

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY
3 MARCH 2025

DESIGNATED OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2023/24

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to update Members of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee on the progress and performance of the Designated Officers' (DO) response to all contacts received relating to allegations/concerns of abuse by those who work with children for the period April 2023 to March 2024.

Summary

2. In line with national guidance, the Designated Officer function is to ensure that:
 - (a) Advice and guidance are provided to partner agencies and staff where an allegation is made against a person who works with children (paid or voluntary capacity).
 - (b) The Designated Officer will facilitate and oversee this process. The Designated Officer does not investigate. Investigation is the role of the employer or the police where a criminal offence has been committed.
 - (c) An agreed outcome of the investigation is established.
 - (d) Allegations are appropriately managed by employers to protect not only the welfare of children but also staff.
 - (e) Support actions are taken without delay to protect children.
 - (f) All learning is effectively disseminated.
3. All organisations working with children in Darlington are required to have policies and procedures in place in relation to what their organisation should do when an allegation is made against an employee/volunteer who has contact with children. These policies and procedures should be in line with Darlington Safeguarding Partnership multi-agency procedures.

4. The allegation can be in connection with:
 - (a) Employment
 - (b) Voluntary activity
 - (c) Work placement
 - (d) The individual's own children
 - (e) Related to the community or private life of a partner, member of the family or other household member.

Recommendations

5. It is recommended that:
 - (a) The contents of the report and the work undertaken during 2023/24 be noted.
 - (b) The annual report be agreed.

Chris Bell
Assistant Director of Children's Services

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Martin Graham Extension 6703

Council Plan	This report has no implications for the Corporate Plan
Addressing inequalities	There are no issues relating to inequalities which this report needs to address
Tackling Climate Change	There are no issues which this report needs to address
Efficient and effective use of resources	The outcome of this report does not impact on the Council efficiency agenda
Health and Wellbeing	The work of the Designated Officer can have a positive impact on the health and well-being of children and young people
S17 Crime and Disorder	This report has no implications for Crime and Disorder
Wards Affected	All wards
Groups Affected	All Children and Young People
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not represent a change to the budget and policy framework
Key Decision	Not a key decision
Urgent Decision	Not an urgent decision
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Purpose of the Report

6. The purpose of this report is to update Members of Scrutiny on the progress and performance of the Designated Officer (DO) service, (previously known as the Local Authority Designated Officer LADO) for all contacts received relating to allegations/concerns of abuse by those who work with children for the period April 2023 to March 2024.

Introduction / National Context

7. The framework for the management of allegations of abuse is set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children (July 2018) and Keeping Children Safe in Education: Statutory Guidance for Schools and Colleges September 2018 (Revised 2022).
8. In line with the guidance, the Designated Officer function is required to ensure that:
 - (a) Advice and guidance are provided to partner agencies and staff;
 - (b) Any allegation made against a person who works with children in either a paid or a voluntary capacity is investigated. The Designated Officer will facilitate and oversee this process to conclusion. The Designated Officer does not investigate. That is the role of the employer or if a criminal allegation, the police;
 - (c) Designated Officer meetings are chaired effectively, and an agreed outcome of the investigation is established;
 - (d) Allegations are appropriately managed by employers to protect not only the welfare of children but also staff;
 - (e) Support actions are taken without delay to protect children;
 - (f) Learning from Designated Officer referrals is effectively disseminated.
9. All organisations within Darlington are required to have clear policies and procedures in place which outline how and what their organisation should do when an allegation is made against an employee/volunteer who has contact with children. These policies and procedures should be in line with Darlington Safeguarding Partnership procedures.
10. The criteria for a Designated Officer referral are when a person is alleged to have:
 - (a) Behaved in a way that has harmed or may harm a child;
 - (b) Has possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to a child;
 - (c) Behaved towards a child or children in a way that indicates that he or she may pose a risk of harm if they work regularly or closely with children

(d) Behaved in a way or may have behaved in a way that indicates they may not be suitable to work with children.

11. The allegation can be in connection with employment / voluntary activity / work placement, regarding individual's own children or related to the community or private life of a partner / member of the family / household member.

