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CHILD PROTECTION AND SAFEGUARDING IN EDUCATION

GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS
AND EDUCATION SETTINGS
IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Foreword

Every child and young person in Northern Ireland has the right to feel safe, valued and supported throughout their educational journey. Safeguarding is not supplementary to education; it is fundamental to it. Children and young people learn, develop and achieve their potential when they are secure, valued and able to trust those around them.

This updated *Safeguarding and Child Protection in Education* guidance reaffirms a fundamental principle: the welfare of the child is paramount. It reflects the Department's commitment to ensuring that safeguarding is at the heart of everything we do across our education system.

For many children and young people, school is much more than a place of learning. It is a place where they build friendships, develop confidence, experience stability and build trusted relationships. Educational settings often play a crucial role in identifying concerns, providing support and helping children access the services they need. This early intervention can make a lasting difference.

The safeguarding landscape continues to evolve. Children and young people face increasingly complex risks, including online harms, exploitation, domestic abuse and challenges relating to emotional health and wellbeing. This guidance responds to those challenges by providing a clear framework of roles, responsibilities and accountability across the education system. It strengthens a child-centred, rights-based approach and promotes prevention, early intervention and a culture of vigilance and care.

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Effective safeguarding depends not only on robust policies and procedures, but on the culture, we create every day. It requires children and young people to be listened to, concerns to be recognised and acted upon promptly, and all those working with children to understand and fulfil their responsibilities with confidence. Teachers, support staff, governors, wider education workforce, volunteers, parents and carers all play a vital role.

This guidance is underpinned by a whole-school, whole-community approach. Safeguarding is most effective when it is embedded throughout the life of a school and supported by strong partnerships across education, health, social care, justice, and the voluntary and community sectors. Working together, we can ensure that children and young people receive the right support at the right time.

Thank you to the many dedicated professionals who work tirelessly every day to keep children and young people safe. This guidance seeks to support that important work by providing clarity, consistency and practical direction.

Ultimately, safeguarding is about more than protecting children from harm. It is about creating the conditions in which every child and young person can thrive, fulfil their potential and look to the future with confidence. By placing safeguarding at the heart of education, we are investing not only in the wellbeing of individual children and young people but in a safer, stronger and more inclusive society for all.

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Safeguarding in Education - How to Use this Guidance

This guidance sets out the statutory expectations, roles and responsibilities for safeguarding and child protection across education settings in Northern Ireland. It is designed to support **consistent, lawful and effective safeguarding practice**, while also providing reassurance and assurance enabling to Boards of Governors (BoGs), Management Committees, employing authorities, inspectors and partner agencies.

This guidance:

- Clarifies roles, responsibilities and accountability across the system—from the Department of Education, the Education Authority and all managing authorities, to Boards of Governors and individual staff members working right across our education system.
- Supports a child-centred, rights-based approach, aligned with statutory duties.
- Responds to the evolving nature of safeguarding, including risks associated with online environments, exploitation, domestic abuse and pupil wellbeing challenges.
- Makes clear that safeguarding does not stop at age 18, promoting a coherent, proportionate approach to safeguarding across the full age continuum.
- Emphasises early intervention and prevention through a whole school ethos, that prioritises emotional health, wellbeing and the development of resilience and positive relationships.

Who this guidance is for

For the purposes of this guidance, ‘education settings’ are defined as Early Years Providers (including those commissioned through the PSEP Programme), EOTAS, Youth Settings and Commissioned Education Services i.e. voluntary or community based alternative education provisions.

This guidance is relevant to everyone involved in education¹ and youth services², however not every section will be equally relevant to every reader. The structure set out below is designed to help you navigate the document and seek out the information you need quickly.

¹ For the purposes of this guidance the terms education settings includes schools, non-statutory pre-school providers, youth provisions, EOTAS, commissioned voluntary or community based alternative education providers.

² For the purposes of this guidance the term youth services applies to both EA Youth Services and those voluntary and community sector youth work providers delivering youth work activities for persons aged 4 to 25 in an informal setting.

How the guidance is structured

- **SECTION 1: Purpose, Legal Context to Child Protection and Safeguarding Framework**

Sets out the statutory, policy and rights-based framework that underpins safeguarding and child protection in education.

- **SECTION 2: Roles and Responsibilities**

Clarifies safeguarding roles, responsibilities and accountability across the education system, from strategic leadership to frontline practice.

- **SECTION 3: Leadership, Governance and Accountability**

Explains how safeguarding should be led, governed, monitored and embedded as a whole-school responsibility.

- **SECTION 4: Recognise – Respond – Report – Record – Refer**

Provides practical guidance for staff on identifying concerns, responding appropriately and taking timely safeguarding action.

- **SECTION 5: Workforce**

Sets out expectations for safer recruitment, staff conduct, training, professional boundaries and managing concerns about adults working with children.

- **Child Protection and Safeguarding in Education – Companion**

This section signposts to DE Website and the Education Authority Child Protection Support Services page for supporting resources, templates and supplementary guidance to support implementation.

It also provides more detail in respect of:

- i. A Whole School Approach to Safeguarding and Wellbeing
- ii. Safe School Environment
- iii. Monitoring, Self-Evaluation and Safeguarding Assurance
- iv. System Level Assurance: Inspection, Reporting and Escalation

- **Final Summary**

-

This guidance provides a clear framework for safeguarding and child protection across education settings in Northern Ireland. It will be kept under regular review to ensure it remains responsive to legislative changes, emerging risks and developments in practice.

Feedback from education settings and safeguarding partners is welcomed and can be submitted to the Pupil Support Team at psu.mail@education-ni.gov.uk.

SECTION 1: Purpose, Legal Context to Child Protection and Safeguarding Framework

1.1 Purpose of this Guidance

This document provides child protection and safeguarding guidance for all education settings in Northern Ireland.

Its purpose is to:

- set out statutory duties and key responsibilities in respect of child protection;
- provide clear, practical expectations for safeguarding practice;
- support consistent and proportionate responses to concerns; and
- promote a whole-setting approach to safeguarding and wellbeing.

This core guidance is supported by a companion operational resource³, which includes:

- templates and checklists;
- flowcharts and procedures;
- exemplar policies; and
- links to relevant legislation and partner guidance.

1.2 Safeguarding in Education: Statutory and Rights-Based Context

Safeguarding and child protection in education in Northern Ireland sit within a clear statutory and international framework. This guidance should be read in the context of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995⁴, the cross-departmental guidance Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland⁵, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)⁶. Together, these establish that safeguarding is a shared responsibility across government, public services, communities and families, and that the welfare and best interests of the child must be at the centre of all decision-making.

The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995

[The Children \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1995](#) is the principal legislative framework for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people.

³ The companion resource is at page 39 of this guidance and provides links to the DE website, the EA website and also links to additional resources

⁴ [The Children \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1995](#)

⁵ [Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland | Department of Health](#)

⁶ [UNCRC](#)

Key principles include:

- The welfare of the child is paramount (Article 3). When courts and public authorities make decisions affecting children, the child's welfare must be the first and overriding consideration.
- Children are generally best cared for within their families, with support provided where needed to help families safeguard and promote their children's welfare.
- Authorities must act to protect children who are suffering, or are likely to suffer, significant harm.
- Children's views must be considered, taking account of their age and understanding.
- Public authorities have duties to cooperate to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

The Order defines harm as ill-treatment or impairment of health or development and establishes the threshold of significant harm, which is the legal basis for statutory child protection intervention.

Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland

[Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland](#) is the overarching cross-departmental guidance issued by the Department of Health and endorsed across government.

It makes clear that:

- safeguarding is everyone's responsibility;
- agencies must work together to identify, assess and respond to need and risk;
- early intervention and prevention are essential;
- information should be shared lawfully and proportionately to protect children; and
- no single agency can safeguard children effectively in isolation.

Education settings are a key part of this wider safeguarding system. Schools, early years settings (including non-statutory pre-school settings), EOTAS, youth services and commissioned education providers must work in partnership with Health and Social Care Trusts, the PSNI, the Education Authority, managing authorities and voluntary organisations to ensure children receive timely support and protection.

Education as a Safeguarding Partner

Education settings are uniquely placed to safeguard children and young people. Through daily contact, trusted relationships and an inclusive learning environment, education can:

- identify concerns at an early stage;

- provide stability and emotional support;
- promote attendance, belonging and resilience;
- equip children with the knowledge and skills to stay safe; and
- work with families and partner agencies to reduce risk and strengthen protective factors.

Safeguarding is therefore not an additional task; it is integral to the purpose of education.

Shared Responsibility Across Government and Society

Safeguarding children and young people requires coordinated action across all sectors. The Department of Education, schools and education settings fulfil their responsibilities as part of a wider network of statutory agencies, voluntary organisations, families and communities.

Every adult working with children has a responsibility to:

- be alert to signs of harm and vulnerability;
- listen to and respect children's views;
- act promptly when concerns arise; and
- work collaboratively to ensure children are protected and supported.

1.3 Status of this Guidance

This is **statutory guidance issued by the Department of Education (DE) under Article 18(1)(c) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003⁷** and relates to the welfare and protection of pupils. The noted legislation places a duty on the Board of Governors of a grant-aided school to have regard to this guidance when determining the measures to be taken at a school.

This guidance reflects statutory duties, compliance is mandatory.

Where the guidance reflects best practice, settings are expected to have due regard and to be able to demonstrate and evidence their approach, particularly in the context of inspection.

The guidance is relevant to all adults working within these settings, including Boards of Governors, proprietors, principals, designated teachers, youth workers, teachers, pre-school leaders, Management Committees, classroom assistants, non-teaching workforce, volunteers and contracted providers. This list is not exhaustive.

⁷ [The Education and Libraries \(Northern Ireland\) Order 2003](#)

1.4 Scope and Application

This guidance applies to all settings where children and young people receive education or are engaged in education-related provision, including:

- statutory and non-statutory pre-school and early years settings
- primary, post-primary schools and special schools.
- Education Other Than at School (EOTAS), Exceptional Teaching Arrangements including commissioned Alternative Education Providers⁸;
- Independent Schools⁹
- EA Youth Services and those youth work services delivered by the voluntary and community sector, including those working in Outdoor Learning Centres; and
- Any other organisations commissioned or funded to provide education or educational support on behalf of DE, the EA or other managing authorities.

Throughout this document, the term 'education setting' is used to refer to all of the above settings and services unless otherwise stated. Regardless of the type of provision, all settings must have effective safeguarding arrangements that are appropriate to their legal status, the age and needs of the children and young people they serve and the nature of the provision being delivered.

It also applies, where relevant, to:

- young people aged 18+ who remain in education; and
- adults at risk of harm who come into contact with education settings.

Settings must apply this guidance in conjunction with:

- relevant safeguarding and child protection legislation and additional circulars issued by the Department of Education¹⁰;
- Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) procedures¹¹; and
- relevant Health and Social Care (HSC) safeguarding frameworks¹².

Early Years settings e.g. Sure Start and non-statutory providers who are delivering the Pre-School Education Programme must comply with both Health and Social Care regulatory requirements, including the Minimum Standards for Childminding and Daycare¹³, as well as the safeguarding expectations set out in this guidance

⁸ That is those services (usually voluntary groups) who have been commissioned to deliver Education Otherwise than at School

⁹ [Independent schools' registration | Department of Education](#)

¹⁰ [Protecting and safeguarding our children | Department of Education](#)

¹¹ [Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland \(SBNI\) Procedures Manual](#)

¹² [Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland](#)

¹³ [Minimum Standards for Childminding and Daycare for Children Under 12](#)

Youth Work Settings should also have regard to the [EA Safeguarding Guidance for Youth Services | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#). While this is specific to EA Youth Services, other youth work providers should consider this document when developing their own internal child protection and safeguarding policies and practice.

