

Bridge To The Future series

# Safeguarding at scale

A strategic approach to developing  
excellent practice in school trusts

*Produced in association with*

**Browne  
Jacobson**

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**Confederation  
of School Trusts**

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Bringing together trusts from every region and of every size, CST has a strong, strategic presence with access to government and policy makers to drive real change for education on the big issues that matter most.

## **Browne Jacobson**



Dai Durbridge is a partner and education lawyer at Browne Jacobson LLP. He leads the firm's team on safeguarding and data protection and heads up the North West education team based in Manchester. He is recognised as an education law expert by Legal 500.

Dai is a recognised safeguarding expert and works with schools and trusts on day-to-day and complex safeguarding issues including safer recruitment, handling disclosures of abuse, managing allegations against staff and child deaths. He also carries out safeguarding governance audits for trusts, supports larger trusts with the development and implementation of five-year safeguarding strategies and acts as a coach/mentor for Designated Safeguarding Leads providing external guidance and advice.

Independently recognised as one of the best education law practices in the country, Browne Jacobson has a wealth of sector-specific knowledge and experience to assist school trusts, managing estate and construction projects, employment issues and funding matters, to intellectual property, health and safety, defamation and disputes. The firm has bases in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Exeter, Nottingham and Dublin.

## Foreword to the new edition

We launched this paper in January 2023 and 12 months on we have paused to reflect on its impact, on how trusts have developed their approaches to safeguarding at scale in that time, and to consider the findings of CST's 2024 Safeguarding at Scale Survey.

The concepts set out in this paper were designed to provide trusts with a framework to follow and to promote debate in the sector. One year on, it feels as though it achieved those aims. Many trusts have fed back to CST and to me that they have either adopted one of the models set out in the paper or have used them as a basis to develop their own model. Other trusts have focused on one of more of the 3Cs; driving consistency and developing horizontal communication through the trust to improve safeguarding governance seems to have been the most impactful.

Alongside anecdotal feedback, the survey results provided useful information on how trusts are managing safeguarding at scale. We have taken the opportunity to update this paper to include some of the key findings from the survey to add some of this context. Our trust contributors have also updated their original case studies to reflect the development of their approaches over the last 12 months.

In that time we have also seen some new ideas gain momentum: reviewing the role of local governance in safeguarding; a greater focus on DSL wellbeing and supervision; and developing a career development pathway for safeguarding professionals are just three examples. I am confident we will see many more new concepts develop over the next few years to drive further development.

All I now ask is that you keep doing what you are doing. Keep driving progress, keep trialling new ideas and concepts, and most importantly, keep talking to and sharing with each other so your great work can positively impact as many people as possible.

**Dai Durbridge**  
**January 2024**



## Introduction

Safeguarding will always be an issue of critical importance in education. From boards, through trust leaders, Designated Safeguarding Leads, and on to all frontline staff, everyone has a role to play. We all need to be clear on its importance, and to recognise the growing complexity of safeguarding issues and the pressures that can come with attempting to deliver excellence in safeguarding without a considered, strategic approach.

We may have different perspectives on what safeguarding excellence looks like but we can agree that true safeguarding excellence has to be measured by outcomes: our greater understanding of safeguarding concerns leads to better resolutions for the children and families concerned. It is a high bar, but one that trusts are well placed to meet if they take a strategic approach to safeguarding.

As the range and complexity of safeguarding issues has increased over time, our use of online systems and safeguarding data to improve outcomes has developed alongside them. However, there has not been the same evolution in the strategic understanding of how school trusts can more effectively deliver excellence in safeguarding at scale.

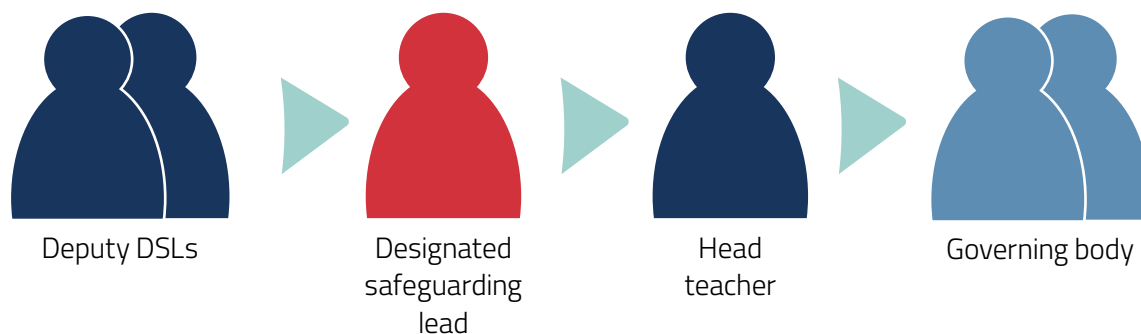
Statutory guidance currently does not recognise the differences inherent in a school trust compared to a single school environment, and offers little direction on how trusts might structure their approach, or what their focus should be, to ensure excellence in safeguarding at scale. There are no recognised models or exemplars for the trust's positive potential in keeping children safe, or for emerging roles such as trust directors of safeguarding, which offer the potential for strategic as well as operational oversight.

In this paper, Dai Durbridge draws upon developing practice from across the school trust sector to propose a model for the delivery of safeguarding at scale in trusts of all sizes. This model offers a framework which trusts can use to inform their own strategic development of safeguarding structures and practice. It focuses on governance and structure, offers ideas about how to drive consistency and efficiency at scale, promotes a 'one-team' approach to safeguarding across the trust, and encourages trusts to develop a three to five year safeguarding strategy.



## Safeguarding at scale: the challenge we face

Safeguarding in trusts differs from safeguarding in a single school - frontline issues impacting on children and families are the same but there are significant practical and operational differences. A single school may have a traditional, linear approach to managing safeguarding through the school: the DSL leads, the head teacher (assuming they are not themselves the DSL) line manages the DSL, with regular appropriate reporting to the governing body. The DSL works with the various deputy DSLs, all of whom are on the same physical site. They see each other every day, but often have multiple other duties that draw on their time.



