

SAFEGUARDING NEWSLETTER

Issue: February 2026

Explore the evolving landscape of safeguarding within The Leep Group, uncovering the latest trends and challenges affecting learners today, with practical tools, expert insights, and essential resources to help you support learners facing these challenges.

TALK TO US

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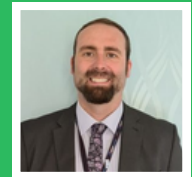
SAFEGUARDING TEAM



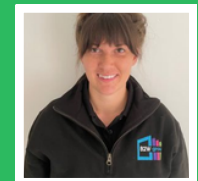
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WELCOME...



Alison Dann
Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL)

At the Leep Group, safeguarding remains at the core of everything we do. For both learners and staff, our commitment goes beyond compliance; we are focused on building a safe, informed, and resilient community where everyone feels supported.

In this edition, we explore emerging safeguarding themes and inclusion priorities that are shaping education and wider society. From the risks associated with deepfakes, AI crime, and encrypted messaging, to criminal exploitation such as cuckooing, we highlight the practical steps we can take to recognise warning signs and respond confidently.

We also reflect on the importance of inclusion through the lens of the new Ofsted Further Education and Skills Toolkit, reinforcing why safeguarding and inclusion must work hand in hand. Alongside this, we raise awareness of Seasonal Affective Disorder and provide guidance on supporting wellbeing across our community. We also mark Ramadan, offering insight into how we can promote understanding, respect, and inclusion during this important period.

These topics are not abstract issues. They are real, current challenges that affect learners, colleagues, and families. By contextualising them within our setting, we strengthen our collective awareness and ensure that safeguarding remains proactive, visible, and embedded in daily practice.

This edition also includes a reminder of our safeguarding reporting flow, so everyone is clear on how to raise concerns and access support.

If you have any concerns or require further guidance, please contact the safeguarding team. Early reporting and open conversations remain our strongest tools in keeping everyone safe.

Together, we continue to prioritise safety, inclusion, and wellbeing across the Leep community.

Best wishes,
Alison Dann
Designated Safeguarding Lead
Leep Group



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Deepfakes



Sexual, non-consensual, abuse

Deepfakes are digitally created or altered images, videos, or audio recordings that use artificial intelligence (AI) to make someone appear to say or do something they never actually did.

While some uses of AI technology are creative or harmless, deepfakes can also be used to deceive, manipulate, exploit, or abuse others.

One of the most serious safeguarding concerns is the creation of non-consensual sexual deepfakes, where a person's face is digitally placed onto explicit content without their permission. This is a form of abuse and can have significant emotional, reputational, and safeguarding consequences.



The European Commission has launched an investigation into Elon Musk's X (formally twitter) over concerns its AI tool, Grok, was used to create sexualised deepfake images of real people. Regulators will assess whether the platform breached EU digital safety laws, with potential fines of up to 6% of global turnover. Investigations remain ongoing across multiple countries.

Why Deepfakes Are a Safeguarding Issue

Deepfakes can be used to:

- Harass, threaten, or blackmail individuals
- Create non-consensual sexual images or videos
- Damage reputations or relationships
- Manipulate or coerce someone into further contact
- Spread misinformation or cause public distress

Both adults and children can be targeted. Young people may be particularly vulnerable due to social media presence, image sharing, or online peer pressure. Adults can also be targeted in professional contexts, including workplace impersonation scams or reputational harm. The impact can include anxiety, shame, isolation, fear, and in serious cases, risk of exploitation or coercion.



Deepfakes



How to stay safe



How to Recognise a Potential Deepfake

Deepfakes are becoming more sophisticated, but there may still be signs such as:

- Facial movements that look unnatural or slightly out of sync
- Blurred or distorted edges around the face
- Lighting inconsistencies between the face and body
- Audio that does not quite match lip movements
- Content appearing suddenly from unknown or anonymous sources

However, it is important to remember that deepfakes are designed to look convincing. Suspicion should not rely only on spotting technical flaws.