1.5 Definitions

Child Protection

Child protection is a core element of safeguarding and relates to the specific activity undertaken to protect individual children who are suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm.

This includes:

- Identification, monitoring and support provided in school by the school safeguarding team;
- referral to statutory services;
- assessment and intervention by Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs); and
- multi-agency planning and protective action.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is the overarching responsibility to protect children, young people and those over 18 who could be 'at risk' from harm, prevent impairment of their health or development and ensure their circumstances reflect safe and effective care.

In an education setting, safeguarding includes:

- Creating safe, inclusive environments.
- Promoting wellbeing, resilience and positive relationships; and
- Identifying and responding to emerging concerns at the earliest opportunity.

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and extends beyond formal child protection processes.

Adult Safeguarding

While the primary focus of this guidance is the safeguarding and protection of children and young people under 18, education settings may also have responsibilities in relation to adults aged 18 and over who are at risk of harm.

An adult at risk of harm is a person aged 18 or over who has needs for care and support and is unable to protect themselves from abuse, neglect or exploitation. For schools this will include pupils and in youth settings this is young people aged 18-25.

Education settings do not investigate adult safeguarding concerns. **Contact EA Child Protection Support Service to assist you where you have a concern regarding an adult** [Child Protection Support Service \(CPSS\) | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#)

Adult Safeguarding Framework is set out in the [Adult Safeguarding: Prevention and Protection in Partnership | Department of Health](#)

EA are currently working on detailed operational guidance in respect of Adult Safeguarding and this will be circulated once available.

1.6 Key Safeguarding Principles

All safeguarding practice within education settings must be grounded in the following core principles. These apply across all contexts, roles, decisions and must inform policy and day to day practice.

I. Child-Centred Approach

The welfare of the child or young person is paramount.

- Children's views, wishes and feelings must be actively sought, listened to and given due weight.
- Decisions and actions must be taken in the child's best interest at all times.

II. Education as a Protective Factor

A safe, inclusive and supportive educational environment plays a vital role in safeguarding.

- Positive relationships, regular attendance and meaningful engagement reduce vulnerability.
- Schools and education settings must foster a culture where children feel safe, valued and supported.

III. Early Identification and Intervention

Safeguarding concerns must be recognised and addressed at the earliest possible opportunity.

- Staff must act on concerns promptly and must not wait for certainty before acting.
- Early intervention is critical to preventing harm and escalating risk.

IV. Shared Responsibility

Safeguarding is the responsibility of everyone working or volunteering within an education setting.

- Clear leadership, accountability and reporting arrangements must be in place.
- No individual should assume that someone else will act.

V. Working in Partnership with Parents/ Carers and Supporting Families

Parents and carers have a primary role in their child's care and protection.

- Schools should work in partnership with families, offering early support to help children remain safely within their family networks.
- This must be balanced with the child's welfare as paramount and concerns must be acted on without delay when risk arises.

VI. Proportionate and Timely Response

Responses to safeguarding concerns must be appropriate to the level of need and risk.

- Urgent and serious concerns must be acted upon immediately.
- All actions taken must be recorded, reviewed and where necessary, escalated.

VII. Multi-Agency Working

Effective safeguarding depends on strong partnership working.

- Settings must work in close co-operation with their local Health and Social Care Trust, the PSNI, the Education Authority, their managing authority and other relevant agencies.
- Information must be shared lawfully and appropriately to protect children, and young people.

VIII. Professional Judgement and Curiosity

Staff must exercise sound professional judgement and maintain professional curiosity.

- Assumptions must be challenged and emerging patterns of concern explored.
- A child's circumstances must be considered holistically and over time.

IX. Safeguarding Across the Education System

Safeguarding responsibilities extend beyond compulsory school age¹⁴.

- They apply to young people aged 18 and above who remain in education, those aged 18-25 attending youth work settings and to 'adults at risk'¹⁵ who engage with education settings.
- Arrangements must be proportionate, coherent and responsive to differing levels of need.

¹⁴ Compulsory school age as it stands currently is 16

¹⁵ Refer to page 10 [Adult Safeguarding: Prevention and Protection in Partnership key documents](#)

1.7 Duty to Cooperate and Information Sharing

Education settings have a duty to cooperate with relevant agencies to safeguard children and young people. Effective safeguarding depends on timely, proportionate and lawful information sharing.

Information must be shared where necessary to protect a child or young person. **Data protection legislation does not prevent information sharing for safeguarding purposes and must not be used as a reason to delay or withhold information where there are concerns about a child's welfare. Such sharing is lawful and can be done without consent, if it is necessary to identify a child at risk of harm and to safeguard or protect them from harm.**

Information sharing should be in line with data protection principles, relevant, proportionate and recorded appropriately. Where a child is at immediate risk, information must be shared without delay with statutory services and safeguarding considerations take precedence over confidentiality.

Further information on the Information Commissioners Office position on such sharing can be found at [A 10 step guide to sharing information to safeguard children | ICO](#)

SECTION 2: Roles and Responsibilities

2.1 Overview

Education settings operate as part of a wider multi-agency safeguarding system. Effective safeguarding depends on clear understanding of the distinct roles and responsibilities of partners organisations and on timely, proportionate collaboration.

Key partners include:

- Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs) – Social Services hold the lead statutory responsibility for child protection and adult safeguarding, including assessment, intervention and care planning.
- Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) – are responsible for criminal investigation, public protection and safeguarding where a crime may have been committed.
- Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) – oversee the strategic coordination of the work and ensuring the effectiveness of each person or body represented on the SBNI Board¹⁶.

Effective safeguarding requires clear roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability. Everyone involved in education must understand both their individual duties, and how these contribute to the wider safeguarding system.

This section sets out the core responsibilities of:

- the Department of Education (DE);
- the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI);
- the Education Authority (EA) and other managing authorities¹⁷;
- Boards of Governors;
- Principals and leaders;
- Youth Work Providers;
- Designated Teachers/ member of staff for Child Protection;
- all staff, volunteers and any contracted providers;
- children, young people and parents/carers; and
- wider safeguarding system.

2.2 Role of the Department of Education (DE)

The Department of Education provides strategic leadership and system-wide assurance for safeguarding in education.

¹⁶ [SBNI Member Agencies](#)

¹⁷ Includes CCMS, Voluntary Grammar, Grant-Maintained Integrated, Independent School, Pre-school Proprietors/ Management Committees

DE is responsible for:

- setting policy and strategic direction for safeguarding in education;
- issuing statutory guidance and standards;
- ensuring alignment with legislation and wider government strategies; and
- providing oversight and assurance of safeguarding arrangements across the system.

DE works in partnership with the Education Authority (EA), the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Department of Health, the Department of Justice, the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) and other relevant departments and agencies.

2.3 Role of the Education and Training Inspectorate

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) undertakes the inspection of child protection and safeguarding arrangements as part of the overall inspection of a school or setting; it is a fundamental aspect of inspections.

ETI is responsible for:

- evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the child protection, and where appropriate adult safeguarding arrangements;
- making evidence-based evaluations informed by the school or setting's approach to implementing child protection and safeguarding policies, arrangements for recruitment, vetting and staff training, and monitoring and evaluating practice and oversight arrangements to inform improvements; and
- complete DE commissioned work in relation to child protection and safeguarding and provide policy advice.

2.4 Role of the Education Authority (EA) and Managing Authorities

The primary role of the Managing Authorities is to ensure that all settings apply robust safer recruitment practice and comply with the legislation and guidance in respect of pre-employment checks and vetting.

The Education Authority, through its Child Protection Support Service (CPSS), has a key operational role in supporting and strengthening safeguarding practice.

EA responsibilities include:

- providing advice, guidance and support to schools and settings;
- supporting principals, designated teachers and school leaders;

- contributing to child protection processes as part of its statutory role within the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland; and
- ensuring the provision of services that support safeguarding and wellbeing.

2.5 Role of the Board of Governors¹⁸

The Board of Governors holds ultimate responsibility for ensuring that safeguarding arrangements are in place and effective for their school.

Boards must:

- ensure robust safeguarding and child protection policies are in place and implemented;
- designate a specific member of the Board to lead and advise governors on child protection and safeguarding matters;
- ensure appropriate training for governors and staff is completed;
- monitor and review safeguarding arrangements regularly;
- ensure that safeguarding is a standing agenda item for discussion and oversight;
- ensure that appropriate record keeping and reporting arrangements are in place;
- consider safeguarding in all relevant decisions, including staffing; curriculum; premises; and external engagement.

Boards must be able to demonstrate assurance that safeguarding duties are being met.

Further information on this is available as part of the DE Governors Guide [Pupil Child Protection and Safeguarding | Department of Education](#)

2.6 Role of the Principal / Leader

The Principal (or equivalent setting leader) has day-to-day responsibility for child protection and safeguarding within the setting.

They must:

- appoint a least 1 Designated Teacher / member of staff for Child Protection and additional deputies as required;
- ensure that safeguarding policies are consistently implemented;
- create a safe, inclusive and supportive culture;

¹⁸ For early years and/or youth settings, references to Boards of Governors should be read as applying to the management committee, proprietor or governing body

- ensure that staff understand their responsibilities, receive appropriate training and know how to respond to concerns;
- ensure that concerns are responded to promptly and appropriately;
- support and supervise the Designated Teacher in carrying out their role;
- ensure effective liaison with external agencies.

2.7 Role of the Designated Teacher / member of staff (includes Deputies)¹⁹

The Designated Teacher (DT) leads safeguarding and child protection within the setting.

In line with best practice there should only be 1 lead Designated Teacher with Deputy Designated Teacher or Teachers working to support the work of the DT under overall leadership of the Principal.

The DT is responsible for:

- ensuring that, in conjunction with Principal, all training for BoGs, and staff is up to date;
- acting as the first point of contact for safeguarding concerns;
- advising and supporting staff;
- ensuring that concerns are recorded, assessed and responded to appropriately;
- making referrals to social services when required;
- maintaining secure and accurate safeguarding records;
- representing the school in multi-agency processes, including case conferences.

Where adult safeguarding concerns arise, the DT or nominated safeguarding lead should contact EA CPSS for support and guidance.

The Board of Governors and Principals are responsible for ensuring DTs are given sufficient protected time, training and support to carry out their role effectively.

2.8 Role of the School Child Protection and Safeguarding Team²⁰

The School Safeguarding Team does not replace the responsibility of individual staff members to recognise, report and record safeguarding concerns. All staff remain

¹⁹ The language here will be different for settings other than schools, however this refers to the member of staff with the designated responsibility for child protection and safeguarding within the setting.

²⁰ It is good practice for all settings to establish a Setting Safeguarding Team.

responsible for safeguarding and child protection. The role of the Safeguarding Team is to provide leadership, oversight, coordination, support and assurance that children and young people are safe, heard and protected.

The School Safeguarding Team should include:

- Principal (or nominated senior leader);
- Designated Teacher for Child Protection;
- Deputy Designated Teacher(s);
- Chair of Board of Governors;
- Designated Governor for Child Protection (strategic oversight role);
- Other relevant roles within the schools as determined by the Principal e.g. SENCO, Pastoral Lead etc.

2.9 Role of All Staff, Volunteers, External Providers and Staff within Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) or Commissioned Education Services eg Alternative Education Providers

Safeguarding is the responsibility of all staff and volunteers.

They must:

- be aware of signs and indicators of abuse, neglect or exploitation;
- maintain appropriate professional boundaries;
- listen to children and young people and take concerns seriously;
- report concerns immediately in line with the setting procedures;
- record concerns accurately and promptly;
- participate in training and safeguarding activities.

Staff and volunteers must never assume that someone else will act, or delay reporting a concern.