The leadership and management of safeguarding in school trusts can be more complex. There is still a need to maintain board-level assurance, but leaders may not have the same granular knowledge of circumstances on the ground. The trust may span multiple local authorities, NHS trusts, and other support providers. However, it also has the potential to embed best practice, to share experience, and - for larger trusts - to draw on central dedicated staffing. This can help build strong relationships both internally and externally.

Simply replicating the single school model in each school within a trust would be a missed opportunity. Such an approach would be too siloed. A more joined-up, fluid approach is required.

### Current guidance for safeguarding in school trusts

When it comes to safeguarding in trusts there are two core pieces of guidance to consider: *Keeping Children Safe in Education* and the *Governance Handbook*. Both are light on advice, guidance, and support specifically on how to deliver excellent safeguarding at scale.

The *Governance Handbook* provides a section on safeguarding and pupil welfare which offers some broad statements on leading safeguarding together with operational detail on issues such as child-on-child abuse, allegations against staff, and the importance of strong policies. There are two references to 'strategic leadership responsibility' for safeguarding in trusts but no detail, and there is no guidance on how this works in practice or what a good structure looks like (see paragraphs 198 and 201 of the *Handbook*).

Section 5 of the *Handbook* covers the importance of strong governance structures and does state that "Governing a group of schools through a single board also creates the conditions for fully realising the sustained benefits of school-to-school collaboration, which include sharing safeguarding and safer recruitment best practice..." (see paragraph 5.1, page 53). This acknowledges the benefits that working as one cohesive safeguarding team across the trust can bring, but



"Our safeguarding structure and ethos create a deep connection to our schools' practice. Each member of the central safeguarding team brings huge expertise and the ability to channel insights from other schools across the trust. This builds collaborative practice and means that our DSLs always have someone to turn to who is real, named and will 'walk the walk' when needed." **Helen Beattie, Head of Safeguarding, REAch2**



disappointingly no guidance is offered as to how such a structure might look or what steps are required to successfully implement that structure.

We find a similar position with the safeguarding guidance. There is no support, advice or guidance in *Keeping Children Safe in Education* specifically aimed at the management and leadership of safeguarding in school trusts. Even when setting out the role of the DSL in Annex C, the guidance makes no mention of how the role of a safeguarding lead is substantially different at scale. In fact, save for passing references to academy trusts when highlighting duties and responsibilities, there is no recognition of the trust model.

This fails to recognise the significant changes in how schools operate in recent years, and the potential for improved procedures and stronger safeguarding for children that working strategically across a trust can offer.

## How trusts lead safeguarding today

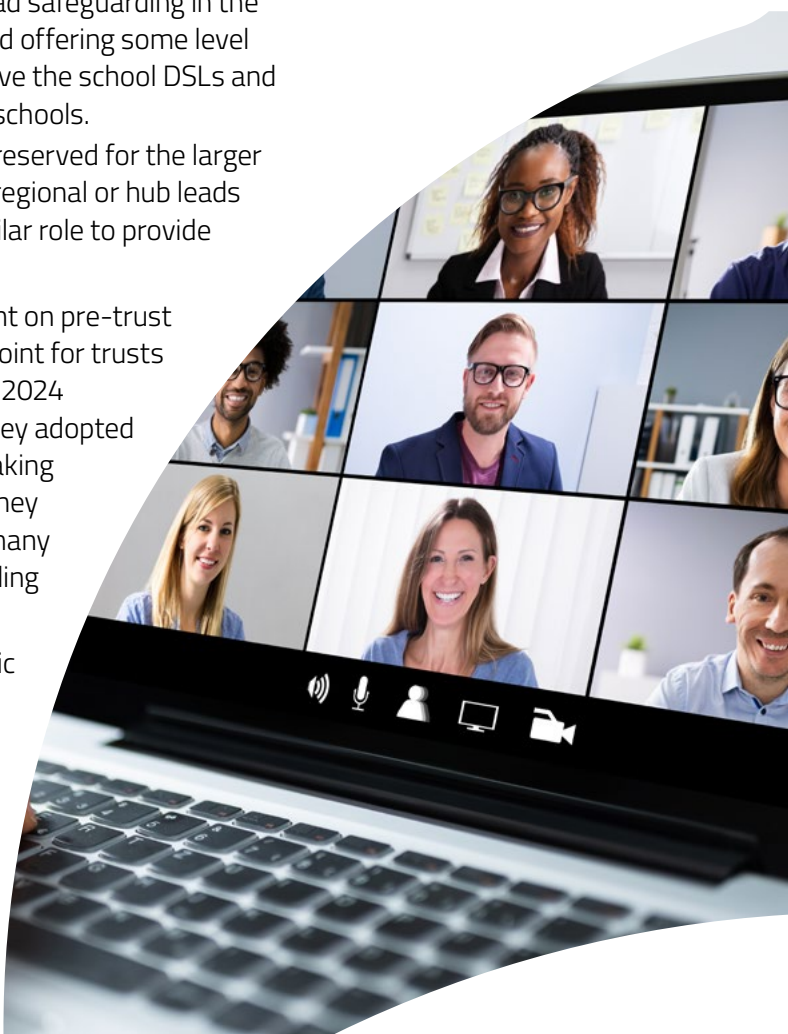
With statutory guidance offering minimal direction, trusts have developed their own approaches to leading safeguarding at scale, often supported by advisors in the sector. Those approaches vary considerably with different models being adopted for different reasons, including the size (and speed of growth) of the trust, the evolution of the trust, and the view taken by leadership.