Top Tips to stay safe

1. **Share personal content carefully** – limit what you post online, especially clear photos and videos, and only accept connections from people you trust
2. **Use strong privacy settings** – restrict who can view your content across social media and file-storage platforms to reduce publicly available material
3. **Watermark images and videos** – adding a digital watermark can discourage misuse and make content easier to trace
4. **Build awareness of deepfakes and AI** – keep up to date with basic developments so you can spot suspicious or manipulated content
5. **Enable multi-factor authentication (MFA)** – add extra security steps to protect accounts from unauthorised access
6. **Create strong, unique passwords** – use long, complex passwords for each account and store them securely in a password manager with MFA
7. **Keep software and devices updated** – install updates and security patches to reduce vulnerabilities
8. **Watch out for phishing attempts** – be cautious with unexpected messages, especially those creating urgency; always verify the sender and avoid suspicious links
9. **Report deepfake content** – flag and report any suspected deepfake material through the appropriate platform or safeguarding channels



Ramadan Kareem

Ramadan

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and one of the most important times of the year for Muslims. It is a period centred on fasting, prayer, reflection, charity, and community.

During Ramadan, many Muslims fast from dawn until sunset, meaning they do not eat or drink during daylight hours. The fast is broken at sunset with a meal called iftar and begins again before dawn after a pre-dawn meal known as suhoor.

Ramadan lasts around 29–30 days and concludes with Eid al-Fitr, a significant religious celebration marking the end of the fasting period.



Ramadan 2026 in the UK is expected to begin on the evening of Tuesday, 17 February 2026, with the first full day of fasting on Wednesday, 18 February 2026, and conclude on Thursday, 19 March 2026, followed by Eid al-Fitr on Friday, 20 March 2026.

What does this mean day to day?

For those observing Ramadan, this time may involve:

- **Fasting throughout the working or learning day**
- **Earlier mornings and later evenings for meals and prayer**
- **Lower energy levels, particularly later in the afternoon**
- **Short breaks for prayer or quiet reflection**
- **Requests for annual leave or authorised absence around Eid**

It's important to note that not all Muslims fast. There are exemptions for reasons such as health, pregnancy, travel, or personal circumstances. Observance of Ramadan can look different from person to person.

Ramadan

A supportive, flexible, and respectful approach during Ramadan helps create a safe, inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and understood. If you have questions or would like to discuss support needs, open conversations are always encouraged.



What can you do to support someone observing Ramadan?



Being open to flexible start or finish times, where possible



Allowing short breaks for prayer



Being mindful when scheduling late-afternoon meetings or sessions



Encouraging open, respectful conversations about individual needs



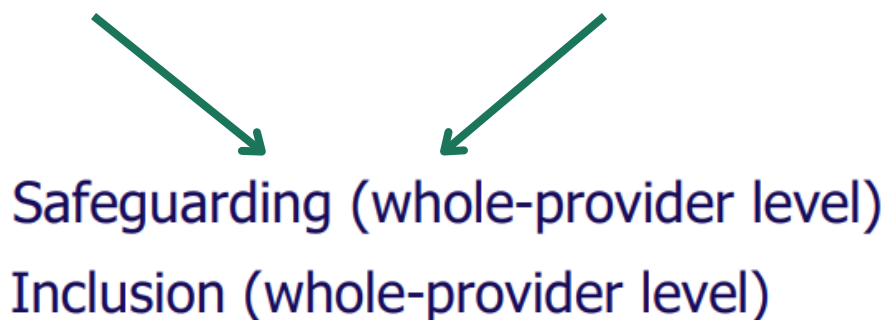
Avoiding assumptions – everyone experiences Ramadan differently



The recently released Ofsted Further Education and Skills Toolkit highlights the importance of recognising disadvantage, removing barriers, and ensuring that learners know how and where to access help throughout their learning journey.