2.10 Role of Early Years Settings and Pre-School Education Programme Providers

Pre-school settings, including voluntary and private providers commissioned by the Department of Education to deliver early years support and education, play a critical role in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of young children. These settings provide some of the earliest opportunities to identify concerns, support families and ensure children receive help at the earliest possible stage.

Non-statutory pre-school and early years settings must comply with this guidance and are expected to apply the same core safeguarding principles that apply across all education settings, including:

- the welfare of the child as the paramount consideration;
- early identification and timely response to concerns;
- effective record keeping and information sharing;
- safe recruitment and workforce training; and
- partnership working with parents, Health and Social Care (HSC) services and other agencies.

It is acknowledged that there are a range of roles within non-statutory pre-school education settings that have specific duties or responsibilities in relation to safeguarding and child protection and in some settings an individual member of the team may undertake more than one of these roles.

Not all settings will have a Management Committee but where they are in place, their roles and responsibilities should be made explicit in writing and audited to ensure adherence to expected standards. The proprietors of settings without a Management Committee should also ensure they are clear on their roles and responsibilities.

Dual Regulatory and Accountability Framework

Non-statutory pre-school providers and early years providers operate within both health and education frameworks and must meet requirements under each.

HSCT require that all providers must be registered and regulated by the Health and Social Care Trusts in accordance with the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and the Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children Under Age 12.

DE requires that non-statutory pre-schools and early years settings that are funded by DE are accountable to the department and the EA for the quality and effectiveness of educational provision.

Providers must:

- have regard to this safeguarding guidance and associated operational resources;
- undertake safeguarding training and support;
- cooperate with monitoring and quality assurance arrangements;
- maintain records required under education funding agreements;
- ensure safeguarding is fully integrated into educational practice and curriculum delivery; and
- demonstrate how children's emotional wellbeing, development and safety are promoted.

Non-statutory pre-school providers and early years providers are inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), which evaluates safeguarding as a core component of effective provision within the inspection framework. ETI will consider whether:

- children are safe, secure and well cared for;
- safeguarding policies and procedures are understood and implemented;
- staff identify and respond appropriately to concerns;
- leaders and management provide effective safeguarding oversight;
- children's emotional wellbeing and development are promoted; and
- statutory and funding requirements are met.

In addition, HSC Trusts may undertake regulatory inspections to ensure continued compliance with the Minimum Standards.

2.11 Role of Youth Work Providers, Youth Workers and Youth Service Volunteers

Youth workers and those in non-school settings play a vital safeguarding role, particularly for children and young people.

Youth work providers should:

- apply the same core safeguarding principles and duties as outlined within this guidance;
- ensure that safeguarding arrangements are clear, accessible and effective;
- work closely with schools, EA and statutory services where appropriate.

Youth services in Northern Ireland are underpinned by statutory legislation as set out in the Education and Librarians (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 and the Youth Service (Northern Ireland Order 1989).

The current overarching policy for youth work is set out in Priorities for Youth - Improving Young People's Lives through Youth Work. This policy is current under review details which can be found at [Priorities for Youth \(PfY\) Policy Review | Department of Education](#).

Statutory youth services are provided by:

- The EA Youth Service;
- Community led youth services (including Church-based; Uniformed; Community and Voluntary Sector) working under mainly voluntary management committees/ Boards of Directors and not managed by the EA.

All youth work providers must have robust child protection and safeguarding policies in place. EA has responsibility for quality assuring such policies and processes for all youth work providers registered with them.

For organisations delivering youth work, these policies and procedures must be evidenced as part of the organisation's EA registration. The responsibility for ensuring child protection and safeguarding policies are in place falls to the management committee/ governance body within each organisation.

The EA Child Protection Support Service (CPSS) provides advice; guidance training and support to all EA Youth Service settings. They can be contacted on [Child Protection Support Service \(CPSS\) | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#)

All **voluntary and community led youth work providers** must be able to access Child Protection and Safeguarding advice, support, training, resources including that for safeguarding adults at risk of harm from their nominated Headquarter Organisation. For those that do not have a nominated Headquarter organisation/ Umbrella Organisation for Safeguarding, it is the responsibility of the Management Committee to ensure this is in place.

Further supporting information for youth work providers can be found at [EA Safeguarding Guidance for Youth Services | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#). While this is specific to EA Youth Services, other youth work providers should consider this document when developing their own internal child protection and safeguarding policies and practice.

2.12 Role of Children and Young People: Incorporating the Views of the Child

Children and young people are central to effective safeguarding. Education settings should ensure that pupils are supported to express their views and that these views are listened to, taken seriously and appropriately considered in safeguarding decisions.

Settings should:

- create safe, inclusive environments where pupils feel able to raise concerns;
- ensure that pupils know who they can talk to and how to seek help; and
- provide age-appropriate information about safeguarding and sources of support.

The views, wishes and feelings of the child must be sought and given due weight, in line with their age and understanding. Where decisions do not align with a child's expressed wishes, this should be explained to them in an age-appropriate way. Children and young people are not responsible for safeguarding decisions or outcomes. Responsibility for assessment, decision making and protective actions rests with adults and statutory services.

2.13 Parents and Carers – Engagement and Expectation

Parents/ carers have a primary role in their child's care, wellbeing and protection. Education settings should work in partnership with families wherever this is consistent with the child's safety and best interests.

Settings should:

- communicate clearly with parents/carers about safeguarding arrangements and expectations;
- promote open, respectful and professional engagement; and
- offer early support where concerns arise to help children remain safely within their family networks.

Engagement with parent/ carers must always be balanced with the overriding duty to safeguard the welfare of the child. Where there are concerns about a child's safety or welfare, settings must act without delay, including information sharing with statutory services where required.

The welfare of the child is paramount in all decisions.

2.14 Accountability and Assurance

All settings must be able to demonstrate that safeguarding arrangements are:

- in place;
- understood; and,
- effective.

This includes evidence of:

- clear policies and procedures;
- appropriate training and awareness;
- accurate and secure record keeping;
- timely and appropriate action in response to concerns.

Safeguarding will be considered through inspection, governance oversight and departmental assurance processes.

SECTION 3: Leadership, Governance and Accountability

Effective safeguarding depends on strong leadership, clear governance and robust accountability.

Boards of Governors (BoGs)²¹ and senior leaders are responsible for ensuring that safeguarding arrangements are lawful, effective and embedded across the whole school approach.

Safeguarding is a core governance responsibility. It must be actively overseen, routinely evaluated and capable of evidencing impact for pupils.

The BoGs should receive a written safeguarding report at least annually from the principal. The report should provide assurance regarding:

- safeguarding and child protection activity;
- staff and governor training;
- policy review and implementation;
- record keeping;
- attendance and emerging safeguarding themes;
- allegations against staff (reported in a manner that preserves confidentiality);
- use of external support and referrals; and,
- priorities for further improvement.

The report should not identify individual children or families.

Best practice would be for safeguarding to be a standing item on the agenda of all scheduled BoG meetings.

More detail on the role of Boards of Governors is linked at [Pupil Child Protection and Safeguarding | Department of Education](#)

3.1 Safeguarding Policies – Governance Requirements

Every school must maintain a coherent safeguarding framework made up of current and complementary policies.

It is for BoGs to ensure that child protection and safeguarding-related policies:

- reflect current legislation, regional procedures and DE guidance;
- clearly articulate roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability;

²¹ For early years and/or youth settings, references to Boards of Governors should be read as applying to the management committee, proprietor or governing body

- are reviewed at least annually, or sooner when required;
- are supported by separate operational procedures and guidance; and
- are accessible to children, young people and their families, alongside the whole staff.

The suite of policies must function as an integrated safeguarding framework, not as a collection of standalone or duplicative documents.

Minimum required policies (statutory core):

- Child Protection Policy (including responding to concerns and referral processes) – further detail on the requirements for this policy are nearer to end of this section;
- Recruitment and Selection Policy (including vetting requirements);
- Staff Code of Conduct / Safe Working Practices;
- Addressing-Bullying Policy;
- Online Safety / Acceptable Use Policy;
- Attendance Policy (including children missing from education);
- Intimate Care Policy (where applicable);
- School Complaints Policy.

Additional recommended policies:

- Behaviour Policy;
- Pastoral Care / Wellbeing Policy (aligned to EHWB Framework);
- Healthy Relationships;
- Supporting Pupils with Medical Needs;
- Substance Use / Misuse;
- Critical Incident Response.

3.2 The Child Protection Policy

Education settings must take all reasonable steps, in the circumstances of each case, to safeguard and promote their pupils' safety, welfare and wellbeing. Each setting must maintain a **child protection policy** that reflects both its statutory duties and its wider safeguarding responsibilities.

This is a statutory requirement under Article 18 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 which requires the Board of Governors (BoG) to prepare a written statement of child protection measures and to provide this to parents.

Key Message

A clearly defined Child Protection Policy, supported by separate operational procedures ensures:

- legal and statutory compliance;
- clarity of responsibility and accountability;
- consistency of safeguarding practice; and.
- transparent assurance for inspection and governance.

Accordingly:

- all grant-aided schools, independent schools, DE funded early years and youth settings must have a child protection policy;
- this must include the appointment of a Designated Teacher (DT) and the Deputy Designated Teacher (DDT) for child protection; and,
- equivalent requirements apply to other settings as a condition of grant or commissioning framework.

Purpose and Status of the Child Protection Policy

The Child Protection Policy is a core governance document. It sets out the settings safeguarding commitments and statutory responsibilities and provides a clear framework within which staff and volunteers can operate.

A school's child protection policy must be a 'living document' providing a secure framework within which all staff can work. It reflects the values to which the school community is committed and how the school is fulfilling its statutory responsibilities in safeguarding children.

The school policy must, as a minimum:

- state the settings commitment to safeguarding and the primacy of the welfare of the child;
- define roles and responsibilities for child protection, including DT and DDT appointments;
- confirm that concerns will be acted upon promptly in line with statutory guidance;
- reference the types of abuse and safeguarding risks relevant to children and young people;
- set out expectations for staff conduct and safer recruitment (by reference to the separate policies);
- explain how parents/ carers can raise safeguarding concerns or complaints;
- identify the suite of related safeguarding and pastoral care policies, and procedures that support implementation.

The policy must be sufficiently clear to guide staff understanding, while avoiding procedural duplication.

3.3 Child Protection Practice and Procedures

The BoG must ensure that the child protection policy:

- is reviewed at least annually, or sooner where guidance, legislation or local arrangements change;
- reflects current statutory requirements; and
- is communicated clearly to staff, parents and pupils.

Parents and pupils must receive a copy of the child protection policy and the school complaints procedure at least every two years and it must be available on request. Best practice is that all policies are available on the school website.

Complaints procedures must not delay safeguarding action. Where a complaint raises a safeguarding concern, the matter must be managed in accordance with safeguarding procedures.

SECTION 4: RECOGNISE – RESPOND – REPORT – RECORD – REFER

This section supports all staff to identify concerns early, respond appropriately and take timely action. Child protection and safeguarding are everyone's responsibility. Where you have any concerns, you must act without delay.

RECOGNISE

4.1 Understanding Harm and Significant Harm

What is Harm?

The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995²², defines 'harm' as *ill-treatment or the impairment of health or development*.

This includes:

- Physical abuse;
- Emotional abuse;
- Sexual abuse;
- ill-treatment by domestic abuse; and,
- Neglect.

Harm may result from:

- A single incident;
- A pattern of behaviour over time; or
- Acts of omission, including neglect.

What is Significant Harm?

"Significant harm" is the threshold that justifies compulsory intervention by statutory services.

It is determined by comparing:

- The child's health and development with what could reasonably be expected of a similar child.