The main approaches, which we look at in more detail later, are:

- **The single-school silo model:** a flat governance model with no single DSL leading safeguarding in the trust. Instead, the DSLs in each school act individually with little or no interaction with each other.
- **Dual role DSL:** A DSL from one school 'acts up' as the lead DSL for the trust whilst retaining the DSL role at their school. That lead DSL provides some support to the DSLs in each of the trust schools. This role is also sometimes incorporated within another senior trust role, such as director of education.
- **Trust lead DSL:** The trust appoints a central DSL to lead safeguarding in the trust, providing support to the DSLs in each school and offering some level of consistency of practice. The trust lead DSL sits above the school DSLs and does not act as a substantive DSL in one of the trust schools.
- **Director of safeguarding / lead with a team:** Usually reserved for the larger trusts, this model adds a second tier of support with regional or hub leads working underneath a director of safeguarding or similar role to provide additional resource and leadership.

Apart from the siloed model, which offers no improvement on pre-trust approaches, each structure has its place; the important point for trusts is knowing which model to adopt when and why. In CST's 2024 Safeguarding at Scale Survey, 60% of respondents said they adopted the director of safeguarding / lead with a team model, making it the dominant model. Respondents also indicated that they planned to move their model in the next 12-24 months, many of whom were looking to move to a centralised safeguarding governance model.

These operational structures are only one part of strategic safeguarding at scale. Trust leadership also needs to consider how safeguarding is delivered efficiently, effectively, and consistently across the trust, with the holders of these roles closely examining how to make best use of resource and technology.



## How a strategic model can help

The diversity of trusts means there is no 'one size fits all' approach; trusts vary in size, in speed of growth, in culture, ambition and in leadership style, all of which impact on the most suitable safeguarding leadership and delivery model.

However, a blueprint that trusts can use as a starting point to develop their structure, to improve consistency and to ultimately drive safeguarding excellence can help by:

- Providing an 'off the shelf' option for similar trusts to copy
- Driving some consistency of approach across trusts
- Using that consistency to develop safeguarding data analysis that can ultimately drive up standards of safeguarding in the sector, making trusts the leading light on safeguarding excellence.

# Safeguarding at scale: a three-pronged approach

The following model is proposed to support trusts with delivering excellence in safeguarding at scale, including developing a single, coherent safeguarding team across the trust, regardless of trust size or ambition.

For the reasons already set out in this paper this proposed model is not designed to be a perfect fit for every trust or to be followed slavishly as trusts reach a certain number of schools, but it does offer flexible ideas that most can adopt and evolve to enhance their existing approach. For others, it can act as that 'off-the-shelf' option to help move them away from a siloed approach to safeguarding at scale.

There are three parts to the model which focus on:

- Leadership structure, roles, and communication
- Safeguarding delivery across the trust
- Developing your safeguarding strategy



## Leadership structure, roles and communication

Let's begin with the obvious: when it comes to governance structures, clarity is essential. Each person needs to understand their role, what it includes and, equally as importantly, what it does not include. If they also understand the responsibility of others in the structure, then you are in a good place.

This starts by understanding when to create the lead DSL role, and where to locate it within the trust. I set out the four different approaches currently taken by trusts earlier in this paper; all bar the siloed approach can offer a solution and the most suitable will depend largely on the size of the trust, with indicative numbers below.

### Up to three schools

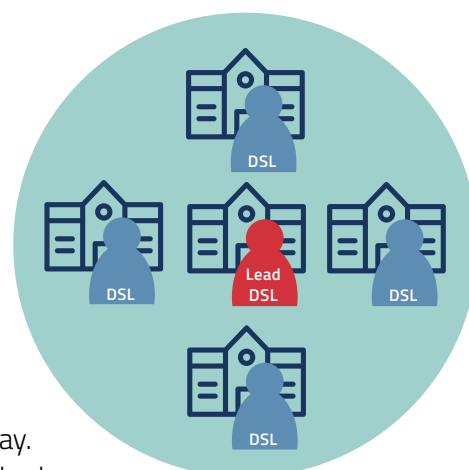
Trusts of up to three schools are generally small enough for the DSLs in each school to work together without the need for one DSL to 'act up' into a lead DSL role. They still need to work together as one cohesive team, with support from senior trust leaders, to avoid the siloed approach and get the benefits of shared expertise.



### Between four and eight schools

Trusts in this bracket will benefit from a lead DSL role to drive consistency across the trust and pull together the safeguarding professionals in those schools to work as one team, but they may not have the resources to support a standalone role. As a result, the lead DSL could 'act up' from their role as an existing DSL or undertake the lead DSL role alongside other central leadership roles, such as director of education.

This 'dual-role' approach can work, but only if the lead DSL has the appropriate time and space to deliver both roles. Current experience within the sector is that this can be hard to do, so trusts need to carefully review workload and expectation when appointing a DSL to 'act up' or to wear another leadership hat, and plan for when the other roles will fall away. This hybrid approach can succeed, but only with careful planning at the outset.

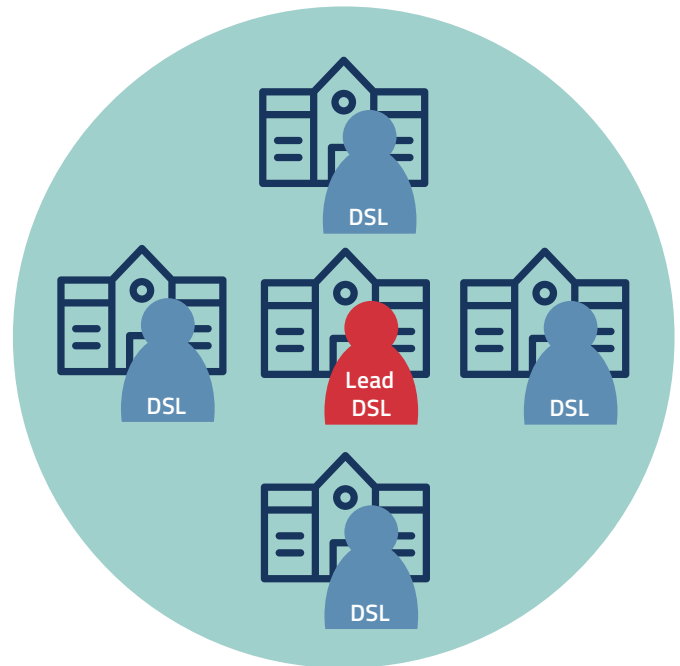




## Between nine and fifteen schools

Trusts at this size need a lead DSL whose sole responsibility is the delivery and leadership of safeguarding across the trust. In nine schools there are likely to be upwards of 40 safeguarding professionals (DSLs and deputies) to mould into an efficient team that work together seamlessly. At 15 schools, that number climbs to over 70. It is a full-time role.

