

Designated Safeguarding Leads in the Youth Sector

Summary Document

A Youth Work Context

Keeping people young people safe from harm is not inevitable. Laws have been passed to offer protection from harm and to direct organisations to act to prevent harm. Guidance is issued and policies are developed setting expectations for implementation. However, greater clarity and additional support is needed for the youth sector, which is represented by range of stakeholders from statutory services to charities, community groups, businesses, uniformed, faith-based and specialist organisations. These sector partners deliver diverse provision including open-access and targeted youth services, detached or outreach youth work, out of school activities and volunteering opportunities.

In youth organisations and groups across the country action is taken every day to proactively prevent harm: training is delivered, background checks are made and risk assessments completed. Youth workers are the port of call for many who are facing abuse, neglect and exploitation. For young people – and for staff, volunteers and other community members – youth organisations and services can offer safe spaces to seek support and help. The lynchpin in these organisations efforts to keep people safe is the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL).

Role of the DSL

The DSL is the in-house champion for safeguarding who sets the direction for action and will lead support to those who have been harmed. They are a critical part of the team to ensure that young people facing abuse, neglect and exploitation are kept in sight. Without the right support for the DSL, safeguarding systems are weakened. The role of DSLs has evolved like much of safeguarding law: piecemeal, in part and varying over time. Currently there is no expectation on the specific responsibilities of DSLs, outside of schools or colleges, and the definition of the role varies between different statutory guidance.

Clarity is needed on the role of the qualified youth worker or volunteer, as designated DSL for youth services and out of school activities. Whilst abuse, neglect and exploitation can occur to anyone, youth services are often working with a population with barriers to accessing support and specific vulnerabilities. There are close working relationships with other statutory services and professional groups, and as part of multi-disciplinary teams and approaches.

However, there is no shared, sector-wide articulation as to the required knowledge, skills and competencies that DSLs need to perform their role effectively. This leads to challenges for youth organisations with no benchmark of what to look for in a DSL. It creates barriers for statutory agencies engaging with a DSL who would encounter significant variation in knowledge, skills and experiences for the role.



Standalone
specific
position



Employed
professional
role



Focused on
practitioner /
board level



Called
various
roles

Local Safeguarding Challenges

Local Safeguarding Arrangements – the local authority, police and clinical commissioning group – have rights to define which local partners to work with; which now include charities, religious organisations and any person or body involved in the provision, supervision or oversight of sport or leisure. Yet local areas work with different titles, or having different mechanisms for the work.¹ While some local areas have retained provision for communicating with and training local groups, many DSLs have noted this has been reduced over time.

Whilst action to protect children from harm are set out in law and statutory guidance; the most recent research from ADCS (2021) highlights how the application and interpretation of thresholds and the management of risk and support at the point of transfer to other services varies between authorities.

The lack of frameworks for the competencies for DSLs impacts the training available. There is a wide variety of different DSL training courses which are available – all with different curricula and coverage of core sets of knowledge and skills. It can make it difficult for differentiating between different training for youth work and out of school activities, and those geared towards formal school or college settings or health care settings, for example.

Overall, young people's identities are distinct from the wider population. There is a broad trend that younger people are from more ethnically diverse groups, identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual; and increased referrals to gender identity services, for example. Many DSLs informally report that a considerable proportion of welfare concerns relate to young people or volunteers experiencing poor mental health or distress. Whilst many will not meet threshold for crisis support; they remain known to the organisation and of concern to the DSL.

There is concern too that most legal expectations for safeguarding is focussed on individuals under 18, whereas youth work supports young people up to age 25 years. Whilst the Care Act 2014 put in place duties for local authorities to investigate concerns; there remains no proactive duty on many public bodies to consider safeguarding adults at risk of harm. The children's and adults' statutory safeguarding systems are conceptually and procedurally different, and underpinned by different legislation.

Meanwhile DSLs in youth organisations have become increasingly familiar with children and young people sharing concerns about adults at risk of harm including family members of the young people they work with, or in acting on concerns about their own staff or, more commonly, volunteers.



