

# National school trust safeguarding report

A survey of safeguarding practice at  
school trusts in England

*Produced in association with*

**edurio**

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**Confederation  
of School Trusts**

**The voice of school trusts**



The Confederation of School Trusts is the national organisation and sector body for academy trusts. Almost three million children are educated in our members' schools and we work to drive real change to make their lives better.

We do this by advocating for, supporting, and connecting school trusts. We advocate for trusts as the best approach for improving education by helping politicians, policy makers, and the wider public better understand what they do. We support trusts through practical advice, strategic guidance, and consultancy. We connect them with each other, and with expert thinking and research.

Like our members, we are a charity aimed at promoting the public benefit of education. We believe school trusts make lives better for children because they bring schools and people together in organisations with a strong, single purpose: education. This encourages the sharing of expertise, ideas, and resources to give pupils a better start in life.

## edurio'

Edurio is a leading provider of staff, pupil, and parent feedback surveys for schools and multi-academy trusts, working with over 150 trusts and 2000 schools across England and internationally.

Edurio's platform and nationwide dataset allow trust and school leaders to benchmark their performance against national averages on topics like staff wellbeing, parental engagement, pupil wellbeing and others.

By measuring the often difficult-to-track elements of education quality, Edurio can help school leaders make informed decisions, develop engaging relationships with staff and communicate their values to their community

## Introduction

In January 2023, CST published [Safeguarding at scale](#) to explore the new approaches to safeguarding being developed by school trusts. It codified the four main models used by trusts of different sizes, and the mix of strategy, practice, people, and culture required to deliver safeguarding excellence.

In autumn 2023, we surveyed members of the [CST professional community for trust safeguarding leaders](#) to gain further insight into how school trusts are building their safeguarding capacity at a time of increasing pressures on young people, their families, and schools. We wanted to understand the breadth of what trust safeguarding teams are doing and how trusts are supporting and developing colleagues at the vanguard of keeping children safe.

The survey explored the roles and responsibilities of the trust safeguarding team, the support that trusts provide at a school and trust level, and the factors influencing the retention and career progression of safeguarding professionals. It also invited trust safeguarding leaders to share their priorities for the year ahead.

### Who contributed?

118 people responded, the majority of whom are the strategic safeguarding lead for their trust. Respondents were from all sizes of trust, with the majority (52%) representing trusts of between six to nine and 10-14 schools.

Many of these respondents will have recent experience of scaling their model and evolving their safeguarding practice as their trusts grow.



## Key insights

The findings showed a diversity of approaches to trust safeguarding, which suggests that as trusts develop their safeguarding structures, ethos, and practice are more strongly influenced by leadership vision and values – and the ability to create the right environment for designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) and their teams – than trust size.

The survey also revealed some inherent challenges and inequalities within the safeguarding workforce on a systemic level. These demand further consideration in policy and practice as the trust sector matures.

- Most practitioners in school trusts with safeguarding responsibilities have clear job descriptions that cover their safeguarding remit and individual professional learning plans. However, there are very few career development pathways for safeguarding leadership as a field of practice because many DSLs and deputy DSLs are already in other senior roles that dictate their progression.
- Some respondents reported stable safeguarding teams, bound by strong support, trust and professional agency and a powerful sense of making a difference in their roles. However, many others identified retention challenges due to workload pressure and burnout related to the challenging nature of safeguarding work, the lack of wider children's support services and the growing gap between location cost and salary levels, especially in London.
- The requirement for DSLs to be in leadership and therefore historically from a teaching background can still limit career progression for safeguarding professionals with predominantly clinical or pastoral experience, irrespective of their potential or expertise. Whilst some trusts navigate this by having a highly experienced safeguarding officer reporting to the trust DSL, this raises the fundamental question of equity and diversity of skills amongst those leading trust safeguarding.
- Trusts' commitment to providing support for safeguarding practitioners through supervision – and the take up of supervision where offered – is increasing, with more trusts looking to introduce this as an internal support mechanism. Whilst most practitioners who can access supervision take it up, a significant minority (14% of respondents) reported less than 50% take up due to a combination of time pressure and lack of perceived relevance.