Local Arrangements

12. Darlington Borough Council currently has one Designated Officer who is based within the Independent Review and Darlington Safeguarding Partnership Service. In the year, the Designated Officer role has been agency Designated Officers.
13. The Designated Officer function is supervised by a Service Manager to ensure that policies are applied consistently and fairly and that all enquiries are progressed in a timely manner.

Cross-Boundary Issues

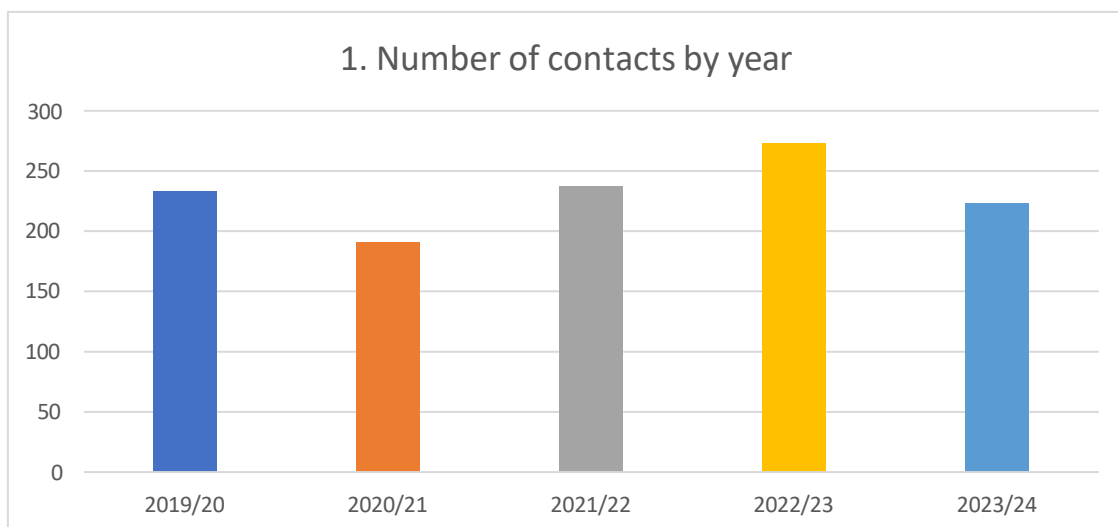
14. Where a child from the Darlington Local Authority area makes an allegation in a setting or placement which is outside the Darlington Borough Council jurisdiction, the lead responsibility for action lies with the Designated Officer in the local authority for the area where the alleged abuse occurred.
15. In these circumstances, the relevant Designated Officer, and where appropriate, the child's Social Worker, will liaise with the relevant local authority and agree a joint strategy.
16. Checks should be made as to whether there are any other children in the placement. If so, the child's Social Worker and Team Manager must be informed, and the Designated Officer should consult them about the action required.
17. Interviews of children from Darlington Local Authority living out of area will usually be undertaken by their own local children's social care services in conjunction with the police as appropriate.
18. Where the referral relates to a child from another Local Authority temporarily placed in an establishment located within the Darlington Local Authority area, the Darlington Designated Officer should liaise with the child's home authority about the roles and responsibilities in carrying out this procedure.

Contact made with the Designated Officer

19. It should be noted that two Designated Officers have carried out the role at different times throughout 2023/24.
20. In the report, all percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.
21. In 2023/24 the Designated Officer service received a total of 223 contacts in respect of

