



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

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What schools need to know: Independent scrutiny in safeguarding partnerships

The Department for Education has published new research, Understanding Independent Scrutiny in Safeguarding Partnerships, examining how independent scrutiny operates across local safeguarding partnerships in England and how it contributes to learning, accountability and improvement.

Published on 24th September 2026, this is a research report rather than new statutory guidance for schools. However, its findings contain important messages for schools about their role within effective multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

What is independent scrutiny?

Independent scrutiny provides objective challenge and assurance about how effectively local organisations are working together to safeguard children.

Under Working Together to Safeguard Children, safeguarding partners must have arrangements for independent scrutiny of their multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. The role is intended to act as a constructive “critical friend” providing challenge and support while encouraging reflection, learning and continuous improvement.

What did the research find?

The research included responses from 78 safeguarding partnerships, approximately 55% of partnerships nationally, alongside interviews with stakeholders from 15 partnerships.

Effective scrutiny was associated with several important features:

- **strong leadership and clear accountability**
- **openness to constructive challenge**
- **high-quality data and evidence**
- **learning from safeguarding reviews and audits**
- **practitioner perspectives and frontline experience**
- **effective multi-agency relationships**
- **the experiences and voices of children and young people**
- **following through on learning to improve practice**

A particularly important finding was the value of triangulation bringing together different sources of evidence rather than relying on one measure or one agency's perspective.

What does this mean for schools?

Schools are a vital part of the local safeguarding system and often hold information that other agencies may not see.

Independent scrutiny may therefore draw upon information from schools, safeguarding audits, multi-agency practice, practitioner feedback, performance information, safeguarding reviews and children's experiences to understand how well local arrangements are working.

For DSLs and senior leaders, this reinforces the importance of engaging effectively with local safeguarding partnership arrangements, contributing to multi-agency learning and responding to learning arising from reviews, audits and scrutiny.

The voice of children matters

One of the strongest themes within the research is the importance of ensuring that children and young people's experiences genuinely influence safeguarding arrangements. The research found that practice remains uneven. Some partnerships have developed innovative approaches, including young scrutineers, while others rely mainly on existing participation activity.

The report highlights the importance of moving beyond simply consulting children towards meaningful participation and co-production.

For schools, this provides a useful opportunity to reflect on how pupil voice informs safeguarding practice.

Ask:

“How do we know what safeguarding feels like for children in our school, not simply what our policies say should happen?”

Learning must lead to change

Independent scrutiny is not intended to be another inspection.

Its purpose is to help safeguarding partnerships understand what is working, what needs to improve and whether previous learning has actually resulted in changes to practice.

Schools should therefore consider:

- **whether learning from local and national safeguarding reviews reaches relevant staff**
- **whether safeguarding audits result in clear actions and follow-up**
- **whether recurring concerns and patterns are identified**
- **whether staff feel able to challenge and escalate concerns**
- **whether multi-agency working is effective**
- **whether changes made following learning are having an impact on children**

What should schools do?

There is no new action or statutory requirement for schools arising directly from this research report.

However, DSLs and senior leaders can use the findings as an opportunity to reflect on their school's contribution to the wider safeguarding system.

Consider:

Are we open to challenge? Do we learn from reviews and audits? Do we contribute effectively to multi-agency working? Do we know whether changes to safeguarding practice are actually making a difference? And, crucially, are children's

experiences helping us answer those questions?

Key message for schools

Effective safeguarding is not demonstrated by policies and procedures alone. Strong safeguarding systems continually test, challenge and evaluate whether arrangements are working in practice.

For schools, that means looking beyond compliance and asking:

“How do we know?”

How do we know children feel safe?

How do we know staff understand procedures?

How do we know multi-agency arrangements are working?

How do we know learning has changed practice?

Listen to children. Triangulate the evidence. Welcome challenge. Act on learning. Test the impact.

Read:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-independent-scrutiny-in-safeguarding-partnerships>

What schools need to know: Children in Need – A focus on disability

The Department for Education has published new analysis examining children in need (CIN), children looked after and care leavers with a recorded disability in England. Published on 24th September 2026, this is statistical analysis rather than new statutory guidance, but it contains important messages for schools about disability, SEND and safeguarding.

What does the data tell us?

At 31st March 2025, 58,100 children in need (14%) had a recorded disability.

Among these children:

- **46% had autism recorded**
- **33% had a learning disability**
- **88% had an EHC plan**
- **76% were aged 10 or over**

Importantly, 31% of children in need with a recorded disability had abuse or neglect recorded as their primary need. Among children looked after with a recorded disability, this increased to 57%.

Look beyond the diagnosis

Schools should be alert to diagnostic overshadowing, where behaviour, distress or changes in presentation are attributed to a child's disability or SEND rather than prompting consideration of other possible explanations.

Avoid assumptions such as:

“That's part of their autism.” “They always behave like that.”

Instead ask:

“Is this usual for this child?” “What has changed?” “Could this behaviour be communicating something else?”

A child's disability and a safeguarding concern can exist at the same time.

Attendance matters

In 2024/25, 39.9% of children in need with a recorded disability were persistently absent, compared with 18.5% of all pupils.

Schools should consider absence alongside the child's SEND, health, family circumstances and wider safeguarding information, rather than viewing it solely as an attendance issue.

What should schools consider?

This publication introduces no new statutory requirements, but schools should consider whether:

- **DSL and SENCO systems work effectively together**
- **staff recognise changes in a child's usual presentation**
- **children's communication needs are considered when seeking their views**
- **attendance concerns are considered within the wider safeguarding picture**
- **relevant information is shared effectively with other agencies**

Don't allow a diagnosis to become the explanation for every behaviour, change or concern.

Know the child's usual presentation and remain professionally curious: ***“Is this typical for this child and what else could be happening?”*** **Know the child. Notice the change. Look beyond the diagnosis. Join the dots.**

Read:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-in-need-a-focus-on-disability>

Safeguarding Network Meeting - Thursday 22nd October, 3:45pm - 5pm Free

This free Safeguarding Network Meeting will provide an opportunity for Designated Safeguarding Leads, Deputy DSLs and senior leaders to reflect on how the changes are working in practice, discuss emerging issues and ask any questions that have arisen. The session will be practical, interactive and discussion-based, and will include:

- **✓ KCSIE 2026 – Frequently asked questions**
- **✓ Interactive safeguarding scenarios based on real-life situations schools are facing**
- **✓ Discussion around professional curiosity, online safety and AI, Family Help, child-on-child abuse, information sharing, record keeping and decision making**
- **✓ Sharing safeguarding challenges, ideas and good practice with colleagues from across our schools**

Forthcoming free safeguarding webinars for Autumn term 1 2026

Self harm and suicidal ideation - Tuesday 6th October

Anti-bullying - Tuesday 13th October

Domestic abuse - Tuesday 20th October

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