Most legal expectations for safeguarding only focuses on young people up to 18. Youth Work supports up to 25



Young people's identities are distinct from the wider population

¹ [Safeguarding Early Adopters Developing the Learning on Multi-agency Safeguarding Arrangements Final Report](#) National Children's Bureau

Training and Resources

A significant proportion of DSLs have no nationally accredited qualification. If they have had training it has been without external verification or recognisable accreditation. Only half of DSLs (54%) report that they have a nationally accredited qualification specifically about safeguarding or equivalent (eg. child abuse, child protection, adult safeguarding). The vast majority were entry level qualifications with a combined 40% have a Level 2 (equivalent to GCSE grades 9 - 4 or A* - C) or Level 3 qualification (equivalent to A level).

At the same time, keeping on top of legal reform is especially challenging given that work with people across the life course. They must keep track of laws specifically affecting children (with changes in laws such as child cruelty and exploitation), young adults (issues of knife crime, domestic violence and harassment) and with adults at risk (such as around issues of deprivation of liberty and mental health). The pace of change has been significant with major new offences on a diverse range of issues over the past five years such as definitions of child cruelty²; controlling or coercive behaviour³; forced marriage; harassment; child exploitation⁴, offensive weapons⁵, stalking⁶, online abuse and social media, including up-skirting.

DSLs must also keep on top of the range of technology that young people are using. They are developing policies and procedures for how the organisation uses these platforms and make judgments about safer ways of working.

The Age Appropriate Design Code statutory code of practice with compliance due from September 2021 will bring additional considerations⁷ for data protection⁸ and implementation of GDPR, to ensure any information sharing is done lawfully.⁹



54% hold accredited safeguarding qualifications at level 2 or above



Only around half of DSLs feel they receive the job-based supervision support needed

² Serious Crime Act 2015 amends the Children and Young Persons Act 1933

³ Serious Crime Act 2015

⁴ Policing and Crime Act 2017

⁵ Offensive Weapons Act 2019

⁶ Stalking Protection Act 2019

⁷ Information Commissioner Office (2020) [Age appropriate design: a code of practice for online services](#)

⁸ Data Protection Act 2018

⁹ HM Government (2018) [Information sharing Advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers](#)

Recommendations

The NYA Safeguarding Hub has been launched to drive forward resources for the youth sector. This sector collaboration will further develop a suite of tried and tested, evidence based and effective support tools and draw on the best insights from organisations specialising in child protection and those working with adults at risk.

Priorities for government, local authorities and youth services, are to harmonise different statutory provisions for safeguarding across the youth sector and out of school activities; we recommend this includes:

- 1. A call for a national review of safeguarding support services across the youth sector to harmonise safeguarding provision with statutory services, including education and mental health, and the transition to adult services.**
 - a. One year on from the introduction of Safer Partnerships, evidence suggests DSLs are not able to access intervention services for young people. The review should explore barriers to referral routes and the impact on youth sector organisations and in particular Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) within those organisations.
 - b. The review should include an evaluation of the role of DSL in formal and non-formal settings, including education, to ensure it is standardised and able to fulfil its legal duties.
 - c. The review should look to strengthen the links between safeguarding, mental health and wellbeing.
 - d. The review should include an explicit safeguarding requirement on any organisation offering digital interaction with children and adults at risk of harm.

- 2. Ensure children and young people are involved in all elements of safeguarding structures and services in order best meet their needs.**
 - a. Authentically and consistently put young people at the heart of decision making, supported by an organisational approach to collaboration with young people.
 - b. Reviewing safeguarding language to be accessible, meaningful and relevant.
 - c. Ensure open and ongoing discussions about safeguarding and ways to recognise, report and seek support over any safeguarding concerns.

- 3. The development of DSLs as an explicit part of a youth workforce development strategy that increases capacity in safeguarding practice over the long term.**
 - a. Development of a national qualification framework that defines a set of National Occupancy Standards and training standards for DSLs; and compulsory supervision for DSLs.
 - b. Consideration of whether the role of DSL should become 'Protected' in line with a HSW Officer and Data Protection Officer; and the impact of the DSL role being given the status of 'Position of Trust'.
 - c. A proactive recruitment campaign to increase the diversity of DSLs.
 - d. The youth sector to work collectively to increase support for DSL practitioners.



Regular
benchmarking -
size, scale, role



Further
research - DSL
effectiveness



Further
research -
supervising



Further
research -
survivors of harm