The larger trusts in this bracket should also start considering developing a team around the lead DSL to provide additional support and prepare for growth.



## More than 15 schools

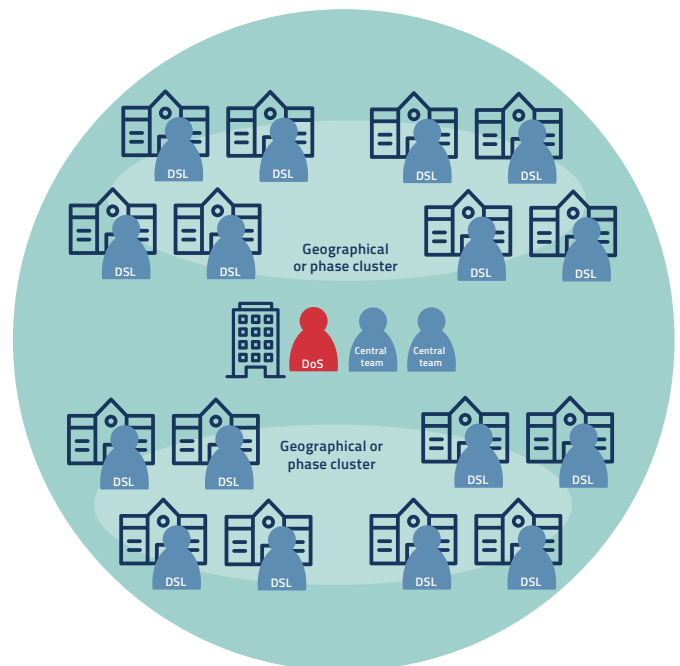
Trusts of this size should consider developing a DSL Leadership team instead of a flat structure, where the lead DSL could too easily become overloaded attempting to support too many schools. That leadership team can work in two ways:

- **One team model:** the central team share workload reactively and have no defined responsibilities for specific schools in the trust; or
- **Hub or phase model:** here, the leadership team act as a second tier, fitting between the Lead DSL and DSLs in the schools. Each team member takes responsibility for supporting a defined group of the schools (determined by region, or phase, for example), much in the same way as a lead DSL does in a smaller trust.

Trusts should also consider creating a director of safeguarding role to replace the lead DSL role. This is not simply about rebranding, but to elevate the role of safeguarding in the trust and cement it as a strategic leadership role. This aids with perception in both directions – it signifies its importance both to the trust board and also to the wider staff.

For any of these structures to be effective in practice, it is critical that roles and responsibilities are clearly set out and understood. For this, a core set of documents is required, including:

- **Job and role descriptions:** director of safeguarding, lead DSL, school DSLs and deputies, central safeguarding team members need job descriptions. It is also sensible to have in place role descriptors for the safeguarding trustee, and for any governance at a more local level, to set out what is expected of them
- **Escalation procedure:** to provide clarity and consistency regarding what must be escalated by the DSLs to the lead DSL
- **Scheme of delegation:** setting out the safeguarding expectations at local and trust board levels
- **Board reporting:** a clear and consistent reporting style to keep the trust board up to date on safeguarding.



Think of them as a jigsaw – they need to fit together neatly with no gaps and no overlapping. From there, it is all about delivery in practice.

## Safeguarding delivery across a trust

Putting the structure into practice and delivering safeguarding excellence across a trust is a significant undertaking. To make it manageable, consider applying the three Cs of safeguarding at scale: communication, consistency, and continuous development.

### Communication

We need to think about communication in two ways: communication from DSLs through the safeguarding leadership structure up to the Trust Board (vertical communication), and communication between the safeguarding professionals working as a single safeguarding team across the trust (horizontal communication).

Invest time getting the documentation right and ensuring relevant people have a good understanding of it, and clear and effective vertical communication should be relatively easy to achieve. Horizontal communication will be more of a challenge and take longer to embed.

### Vertical communication

The core documentation mentioned earlier is key to making the vertical communication work effectively. Job descriptions and role descriptors make it clear who does what, the escalation procedure clearly sets out the trigger events that must be reported to the lead DSL, the board reporting ensures that trustees know what they need to know, and the scheme of delegation sets out the respective responsibilities of the trust board and any local governance arrangements.

This also offers the opportunity to improve consistency and effectiveness of relationships with external safeguarding agencies and regulators, by clearly setting out responsibilities for external relations, audit, and escalation.

### Horizontal communication

Earlier in this paper we talked about a 15-school trust having upwards of 70 safeguarding professionals working in its schools. Effective horizontal communication will go a long way to galvanising those 70 plus individuals to work as one cohesive safeguarding team. To succeed here, trusts need to consider the why, the where, and the when of horizontal communication.

- **The why:** the primary reason is to develop a team culture and promote a one-team approach. This can be achieved by sharing learning and intelligence, providing coaching and supervision, creating time and space for peer-to-peer support, and affording opportunities to work through difficult safeguarding issues.
- **The where:** the venue and method of communication should vary depending on the desired outcome. Most of what we need to do can be achieved using technology: using Microsoft Teams or similar software to meet remotely. Do not underestimate the value of meeting in a physical environment though: experience suggests meeting in person as a whole team at least once per year is beneficial. Written communication (together with video and audio communication) still has its place, especially for short one-way information sharing. It is still an efficient way to push information.
- **The when:** The whole safeguarding team should meet at least once per term,



"Collaboration is the school trust dividend. The success of our approach to safeguarding at scale is the commonality and effective collaboration enjoyed by all. All resources are readily available to all DSLs and there are obvious economies of scale savings which all schools benefit from." **Gill Creighton, Safeguarding Lead, Cumbria Education Trust**

preferably twice per term. While this may feel burdensome, used effectively these meetings and improved communication can reduce workload by driving consistency of practice, eradicating duplication, and improving learning.

