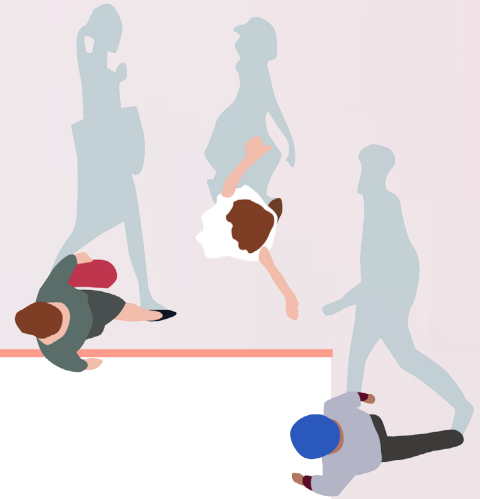




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# SUPERVISION FOR DESIGNATED SAFEGUARDING LEADS: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

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## Supervision for designated safeguarding leads doesn't have an impact on children's social care referrals.

Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) play a critical role in schools, coordinating and overseeing safeguarding procedures, as well as acting as a first point of contact in schools for anyone with concerns about a child. Statutory guidance highlights the importance of training and support for DSLs, and the role that supervision can play in improving outcomes for children and families, but the type of supervision that DSLs receive (if any) varies and is not always delivered by a social worker. It is also not clear whether different kinds of supervision have an impact on DSLs' practice or outcomes for children.

This evaluation aimed to assess the impact of providing DSLs with supervision from a Supervising Social Worker (SSW). Through supervision, the programme aimed to improve the "appropriateness"<sup>1</sup> and quality of contacts made by schools to children's social care (CSC) and to improve DSLs' wellbeing.

In order to assess whether supervision for DSLs had an impact on the appropriateness of contacts made by schools to CSC, we measured whether there was a difference in the number of contacts made by schools to CSC which resulted in no further action, and used this as the proxy measure. If supervision had the intended impact, we expected that there would be fewer contacts made by schools to CSC which resulted in no further action.

This evaluation found that, **although well received by DSLs, providing supervision for DSLs had no impact on either the appropriateness of contacts made by schools to CSC or DSLs' wellbeing.**

This evaluation involved three randomised controlled trials (RCTs), alongside Implementation and Process Evaluations (IPEs) and cost analyses. In total, 1,678 schools across 26 local authorities (LA)s were randomly assigned to receive supervision (nearly 682 schools), or to continue with business as usual (996 schools). 34 SSWs were recruited to provide supervision for DSLs in schools in the intervention group. Schools receiving the intervention were then compared to those who continued with business as usual.

A fourth RCT examined the impact of DSL supervision on the proportion of pupils for whom a new contact is made by a school, in relation to potential child sexual abuse. This study also found that supervision for DSLs had no impact on the outcomes measured. You can read more [here](#).

1 In the context of this evaluation, contacts resulting in no further action are used as a proxy measure for "inappropriate" contacts. Recent years have seen increases in the number of referrals to CSC that originate from schools. Reducing the number of inappropriate contacts made can help to ensure that resources are focused on addressing those contacts where further action by CSC is most needed. This evaluation used contacts made to CSC that resulted in no further action as a proxy for "inappropriate" contacts.



## KEY FINDINGS

- Our large scale RCT of supervision for DSLs found no statistically significant differences in outcomes between schools with supervision and schools without supervision. This means that providing supervision for DSLs does not improve appropriateness of CSC contacts or DSLs' wellbeing.
- Providing supervision for DSLs is not a cost-effective intervention. DSL supervision cost an average of £850 per school per year for one-to-one supervision, and £1,900<sup>2</sup> per school per year for group supervision and had no impact on the measured outcomes.
- Supervision was well received by DSLs who reported finding the supervision sessions useful, including having the time for reflection, discussing complex or new types of cases, learning from a social worker's perspective, and discussing their own wellbeing.
- Perceptions of the impacts of the supervision were however mixed:
  - Some DSLs reported that supervision had no impact on their practices, as they were already confident in their ability to perform the role and their knowledge, including about thresholds that applied for children's social care referrals.
  - At the same time, some DSLs also described positive perceived impacts, particularly in relation to improving confidence in the role and their emotional wellbeing.
  - Some DSLs found supervision difficult to implement, with finding time to schedule supervision sessions identified by DSLs as the main barrier to implementation.

## RANDOMISED CONTROLLED TRIALS

RCTs are an evaluation method where people are randomly assigned to programmes or service-as-usual. Done well, RCTs are more able than other kinds of evaluation to say whether programmes, rather than other factors, are the cause of outcomes. This means we can be more confident about whether an intervention is making a difference for children and families.

- 2 In the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) trial, the cost was significantly higher at around £4,500 per school per year. This trial involved a mixture of group and one-to-one supervision across primary and secondary schools, but also found no impact on the outcomes measured, so supervision was not cost effective.