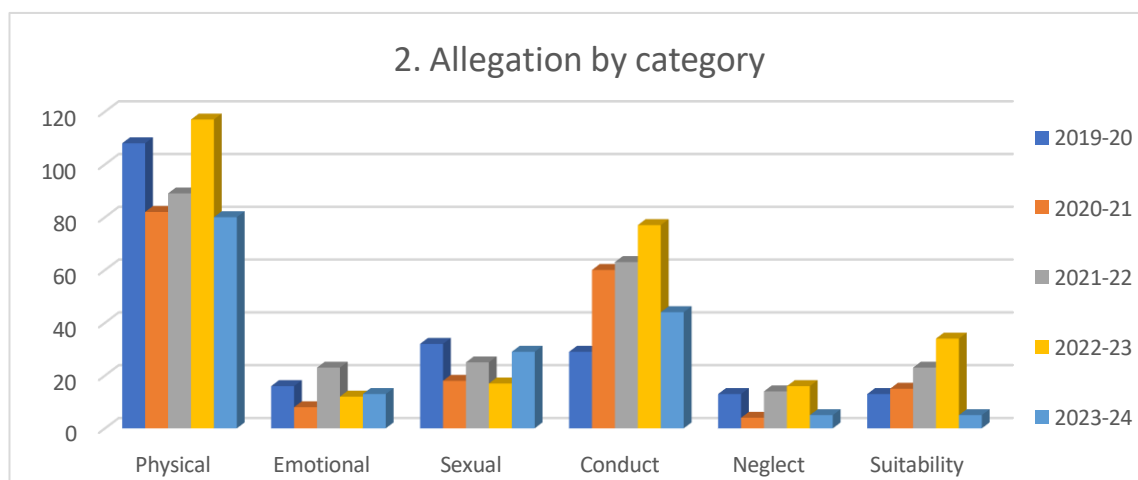
potential allegations. This was a 22% decrease on the number of contacts received in 2022/23 but is more in line with recent years. Of the total number of contacts received, 28 allegations progressed to an Initial Evaluation Meeting (IEM) or a strategy meeting which the Designated Officer attended, (all of which were conducted via Microsoft Teams). This was 12.5% of all contacts, a decrease on the 2022/23 figure.

22. Initial Evaluation Meetings take place when information sharing is beneficial between agencies involved, for example, Designated Safeguarding Leads within the referring organisation, Human Resources, Police and Children’s Services. This can follow a Strategy Meeting held by Children’s Services, or it may be a stand-alone meeting. In some circumstances, it is appropriate to share information via telephone without the need of convening an Initial Evaluation Meeting, for example, when the allegation is not of a serious nature, there is no involvement with other agencies, or there is limited information to share with the employer. These allegations are still monitored by the Designated Officer.



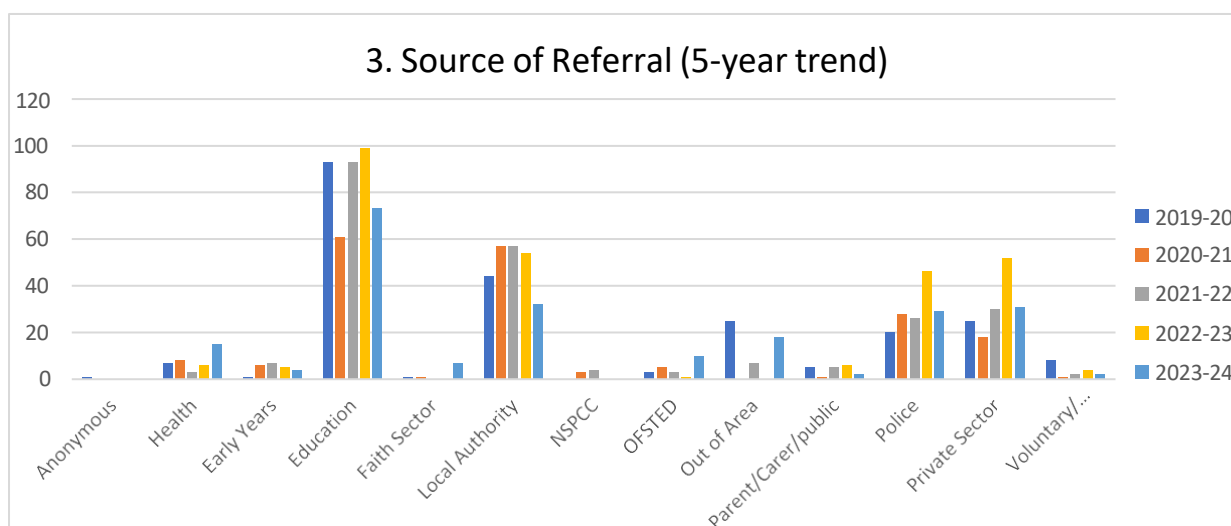
23. The figures in **Chart 1** show that the rate of contacts in 2023/24 fell by 22% (50 contacts) in comparison to the previous reporting year.
24. The majority of contacts with the Designated Officer relate to schools and the number tends to fall significantly in the month of August during the summer break and falls to a lesser extent during other months when schools are closed.