Factors considered include:

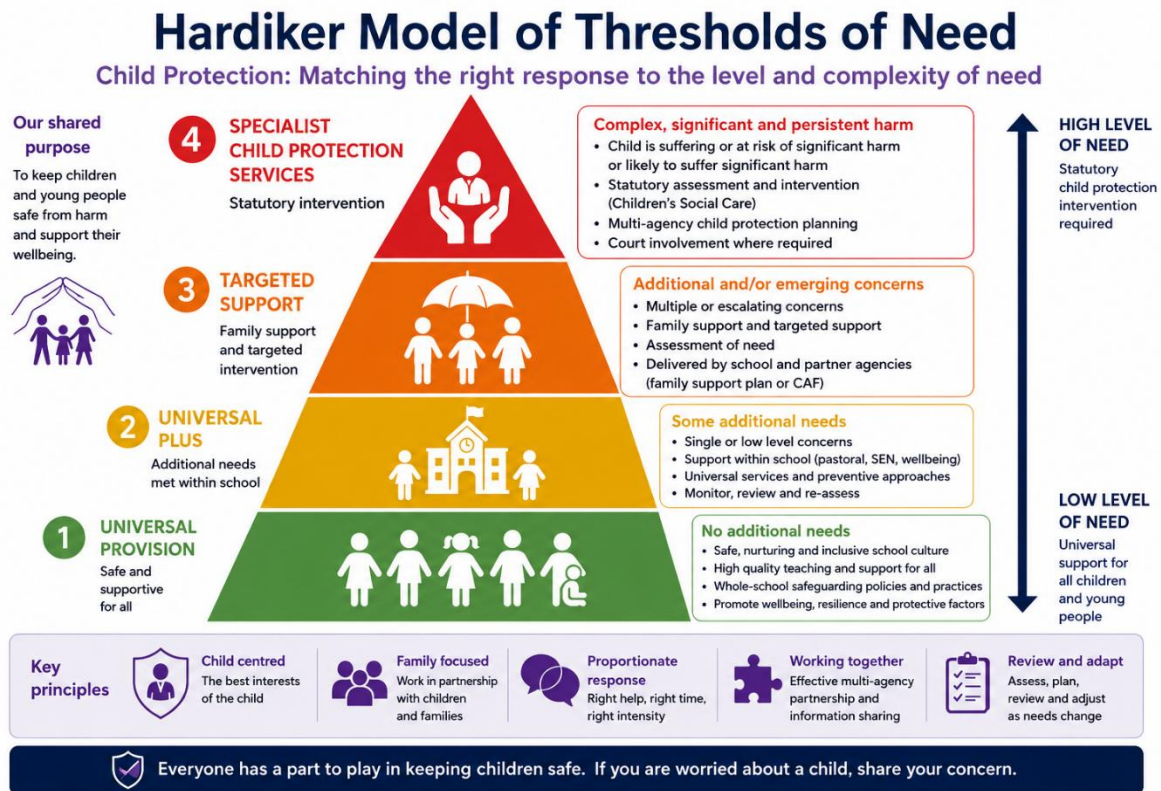
- Severity and impact of the harm;
- Duration and frequency;

²² [Harm as defined within The Children \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1995](#)

- Vulnerability of the child; and,
- Parental capacity to protect.

4.2 Thresholds of Need Model²³

Education staff must understand that safeguarding concerns exist along a continuum of need:



Level 1: Universal Provision

- All children needs are met through universal education and pastoral provision

Level 2: Universal Plus - Early Intervention / Additional Support

- Emerging concerns (e.g. attendance, behaviour, wellbeing) are managed through school-based support, family support²⁴ services and engagement with parent/ carers

Level 3: Targeted Support – Child in Need

- Complex needs requiring multi-agency support and where a UNOCINI referral to HSCT may be appropriate

Level 4: Specialist Child Protection

- Child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm requiring an immediate referral to Social Services (HSCT) and possible involvement of PSNI

²³ [Department of Health – Thresholds of Need Model](#)

²⁴ Family support can be delivered by local health and social care trusts or via a referral to the local [Family Support Hub](#)

EARLY YEARS PROVIDERS, SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION SETTINGS TO NOTE:

Staff must not attempt to investigate concerns or determine thresholds themselves.

All concerns must be reported promptly to the Designated Teacher and, where appropriate, to Social Services and/or PSNI, without delay.

4.3 Professional Responsibility and Decision-Making

All staff must:

- recognise signs of harm;
- act promptly on concerns;
- record accurately; and,
- report through appropriate channels.

Remembering at all times:

- the child's welfare is paramount;
- decisions must be child-centred, proportionate, and timely; and,
- early action prevents escalation.

4.4 Types and Indicators of Abuse and Neglect

Abuse may be physical, emotional, sexual, or take the form of neglect. It can occur in person or online.

Staff should remain alert to indicators including but not limited to:

- unexplained injuries or repeated injuries;
- significant changes in behaviour, mood or presentation (e.g. withdrawal, aggression, anxiety);
- persistent issues relating to hygiene, hunger or inappropriate clothing;
- sexualised behaviour or language inappropriate to the child's age or stage of development;
- reluctance to go home or expressed fear of specific individuals; and,
- frequent absence or patterns of missing from education.

For 'adults at risk' – these are categorised slightly differently



Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility

TYPES AND INDICATORS OF ABUSE

Children and Young People

Abuse can happen to any child or young person.

Spot it. Report it. Support them.



Abuse is a violation of a child or young person's rights and can seriously impact their health, development and wellbeing.



PHYSICAL ABUSE

Involves hurting or injuring a child or young person, or putting them at risk of harm.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Unexplained bruises, cuts, burns or injuries
- Injuries in shapes (handprints, bite marks)
- Frequent injuries or inconsistent explanations
- Fear of going home or of a particular person
- Flinching when approached or touched
- Aggression or self-harm



EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Involves the persistent emotional mistreatment of a child or young person that impacts their emotional wellbeing.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Low self-esteem or lack of confidence
- Withdrawal, anxiety or depression
- Sudden changes in behaviour or mood
- Seeking constant reassurance
- Self-harm or suicidal thoughts
- Developmental delays without explanation



SEXUAL ABUSE

Involves forcing or coercing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Inappropriate sexual knowledge or behaviour
- Sexualised drawings, play or language
- Physical pain, itching or bruising in genital/anal area
- Pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections
- Fear of a person or place
- Reluctance to get changed for PE/swimming



NEGLECT

Involves the persistent failure to meet a child or young person's basic physical or emotional needs.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Poor hygiene or inappropriate clothing
- Constant hunger or asking for food
- Untreated medical or dental issues
- Fatigue, falling asleep in class
- Lack of supervision
- Living in an unhygienic environment



DOMESTIC ABUSE

Children and young people can be harmed by witnessing or experiencing domestic abuse at home.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Anxiety, fear or sadness
- Changes in behaviour or school performance
- Physical injuries
- Fear of a parent/carer or going home
- Overly protective behaviour towards siblings
- Re-enactment of abuse through play



CHILD EXPLOITATION

Involves exploiting a child or young person for someone else's gain, benefit or advantage.

This can be sexual or criminal.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Going missing from home or school
- Contact with unknown adults
- Carrying weapons or excessive money
- Unexplained gifts or new possessions
- Signs of substance misuse
- Secrecy about activities or relationships



ONLINE ABUSE

Involves harm caused through the use of technology, online platforms or devices.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Spending excessive time online
- Withdrawal when online or after going online
- Upset after using devices
- Secretive about online activity
- Exposure to inappropriate content
- Receiving messages from unknown people



REMEMBER

Indicators can be signs that a child or young person may need help. Not all signs mean abuse is happening.



Notice
Trust your concerns



Listen
Listen to what they are saying



Respond
Report concerns without delay



Report
Follow your school's safeguarding procedures



Support
Help keep the child/young person safe



IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS
Report to the Designated Teacher for Child Protection or follow your school's safeguarding procedures.

SAFEGUARD | RESPECT | SUPPORT | REPORT



Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility

TYPES AND INDICATORS OF ABUSE

Adults at Risk in Education Settings

Adults at risk may include 18+ pupils, young adults up to 25 in education or training, parents/carers, visitors, volunteers, contractors and members of the school community.

 Abuse can happen to any adult.

 **Spot it. Report it. Support them.**



Abuse is a violation of an adult's rights and can seriously impact their health, safety, dignity and quality of life.



PHYSICAL ABUSE

Involves the use of physical force which may cause pain, injury or impairment.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Unexplained bruises, cuts, burns or injuries
- Injuries in shapes (handprints, bite marks)
- Frequent injuries or inconsistent explanations
- Pain or discomfort when touched
- Withdrawal or fear of certain people



PSYCHOLOGICAL/EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Involves the persistent emotional mistreatment that causes distress and undermines self-worth.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Low mood, anxiety or depression
- Loss of confidence or self-esteem
- Withdrawal from activities or people
- Changes in behaviour or personality
- Expressions of fear, anger or distress



FINANCIAL OR MATERIAL ABUSE

Involves the misuse or theft of money, property or possessions.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Missing money or possessions
- Unexplained bank withdrawals or transactions
- Bills or debts not being paid
- Pressure to sign documents
- Living in unsuitable conditions



NEGLECT OR ACTS OF OMISSION

Involves the persistent failure to meet an adult's care and support needs.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Poor personal hygiene or unkempt appearance
- Dirty or unsafe learning or living environment
- Inadequate food, water or heating
- Missed medication or medical appointments
- Lack of necessary clothing or equipment



SEXUAL ABUSE

Involves any non-consensual sexual activity or behaviour.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Unexplained genital injuries or pain
- Bruising on inner thighs, buttocks or chest
- Sexualised behaviour or language
- Fear, anxiety or withdrawal
- Changes in mood or behaviour



DISCRIMINATION ABUSE

Involves treating an adult unfairly because of their characteristics or beliefs.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Being treated less favourably than others
- Denial of access to services or support
- Harassment, bullying or derogatory comments
- Exclusion or unfair restriction



ORGANISATIONAL ABUSE

Involves poor practice within an education setting that disregards an adult's needs and rights.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS

- Poor standards of care or support
- Lack of procedures or staff training
- Long waits or delays in support
- Ignoring complaints or concerns
- Inappropriate use of restraint



REMEMBER

These indicators can be signs that an adult may need help. Not all signs mean abuse is happening. Always listen, be respectful and take concerns seriously.



Notice

Be alert to changes and signs of abuse.



Listen

Listen to the person and take them seriously.



Respond

Ask if they are safe and what support they need.



Report

Report your concerns to the Designated Person for Adult Safeguarding without delay.



Support

Support the adult and help keep them safe.



IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS

Report to the Designated Person for Adult Safeguarding or your education setting's safeguarding lead, or contact your local Health and Social Care Trust Adult Safeguarding Team.



Everyone has the right to live in safety, with dignity and respect.



CONFIDENTIAL



RESPECTFUL



SUPPORTIVE



RESPONSIVE

TO NOTE:

A single concern may not in itself indicate abuse, but patterns, frequency, or escalation should trigger action. In these cases, robust/strong notes and records of patterns or evidence of escalations are vital.

4.5 Child Sexual and Criminal Exploitation

Child exploitation involves coercion, manipulation or deception which results in a child being exploited for sexual activity or criminal purposes. **Exploitation must always be treated as a form of abuse.**

Possible indicators may include:

- unexplained money, gifts, or new possessions;
- association with older individuals or unfamiliar adults;
- going missing, staying out late, or disengaging from education;
- use of multiple phones or secrecy around online activity; and,
- involvement in anti-social or criminal behaviour.

Staff must:

- treat exploitation as abuse;
- share concerns immediately with the DT; and
- consider risks both within and outside the home.