## KEY MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- **Supervision for DSLs in the form that we evaluated should not be continued or further rolled out:** The evaluation found that providing supervision from a social worker had no impact on the outcomes measured, including appropriateness of CSC contacts and DSL wellbeing, and is therefore not a cost-effective method for improving these outcomes. However, DSLs should receive the funding, training, resources, and support needed to carry out their role effectively, as outlined in "[Keeping Children Safe in Education](#)".
- **This study highlights that there is sometimes a difference between the views held by those involved in an intervention and the findings of impact evaluations:** Supervision was well-received by DSLs. However, in this case the impact evaluation did not find any impact on the measured outcomes. This illustrates that it is important not to base decisions on process evaluations alone.
- **It is important to test interventions for impact before they are rolled-out at scale:** The findings from this evaluation found no impact on the measured outcomes, and that the intervention did not provide value for money. This demonstrates the importance of understanding whether activities have the intended impact before significant investments are made.
- **We would welcome the development of other programmes that aim to improve ways of working between schools and CSC:** Many DSLs identified a gap in communication and in understanding between schools and CSC as a significant issue for safeguarding in schools. We would welcome the development and evaluation of programmes specifically intended to improve partnerships between education and children's social care that seek to improve outcomes for children and are based on a strong theory of change.
- **Improving consistency in how local authorities collect data on CSC contacts would significantly help efforts to evaluate new interventions:** The lack of consistency in how data is collected across local authorities makes it difficult to evaluate the impact of interventions such as DSL supervision. Greater consistency across local authorities in the systems and processes that are used for recording contacts made, better school-level data, and improved connections between different data systems would allow a greater understanding of the impacts of programmes and potentially help to better target support where it is needed most.

## WHAT IS DSL SUPERVISION AND HOW DID WE EVALUATE IT?

Every school has a DSL, who takes lead responsibility for safeguarding issues in the school. The DSL role is often undertaken in addition to other duties, for example, in addition to teaching and other leadership responsibilities. Safeguarding teams are structured differently in different schools, and in secondary schools in particular, there are typically multiple staff with DSL responsibilities.

Existing guidance highlights the importance of the role, the training and support that DSLs should receive, and the critical role of supervision to ensure the best outcomes for the child and family at risk. 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' specifically emphasises that 'effective practitioner supervision can play a critical role in ensuring a clear focus on a child's welfare. Supervision should support practitioners to reflect critically on the impact of their decisions on the child and their family.'



Despite this guidance, [concerns have been raised](#) over a lack of formal supervision and sufficient training for DSLs. DSLs receive statutory training, but the findings of this evaluation highlighted that, while DSLs typically found this training useful, it was not always considered sufficient. The provision of supervision aims to build on this and add further support for DSLs, providing a space for reflective practice.

Given the longstanding policy interest in identifying interventions that can safely reduce the need for children to receive CSC services, there is interest in ways of improving DSLs' practice and the appropriateness of contacts made by schools to CSC. This is seen as important as a way of ensuring that resources are focussed on those contacts where CSC action is most needed.

One such intervention is by providing an experienced social worker to provide supervision to DSLs in schools. WWEICSC worked with the National Institute of Economic and Social Research to evaluate the impact of doing so. This research looked at both one-to-one supervision and group supervision.

In both cases, supervision brings skilled supervisors and practitioners together in order to reflect on their practice. It serves to manage the emotional demands of the work, maintain relationships, and make difficult judgements and decisions often in light of conflicting information. In this study, supervision aimed to enable practitioners to reflect critically on their own practice, receive emotional support, and to develop skills, knowledge and an increased understanding of the mechanisms of children's social care threshold limits and processes.

This model of Supervising DSLs was originally developed by Bolton Council and a pilot study on providing supervision to DSLs in primary schools in Bolton in the school year 2019/20 showed some signs of potential (although it did not find a statistically significant impact on the measured outcomes). The research we've now published looked at the impact of supervision for DSLs on contacts with CSC and DSL wellbeing in three contexts:

- The impact of one-to-one supervision for DSLs in primary schools on school contacts with CSC and DSL wellbeing
- The impact of group supervision for DSLs in secondary schools on school contacts with CSC and DSL wellbeing
- The impact of one-to-one supervision for DSLs in secondary schools in Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) on school contacts with CSC and DSL wellbeing
- The questions that the research aimed to understand were:
  - Did supervision for DSLs increase their understanding of CSC processes, and therefore reduce "inappropriate" contacts with CSC?
  - Did supervision for DSLs improve their wellbeing?

The primary outcome assessed was the proportion of pupils for whom a new contact with CSC is made by a school that does not lead to further action. The evaluation also considered secondary outcomes, including DSL wellbeing, new referrals to social care, and number of new contacts.



## WHAT DO THE FINDINGS MEAN?

These findings show that providing supervision for DSLs does not have an impact on the appropriateness of contacts with CSC. We therefore recommend that DSL supervision is not scaled up further.

We cannot know for certain why supervision for DSLs did not impact the measured outcomes. It is also important to remember that whilst we found that supervision for DSLs has no impact on the appropriateness of CSC contacts, this does not necessarily mean that supervision has no benefit at all. It is possible supervision may impact other outcomes which were not measured in this study. For example, the qualitative evidence shows that DSLs did value supervision in providing time for reflection and receiving guidance from the SSW. However, finding time to schedule supervision was a key challenge, and many DSLs reported that supervision did not affect their practices.

We cannot draw conclusions about whether supervision for DSLs did affect wider outcomes, but the lack of statistically significant impact on the outcomes that we measured means that we do not recommend the further rollout of supervision for DSLs.

## CONCLUSION

We recognise that for many people this finding may be disappointing given the extent to which many DSLs valued supervision, as seen in the qualitative research. Our findings highlight the value of early testing before activities are implemented at scale, so that we understand whether activities have the intended impact before significant investments are made. We welcome the Department for Education's intention to test new ways of working as they take forward the commitments in their recently published CSC Strategy *"Stable Homes, Built on Love"*. The focus of policy must be on improving outcomes for children, and these findings highlight the value of early testing before activities are implemented at scale. If policies were based on solely the preferences of professionals, then this is an example of where a programme may have been rolled out at huge cost with no impact on the desired outcomes for children.

As discussed above, the IPE does indicate that, for at least some DSLs, there is a need for additional support. DSLs also valued the role of supervision in bridging the gap between schools and CSC. A valuable next step could be to develop and evaluate programmes to provide this support or to improve ways of working between schools and CSC in other ways.



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