Finally, whilst the survey highlighted the diversity of safeguarding structures and practices across the sector, it also revealed strong alignment between trust safeguarding leaders on their priorities for 2024. These include:

- achieving consistency of systems and reporting to improve the use of safeguarding data to strengthen strategic decisions and early interventions
- building online safety by embedding new filtering and monitoring requirements
- improving children's attendance
- strengthening connections and collaboration between individual school safeguarding teams across the trust
- developing mental health and wellbeing strategies

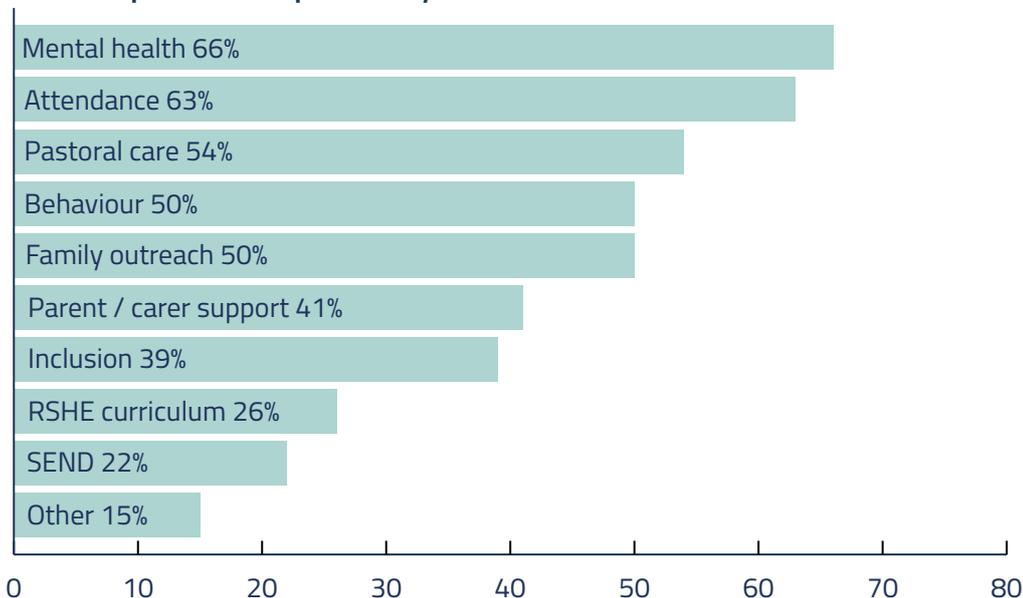
## Roles and responsibilities

The survey found that 27% of respondents identified safeguarding as their sole responsibility and 73% identified a wide range of other responsibilities, from CEOs and executive heads to directors of education and improvement, to leads on attendance, behaviour, inclusion, SEND and well-being.

The vast majority of respondents (79%) confirmed that each role holder within their team had an up-to-date job description that includes their safeguarding responsibilities. A further 19% reported that they are actively working on it.

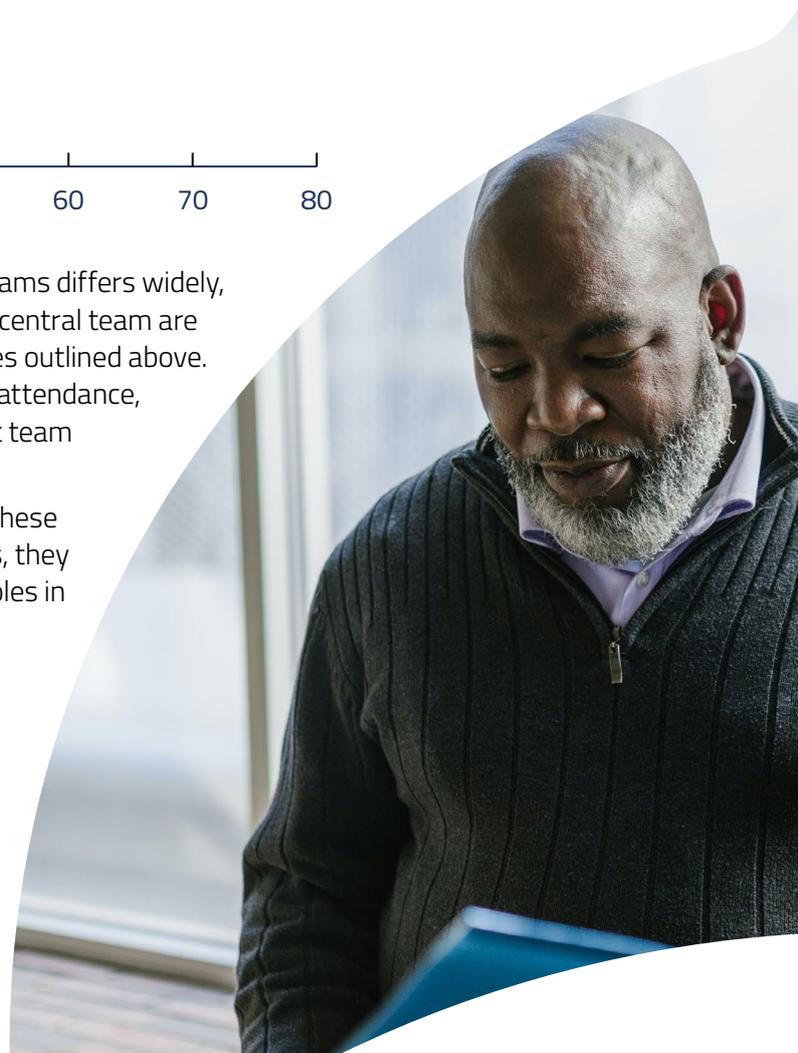
The dominant safeguarding team model, adopted by 60% of respondents, is the central trust safeguarding lead or director coordinating a central team to support DSLs in schools across the trust. Additionally, 24% of respondents said that they planned to change their safeguarding structure over the next 12-24 months, with many indicating that the move to centralise safeguarding strategy, oversight, quality assurance, governance and professional development increases as trusts grow.