Effective horizontal communication is already a focus for many trusts. CST's 2024 survey results revealed that strengthening connections and collaboration between individual school safeguarding teams across the trust is a priority. This is a sensible approach, and it is likely that most (if not all) trusts can drive efficiency, improve safeguarding standards and reduce duplication by focusing on the whole trust working as one cohesive safeguarding team.

## Consistency

Consistency is important to maintain and improve safeguarding excellence, protect the integrity of the trust's approach, and, most importantly, deliver best outcomes for children and families. Think about it in three categories: paper, people, and practice.

- **Paper:** trust-wide consistency of policy, procedures, forms, job descriptions, and role descriptors. Allow for variations for different local authority areas and/or phases of education (which should be minimal), but otherwise drive consistency. After all, how can the DSLs effectively work as one cohesive team across a trust if there are hurdles in the form of variations in core documentation from school to school?
- **People:** a consistent approach to supervision and coaching, succession planning and people development generally (including training, updating and broader knowledge transfer). Getting this right makes it easier for the DSLs to work as one team across the trust, and importantly, galvanises that team thus making the DSLs feel even more supported. Our safeguarding survey identified three key factors which impacted on retention in their safeguarding teams, two of which were workload and the unique pressure of the role. Therefore, a strong and consistent approach to development, support and supervision is critical.
- **Practice:** Processes, team briefings and the use of online systems should be consistent from school to school.

Get communication and consistency right and trusts are more likely to succeed in delivery safeguarding excellence at scale.

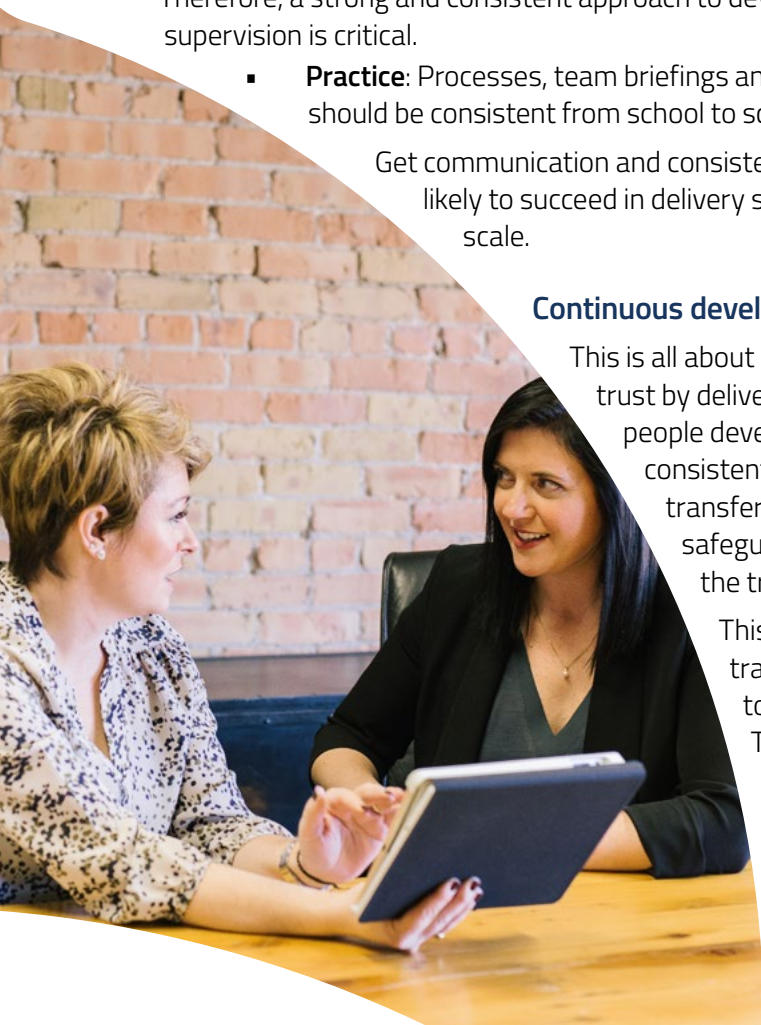
## Continuous development

This is all about upskilling the people in the trust by delivering high quality, consistent people development through innovative, consistent and enjoyable knowledge transfer. This applies not just to the safeguarding team but to all staff in the trust.

This is described as 'knowledge transfer' rather than 'training' to paint a broader picture. Training puts people in mind of attending a session on a specific topic; knowledge transfer covers the varied



"The potential for errors in safeguarding is huge and having consistency across the trust increases oversight and support and narrows down the scope for mistakes." **Barb Timms, Safeguarding Network Lead, River Learning Trust**



ways information is exchanged to help people learn. It does of course include traditional face to face training together with other methods, including reflective learning following safeguarding concerns, video and audio content, top tips guides and three-minute briefings. Think about it as a diet and menu approach – providing options and different ways to deliver different content.

Trusts should also take the opportunity to survey staff to understand how they like to receive knowledge transfer content – for example a range of formats, such as face to face, short written guides, online learning, podcasts, and different scheduling options – and use their responses to create a knowledge transfer calendar delivered consistently across the trust. This helps drive positive engagement. Get that right and staff will enjoy the various learning opportunities afforded to them, which in turn improves their knowledge and practice which has the obvious positive impact on outcomes.

Finally, this consistent approach to knowledge transfer should also limit duplication of effort by the DSLs in each school who, traditionally, would prepare safeguarding updates for their staff and only their staff.

By focusing on the three Cs of communication, consistency and continuous development, trusts can drive the delivery of safeguarding excellence across a trust within a robust safeguarding structure.

Once implemented, trusts can look for further opportunities to better the model, for example by creating DSL 'topic experts' to whom the other DSLs can turn to for advice in their particular field of expertise.

