



Who's Safeguarding the Safeguarders?

Acknowledging and alleviating the mental stresses of keeping students safe.

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About this Paper

The pressures of the DSL role are well documented. Role juggling, time constraints and the need to meet ever growing regulatory requirements are nothing new.



What may be less understood are the harms students face in their digital lives and the impact this can have on those dealing with these occurrences.

Witnessing abhorrent content, and/or dealing with highly sensitive events, week after week, can take its toll on the mental wellbeing of DSLs and headteachers alike. We asked DSLs and headteachers across the UK to help us determine the size and nature of the problem. We also investigated what, if anything, leaders can do to alleviate the pressure for their safeguarding staff on the front line.

This paper, produced by Smoothwall's digital safety experts, shares these findings and provides practical guidance for DSLs and leaders alike.

Essential reading for: DSLs, headteachers, governors and leaders wanting a more practical understanding of ways to support the wellbeing of safeguarding staff. We'd be happy to help.

1.0 Why Safeguard the Safeguarders, and Why Now?

The risks facing children in their digital lives are increasing **at an alarming rate.**

Ofsted's Abuse Report published in 2022 reported that in addition to the risks schools can spot with eyes and ears, there are more risks hidden from view in a child's digital world, and that an inability to spot these risks was placing pupils in danger.

At the end of 2023 Smoothwall's digital monitoring service detected a student at suspected serious risk every 2 minutes, who, without the aid of digital monitoring, could have gone unnoticed, or noticed too late.

What's less documented is the impact this can have on staff members dealing with these events. Witnessing

atrocious content, sexual imagery, online student chats with potential perpetrators and more, is not pleasant and over time can affect staff wellbeing.

So too can the constant fear of missing these instances. Educators are only too aware what little, if any access, they have to students' digital lives. What's more, only 5% of students say they would confide in a teacher if they were in trouble online. It's an alarming disconnect that can and does lead to vulnerable students slipping under the radar. That's a constant worry for many DSLs and the potential impact that has on staff morale and wellbeing should not be ignored.

Every 2 minutes

Smoothwall detected a student at suspected serious risk.

Smoothwall Monitor 2023

5%

of students say they would confide in a teacher if they were in trouble online.

Smoothwall Research (March 2022):
Delivered by Teacher Tapp

An inability to see the dangers to students online can be a constant source of anxiety for those on the front line of safeguarding. Smoothwall Monitor and our team of human moderators are uncovering these risks **every minute of every day.**

All risks

Every 2 minutes we spotted a student suspected to be at serious risk.

Vulnerable person

Every 11 minutes we found a suspected vulnerable student.

Cyberbullying

Every 2.5 hours we found a student suspected to be involved in a very serious cyberbullying, bullying or violent incident including a potential risk to their health or life.

Offensive behaviour

Every 8 minutes we found a student suspected to be involved in a serious incident of offensive behaviour.

Grooming

Every 4 hours we found a student suspected to be involved in a serious grooming incident.

Terrorism

Every 3 hours we spotted a student suspected to be at serious risk.

Incidents of a cybersexual nature

Every 7 minutes we found a student suspected to be involved in a serious sexual incident.



2.0 Recognising the Stress Factors

Keeping children safe in their education environments comes with some often harsh realities for those in charge.

In 2022 we surveyed over 1,000 headteachers and DSLs from across the UK to determine:

What stresses they face within their safeguarding remit.

Whether these stresses have become intensified in the last year.

What their preferred sources of support are to protect their own wellbeing.

What they told us:

Administration and regulatory pressures

Feedback continues to focus on the traditional pressure points that DSLs often face in their role. This includes keeping all staff up-to-date with changes to safeguarding policies and procedures, staying abreast of regulatory updates, managing reprisals, and providing ongoing support to colleagues who have safeguarding concerns.

Time constraints

Many undertake the DSL role in addition to other responsibilities, such as teaching or leadership. Issues around time constraints then invariably arise. Multi-tasking and context switching as one task rolls over into another can and does lead to mental depletion and alert fatigue.



Exposure to online harms

We asked DSLs and headteachers whether, in the past year, they had experienced or seen an online event in school which had distressed or upset them. Over a third of DSLs and nearly half of headteachers claim they had.

Additionally, when we look at the differences between private and state schools, there appears to be a widening gap, since the pandemic. Overall, 31% of state schools staff claimed to experience distress, but only 20% of public schools claimed the same.

Response	Results
Yes	40%
No	60%
Headteachers - yes	48%
DSL - yes	36%
DSL - no	44%
Private school - yes	20%
State school - yes	31%

Anxiety around missing a child at risk

The culmination of these various stress factors can lead to what our DSL customer community refer to as FMCR – fear of missing a child at risk. It can give rise to a low or heightened level of anxiety, often constant and often the single biggest pressure, DSLs and headteachers tell us, that can keep them awake at night.

1 in 10 DSLs can't spot mental health issues

Our data revealed that 1 in 10 DSLs do not feel confident identifying a child suffering from mental health issues, while more than one in five (22%) were not confident that they could. This could add to DSL stress, and the anxiety of missing a child at risk.

Overall, 31% of state schools staff claimed to experience distress, but **only 20%** of public schools claimed the same.