### Which of the following areas does your safeguarding team have the ownership or lead responsibility for?



The span of responsibilities held by trust safeguarding teams differs widely, according to trust size and structure. In some trusts, the central team are responsible for leading safeguarding through the practices outlined above. In others, responsibility for areas such as mental health, attendance, family liaison, and pastoral care sit firmly within the trust team structure too.

Some respondents additionally commented that where these wider responsibilities are not formally part of their teams, they work very closely with colleagues in central and school roles in delivering them.



## Retention

Safeguarding teams are vulnerable to the national crisis in retention and recruitment. Whilst some respondents reported stable teams and respondents were not asked to share retention data, many identified the factors that are impacting retention in their trusts. The top three of which are workload, the unique pressure of the role and uncompetitive rates of pay.

The pressures of the role were mostly identified as the emotional load of working in safeguarding and the significant increase in demand that teams are facing. As well as being described as rewarding and important work that can make a difference, respondents acknowledged that safeguarding work can be 'harrowing' and lead to fatigue and burnout.

Workload was cited as a particular issue for staff who also have teaching responsibilities. Respondents said that it was an increasingly difficult balance to manage when more is being required in both areas:

"We find schools are increasingly having to ask teachers and leaders to do more as there is much less slack in the system. This is not sustainable."

"Most DSLs teach and have SLT responsibilities so tend to have short shelf lives."

Rising caseload and lack of support from children's services due to staffing issues and higher thresholds were also mentioned, alongside the complexity of cases "being pushed back to schools" and the "complexity of working across different local authorities."

In terms of pay, the rising cost of living vs greater competition from other sectors is perceived to be a significant challenge to retention: "Amazon pay a lot more for far less responsibility".

Some suggestions for how to address these challenges include:

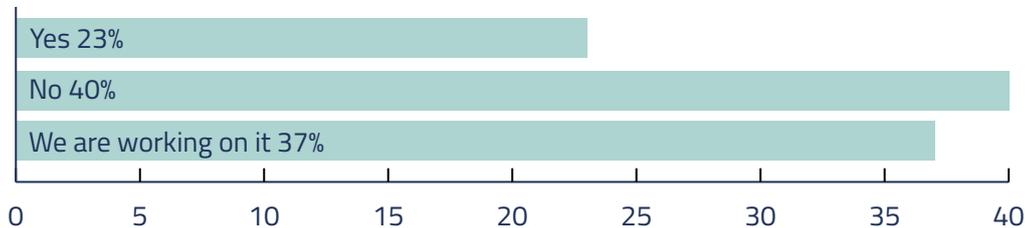
- Support, supervision, working as a team and not having to make decisions in isolation
- Training opportunities
- Feeling listened to and allowed to develop and implement new and innovative procedures
- Excellent working relationships with all central teams and local authorities
- Flexible working
- High quality continuing professional development offer (including investment in postgraduate qualifications)
- Collaboration across the trust
- Good rates of pay relative to some other schools and trusts
- Free food and drink allowance for all staff



## Career progression

Only 23% of respondents agreed that role holders within their teams have a clear career development pathway; a further 37% acknowledged the issue as something that they are working on.

