proud of, and each will likely have children who are in situations of concern, and it seems like there is drift. Sharing of knowledge and ideas is one way of helping to think about approaches in a new light, be that through formal supervision, informal local networks, trust-led support groups or any other means. Safeguarding Network can support with this, for example through independent supervision or through more informal channels such as our DSL support group on Facebook.

The benefits of supervision

Supervision can offer a space where:

- you get support with identifying what is going well, what is not going so well, and what needs to change (for example if work with a child seems stuck or drifting).
- there can be discussion about your learning and development.
- you can get help with networking or accessing resources – thinking about how to do things differently.
- achievements can be acknowledged and celebrated.
- you can articulate ideas for change and get support to help grow them.

Underlying all this, supervision is a space where your well-being is core to the process.

For more information, or to enquire about supervision, please visit us at safeguarding.network/supervision.

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Building confidence in safeguarding

ABOUT US

Safeguarding Network is here to support you and your staff. Our value for money memberships are perfect for DSLs and their teams, governors and senior leadership teams in early years, primary, secondary, further education, and SEND across individual settings or Trusts.

Build safeguarding confidence in your setting using our time-saving monthly training materials covering every area of KCSiE, including expert resources, INSET Packs, discounted training courses and E-Learning.

We also offer bespoke supervision, safeguarding reviews, and consultancy services.

TRAINING

Using our network of trainers we provide courses either virtually or face to face providing that greater level of detail.

E-LEARNING

Safeguarding Network has a number of e-learning courses that can either be accessed as part of your subscription or as standalone courses.

SAFEGUARDING DEVELOPMENT REVIEWS

We take a developmental view as opposed to an audit. Our approach is to provide a clear understanding of the strategic and operational complexity and dynamic nature of safeguarding within your school.

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