Child exploitation is recognised as a form of modern slavery and human trafficking. A National Referral Mechanism (NRM) referral should be made for every child who is suspected of being a victim of exploitation.

The NRM is the UK-wide framework for identifying, safeguarding and supporting victims of modern slavery, including all forms of child exploitation. An NRM referral can play a significant role in ensuring that children and young people receive appropriate support and may also provide important evidence to assist with their defence during legal or criminal proceedings.

Referrals to the NRM can only be made by designated organisations known as First Responders. Youth Work Alliance, PSNI and HSC Trusts are recognised First Responder organisations and can therefore submit referrals.

For further information about the NRM, including the referral procedures and details of organisations authorised to make referrals, please see: [Annex A: National Referral Mechanism \(NRM\) – Northern Ireland | Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland](#)

Further information can be found on this at SBNI [Practitioner Awareness of Child Criminal Exploitation](#) and [Safer Spaces: Raising Awareness of Child Sexual Exploitation \(CSE\) In Our Communities](#)

If you have concerns about a child in the first instance EA CPSS is available to provide advice, however if a child is at risk of immediate harm do not hesitate to contact the PSNI or your local Social Services Gateway Team.

4.6 Domestic and Sexual Abuse

Children may be directly harmed by domestic or sexual abuse or may experience significant adverse impacts arising from abuse within the household.

Indicators may include:

- heightened anxiety, fearfulness, or hypervigilance;
- injuries or unexplained absences following weekends or holidays;
- disclosure of conflict, coercive control, or violence at home; and,
- changes in mood, sleep, or concentration.

Staff should:

- recognise the potential impact on the child's safety and wellbeing;
- avoid asking leading questions; and
- report concerns promptly in line with safeguarding procedures.
- Be aware that domestic abuse can continue after a relationship has ended.

Operation Encompass is an early intervention partnership between the PSNI and educational settings²⁵ that focuses on the routine sharing of information relating to domestic violence or abuse in line with the Domestic Abuse Information-Sharing with Schools etc. Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022.

Further information on Operation Encompass and training can be found at [Operation Encompass | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#) and [Online National Key Adult Training : Operation Encompass](#).

All members of a school's safeguarding team must complete the Operation Encompass 'Key Adult' training.

²⁵ Currently only operational in statutory nurseries and grant-aided schools

4.7 Child on Child Abuse (including Harassment and Violence)

All staff should recognise that children are capable of abusing other children (including online) and should be clear about their school or college's policy and procedures with regard to child-on-child abuse.

Principals and Leaders should ensure that their child protection policy includes:

- procedures to minimise the risk of child-on-child abuse.
- the systems in place (and they should be well promoted, easily understood and easily accessible) for children to confidently report abuse, knowing their concerns will be treated seriously.
- how allegations of child-on-child abuse will be recorded, investigated, and dealt with.
- clear processes as to how children and young people experiencing the behaviour, those who have carried out the behaviour and any other children affected by child-on-child abuse will be supported.
- a recognition that even if there are no reported cases of child-on-child abuse, such abuse may still be taking place and is simply not being reported.
- a statement which makes clear there should be a zero-tolerance approach to abuse, and it should never be passed off as “banter”, “just having a laugh”, “part of growing up”, “boys being boys” or “girls being girls” as this can lead to a culture of unacceptable behaviour, misogyny and an unsafe environment for children.
- recognition that for some (but not all) forms of child-on-child abuse it is more likely that girls will be those who experience abuse and boys’ perpetrators, but that all child-on-child abuse is unacceptable and will be taken seriously, and
- the different forms of child-on-child abuse can take, such as:
 - bullying (including cyberbullying, prejudice-based and discriminatory bullying).
 - abuse in intimate personal relationships between children (also known as teenage relationship abuse).
 - physical abuse which can include hitting, kicking, shaking, biting, hair pulling, or otherwise causing physical harm.
 - physical assault and harm, or the threat of harm with a weapon.
 - harmful sexual behaviour, sexual violence and sexual harassment (More detail at section 4.8)
 - consensual and non-consensual making or sharing of nudes and semi nudes, including those generated using AI. The policy should include the settings approach to it. The UKCIS Education Group has published [Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people](#) which outlines how to respond to an incident. While this applies to England it is of relevance to Northern Ireland settings.

- causing someone to engage in sexual activity without consent, such as forcing someone to strip, touch themselves sexually, or to engage in sexual activity with a third party.
- 'Upskirting' and 'downblousing' (these are criminal offences)²⁶, which typically involve taking a picture under a person's clothing without their permission, with the intention of viewing their body to obtain sexual gratification, or cause the victim humiliation, distress, or alarm, and
- initiation/hazing type violence and rituals.

4.8 Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Children and young people may display sexualised behaviours that are inappropriate, concerning or harmful to themselves or others. Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) refers to developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour by a child or young person which causes harm or has the potential to cause harm. Such behaviour can occur in any educational setting, including primary schools, and should always be taken seriously.

Where harmful sexual behaviour is alleged, witnessed or disclosed, the immediate priority is the safety and wellbeing of the child or young person who has experienced the behaviour. This is particularly important where both children attend the same school or educational setting. Leaders must take prompt and proportionate action to protect and support the child or young person experiencing the behaviour, including considering whether changes to timetables, supervision, transport, break arrangements or class groupings are required so that the child or young person who has experienced the behaviour feels safe and is able to continue their education with minimal disruption.

Schools should listen carefully to the wishes and feelings of the child or young person experiencing the behaviour and their parents/carers, provide ongoing pastoral support, and ensure they are kept informed of the actions being taken. The child or young person experiencing the behaviour should never be expected to manage contact with the other child or to alter their educational experience unnecessarily.

The child displaying the behaviour should also be supported appropriately. In some cases, they may have experienced abuse, neglect, trauma or other unmet needs and may require assessment and intervention from relevant services.

All concerns should be managed in accordance with [Circular 2022/02: Children Who Display Harmful Sexual Behaviour](#) and local safeguarding procedures. The Designated Teacher should:

- take immediate steps to safeguard all children involved;

²⁶ [Upskirting and Downblousing | PSNI](#)

- record the concern accurately and objectively;
- consult with Social Services, the PSNI and other relevant agencies where appropriate;
- inform parents/carers, unless doing so would place a child at further risk;
- undertake a risk assessment and implement a clear safety and support plan; and,
- monitor arrangements regularly to ensure that the child or young person experiencing the behaviour remains safe and supported.

Schools should adopt a child-centred and trauma-informed approach, balancing the need to safeguard the child or young person experiencing the behaviour, manage risk and provide appropriate support to all children involved.

4.9 Digital Safety and Online Harms

Digital technologies are an integral part of children and young people's learning and social lives. While online environments can provide significant educational and social benefits, they can also expose children and young people to a range of safeguarding risks. Schools and education settings must take a proactive and preventative approach to promoting digital safety and responding to online harms as part of their wider safeguarding arrangements.

Online harms may include, but are not limited to:

- cyberbullying and online harassment;
- exposure to harmful or inappropriate content;
- online grooming and sexual exploitation;
- coercion, sextortion and the sharing of self-generated sexual images;
- child sexual abuse material;
- radicalisation and extremist content;
- disinformation and harmful online challenges;
- financial scams and fraud;
- misuse of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies; and,
- excessive or problematic online use that impacts on wellbeing, attendance or learning.

Schools should ensure that:

- digital safety is embedded within the curriculum and taught in an age-appropriate manner;
- pupils are supported to develop the knowledge, skills and resilience to use technology safely and responsibly;
- staff receive regular training on emerging online risks and appropriate responses;

- clear policies are in place for online safety, acceptable use of technology, and the use of mobile and personal devices;
- filtering and monitoring systems are proportionate, effective and regularly reviewed;
- concerns about online harm are treated as safeguarding concerns and managed in accordance with child protection procedures;
- parents and carers are provided with information and support to help keep children safe online; and,
- incidents involving criminal behaviour or immediate risk are referred promptly to the PSNI and/or Social Services, as appropriate.

Where online incidents involve nude or semi-nude image sharing, exploitation, coercion or abuse, schools must prioritise the safety and wellbeing of the child, avoid criminalising them, and seek advice from relevant safeguarding agencies.

The department recently updated its own social media policy which can be found at [Social media policy | Department of Education](#)

Settings may also wish to consider the guidance on 'Protecting Your Settings Images from AI Manipulation or Abuse' [Image guidance for education settings - UK Safer Internet Centre](#)

Childline's Report Remove Tool may be able to assist in having an image blocked or removed to prevent further distribution. [Report Remove | Childline](#)

Online safety should be considered within the setting's safeguarding self-evaluation and reviewed regularly by the Board of Governors and senior leadership team to ensure that policies, practice and technology remain effective in protecting children and young people.

Schools and educational setting are reminded of the Department's [Circular 2026/16 - Guidance on the use of mobile phones in schools and EOTAS centres in Northern Ireland](#) which recommends that schools and EOTAS Centres should be mobile phone-free environments by default; anything other than this should be by exception only.

Safer Schools NI [Home - Safer Schools NI](#) and the SBNI Online Safety Hub [Online Safety Hub - Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland](#) are trusted sources of information that you may find helpful.

4.10 Mental Health and Suicide Concerns

Education settings play an important role in early identification and support but **should not** replace clinical assessment or intervention.

Only appropriately trained professionals should attempt to make a diagnosis of a mental health problem. Education staff, however, still have an important role to play, by promoting good mental wellbeing through the whole school approach as set out in the [Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework](#).

Indicators to watch out for:

- persistent low mood, withdrawal, or distress;
- expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness;
- self-harm or talk of suicide; and,
- sudden behavioural changes

All expressions of suicidal ideation or self-harm must be treated as safeguarding concerns.

The DT must be informed immediately.

In urgent situations, immediate medical or emergency services must be contacted.

Further information in respect of this can be found at [Listen, Support, Connect: Guidance on Self-Harm and Suicide in Educational Settings | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#) and [Supporting through a Watchful Wait | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#)

4.11 Other types of abuse

The following types of abuse are low in incidence but are appearing across the Northern Ireland education system. It is important that settings are aware of these types of abuse and know where to go for more information.

- FGM [Female genital mutilation: the facts \(accessible version\) - GOV.UK](#)
- Honour Based Violence [Honour Based Abuse – Karma Nirvana](#)
- Child/ Forced Marriage [Forced marriage - GOV.UK](#)

You should contact EA CPSS for more advice should this be a concern for you.

If there is an immediate risk of harm – contact the PSNI and/ or your local Trust Social Services Gateway Team

RESPOND

4.11 Responding to a Disclosure

When a child or young person discloses information that gives rise to a safeguarding concern, staff must:

- Listen carefully and take the disclosure seriously;
- reassure them they have done the right thing;
- make no promises of confidentiality;
- avoid leading questions or investigative actions; and
- record the child's words accurately and as soon as possible.

Staff should explain next steps in an age-appropriate way and report immediately to the DT.

4.12 Immediate Safeguarding Actions

Where a child is at immediate risk of harm, staff must take prompt action to ensure the child's safety, including informing the DT without delay and where necessary contacting EA CPSS for guidance and then if required the local Trust Gateway team and/ or PSNI.

Staff must not delay action or attempt to manage high-risk situations alone.

RECORD

Effective record keeping is a core safeguarding function. It supports early identification of risk, informed decision-making, and provides a clear audit trail for accountability.

[DE Circular 2020/07](#) Child Protection Record keeping in Schools – provides more detailed information and templates.

4.13 Principles of Effective Record Keeping

Schools must ensure that safeguarding records are accurate, timely and factual.