3.0 Helping to Alleviate the Stress

In our survey we asked DSLs if they have accessed any of the following in the past year to help deal with the most stressful parts of their work.

Response		Results
Free face to face counselling	All	4%
Free phone counselling	All	5%
Regular supervision/discussion session	All	4%
Speaking to colleagues	All	77%
Speaking to colleagues	DSL	76%
Speaking to colleagues	Females	80%
Speaking to colleagues	Males	69%
Speaking to a boss/senior person at work	All	42%
Speaking to boss at work	DSL	42%
Online forums	All	8%

Source: Smoothwall Research (March 2022): Delivered by Teacher Tapp

It's clear that colleagues act as a vital support tool for DSLs when things get tough. In fact, over three quarters of DSLs reported that they have spoken with their colleagues as a means of direct support.

Speaking to a line manager or similar senior person is also a popular route – with 42% of DSLs using this as an option.

There was a difference between male and female – with far more females reporting using more support methods, whereas it was less common for males. In fact, one in four males haven't used any of these options when dealing with stressful parts of their work.

Accessing counselling services, whether that be face-to-face or virtually, has decreased since our previous survey in 2020. This could be a knock-on effect from the pandemic, but is concerning that fewer DSLs are utilising formal support channels available to them.

Other support factors

DSLs shared with us additional ideas for gaining support, including:

Ensure all colleagues understand the role they play, in relation to safeguarding.

Encourage others to adopt an open-door culture, so that we can share any worries or concerns we have within our role.

Have procedures to allow us to offload concerns. For example, having a debrief procedure, after any referrals or meetings.

Encourage Governors to seek out safeguarding training so that they can understand the safeguarding lead's responsibilities and the pressures we face in our roles.

The role of digital monitoring in reducing stress

Technology-led proactive digital monitoring is a technology solution in which students' digital behaviours are monitored for potential signs of risk or danger. Acting as additional eyes and ears in previously unseen locations it can provide significant peace of mind for DSLs.

In the case of Smoothwall Monitor, the leading solution in UK education, technology removes false positives – usually 99% of all alerts generated – before grading genuine alerts on a scale of one to five; one being a low suspected risk and five being the highest, including a potential risk to health or life. Low level alerts appear in a dashboard for the DSL to review and decide the most appropriate action, next time they log in.

Higher risk alerts are sent to a team of specialist, highly trained moderators who review the context and decide the severity of the alert. If high, the DSL is notified via email or, in the case of a suspected risk to health or life, by phone. That's 24/7, 365 days a year, all in real time, and within minutes of the event occurring.

A human moderated service such as this exposes the potential risks in a student's digital life – which in some cases, can be invisible even to the student themselves, such as sexual grooming.

It provides a whole new level of digital safeguarding, whilst greatly reducing, if not eliminating, the constant anxiety around missing a child at risk – and without creating any additional work for the DSL.

42% of DSLs will speak to a line manager or similar senior person to help them deal with the **more stressful parts of their work.**



4.0 How Digital Wellbeing Platforms Can Benefit DSLs and Students

Vulnerable children don't always speak up. Spotting them can be a major challenge for DSLs, and this is where student wellbeing platforms can help.

Student wellbeing platforms offer pupils a simple, confidential way to share how they're feeling and ask for help, if needed. The instant visibility this provides for DSLs allows safeguarders to spot issues early and address them before they become a problem.

Smoothwall Pulse is a mental health check-in tool that takes just 60 seconds a week to assess the wellbeing of students. All responses are recorded as colour-coded reports that staff can access to gain invaluable insights into wellbeing levels across classes, year groups and schools.

On top of the immediate advantage of being able to quickly identify those in need, data gathered by Pulse can be used to highlight trends, recognise problem areas and track improvements over time.

If a student wishes to talk to someone about how they're feeling, they have the option to select a preferred staff member. Not only does this encourage and facilitate necessary conversations, but it also takes some of the pressure off DSLs, as other staff members are able to play a key role in supporting students' mental health.

Student wellbeing platforms empower DSLs to take a proactive approach to digital safeguarding and establish a positive wellbeing culture that can be felt across the school community.

Conclusion

Keeping children safe in their education environments comes with some harsh realities for those on the front line.

Over one third of DSLs and almost half of headteachers surveyed said they have felt distress caused by the safeguarding element of their role.

The rise in online harms and the invisibility of these potential risks only adds to the stress.

Safeguarding technology can play a vital role in making invisible risks visible, transforming safeguarding while reducing workloads and stress levels.

Let's talk

If you would like to understand more about using digital monitoring or wellbeing platforms in your school, college or MAT, please contact us. Our experts will show you how they work and answer any questions.

Our team is dedicated to UK education and most are DSL trained, so we understand first hand the pressures you face.

We can also put you in touch with other schools, colleges and MATs who have already transformed their safeguarding with digital solutions.

Email: enquiries@smoothwall.com
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Smoothwall is the leading provider of digital safeguarding solutions in UK education. For more information, visit our website or get in touch with our team of experts.

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Qoria

Smoothwall is part of Qoria, a global technology company, dedicated to keeping children safe and well in their digital lives. We harness the power of connection to close the gaps that children fall through, and to seamlessly support them on all sides - at school, at home and everywhere in between.

Find out more
www.qoria.com