Inclusion and safeguarding are inseparable. An inclusive environment is one where all learners feel safe, respected, and supported, and safeguarding is strongest when staff understand the vulnerabilities learners may face and respond consistently.

The released toolkit has both whole-provider level (organisation level) judgement areas including both Safeguarding and Inclusion.



What does this mean?

Inclusion and safeguarding are not separate responsibilities or specialist functions. They are embedded in everyday practice, in how sessions are planned, how behaviour changes are noticed, how conversations are handled, and how concerns are recorded and reported. It requires professional curiosity, consistent responses, and an understanding that vulnerability can be visible or hidden, temporary or ongoing.

Everyone should feel safe, respected, and supported. You should know who to speak to if something does not feel right, feel confident that you will be listened to, and understand that asking for help is a strength, not a weakness.

Cuckooing

Cuckooing is a form of criminal exploitation where individuals or organised groups take over someone's home and use it for illegal activity, such as storing drugs, dealing, or other criminal behaviour. Cases of cuckooing is on the increase since 2019, with at least a quarter of cases observing victims with a disability. The term comes from the idea of criminals "moving in" and displacing the original resident.



Cuckooing often targets people who are already vulnerable, including those who are isolated, experiencing financial hardship, living with mental health needs, or lacking strong support networks. It can affect people of all ages and backgrounds, and those impacted may not recognise what is happening or may feel unable to ask for help.

Cuckooing is a crime where drug dealers or other criminals take over the home of a vulnerable person to use it as a base for illegal activities, such as drug dealing, storage of weapons, or sex work.

Who is Targeted?

- Individuals with drug or alcohol addictions
- Those with learning disabilities or mental health issues
- Elderly or isolated individuals
- People living in poverty or with financial difficulties

How it Happens

- Befriending the vulnerable person
- Offering 'gifts' like drugs, alcohol, or money
- Gradual increase in presence and control
- Intimidation, threats, and violence to maintain control

Warning Signs to Look Out For

At the Property:

- Increased foot traffic at unusual hours
- Strong chemical smells or drug paraphernalia
- Windows covered or curtains always drawn
- Unfamiliar people coming and going frequently

Changes in the Victim:

- Sudden withdrawal from family and friends
- Appearing fearful or anxious
- Unexplained injuries or signs of abuse
- No longer in control of their own home

Key Facts: Cuckooing is recognized as a form of modern slavery under UK law and is often linked to 'County Lines' drug operations. It affects an estimated 10,000+ vulnerable adults across the UK annually.