Records must:

- be completed as soon as possible and no later than 24hrs after a concern is identified;
- be relevant, proportionate, clear, legible and securely dated, timed and attributed;
- maintain a clear chronology of concerns, actions taken and decisions made;
- record what happened, what action was taken and the rationale for decisions;

- clearly distinguish between fact, professional judgement and third-party information;
- include low level, emerging and cumulative concerns; and
- record decisions not to refer, including rationale.

Record keeping systems must be robust, secure and access-controlled and compliant with Data Protection Act 2018 / GDPR.

4.14 Notes of Concern

All staff must record safeguarding concerns using a Note of Concern (NoC). This can be part of a wider electronic child protection recording system eg: CPOMS or My Concern.

A NoC must be completed where a child at risk (or in adult safeguarding cases):

- makes a disclosure;
- shows signs of harm or distress; or,
- gives rise to any safeguarding concern.

A NoC must:

- be completed immediately or within 24 hours;
- be reported to the Designated Teacher (DT) without delay; and,
- record concerns **without** investigation.

NoC must include:

- date, time and contextual information;
- a factual account of what was seen, heard or disclosed, using the child's own words where possible;
- details of those involved or present;
- action taken and advice sought; and,
- the name and signature of the person recording, alongside the date and time.

STAFF TO NOTE:

- record factually and objectively;
- do not include assumptions or speculation; and.
- record even if concern appears minor – patterns may emerge.

All Notes of Concern must be passed to the DT and retained on the safeguarding file²⁷.

²⁷ This can be a digital record.

REFER

4.15 Early Referral for Support – Family Support Hubs

A Family Support Hub is a multi-agency network of statutory, community and voluntary organisations that provide early intervention services, or work with families who need support. The network accepts referrals and uses their knowledge of local service providers to signpost families with specific needs to an appropriate service.

The specific purpose of hubs is as follows:

- To improve access to early intervention family Support services by matching the needs of referred families to family support providers;
- To improve coordination of early intervention family support services by creating a collaborative network of community, voluntary and statutory providers;
- To improve awareness of early intervention family support services;
- To assess the level of unmet need for early intervention family support services and inform the Trust Outcomes Group.

There are currently 29 Family Support Hubs in operation covering all of Northern Ireland. Hubs coordinate existing statutory/community and voluntary services. Some hubs have attached services, but this is separate from the hub function which is about coordination.

You can make a referral to your local Family Support Hub via [Family Support Hubs – Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership \(CYPSP\)](#)

4.16 Making a Formal Referral (UNOCINI)

A UNOCINI (Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland) referral is used to request support or protection from Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts.

The DT is responsible for:

- determining when a referral is required;
- submitting the referral promptly; and,
- ensuring information is clear, factual, and evidence based.

Staff must provide accurate information to support the referral and continue to support the child within the setting.

Early referral is a protective action and can prevent escalation of harm.

More information in respect of the UNOCINI process can be found at [UNOCINI \(Understanding the Needs of Children and Young People in NI\) | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#)

4.17 Working with Other Agencies

Effective child protection and safeguarding requires timely and proportionate multi-agency collaboration.

Schools and education settings should:

- share information appropriately and lawfully;
- participate in relevant multi-agency processes; and,
- work with local HSC Trusts, PSNI, EA, and other relevant partners.

Concerns around information sharing must not prevent timely action to protect a child.

[A 10-step guide to sharing information to safeguard children | ICO](#)

Storing Information

4.18 Safeguarding File Content

A separate, confidential safeguarding file must be maintained for each child (and ‘adult at risk’ where applicable). This file must be kept separately from the general pupil record.

Safeguarding files must include where relevant:

- a chronology of concerns and actions;
- all Notes of Concern;
- records of decisions and professional rationale;
- UNOCINI assessments and referral forms;
- records of referrals to Social Services or other agencies;
- records of engagement with children, parents/carers, staff and external agencies;
- any correspondence (sent and received);
- copies of any risk assessments, support plans and child protection plans;
- records of any multi-agency meetings and involvement with statutory services; and
- significant contextual information impacting on the child’s welfare.

Files must provide a clear audit trail, including where information is incomplete or contradictory.

4.19 Information Sharing and Confidentiality

Safeguarding information is confidential and sensitive. Schools must share information on a need-to-know basis in a manner that is necessary, proportionate, relevant, timely and secure.

Consent should be sought where appropriate, however consent is not required where:

- a child or 'adult at risk' may be at risk of harm; or
- seeking consent may increase risk.

Schools must record:

- what information was shared;
- with whom;
- the purpose for sharing;
- the rationale for the decision (including decisions not to share).

The welfare of the child or 'adult at risk' is paramount. Information sharing must not be delayed where it is necessary to protect someone from harm.

4.20 Storage, Retention and Transfer of Records

Safeguarding files must be stored securely, with access restricted to the Principal, DT and DDT²⁸.

Settings must ensure:

- electronic systems are password protected and access controlled;
- a record is kept of access to safeguarding files; and
- records are only removed from the premises where required for safeguarding purposes and transported securely.

Settings must also have in place a 'Retention and Disposal Policy'. As a minimum this must include:

- safeguarding (child protection) files must be retained until the child's date of birth + 30 years;
- records of allegations against staff must be retained indefinitely (unless the member of staff is fully exonerated following investigation).

²⁸ Other settings may use different language here – in this instance this refers to the person with ultimate responsibility for safeguarding within the setting and the support team.

When a pupil transfers, relevant safeguarding and child protection records must be transferred promptly, securely and separately from the main school record. This includes child protection files, notes of concern, risk assessments and safeguarding plans.

The Principal and DT must ensure that the receiving school is informed without delay of any safeguarding concerns or vulnerabilities. Where concerns are ongoing or significant, the DT should make direct contact with the receiving DT to ensure appropriate support and protective arrangements are in place from the child's first day.

Where the receiving school is unknown, the Education Welfare Service must be notified.

All transfers must be recorded.

Contact EA CPSS if you require advice on this process.

4.21 Disposal of Records

At the end of the retention period, records must be securely destroyed and the disposal recorded.

Records must not be destroyed where they may be required for investigation, inquiry or legal proceedings.

More information can be found at [Circular 2020/07 - Child Protection: Record Keeping in Schools](#)

SECTION 5: Workforce

A **safe, skilled and supported workforce** is central to effective safeguarding. All staff and volunteers working within education settings must understand their safeguarding responsibilities, act in accordance with professional standards, and contribute to a culture where safeguarding is prioritised, concerns are recognised early, and appropriate action is taken.

Boards of Governors and setting leaders must ensure that **robust, lawful and consistently applied arrangements are in place** for recruitment, vetting, conduct, training, and workforce support, in line with statutory requirements and recognised best practice. These arrangements must be clearly documented and capable of evidencing impact.

5.1 Allegations Against Staff

Schools must have clear, accessible and well-understood procedures for managing allegations that a member of staff or volunteer has:

- behaved in a way that has harmed, or may have harmed, a child or young person;
- possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to a child; or,
- behaved towards a child in a way that indicates they may pose a risk of harm.

All allegations must be:

- treated seriously and acted upon immediately;
- reported without delay to the Principal and/ or Designated Teacher;
- managed strictly in line with agreed safeguarding procedures, including timely liaison with:
 - Social Services;
 - PSNI (where appropriate); and,
 - the relevant Employing Authority (e.g. EA CPSS/CCMS).

All allegations must be recorded in the 'Record of Child Abuse Complaints' book (known as the Hard Back Book)²⁹.

TO NOTE:

- schools **SHOULD** consult with EA CPSS or relevant managing authority prior to undertaking any internal investigation.
- confidentiality, fairness, and appropriate support must be maintained for all parties;

²⁹ All schools should retain a Record of Child Abuse Complaints to record allegations against a member of staff.

- accurate and contemporaneous records must be kept of decisions, actions and rationale;
- proportionate risk management measures must be considered and reviewed where required.

Boards of Governors must ensure that these procedures are implemented consistently, monitored and subject to appropriate governance oversight.

Additional guidance can be found at [Circular 2015/13 - Dealing with allegations of abuse against a member of staff](#)

5.2 Low-Level Concerns (Code of Conduct Concerns)

The term ‘low-level’ concern does not mean that it is insignificant. A low-level concern is any concern – no matter how small, and even if no more than causing a sense of unease or a ‘nagging doubt’.

Low-level concerns relate to behaviour by staff or volunteers that:

- fall below expected standards set out in a school’s staff code of conduct; and,
- does not meet the threshold for a formal allegation but may indicate emerging risk.

Examples may include:

- being overly familiar with pupils;
- inconsistent application of professional boundaries; or,
- inappropriate use of language, tone or behaviour.

Such behaviour can exist on a wide spectrum, from the inadvertent or thoughtless, or behaviour that may look to be inappropriate, but might not be in specific circumstances, through to that which is ultimately intended to enable abuse.

Low-level concerns may arise in several ways and from a number of sources. For example: suspicion; complaint; or disclosure made by a child, parent or other adult within or outside of the organisation; or as a result of vetting checks undertaken.

It is crucial that all low-level concerns are shared responsibly with the right person and recorded and dealt with appropriately. Ensuring they are dealt with effectively should also protect those working in or on behalf of schools and colleges from becoming the subject of potential false low-level concerns or misunderstandings.

Settings must:

- promote a culture of openness, professionalism and challenge;

- ensure all low-level concerns are recorded, reviewed, and addressed appropriately; and,
- identify patterns of behaviour that may require escalation.

Effective management of low-level concerns is a preventative safeguarding measure and contributes to a safer organisational culture and early risk mitigation.

5.3 Code of Conduct for Staff and Volunteers

All schools must have a written 'Staff Code of Conduct' that clearly sets out expectations for professional behaviour and safeguarding practice.

This should include guidance on:

- appropriate relationships with pupils;
- use of social media and digital communication;
- physical contact and intimate care (where relevant);
- one-to-one working;
- confidentiality and information sharing; and,
- responding to safeguarding disclosures.

All staff and volunteers must:

- be familiar with and adhere to the Code of Conduct; and,
- understand that their behaviour, both in and outside of the setting, may have safeguarding implications.

Principals/ Leaders must ensure that the Code of Conduct is:

- regularly reviewed and communicated clearly; and,
- embedded through induction, training, supervision and professional dialogue.

5.4 Safer Recruitment and Vetting

DE Circular 2025/06 is currently under review, however it must be stressed that pre-employment and Access NI Checks must be completed BEFORE a person can commence regulated activity³⁰.

Schools must ensure that all staff and volunteers are subject to robust safer recruitment processes, including:

- appropriate vetting checks, including Access NI prior to commencing work;
- verification of identity, qualifications, and employment history;
- obtaining and scrutinising references; and,
- that recruitment panels include trained safer recruitment members.

³⁰ [Regulated Activity in relation to Children | Department of Health](#)

Additional safeguards must include:

- an accurate central record of recruitment and vetting checks for all relevant staff and volunteers;
- clear role descriptions with safeguarding responsibilities;
- exploration and recording of gaps in employment history; and,
- appropriate supervision and oversight of volunteers (subject to the period condition being met³¹) and external providers on site.

A recent amendment to the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 means that all staff or volunteers in any regular contact with children or young people are undertaking 'regulated activity' and must be Access NI checked. **The previous supervision exemption is no longer valid.**

Boards of Governors must maintain oversight of recruitment practices and ensure compliance with statutory vetting requirements.

Safer recruitment is a critical and preventative safeguarding control.

5.6 Managing Professional Boundaries

Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries is essential to safeguarding.

Staff must:

- act in a way that is professional, transparent, and accountable;
- avoid situations that could be misinterpreted or place themselves or pupils at risk; and,
- ensure all interactions with pupils are appropriate, proportionate, and recorded where necessary.