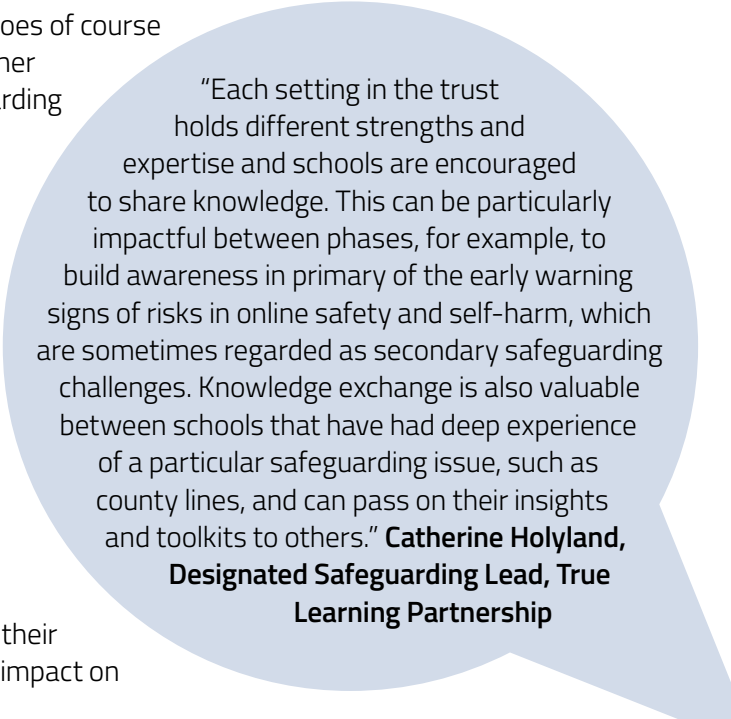
## Developing your safeguarding strategy

Delivering safeguarding excellence on a day-to-day basis can be a challenging and pressured role that leaves little time for horizon scanning, futureproofing, and improving. This can be characterised as the difference between fire fighting and fire prevention.

To reduce the number of fires that need putting out, to learn how to put them out more efficiently and to stop the fires from starting in the first place, more time needs to be devoted to fire prevention. This is where the safeguarding strategy comes in.

Led by the trust's lead DSL or director of safeguarding and supported by the safeguarding trustee, the safeguarding strategy should look forward at least three years and set milestones to measure success. There is no single standard approach, but current best practice suggests looking at these six broad areas:

- **Audit and quality assurance:** This is about reviewing reality. The plan should set out how delivery of safeguarding will be assured, and standards improved. A strategic model offers several advantages over the traditional 'silo' approach, by enabling the trust to offer effective internal challenge, and to monitor and ensure improvements take place. This consistent approach to audits can be taken further if trusts look outside of their own structure and work with the local authority to improve their approach to the S.175/157 audit. Trusts could work together to agree an audit



"Each setting in the trust holds different strengths and expertise and schools are encouraged to share knowledge. This can be particularly impactful between phases, for example, to build awareness in primary of the early warning signs of risks in online safety and self-harm, which are sometimes regarded as secondary safeguarding challenges. Knowledge exchange is also valuable between schools that have had deep experience of a particular safeguarding issue, such as county lines, and can pass on their insights and toolkits to others." **Catherine Holyland, Designated Safeguarding Lead, True Learning Partnership**

format between them and propose it to the LA as a consistent model for them to adopt across the area.

- **Knowledge transfer and people development:** We set out earlier the positive impact that high quality people development can have on safeguarding standards. This part of your safeguarding strategy should include how you will deliver knowledge transfer. It should be linked to your trust-wide people strategy.
- **Systems and processes:** Focus on safeguarding delivery, including a plan to standardise your online systems across the trust. Trusts should also think about their onboarding process for new schools and ensuring their safeguarding strategy is aligned to the overall growth strategy.
- **Safeguarding data and intelligence:** The use of safeguarding data and wider intelligence is of increasing importance, and trusts should plan how they will use it. As well as using online systems and data created internally, trusts should also consider intelligence it can gather from the community, including from other schools and trusts, the local authority, community and faith leaders, and parents and staff. This will feed into audit, and can potentially trigger powerful preventative interventions. The use of safeguarding data to strengthen strategic direction and early interventions was also a priority identified by trusts in our 2024 survey.
- **Board leadership and reporting:** This part of the plan is about ensuring long-term appropriate scrutiny, oversight, support, and challenge by the board.
- **External scrutiny:** Linked to audit and quality assurance, trusts should welcome independent review and challenge and take the opportunity to draw in different perspectives.

The trust system has an integral role to play in improving safeguarding standards across education. The development and delivery of a safeguarding strategy, particularly the use of safeguarding data and the development of topic experts, can positively impact on safeguarding in the trust, across the trust system and more broadly in education.

Coupled with the support trust DSLs offer to each other through external networks such as CST's Safeguarding Professional Community, academy trusts can lead the way in driving safeguarding excellence in all schools.



"Our trust, like many across the country, is making a significant investment in the resourcing of this very challenging area of practice so that we can live up to high expectations for keeping children safe. We are motivated every day by seeing how our work makes an impact on children's lives. We would like to see greater recognition of school trusts' contribution to and development of effective safeguarding." **Helen Beattie, Head of Safeguarding, REAch2**



## Conclusion

Trusts are well positioned to drive excellence in safeguarding at scale across the sector but for this to succeed the potential – and the careful support it requires to reach fulfilment – needs to be more widely recognised. Adopting the models proposed in this paper can help achieve that aim by putting in place a framework to develop strategic safeguarding leadership and delivery at scale across school trusts.

For some trusts, adopting this model will require only a tweak to their current approach. For others, it will require significant change, which itself requires support from senior leadership, and time and resources to embed that change.

There is no right or wrong time to begin the process and no set timeframe in which such change should be achieved. Rather than deadlines, focus on what you are trying to achieve and its importance, rather than an arbitrary 'go-live' date.

