

Leadership & Management for Systems of Quality

Hi, my name is Carys, and I am the safeguarding officer within this day care setting. We care for 15 children under the age of 4 and have a team of four qualified staff, all working in line with Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) standards. Our shared goal is to ensure that we're not just inspection-ready, but that we provide consistent, high-quality care that meets the needs of every child.

My role focuses on leading safeguarding policy reviews, ensuring that staff are trained and confident in safeguarding procedures.

A core part of our inspection preparation involves the Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS), which is submitted annually to CIW. This tool reflects child outcomes, governance, and service delivery (Care Inspectorate Wales, no date). Alongside this, we use the CIW 'Quality of Care' report categories, which fall under the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016 (Welsh Government, 2019). These categories include environment, care and development, well-being, leadership and management (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2019). They give us a structured framework to review and help improve our setting.

These tools are helpful for maintaining accountability (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2016). However, the process can be time-consuming for a small team. If the work isn't integrated into daily routines, it risks becoming a box-ticking exercise. It also relies heavily on the willingness and confidence of staff to reflect, which not everyone finds easy. As safeguarding officer, I pay particular attention to the emotional climate of the setting, ensuring our routines, interactions, and responses support children's well-being and safety. While SASS covers these aspects, it doesn't always capture the emotional quality of care. That's why we've looked at other tools that look into a child's daily routine.

One of those tools is the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) scale, which focuses on how practitioners interact with children to promote language, independence, emotional security and critical thinking (Hoare, no date). SSTEWS includes five areas: building trust and independence, emotional well-being, communication, learning and thinking, and assessment (Siraj, Kingston & Melhuish, 2023). These areas go beyond what is expected by statutory requirements and directly relate to safeguarding.

From a safeguarding perspective, this is key. When children feel safe, secure and understood, they are more likely to form positive relationships and express concerns. Ho and Funk (2018) state that children with social and emotional difficulties often struggle to participate in learning. The SSTEWS scale

encourages practitioners to be sensitive to emotional cues and to create environments where children feel confident and supported (Howard, et al, 2020), conditions that help staff notice early signs of distress or worry, which are vital safeguarding indicators. This is where my role really links in: ensuring we don't just meet policies on paper, but that the emotional safety of each child is a daily priority.

The SSTEWS scale also strengthens our professional development. It prompts staff to reflect on their language, tone, questioning, and responsiveness. In our setting, we already use peer observations, self-reflective and learning journals (Learning Journals, 2025). SSTEWS could provide a more structured approach to using those tools, helping us to focus not just on what's being done, but how it's being done. It also fits well with our staff meetings, where we discuss safeguarding, and observations (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2023).

However, as Wieduwilt, Lehl & Anders (2022) explain, SSTEWS isn't perfect. It's best suited for children over the age of three, and it requires training to use effectively. Without enough time or reflection, it could also become another checklist. While it supports safeguarding and interaction quality, it only works if staff have the time and support to use it.

In contrast, SASS is much more focused on compliance. It ensures that our setting is operating legally and within national guidance, which is essential. We assess our environments by utilising the Care Inspectorate Wales 'Quality of Care' report categories, which are for services regulated under the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016 (Social Care Wales, 2025). It helps us demonstrate that our policies are up to date, that safeguarding procedures are in place, and that our service is being reviewed regularly (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2023). For example, we carry out weekly safety checks, keep updated training records, and hold regular meetings with staff to reflect on our practice, all of which contribute to our SASS submission.

We also engage with parents and carers regularly. One of the ways we do this is through online questionnaires. Their responses are anonymous which then encourages families to be honest. These are quick and accessible, and the feedback is reviewed and discussed during staff meetings to help make improvements. This consistent communication builds trust and provides an insight into the child's life at home (Leenders, et al. 2019). However, Heydon et al. (2023) argue that not all families may be able to access online forms, especially if they don't have regular access to a phone or tablet. Lelkes, et al (2012) also argues that while anonymity can make people feel more comfortable, it can also mean that not much thought is put into their answers. That's something we try to work around by offering different communication options and valuing daily conversations with parents.

In addition to formal policies and planning, we also monitor children's development using learning journals, observations, and reflective logs. These not only help us meet inspection requirements but also help staff notice changes in behaviour, identify children's interests, and adapt planning accordingly (Neaum, 2016). For example, if we notice slower progress in communication skills, we might introduce small group role-play or singing activities to support verbal interaction (Janel, 2019).

While both SASS and SSTEW contribute to the quality of the setting, they serve very different purposes. SASS is focused on meeting regulatory standards and showing compliance to CIW. It offers a broad overview of the setting and helps us demonstrate that we're following best practice. However, it has a main focus on what is in place, rather than how effectively it's being used.

SSTEW, on the other hand, is much more focused on what happens in practice. It looks at the quality of adult-child interactions, emotional well-being, and whether staff are engaging with children to support their thinking, language and well-being. For safeguarding, this is essential. SASS ensures our policies exist; SSTEW helps us check that our daily practice actually keeps children emotionally and psychologically safe.

Used together, they provide a more complete picture of quality. SASS supports inspection readiness, but SSTEW supports reflection and development. From my perspective as safeguarding officer, both tools are valuable — but it's SSTEW that helps us truly connect policy to practice.

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