### Does each role holder have a defined career development pathway?



Multiple factors were identified as barriers to a clear career development pathway for safeguarding professionals, with the top three being:

1. The requirement for DSLs to be on the leadership team. The other leadership roles that DSLs hold have their own career development pathways that do not encompass safeguarding.  
"Some amazing non-teaching DDSLs will never be in this whole school role but would make outstanding DSLs. It may be that a member of the senior leadership team can hold the strategic position and a DDSL could be a 'safeguarding officer' - but not DSL."
2. The lack of training and development courses available to support progression into safeguarding leadership.  
"There are limited courses for DSLs to progress" and "no nationally recognised training pathway (NPQ)"
3. Sufficient central resource to plan career progression and fund it.  
"We have a people strategy but capacity to enact this at pace is a barrier."  
"Pay is not always reflective in terms of difficulties of the job as well as non-teaching DSLs not being able to progress in pay due to non-teaching status."

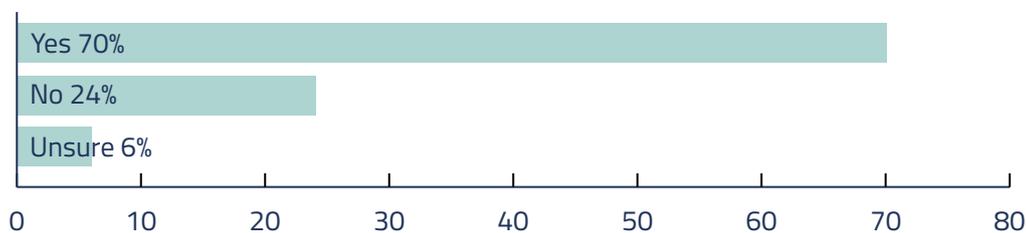


## Support and supervision

Many trust safeguarding teams get school leads together regularly, with half-termly, and weekly being the most popular frequencies. Weekly meetings tend to be in school and half-termly meetings across the trust. Several respondents commented that introducing cross-trust practitioner meetings is a priority. Teams also connect via digital channels and access a wider range of resources and professional development opportunities provided by a broad range of organisations from local authorities and regional networks, charities, commercial providers, professional advisors, and associations. In accessing support, peer networks and collaborations are a valued part of the trust safeguarding lead's knowledge ecosystem.

Over two-thirds (70%) provide access to supervision to their teams. This takes several forms, with the most popular being 1-2-1 supervision delivered in house. Some practitioners comment that their schools' approach isn't consistent across the trust with some of their schools doing supervision differently, or not at all.

### Does every member of your safeguarding team have access to regular supervision?



Where supervision is offered, take-up is not universal, with 67% of respondents estimating 50+% engagement. Of those who highlighted low engagement, time and perception of need are the two biggest barriers to address.

Two approaches to increasing participation in supervision were shared:

"We are moving away from [individual supervision] to a model focussing on caseload supervision. This will be delivered in house and is being introduced following feedback from DSLs."

"The uptake of supervision is increasing with DSL training now delivered centrally the importance of and the rationale of supervision is woven into this training. Peer endorsement of how it supports practice is also helping to encourage more take up."



## Conclusion

The responses to this survey provide a valuable insight into how safeguarding at scale is developing across our sector, with teams continuing to work towards greater levels of consistency, insight, and trust wide support to keep children safe.

Given the increased complexity and demands placed on the safeguarding role in school trusts, the findings highlight how essential it is for trust leaders and boards to be actively supporting the wellbeing of their safeguarding workforce and committed to building appropriate capacity within their trusts.

By indicating the tension between delivering an effective teaching commitment and appropriate DSL cover, respondents also demonstrate that a wider rethink of how safeguarding is resourced in education is needed; one which will increase the diversity of safeguarding leaders and identify new ways for funding and protecting safeguarding time.

Finally, these responses also tell us that the introduction of fair, well- structured and properly resourced training pathways to develop and appropriately recognise (in terms of seniority and pay) the next generation of trust safeguarding professionals should be high on the agenda for the development of national safeguarding policy.





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