Categories of Concern



25. For 2023/24, the main category for referral was allegations of physical abuse. This is in line with the data from previous years.
26. Allegations under the category 'conduct' have seen a decrease in 2023/24. Contacts recorded within this category relate to behaviours which do not easily fit into the four main categories.
27. The category of suitability usually relates to issues in an employee's personal life, such as mental ill-health, 'association' with an offender, or association with proscribed organisations, which may affect their suitability to work with children. Some of these incidents related to mental health, alcohol abuse or self-harm or association with a partner who has committed sexual offences.
28. Sexual abuse, emotional harm and neglect are roughly in line with previous trends.

Source of Referrals by Profession / Employment setting



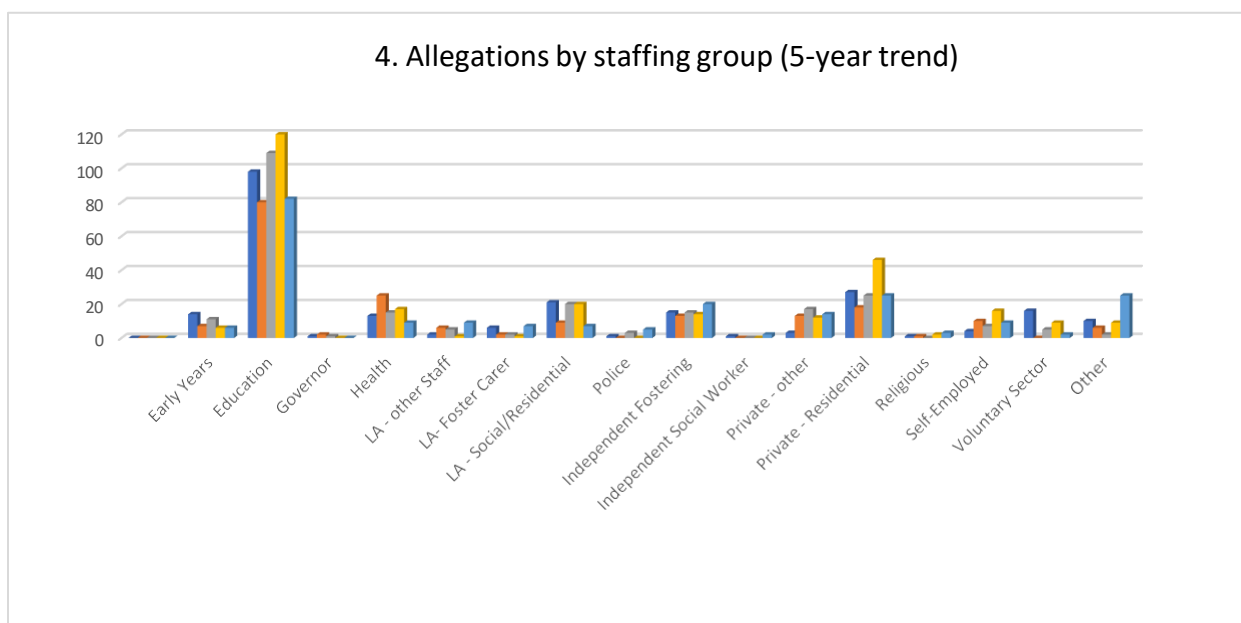
29. As can be seen in **Chart 3**, Education settings in 2023/24 continues to be the largest referring group, accounting for 73 (33%) of contacts. This is a small decrease on last year

(36%). Most contacts involving schools were because of allegations of physical abuse and correspond to the analysis of 'category of concern' data, showing that physical abuse is the most common category of allegation reported by education settings.

- 30. Contacts have continued to be received from a wide range of professions and organisations. The other main sources remain Local Authorities, Police and Private Sector.