St Giles

Turning a past into a future

Cuckooing

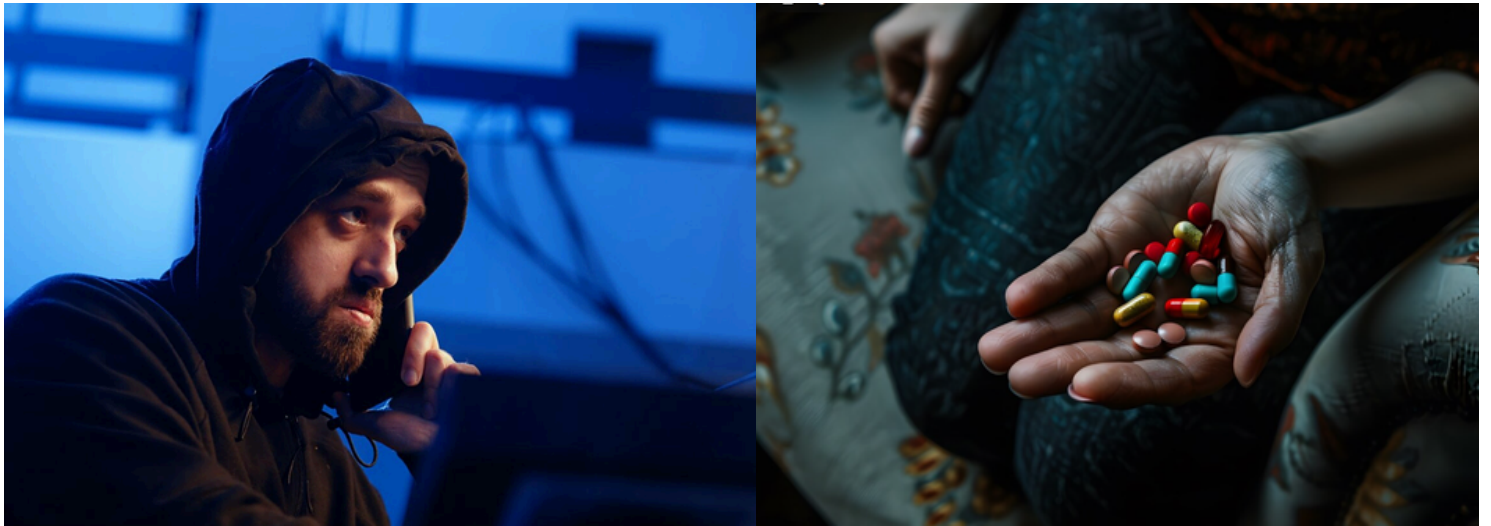


What to do if you're concerned

If you suspect cuckooing or criminal exploitation:

- Do not confront the individuals involved
- Do not put yourself or others at risk
- Do report concerns promptly through safeguarding channels
- Do record what you have noticed factually and accurately
- Do seek advice if you are unsure – it is always better to ask

If there is immediate danger, emergency services should be contacted.



How to Help and Support

If you are worried about someone, the most important thing is to listen and reassure, not investigate or confront the situation yourself. People affected by cuckooing may fear repercussions or feel ashamed, so a calm, non-judgemental response is essential.

Support can include:

- Reassuring them that help is available and they are not in trouble
- Encouraging them to speak to a trusted member of staff
- Helping them understand that exploitation is not their fault
- Making sure concerns are shared with safeguarding leads so the right support can be put in place
- Contact the safeguarding team

Early support can prevent situations from escalating and reduce risk.

S.A.D

Seasonal Affective Disorder

What is S.A.D?

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression linked to changes in the seasons. It is most commonly experienced during the autumn and winter months, when daylight hours are shorter, although some people experience symptoms at other times of year.

SAD can affect mood, energy levels, motivation, and concentration. While it is often described as “the winter blues,” for some people the impact is significant and can affect learning, work, attendance, and overall wellbeing.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

What S.A.D may feel like...

People experiencing SAD may notice changes that build gradually over time rather than appearing suddenly. These can include:

- Persistent low mood or feeling down most days
- Tiredness or low energy, even after sleep
- Difficulty concentrating or staying motivated
- Changes in sleep patterns, such as sleeping more than usual
- Changes in appetite, often craving carbohydrates
- Withdrawal from others or loss of interest in usual activities

Not everyone will experience all of these signs, and symptoms can vary in severity from person to person.



S.A.D

Seasonal Affective Disorder



Why S.A.D Matters in Learning and Work

Low mood and reduced energy can make it harder for people to stay engaged, attend regularly, or manage deadlines. Some individuals may feel frustrated with themselves or worry that they are “falling behind,” which can increase anxiety and isolation if support is not in place.

Being aware of seasonal wellbeing challenges helps us respond with understanding rather than judgement.

How We Can Support Anyone Experiencing S.A.D

Support does not need to be complex or clinical. Small, consistent actions can make a meaningful difference, including:

- Checking in with one another and creating space for honest conversations
- Showing understanding if energy or motivation fluctuates
- Encouraging healthy routines, including daylight exposure where possible
- Promoting balance, rest, and realistic expectations during winter months
- Signposting to appropriate wellbeing or safeguarding support
- Contact Safeguarding if you have a concern for a peer, learner or colleague.

Kindness, flexibility, and reassurance are often just as important as formal support.