Schools should provide clear guidance on:

- one-to-one work with pupils;
- off-site activities and educational visits;
- use of personal devices and communication platforms; and,
- physical contact and support.

School Principals and/ or Setting Leaders must promote a culture of professional curiosity, reflection and challenge, where staff/ volunteers feel confident to raise concerns about practice.

³¹ The period condition means the 'regulated activity' takes place on more than 3 days in a 30-day period or overnight

5.7 Training and Workforce Development

All staff/ volunteers must receive appropriate safeguarding training that enables them to **recognise, respond to, and report concerns** effectively.

Minimum expectations:

- safeguarding as part of induction training for all staff and volunteers;
- regular safeguarding updates (at least annually); and,
- role-specific training for:
 - Designated Teachers and Deputies
 - Governors
 - Pastoral and support staff

Training must be in line with SBNI Child Safeguarding Learning and Development Strategy and Framework 2026 - 2030³² and include:

- recognising signs of abuse, neglect, and exploitation
- responding appropriately to disclosures
- understanding limits to education role referral pathways;
- awareness of emerging safeguarding risks; and,
- professional boundaries and staff conduct.

Schools must also:

- promote continuous professional learning;
- support staff wellbeing, recognising the emotional impact of safeguarding work; and,
- ensure access to advice, supervision, and support.

A well-trained workforce is essential to ensuring that education functions as a key safeguarding system, supporting early identification, intervention, and protection.

³² [SBNI Learning and Development Strategy and Framework v1.0 Final .pdf](#)

CHILD PROTECTION AND SAFEGUARDING – COMPANION

This section has been developed to sit alongside the Core Guidance.

The Core Guidance (Section 1-5) sets out the essential statutory duties and necessary expectations that all Boards of Governors, school leaders, designated teachers, and staff must understand and fulfil. It answers the question: “**What must we do?**”

The Companion document has been designed to answer the equally important question: “**How do we do it in practice?**”

Why the ‘Companion’ Has Been Developed

Feedback from schools and education settings has consistently highlighted that child protection and safeguarding guidance is most useful when it is practical, accessible, and easy to apply in day-to-day situations.

While statutory guidance is necessarily concise and authoritative, staff often need additional support in the form of:

- Practical checklists;
- Step-by-step procedures;
- Templates and sample forms;
- Decision-making flowcharts;
- Case studies and examples of good practice;
- Links to current legislation and specialist guidance; and,
- Training materials and further resources.

By separating operational materials from the Core Guidance, the Department has created a more user-friendly resource that can be updated regularly as legislation, procedures, and best practice evolve.

Benefits for Schools and Education Settings

This companion approach offers several important advantages.

i. **Easier to Use in Practice**

Staff can quickly locate practical tools and examples without having to search through lengthy policy text.

ii. **More Flexible and Responsive**

Templates, hyperlinks, and operational advice can be updated more frequently without requiring a full revision of statutory guidance.

iii. Supports Consistency

Standardised templates and checklists help promote consistent safeguarding practice across all schools and education settings.

iv. Reduces Administrative Burden

Ready-made tools save time and support staff to focus on professional judgement and timely action.

v. Supports New and Experienced Staff

The companion resources serve as both an induction resource and a practical reference for experienced designated teachers and leaders.

vi. Strengthens Governance and Assurance

Governors and school leaders can use the resources to monitor compliance and support continuous improvement.

vii. Aligns with Inspection and Self-Evaluation

The toolkit supports schools to evidence safeguarding practice as part of school development planning, self-evaluation, and inspection.

A Living Resource

Child Protection and Safeguarding is a dynamic area of policy and practice. Emerging issues such as online harms, child exploitation, domestic abuse, and changes in legislation require guidance to remain current.

The Companion is therefore intended to be a **living resource**, maintained jointly by the Department of Education and operational partners, including the Education Authority, CCMS, and other safeguarding agencies.

Schools are encouraged to use the resources routinely and to ensure that staff access the most up-to-date versions of all templates and resources.

Together, these documents are intended to provide a clear, proportionate, and practical framework that supports all education settings to maintain robust safeguarding arrangements and to ensure that every child and young person is safe, supported, and able to learn.

This is a work in progress and will be developed over the course of the 2026/27 Academic Year.

Department of Education

- [Protecting and Safeguarding Our Children](#)
- Safer Schools NI [Home - Safer Schools NI](#)
- SBNI Online Safety Hub [Online Safety Hub - Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland](#)
- Emotional Health and Wellbeing [Emotional Health and Wellbeing | Department of Education](#)
- Addressing Bullying in Schools [Addressing Bullying in Schools | Department of Education](#)
- Attendance [School Attendance | Department of Education](#)
- TransformED [TransformED | Department of Education](#)
- Complaints Process [Complaints \(Chapter 25\).docx](#)
- Whistleblowing – School Staff should consider [TNC 2005/4 Whistleblowing | Department of Education](#). Departmental policy can be found at [DE Raising Concerns at Work Policy \(Public Interest Disclosure - Whistleblowing\) | Department of Education](#)

The Education Authority

- EA Child Protection Support Services - [Child Protection Support Service \(CPSS\) | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#)
- EA Safeguarding Resource Library - [Safeguarding Resource Library | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#)

COMPANION 1: A Whole School Approach to Safeguarding and Wellbeing

Safeguarding must be systemic, visible, and consistently applied across all aspects of school life. It is not a discrete function but a core feature of leadership, culture, curriculum and daily practice.

Schools must be able to demonstrate how safeguarding is embedded, monitored and reviewed and how it contributes to children being safe, supported and able to learn.

Key Message:

A strong whole school safeguarding approach ensures that:

- safeguarding is embedded, not isolated;
- prevention and early intervention are prioritised;
- all staff understand and fulfil their role;
- staff feel that they can raise concerns freely; and,
- children are safe, heard and supported to engage with learning.

Staff Responsibilities and Daily Practice

All staff must understand that safeguarding is a core professional responsibility.

Staff are expected to:

- remain alert to signs of harm, distress, or vulnerability;
- act in line with safeguarding procedures, including raising concerns promptly; and,
- contribute to a culture where safeguarding is everyone's business.

No member of staff should assume that someone else will act.

1.2 Setting Ethos, Culture and Environment

A safe setting is underpinned by a positive, inclusive and respectful culture.

Settings should ensure:

- clear expectations for behaviour and conduct;
- safe physical and emotional environment;
- promote a culture of openness, trust and respect;

- effective management of visitors, shared education activities and use of premises; and,
- promotion of equality, inclusion and respect.

A strong safeguarding culture is evidenced by early identification of concerns, confident staff practice and pupils feeling safe to disclose.

1.3 Pupil Emotional Health and Wellbeing

Pupil wellbeing is integral to safeguarding and underpins learning, engagement and attainment.

Settings should:

- implement a whole-school approach to emotional health and wellbeing in line with the DE Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework;
- promote resilience, connection and a sense of belonging; and,
- use pastoral systems to identify and respond to emerging need.

Setting staff play a key role in supporting wellbeing but are not mental health professionals.

Where there are concerns regarding a child's mental health, schools and settings should engage with parents/carers and suggest contact with GP or other specialist services.

For more information go to [Emotional Health and Wellbeing | Department of Education](#)

1.4 Curriculum as a Safeguarding Measure – Preventative Education

The curriculum is a powerful safeguarding tool, equipping children with the knowledge and skills to stay safe and make informed decisions.

Curriculum provision will ensure that pupils learn:

- how to recognise and respond to risk;
- how and where to seek help and support; and,
- about key safeguarding themes, including relationships, online safety, personal safety and exploitation.

Delivery must be age-appropriate, inclusive and delivered by trained staff and reinforced as part of wider school life.

Curriculum resources can be found at [Preventative Curriculum | CCEA](#)

Online Safety support can be found at Online Safety – CCEA, [Home - Safer Schools NI](#) and at the SBNI [Online Safety Hub - Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland](#)

1.5 Attendance and Engagement

Regular attendance is a protective factor.

Children missing education are at heightened risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation, forced marriage and trafficking.

Schools must:

- promote a culture of high expectations for attendance;
- monitor attendance data to identify concerns early; and,
- act promptly through engagement with families and support services where concerns arise.

Particular attention should be given to:

- children missing from education (CME);
- pupils with irregular attendance patterns; and,
- vulnerable groups³³ at higher risk of disengagement.

Schools must consider safeguarding implications when making decisions about suspension or expulsion, particularly for vulnerable pupils.

Consideration should be given to the implications for children and young people in either employment or regular performance. The EA Children in Entertainment and Employment Team are available to consider these specific issues. They can be contacted via [Children in Entertainment & Employment Team \(CEET\) | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#)

For more information in respect of school attendance click on [School Attendance | Department of Education](#)

1.6 Behaviour, Addressing-Bullying and Pastoral Support

Behaviour and pastoral systems are key safeguarding mechanisms.

Schools must ensure:

³³ This list is not exhaustive but can include children with SEND; children in need and/or on the child protection register; children looked after; other section 75 groups

- behaviour and addressing bullying measures are clear, consistently applied and understood;
- early intervention where concerns arise; and,
- graduated pastoral support aligned to level of need.

Systems must be well-defined, accessible and regularly reviewed for effectiveness.

BoGs must ensure that the school complies with the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016³⁴.

Schools must:

- maintain and implement an addressing bullying policy;
- record all incidents of alleged bullying behaviour;
- identify and address patterns and trends;
- provide support to pupils involved; and,
- consult with pupils and parents/carers when reviewing policy and practice.

Bullying, including prejudice-based and online bullying, may constitute a safeguarding concern and must be responded to accordingly.

The EA have a number of resources which can found at [Addressing Concerns of Bullying Type Behaviour | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#)

1.7 Trauma-Informed³⁵ and Restorative Practice³⁶

Schools should recognise that trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), can impact behaviour, relationships and learning.

Where appropriate schools should:

- apply trauma-informed approaches that prioritise safety, predictability and support;
- avoid practices that may re-traumatise; and,
- use restorative practices to support accountability, repair relationships and reintegration.

This work should be undertaken collaboratively with the child, their family and external services as necessary.

³⁴ [DE Guidance – Addressing Bullying in Schools Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016](#)

³⁵ [A Trauma Informed Approach](#)

³⁶ [What is restorative practice?](#)

Support is available through [EA Pupil Wellbeing Service](#) should you wish to discuss this further for your setting.

1.8 Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups of Learners

Some children and young people may face additional or cumulative vulnerability.

Schools must ensure that safeguarding approaches are responsive to the needs of:

- Children Looked After (CLA) and care-experienced children;
- Newcomer pupils, including refugees and asylum seekers;
- Traveller children;
- children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEN/D);
- children with medical needs;
- children experiencing poverty, domestic abuse or family instability;
- children at risk of exploitation (sexual or criminal);
- Young Carers;
- children under 16 (or under 19 with a statement of special educational needs) being cared for by someone who is not a close relative for 28 days or more; and,
- Adults at risk (including pupils aged 18+ in school settings).

Information on supporting pupils with medication needs can be found at [Support for pupils with medication needs | Department of Education](#)

Support must be equitable, proportionate and delivered in partnership with parents/ carers and relevant services.

1.9 Complaints Process³⁷

It is the expectation of the Department that each school Board of Governors/ Setting Management should establish formal written procedures for dealing with complaints.

The complaints process put in place should ensure that complaints in relation to decisions made by schools or Boards of Governors are directed to the school Board of Governors in the first instance.

If following this procedure, a person remains unsatisfied with the decisions made or the time taken to conclude the process is unreasonable, the process should set out

³⁷ Settings other than schools who are providing services commissioned by the department should ensure that they have comparable complaints processes in place as they can also be subject to a further complaint to NIPSO.

that they have the right to ask the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman to consider unresolved complaints about maladministration, which is generally taken to mean poor administration or the wrong application of rules in all publicly funded schools in Northern Ireland.