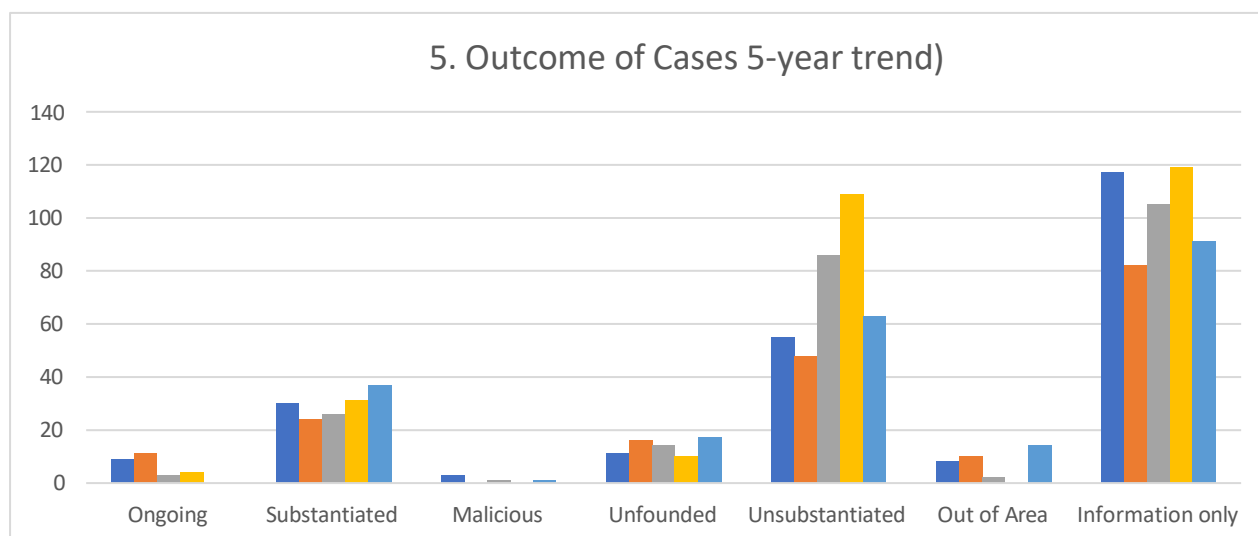
Allegations by Staff Group

- 31. **Chart 4** shows that referrals are made across a wide range of roles and settings, whether paid staff or volunteers, as outlined in the national guidelines.



- 32. As expected, and in accordance with previous years, the largest number of allegations by staffing groups is Education, accounting for 82 contacts which is 37.43% of all allegations referred in 2023/24. This is a drop from last year's figure which was the highest ever, but more in line with previous years.
- 33. The Designated Officer has worked on re-establishing a good relationship with the Designated Safeguarding Leads in all schools in Darlington and there are clear channels of communication.

Outcome of Cases



34. In relation to the 37 substantiated allegations, 11 employees were dismissed (30%), 4 were deregistered (11%), 6 resigned from their position (16%), and 7 staff members were reinstated (19%). No action was taken in respect of 9 staff members (24%), with actions plans or management advice provided.
35. There were 63 unsubstantiated outcomes and of these, 19 were re-instated (30%) and 25 resulted in no further action (40%), 19 were either dismissed or resigned (30%). When an allegation is recorded as unsubstantiated, employers are encouraged to look at whether learning can be derived from the incident to inform future practice and whether additional training or management advice for the employee is required.
36. There were 17 allegations deemed to be unfounded, in all cases, no further action was taken.
37. One allegation was recorded under the category 'malicious'. This outcome is not used by the Designated Officer unless there is overwhelming evidence that the allegation was based on deliberate falsehoods.
38. In this reporting period, 63 contacts were recorded for 'information only'. Sometimes after initial enquiries have been carried out by the Designated Officer it is identified that they fall outside of the remit of the Designated Officer. They normally result in advice being given or signposting to other services.
39. At the time of writing, no allegations remain open.

Designated Officer in 2024/25

40. The Designated Officer service will continue to be crucial to frontline practice to safeguard children in Darlington. Working in partnership with the Designated Officer and sharing information effectively ensures that children are protected from people who pose a risk of harm and promotes good practice and challenges unsafe practice. The Designated Officer continues to work with the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership Trainer and the Education Safeguarding Officer to raise awareness of the role of the Designated Officer and the Managing Allegations Procedures to promote good practice and safeguard children.

Recommendations

41. To note the contents of the report and the work undertaken during 2023/24.

The future of the Designated Officer service in Darlington to be agreed and a decision made as to where the service will be placed within the Local Authority

Action	Planned Outcome	Lead	Timescale
A decision to be made as to where the Designated Officer would be best placed within the Local Authority with regards to workload and taking into consideration resilience for abstraction.	A decision regarding where the DO role should be placed.	Assistant Director	March 2024