Reminder

Changes in mood, behaviour, or engagement should never be dismissed as “just winter.” Early conversations and timely support can prevent issues from escalating and help individuals feel seen, heard, and supported.

SAMARITANS

‘Encro’... Encryption

Encrypted chats are a common part of modern digital communication. Many popular messaging apps use end-to-end encryption, which means messages are scrambled so that only the sender and recipient can read them. Even the company providing the app cannot see the content of the messages.

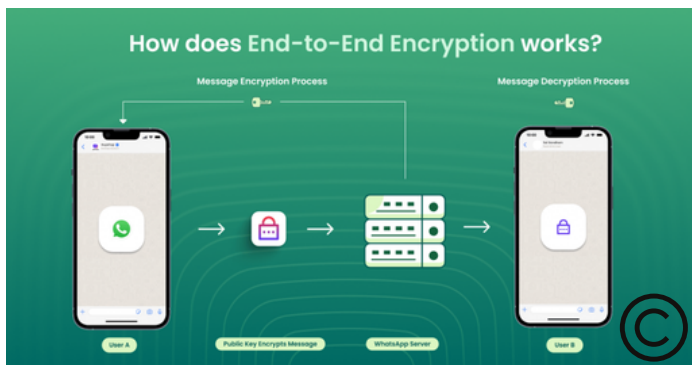
Encryption itself is not harmful. It is widely used to protect privacy and personal data. However, the same privacy features can also be misused to hide harmful, exploitative, or criminal behaviour, which is why encrypted chats are a key safeguarding consideration.



How Encrypted Chats Work (In Simple Terms)

When a message is encrypted, it is turned into a code before being sent. Only the intended recipient has the digital “key” to unlock and read it. This protects conversations from being intercepted, but it also means that harmful content can be shared without visibility from others.

This lack of visibility can increase risk, particularly for individuals who are vulnerable, isolated, or being targeted for exploitation.



Why Encrypted Chats Can Be a Safeguarding Risk

Encrypted messaging can be used to:

- Groom or manipulate individuals
- Apply pressure, threats, or control
- Share harmful or illegal content
- Facilitate criminal or exploitative activity
- Encourage secrecy or isolation from trusted people

A common warning sign is when someone is encouraged to move a conversation off public platforms and into private, encrypted spaces, especially if secrecy is emphasised.



‘Encro’... Encryption

What to do...

How to Support Someone You’re Concerned About

If you are worried about someone’s use of encrypted chats, the most important response is calm, supportive, and non-judgemental.

Support includes:

- Listening without pressure or blame
- Reassuring them that they are not in trouble
- Avoiding demands to show messages or confront others
- Encouraging them to talk to a trusted person
- Sharing concerns with safeguarding so support can be put in place

People experiencing online harm may feel embarrassed, frightened, or worried about consequences. Reassurance and safety come first.

[Report Fraud](#)



Reporting Concerns and Safeguarding at Leep

At Leep Group, safeguarding is in place to support everyone. If you have concerns about encrypted chats, online exploitation, or digital safety, whether for yourself or someone else, these should be shared through internal safeguarding routes.

You do not need proof or certainty. Safeguarding is about early support and protection, not investigation. Sharing concerns allows trained safeguarding leads to assess risk, offer guidance, and involve external support where appropriate.

If there is immediate risk of harm, emergency services should always be contacted.

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Safeguarding Flowchart

When you self-refer or contact the Safeguarding Team to report a concern about yourself or someone else, your concern is taken seriously and handled with care, confidentiality, and professionalism. Once received, the Safeguarding Team will review the information and assess the level of risk. You may be contacted for more details to ensure a clear understanding of the situation. From there, appropriate action will be taken—this may include offering support internally, signposting to external services, or escalating to relevant authorities where necessary. The team will keep you informed throughout the process, and your safety and wellbeing will remain their priority. The flowchart below outlines each step of this process.