This means that any pupil or parent who believes that they have been treated unfairly as a result of the actions or decision of a school's Board of Governors will be able to bring their complaint to the Ombudsman after the school's complaints process has been exhausted.

More information on NIPSO can be found at [About Us | NIPSO](#)

1.10 Whistleblowing

Settings must have arrangements for staff to raise concerns about unsafe practice, leadership failures or misconduct.

All staff and volunteers must know how to raise concerns about the conduct or practice of colleagues where they believe a person may be at risk. Schools must maintain clear 'whistleblowing' arrangements and ensure that individuals can raise concerns without fear or detriment.

[TNC 2005/4 Whistleblowing | Department of Education](#) provides advice to teachers who wish to make disclosures of information relating to malpractice by their employers or colleagues at work.

COMPANION 2: Safe School Environment

A safe school environment is central to safeguarding and reflects the role of education as a protective factor. Boards of Governors and Principals must ensure that the school environment—**physical, relational, and digital**—is secure, well-managed, and promotes a culture where safeguarding risks are anticipated, mitigated and responded to effectively.

Schools must be able to demonstrate that arrangements are in place, understood by staff and effective in practice.

Key Message:

A safe school environment is achieved through:

- proportionate risk assessment and supervision;
- clear, consistently applied procedures;
- effective oversight by leaders and governors; and,
- a culture where safeguarding is understood prioritised and embedded in daily practice.

2.1 Safe School Site, Premises and Supervision

Schools must ensure that premises are secure, appropriately supervised and designed to reduce safeguarding risk.

This includes:

- controlled access to the school site and clear visitor management procedures;
- regular, documented risk assessments of buildings, grounds, and any areas used by pupils;
- appropriate supervision arrangements during the school day, including break and transition times;
- safeguarding considerations in the use of toilets, changing areas, and less spaces within the setting; and,
- clear emergency procedures including evacuation and lockdown³⁸.

Arrangements must be proportionate, reviewed regularly and informed by identified risk.

³⁸ [EA School Lockdown Procedures](#)

2.2 Visitors to School and Use of Premises

Schools must have robust visitor management procedures proportionate to the role and level of access.

As a minimum, schools must ensure:

- visitor identities are verified and records maintained;
- visitors are supervised in line with their role and level of vetting;
- safeguarding checks are completed where required by role; and,
- visitors are informed of how to raise safeguarding concerns.

Use of the premises by external organisations must be subject to clear agreements that set out safeguarding responsibilities and expectations. More information on this can be found at the Community Use of Schools [Community use of school premises | Department of Education](#)

2.3 Shared Education and Off-Site Activities, including Residential

Where pupils participate in shared education, educational visits, work placements, residential or other off-site activities, they must have clear arrangements in place before activity begins.

Partner schools and organisations should agree in advance

- agreed safeguarding roles and responsibilities between partner organisations, including who will lead;
- supervision arrangements and staffing arrangements must be defined and risk assessed;
- information sharing must be lawful, proportionate, and support safeguarding;
- how information will be communicated to the child's home and where appropriate statutory agencies;
- visiting staff and organisations must adhere to the host school's safeguarding procedures.

Risk assessments must reflect the activity, location and needs of pupils.

Information on Educational Visits can be found at [Educational Visits | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#)

Information on School Work Experience can be found at [School Work Experience Arrangements | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#)

For further advice contact [EA CPSS](#) who will be able to talk through your needs

2.4 Safe Spaces and Pastoral Support Areas

Schools may provide designated spaces to support wellbeing and pastoral engagement.

Where such spaces exist:

- they must be appropriately supervised;
- staff must understand safeguarding responsibilities and escalation routes; and,
- access should be inclusive and free from stigma.

Safe spaces **do not** replace formal safeguarding processes. All concerns must be recorded and acted upon in line with safeguarding procedures.

2.5 Schools with Boarding/Residential Provision

Schools with boarding or residential elements must ensure safeguarding extends beyond the school day:

- clear arrangements for supervision, staffing ratios, and overnight care;
- secure access to residential areas;
- procedures for responding to concerns outside normal school hours; and,
- arrangements that respect pupils' privacy, dignity, and wellbeing in residential settings.

Safeguarding policies must reflect the 24-hour nature of care.

The duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children for whom accommodation is provided is at Article 176 of the Children (Northern Ireland) order 1995. This is supplemented by the Inspection of Premises, Children and records (Children Accommodated in Schools) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000.

All boarding schools must have a policy in relation to pupils who remain in Northern Ireland and stay with other families (or teachers) outside of terms time and adhere to the private fostering arrangements as set out in Regulation 6 of the Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996.

RQIA undertake inspections of Boarding provision.

2.6 Online Security and Digital Environments

Schools must take proportionate steps to manage safeguarding risks in digital environments.

This includes:

- appropriate filtering and monitoring systems must be in place;
- clear policies on acceptable use for pupils and staff;
- education for pupils on online risks, including potential for criminal prosecution; and,
- clear procedures for responding to online safety incidents.

Online safeguarding arrangements must be reviewed regularly and respond to emerging risks.

For more information see [Circular 2016/27 Online Safety | Department of Education](#) (to be reviewed)

2.7 Substance Use, Vaping and Risk-Taking Behaviours

Schools must maintain clear, consistent approaches to substance related risks, including drugs alcohol and vaping.

Arrangements must ensure that:

- concerns are responded to promptly and proportionately;
- incidents are recorded and addressed;
- engagement with parents/carers and relevant services takes place when required.

Preventative education should support pupils to make informed, healthy choices.

This is reflected in [Circular 2015/23 - Drugs guidance](#) (to be reviewed)

2.8 Health and Safety Interface

Safeguarding and Health and Safety are distinct but can overlap and must operate in a complementary way.

Schools must ensure that:

- risk assessments should consider both physical safety and potential safeguarding risks;
- Staff understand reporting routes for accidents, incidents and safeguarding concerns; and,
- leadership should ensure a coordinated approach across policies and practice.

In an emergency – schools should contact EA on the following numbers:

The **EA Emergency Planning Service** is your first point of call in respect of a school emergency and can be contacted on Telephone: 028 9047 5888 or via Email: EASafetyTeam@eani.org.uk

EA Maintenance Emergency Contact Details - Buildings, Mechanical and Electrical Maintenance - Helpdesk Contact Details (Office Hours). If you require any support in relation to adverse / severe weather during EA office hours please contact the Maintenance Helpdesk. Telephone: 028 9598 6111

EA Emergency Maintenance Contact Number (Out of Hours). In the event of an out of hour's adverse / severe weather-related emergency in your school, please contact the EA Emergency Contact Number for assistance. Telephone: 028 3751 2345

If your school would like **support following the serious injury or death of pupil or staff member**, please contact the **Critical Incident Response Team** on 028 3751 2515. Support is available during office hours and out of hours (8am - 9pm) every day, including weekends and public holidays. More information on this team can be found at [Management of Critical Incidents in Educational Settings | Education Authority Northern Ireland](#)

COMPANION 3: Monitoring, Self-Evaluation and Safeguarding Assurance

Schools must have robust and proportionate monitoring and self-evaluation arrangements to ensure safeguarding is effective in practice, not solely compliant on paper.

Safeguarding must be a standing feature of school improvement, quality assurance and governance oversight.

Key Message

Effective child protection and safeguarding is demonstrated through culture, practice, and outcomes, not documentation alone.

Schools must ensure that safeguarding self-evaluation is informed by

- regular review of safeguarding practice, including:
 - quality of records and record-keeping;
 - timeliness and appropriateness of decision-making and referrals; and
 - staff understanding of safeguarding responsibilities.
- monitoring of key indicators, including:
 - attendance and patterns of absence;
 - behaviour, bullying, and safeguarding-related incidents; and,
 - pupil wellbeing indicators.
- engagement with the views of children, young people, families and staff on safety and wellbeing;
- identification of emerging and contextual risks (e.g. online harms, exploitation, community risks), and,
- evidence that learning from safeguarding incidents informs improvement to practice.

In terms of governance and oversight the role of the Principal (or setting leader) is to ensure that:

- safeguarding is regularly and formally reported to the Board of Governors;
- identified weaknesses are addressed promptly and monitored; and,
- safeguarding, wellbeing, and educational outcomes are clearly linked to improvement planning.

COMPANION 4: System Level Assurance: Inspection, Reporting and Escalation

4.1 The Role of Inspection

During inspection, ETI evaluates the effectiveness and impact of child protection and adult safeguarding arrangements. ETI evaluates if a school or setting's arrangements for child protection align to the Department of Education's current statutory guidance (e.g. safeguarding policies and circulars) and reports areas for action where required

Where the arrangements for child protection do not align sufficiently to the current statutory guidance, ETI undertakes a child protection progress inspection within six working weeks of the conclusion of the inspection. If serious safeguarding issues are identified, ETI raises concerns directly with the school and the employing authority and informs the Department.

Key Message

Inspection provides independent assurance of the effectiveness of child protection and safeguarding arrangements.

ETI's evaluation of the arrangements for child protection are based on the appropriateness and effectiveness of a school or setting's policies, vetting arrangements, staff and governor training and, importantly, its practice.

Further detail is set out in ETI guidance [Empowering Improvement - New Framework for Inspection | Education and Training Inspectorate - Empowering Improvement](#)

EARLY YEARS SETTINGS TO NOTE: safeguarding arrangements are evaluated through both the ETI and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority. Contact your local Health Trust Early Years team for advice and support.

4.2 Reporting and Escalation

Schools, Boards of Governors, education settings and employing authorities must ensure that safeguarding information is reported accurately, promptly and lawfully, in line with statutory and Departmental requirements.

Key Message

Safeguarding concerns must be identified, reported and escalated promptly in accordance with statutory, regional and Departmental requirements. Settings should not seek to manage concerns internally where referral, notification or external intervention is required. Timely escalation is essential to protecting children and ensuring appropriate oversight, accountability and support.

Settings must report, as required:

- child protection and adult safeguarding concerns to statutory services (Health and Social Care Trusts and/or PSNI) in line with regional procedures;
- safeguarding concerns relating to staff in line with managing allegations procedures
- serious incidents in accordance with Departmental guidance; and,
- any issues that may present a systemic safeguarding risk.

Serious safeguarding incidents, allegations or events likely to attract significant public concern must be reported promptly to the relevant managing authority.

Managing Authorities should ensure that the Department is kept informed in respect of serious child protection and/ or safeguarding breaches on a 'no surprises' basis.

These should be forwarded to Pupil Support Team psu.mail@education-ni.gov.uk.

Summary

Safeguarding and child protection are fundamental to education and to ensuring that every child and young person is safe, supported and able to thrive. This guidance provides a clear framework to support consistent and effective safeguarding practice across all education settings in Northern Ireland.

The guidance has been redesigned in response to feedback from the sector. The Core Guidance sets out statutory duties and expectations, while the Companion Section provides practical tools, templates and operational support. Together, they are intended to make safeguarding guidance more accessible, easier to navigate and simpler to implement in practice.

As safeguarding practice continues to evolve, this guidance and the accompanying resources will be kept under regular review to reflect legislative changes, emerging risks, developments in policy and learning from practice.

The Department would like to thank all those who contributed to the development of this guidance and those who work every day to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people across Northern Ireland.

The Department welcomes ongoing feedback to help inform future updates and improvements. Comments, suggestions and implementation feedback can be submitted to the Pupil Support Team at: psu.mail@education-ni.gov.uk

Together, through continued partnership and a shared commitment to children and young people, we can ensure that safeguarding remains at the heart of education.