There is also a key role for the Department for Education and local authorities to play in recognising the reality of today's education sector, and the role that trusts can play in improving safeguarding. Trusts are becoming more sophisticated in how they manage safeguarding at scale – particularly with the use of data – and as trusts mature and grow, their approaches will improve further. This wealth and knowledge and experience is perhaps under appreciated and certainly underutilised.

This should be reflected in the safeguarding guidance, to provide further encouragement to trusts to invest in and develop this crucial area, and to support the drive for consistency of practice when safeguarding at scale.



## Case studies

### Inspire Learning Partnership: Dual role DSL

The [Inspire Learning Partnership](#) (ILP) has five schools and a nursery in Southampton and Hampshire. It is characterised by a strong child-centred culture to transform lives and build futures. This is achieved by looking at every aspect of school life through a safeguarding lens, and a relentless drive to build capacity across the six settings in the growing trust. Safeguarding is highly visible and lived, down to all DSLs in the trust wearing a distinctive trust DSL lanyard, to ensure they are immediately identifiable to all stakeholders. ILP's safeguarding structure follows the dual role DSL model. The trust DSL is also the director of primary education, with one to two days a week provided for the safeguarding remit, depending on need.

Trust DSL Amanda Johnston believes that "if we get the culture right, compliance follows" and ensures that DSLs can always access advice that is helpful, rapid, child-centred and reassuring. In addition to the trust being outward facing, both supporting and learning from other schools and trusts, safeguarding is one of the first points of collaboration as new schools prepare to join the trust.

The trust DSL role at ILP is to "advise, strategically support and build capacity" for DSLs in each setting and to hold a space for the co-construction of innovative practice. This is partly achieved through a robust central system of policy, audit, and professional development, and partly through its active trust-wide community of practice. ILP's DSLs come together on a half termly basis for networking and CPD meetings with agendas co-constructed around what is happening on the ground in their schools and a termly thematic focus on a contextual issue. All staff participate in annual safeguarding INSET that is led by the Trust DSL and followed up by DSLs in schools on a regular basis through safeguarding questions, scenarios, and bitesize CPD. Capacity for ongoing support and development has been nurtured by grouping schools into two hubs that provide mutual support and facilitate a model of group supervision. The hub structure also creates opportunities to build the trust's future safeguarding leaders.

ILP has a safeguarding peer review arrangement with another school trust so that it can learn from and give back to the system, seek external challenge and assurance, as well as develop the capacity and expertise within the trusts' respective and growing DSL teams.

Amanda explains: "We want DSLs to feel valued, supported and to create a common language for safeguarding across the trust, sharing strengths and tasks so that individual schools are not trying to crack the nut on their own. Another important aspect of the trust DSL role at ILP is to be the conduit between governance and operations. I have the strategic oversight of safeguarding across the trust that allows me to report authoritatively to trustees, which in turn supports their strategic decision-making. This facilitates evidence-based advocacy for appropriate resource and ensures that our settings have their voice heard and context known."



### True Learning Partnership: Dual role DSL

The [True Learning Partnership](#) is based in Cheshire and has five academies, from primary through to sixth form. Safeguarding at the trust follows the dual role DSL model, with the DSL of one of its secondary schools also acting as lead DSL for the five schools in the trust. One day per fortnight is allocated to the trust lead DSL.



role. In setting up this model, the trust commissioned an independent review of its structures and accountability for safeguarding in all its schools to ensure that responsibility is held in the right places, and that roles are adequately defined and resourced.

At TLP, each school now follows a centralised policy, undertakes a trust safeguarding audit, and accesses core training so that there is a baseline for safeguarding across the trust. The trust HR team works closely with DSLs to support safer recruitment practice and take a consistent approach to online checks.

Each setting in the trust holds different strengths and expertise and schools are encouraged to share knowledge. This can be particularly impactful between phases, for example, to build awareness in primary of the early warning signs of risks in online safety and self-harm, which are sometimes regarded as secondary safeguarding challenges. Knowledge exchange is also valuable between schools that have had deep experience of a particular safeguarding issue, such as county lines, and can pass on their insights and toolkits to others.

Trust DSL Catherine Hoyland says: "My trust-wide role is to lead safeguarding strategy. Doing this centrally allows our schools to be more operational. It is a privilege to work closely with our schools to build the strong relationships that are the crux of effective safeguarding. It is often the back and forth over the right steps to take that produces the best outcomes for our children. I am the sounding board for these trusted conversations and help colleagues to stand back if they are bringing their own emotions to situations. It is essential for the Lead DSL to be accessible to give reassurance and be the voice of reason when needed."

## Cumbria Education Trust: Lead DSL

[Cumbria Education Trust](#) (CET) consists of 14 schools from primary to sixth form, and has a safeguarding lead appointed from the central services team in a version of the trust lead DSL model. The safeguarding lead works three days a week and is accountable to the operations director for implementing national and local standards across the Trust and monitoring of all performance indicators in relation to safeguarding. The safeguarding lead provides supervision and specialist support across CET's schools and offers assurances and CPD to the trust board.

Safeguarding Lead Gill Creighton says: "This model makes it possible to work strategically in a complex organisation to ensure compliance with ever-changing statutory regulations and guidance to improve practice. A single school could not achieve such an in-depth oversight of safeguarding systems, audits and review mechanisms or be so readily able to escalate safeguarding concerns. As the safeguarding lead, I build and sustain strategic relationships and partnerships on behalf of the trust with other service providers and agencies. I can influence safeguarding decisions and advise relevant external stakeholders of any implications and required actions.

"I would say that collaboration is the school trust dividend. The success of our approach to safeguarding at scale is the commonality and effective collaboration enjoyed by all. All resources are readily available to all DSLs as they are kept centrally and there are obvious economies of scale savings which all schools benefit from."

## Sigma Trust: Lead DSL

The [Sigma Trust](#) uses the lead DSL model across its four primary and eight secondary schools in North Essex, along with one Social, Emotional and Mental



Health provision.

