

SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

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Online Child Sexual Abuse - What schools need to know

A recent report from HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services highlights significant concerns about how effectively agencies are responding to online child sexual abuse and managing registered sex offenders. The findings reinforce the vital role schools play in identifying risk early and maintaining strong safeguarding practice.

Key findings

- **Demand is increasing rapidly** - Referrals relating to online child sexual abuse have risen significantly, placing pressure on police capacity and response times.
- **Delays are impacting safeguarding** - Digital forensic examinations can take many months, sometimes years, meaning children may remain at risk while investigations are ongoing.
- **Inconsistent practice across services** - There are variations in training, resources and access to technology, leading to uneven responses.
- **Weaknesses in offender management** - Online offending is not always effectively integrated into wider offender management, limiting a coordinated safeguarding response.
- **Ongoing risk during investigations** - In some cases, suspects are not immediately detained, meaning they may continue to pose a risk to children online.

Why this matters for schools

Online child sexual abuse continues to grow in scale and complexity. Harm can happen quickly, take place outside of school, and remain hidden. Where external agencies face delays, schools often remain the consistent point of contact and support for children.

What schools need to do

- **Strengthen online safety education** - Ensure a well-sequenced curriculum through PSHE, RSHE and computing that teaches pupils about grooming, exploitation, image sharing and how to report concerns.
- **Maintain a strong safeguarding culture** - Reinforce the principle from Keeping Children Safe in Education that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and that concerns should never be dismissed.
- **Act promptly on concerns** - Record concerns clearly using systems such as CPOMS or MyConcern. Do not delay referrals while waiting for thresholds to be met. Follow up robustly where external responses are slow.
- **Review filtering and monitoring systems** - Ensure systems are effective and regularly reviewed, with clear DSL oversight of alerts and vulnerable pupils.
- **Engage parents and carers** - Provide practical guidance to help families understand online risks, device use and how to seek support.

Questions for school leaders

- **How confident are staff in recognising signs of online abuse or grooming?**
- **Are safeguarding records detailed, timely and followed up appropriately?**
- **How are vulnerable pupils monitored for online risk?**
- **Does the curriculum equip pupils with the knowledge to stay safe online?**

Read:
<https://hmicfrs.justicesectorates.gov.uk/publications/policing-online-child-sexual-abuse-and-managing-registered-sex-offenders/>

Children growing up in B&B accommodation - What schools need to know

A recent blog from the Children's Commissioner for England highlights the reality for thousands of children living in temporary "B&B" accommodation. The findings provide an important safeguarding lens for schools, particularly in understanding vulnerability linked to housing instability.

Key findings

- **Large numbers of children are affected** - Tens of thousands of children are living in temporary accommodation with shared facilities, often for extended periods.
- **Conditions are often unsuitable** - Children may share bathrooms, kitchens and living spaces with strangers, sometimes in cramped and poor-quality environments.
- **Stays are far longer than intended** - Although B&B accommodation is meant to be short-term, many families remain for months or even years, with some recorded cases exceeding five years.
- **Significant impact on daily life** - Children report lack of privacy, limited space to play or study, and restricted access to basic facilities such as cooking.
- **Safeguarding risks are heightened** - Sharing facilities with unknown adults, who may themselves be vulnerable, can present unacceptable risks to children's safety and wellbeing.

Why this matters for schools

Children living in temporary accommodation may experience:

- **Increased safeguarding vulnerability due to unstable or unsafe living conditions**
- **Disrupted routines, attendance and punctuality**
- **Limited opportunity to complete homework or access basic needs**
- **Emotional stress, anxiety and reduced wellbeing**
- **Social isolation and stigma**

For some pupils, this is not a short-term issue but a prolonged part of their childhood, which can significantly affect development and educational outcomes.

What schools need to do

- **Recognise hidden vulnerability** - Ensure staff understand that housing instability is a safeguarding concern, not just a welfare issue. Maintain professional curiosity where

there are signs of fatigue, poor attendance or changes in behaviour.