The lead DSL meets with each school DSL individually every half term to look at data covering harmful sexual behaviours, cases requiring risk assessments, those where police may be involved, LLC/LADO input and any complex cases. This holistic information is then shared with trustees from the lead DSL's report every term, and is also fed through to the safeguarding trustee. DSLs meet half termly as a cluster group to share key headlines from the local authority and trust, with the sharing of good practice kept as a standing agenda item each meeting.

Termly safeguarding file and local third party Single Central Record spot checks are conducted by the lead DSL with an annual external audit of safeguarding across the trust adding an additional layer of quality assurance.

Assistant Director of Education Alison Peirson says: "Our model enables a consistent approach in terms of central training for governors and trustees, which leads to a more productive and effective input from each school's safeguarding link governor. This year, having a lead DSL for the first time means we have a further escalation tier in terms of raising concerns with responses from external agencies."

## REAch2: Safeguarding team

[REAch2](#) is a large primary academy trust of 60 schools, grouped in 10 clusters across England. Each has a DSL and one or more deputy DSLs who are trained to the same standard. There is a huge diversity within the REAch2 family with some schools caring for 100 pupils and others with 1,200 on roll. There are around 500 DSL trained staff across the trust overall.

Head of Safeguarding Helen Beattie has strategic oversight of safeguarding across the trust. She keeps the board apprised of safeguarding risk, is responsible for quality assurance and the development of effective safeguarding standards and ensures that all schools are supported by the three-person central safeguarding team. Each member of the team holds responsibility for providing substantive support to DSLs and their teams in 17-18 schools. Helen retains operational responsibility herself for seven REAch2 schools to remain connected with the issues on the ground.



The support that the central safeguarding team provides to schools includes the provision of frameworks and templates, monitoring support for vulnerable pupils, providing a sounding board and escalation point, and when necessary, stepping in to add capacity in crisis.

Helen says: "One of the beautiful things about how we work is that we do not just have a bird's eye view of 60 schools. Our safeguarding structure and ethos create a deep connection to our schools' practice. Each member of the central safeguarding team brings huge expertise and the ability to channel insights from other schools across the trust. This builds collaborative practice and means that our DSLs always have someone to turn to who is real, named and will 'walk the walk' when needed. Whilst this is hardwired into our trust through our culture and structures, it is not inherent in the wider school system.

"Our trust, like many across the country, is making a significant investment in the resourcing of this very challenging area of practice so that we can live up to high expectations for keeping children safe. We are motivated every day by seeing how our work makes an impact on children's lives. We would like to see greater recognition of school trusts' contribution to and development of effective safeguarding."



## River Learning Trust: Safeguarding team



[River Learning Trust](#) (RLT) is a trust of 28 primary and secondary schools in Oxford and the surrounding areas that was founded in 2015 and has grown rapidly. In the last year, the trust has established a new structure for safeguarding that builds on the central team model.

The safeguarding lead reports directly to the chief executive, with responsibility for the strategic development and quality assurance of safeguarding across the trust on a 0.4 FTE basis. They are supported by a safeguarding officer with a highly operational school-facing remit. The safeguarding officer supports the DSLs of each school on a range of practical matters, from compliance to caseload management, to overseeing the trust's digital safeguarding record system. The work of the central team is augmented by the HR team's leadership of safer recruitment.

The culture at RLT is one of aligned autonomy. This means that schools can set some of areas of practice according to their context, size and cohort whilst following core trust expectations and processes in others. The common core for safeguarding practice includes DSL job descriptions, the format and oversight of safeguarding action plans, and consistent reporting formats to local governing committees. There is also a shared library of training materials that can be accessed anytime and tailored to meet individual school needs.

Safeguarding lead Barb Timms identifies two particular areas of strength that flow from the central team's new structure and practice. The first is the consistency achieved through common processes, formats and language as "the potential for errors in safeguarding is huge and having consistency across the trust increases oversight and support and narrows down the scope for mistakes."



The second is the strength of the professional community of safeguarding practitioners within the trust. Barb runs two termly network meetings by phase for DSLs and DDSs, which are well attended and highly valued, often including the LADO to build mutual understanding between the trust, its schools and the local authority. She believes that this helps to develop a real sense of community between safeguarding peers across the trust. The RLT safeguarding community is a safe space for sharing and support and prevents professional isolation.

Barb says: "Safeguarding at scale in RLT is on a journey, and we are confident that our work in this area is benefiting our children, young people and colleagues."

## Arthur Terry Learning Partnership: Safeguarding team



The [Arthur Terry Learning Partnership](#) (ATLP) uses the central safeguarding team model for its 21 primary and secondary schools, based in Birmingham, Coventry, North Warwickshire and Staffordshire. This model serves the trust's size and fits well with its hub model. Its schools are in four different local education authorities and range from schools close to inner city areas to small village schools. All have complex and significant safeguarding needs. The trust's hubs bring schools with similar characteristics together, including those of a safeguarding nature, to collaborate and share resources, including staff.

A team of three safeguarding leads provide direction and leadership on safeguarding to lead DSLs at each school. They analyse data to monitor trends and provide support and advice which includes quality assurance and supervision. Each uses their specific areas of expertise to facilitate training that meets the needs of the different settings across the trust, and together the team offers a multi-agency approach. The safeguarding leads remain hands-on and as such has a strong



appreciation of the demands of safeguarding post-pandemic.

The safeguarding leads report to the trust's primary and secondary strategic leads and work very closely with the school improvement team. They also engage regularly with a vulnerable children's lead, and support and advise the trust board and newly appointed safeguarding advocates to inform good safeguarding governance. This level of accountability and alignment of responsibilities across the trust team helps ATLP's 100+ DSLs and 1,500 staff to "keep the child at the centre of everything we do" and sustain good safeguarding relationships.

Safeguarding lead Sue Baliey says: "Our model gives us depth and flexibility within our work. It allows us to develop our lead DSLs through engaging them in our review and audit process and offers opportunities for staff to support and learn from each other."





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Suite 1, Whiteley Mill  
39 Nottingham Road  
Stapleford  
Nottingham  
NG9 8AD

0115 9170142

[cstuk.org.uk](http://cstuk.org.uk)

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