- **Strengthen early identification** - Use admissions, attendance monitoring and pastoral systems to identify pupils living in temporary accommodation. Ensure this information is shared appropriately with safeguarding leads.
- **Provide practical support** - Consider how the school can support pupils with: *Access to food and basic needs, safe and quiet spaces for learning and flexibility around homework and expectations.*
- **Work with external agencies** - Engage with local authorities, housing teams and early help services where appropriate. Escalate concerns where living conditions present a safeguarding risk.
- **Support wellbeing** - Ensure pastoral support is in place. Children may not disclose their living situation readily, so trusted relationships are key.

Questions for school leaders

- **Do we know which pupils are living in temporary or unstable housing?**
- **How is this information used to inform safeguarding and pastoral support?**
- **Are staff aware of the risks linked to shared accommodation?**
- **How do we adapt provision for pupils facing these challenges?**

Read:
<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/children-growing-up-in-bbs-new-data-shows-the-full-story/>

Responding to online scares, trends and "dangerous challenges" - What schools need to know

Schools are increasingly faced with warnings about online "challenges", harmful trends, or rumours of serious incidents. These alerts may come from a range of sources, including official communications, media coverage or widely shared social media posts. While often well-intentioned, the way schools respond to and share this information can have a significant impact on children's safety and emotional wellbeing.

Understanding the risk

Not all online scares or trends present a genuine or immediate risk. Some may be exaggerated, misleading or even entirely false. However, the response to these warnings can sometimes unintentionally increase harm if not carefully managed.

Why naming trends is not always helpful

It can feel proactive to name specific apps, games or "dangerous challenges" when communicating with pupils and parents. However, this approach can be counterproductive for several reasons:

- **It can give free publicity** - Highlighting a specific trend or app may increase curiosity. By naming it and explaining where to find it, adults may unintentionally encourage children to search for and engage with the content.
- **It can spread anxiety and panic** - Alarmist messaging can heighten fear among pupils and parents, making it harder to have calm, constructive conversations about online safety.
- **It can create a false sense of security** - Focusing on one specific app or trend may lead to the belief that banning a single platform will keep children safe, rather than promoting a broader understanding of online risk and digital resilience.

What schools should do instead

- **Focus on general risk rather than specifics** - Discuss the types of risks children may encounter online, without naming or promoting particular trends. This helps build transferable understanding rather than reactive responses.
- **Use calm, age-appropriate messaging** - Provide reassurance and practical advice using non-sensationalised examples. Avoid language that may alarm or overwhelm pupils.
- **Promote a balanced view of technology** - Recognise both the benefits and risks of online activity. This supports a more realistic and sustainable approach to online safety.
- **Encourage open communication** - Support ongoing dialogue between children and trusted adults, both at school and at home. Children are more likely to share concerns when they feel listened to rather than judged.
- **Adopt a "drip feed" approach** - Share regular, consistent guidance with pupils and parents throughout the year, rather than reacting only when concerns arise.
- **Signpost support clearly** - Regularly remind pupils who they can talk to if they feel worried, including trusted staff and anonymous reporting systems within school, as well as external sources of support.

Policy and preparedness - Schools should also review their internal procedures to ensure they are equipped to respond appropriately:

- **Are serious incident and safeguarding policies up to date?**
- **Do procedures clearly address how to manage hoaxes or online scares?**
- **Are roles and responsibilities clearly defined for staff?**
- **Are communication protocols with parents proportionate and considered?**

A clear, consistent approach helps prevent unnecessary escalation and ensures that responses remain focused on safeguarding.

Poster:
https://www.nca.gov.uk/hubs/safeguarding/Pastorals/101_Safeguarding-Pastorals-3-Scare.pdf?utm_campaign=Safeguarding&utm_medium=email&utm_source=hs_email

Summer term 1 - 5-minute 'bitesize' and audio version safeguarding refresher videos

- **Private fostering - Tuesday 28th April**
- **Homelessness - Tuesday 5th May**
- **Sexism and sexual harassment - Tuesday 12th May**
- **Identifying young carers in school - Tuesday 19th May**

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