

Subject: Child Protection and Safeguarding in Education - Guidance for Schools and Education Settings	Circular Number: 2026/17 Date of Issue: 27 August 2026
Audience: • Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided schools; • Independent Schools; • Education Authority; • Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; • Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta; • Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education; • Governing Bodies Association; • Statutory and Non-Statutory Pre-School Providers; • Controlled Schools' Support Council • EOTAS Centres and any Voluntary or Community Commissioned Settings • Leaders of Youth Settings • Middletown Centre for Autism Summary of Contents: This Circular advises of the publication of the Department of Education's refreshed statutory guidance 'Child Protection and Safeguarding in Education'. Enquiries: Any enquiries about the contents of this Circular should be addressed to: Pupil Support Team Department of Education Rathgael House Balloo Road	Status of contents: Advice and Guidance Related Documents: The Department of Health document: 'Co-Operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland' Superseded Documents: • Circular 2017/04 (original & updates) • Circular 1999/10 • Safeguarding and Child Protection in Schools – A Guide for Schools (September 2024) DE Website: This Circular and guidance document are available to download from Child Protection and Safeguarding in Education Guidance

BANGOR
BT19 7PR

Tel: 028 9127 9000

Email: psu.mail@education-ni.gov.uk

[DE Circular 2026/17 - Child Protection
and Safeguarding in Education -
Guidance for Schools and Education
Settings](#)

CHILD PROTECTION AND SAFEGUARDING IN EDUCATION – Guidance for schools and Education Settings

Status of this Guidance

1. This guidance is issued under Article 18(1)(c) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. Boards of Governors are required to have regard to this guidance when determining measures to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils. The guidance applies across education settings in Northern Ireland and sets out the statutory expectations for safeguarding and child protection.

Statutory Duties

2. The refreshed guidance does not create new statutory safeguarding duties. Rather, it:
 - Consolidates existing requirements;
 - Clarifies roles, responsibilities and expectations;
 - Strengthens consistency across education settings; and
 - Provides clearer operational support to assist implementation.

Guidance

3. The Department of Education has published refreshed statutory guidance entitled '**Child Protection and Safeguarding in Education**', available at [Child Protection and Safeguarding in Education Guidance](#). This guidance replaces Safeguarding and Child Protection in Schools: A Guide for Schools (2024) and provides a comprehensive safeguarding framework for schools and a wider range of education settings. The refreshed guidance reinforces the core principles that **safeguarding is everyone's responsibility** and that **the welfare of the child is paramount in all decision-making**.
4. While schools remain the primary audience, the guidance now has a broader scope and applies to:
 - Pre-school and early years settings;
 - Education Other Than at School (EOTAS);
 - Youth Work services;
 - Alternative and commissioned education providers; and
 - Other settings delivering education on behalf of the Department of Education or managing authorities.

This supports greater consistency in safeguarding practice across the education system

Key Changes Introduced Through the Refresh

5. The refreshed guidance introduces a new structure consisting of:
 - Core Guidance, setting out statutory duties, legal responsibilities and minimum safeguarding expectations; and

- Companion section, providing practical implementation support through links to Department of Education and Education Authority resources, templates, checklists, flowcharts and operational guidance.
6. This new format enables operational resources to be updated more regularly without requiring revision of the statutory guidance itself, helping schools and education settings access current advice and supporting materials more easily.
 7. The refresh is intended to improve clarity, accessibility and usability while reducing administrative burden through clearer guidance and more practical implementation tools.

Areas Strengthened in the Refreshed Guidance

8. The refreshed guidance strengthens expectations across a number of key safeguarding areas, including governance and leadership, safeguarding culture, record keeping, information sharing, online safety, child exploitation, child-on-child abuse, domestic abuse, safer recruitment, staff conduct, and safeguarding assurance arrangements.
9. It also places greater emphasis on early intervention, professional curiosity, attendance and engagement, emotional health and wellbeing, trauma-informed practice, safeguarding vulnerable learners, and effective multi-agency working.

Governance and Leadership

10. The guidance places a stronger emphasis on safeguarding governance and accountability. Boards of Governors are reminded of their responsibility to ensure robust safeguarding arrangements are in place, regularly reviewed and subject to appropriate oversight. The guidance also signposts governors to the updated Safeguarding and Child Protection - The Role of Governors ([Pupil Child Protection and Safeguarding](#)).

Previous Early Years and Youth Settings Annexes Removed

11. Material that was previously set out in separate annexes for early years and youth settings has now been fully integrated throughout the main body of the guidance. This approach recognises that the same overarching safeguarding principles apply across all education settings, while avoiding unnecessary duplication and promoting greater consistency.

Adult Safeguarding

12. The refreshed guidance includes a dedicated section on adult safeguarding. While this does not introduce a new responsibility, it provides clearer expectations regarding how schools and education settings should respond where safeguarding concerns arise in relation to:
 - Learners aged 18 and over;
 - Adults at risk who engage with education settings;
 - Parents and carers; and

- Staff and volunteers.

The role of education settings remains one of recognising, recording, reporting and referring concerns. Further operational guidance and support will be developed jointly with the Education Authority during the 2026/27 academic year.

Alignment with Wider Education Policy

13. The refreshed guidance has been designed to align with:

- The [Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework](#);
- The [Education and Training Inspectorate's Empowering Improvement framework](#);
- [School development planning processes](#); and
- Wider education and inclusion policies

Related Guidance Updates

14. Alongside the publication of the refreshed safeguarding guidance, the Department and the EA Pupil Wellbeing Team have also updated:

- Listen, Support, Connect: Guidance on Self-Harm and Suicide in Schools (formerly Protecting Life in Schools); and
- Management of Critical Incidents in Schools.

These documents should be read alongside the refreshed safeguarding guidance as part of the overall safeguarding framework for schools and education settings.

Safer Recruitment Reminder

15. The guidance reiterates the Department's key safer recruitment expectation that:

Access NI and all required pre-employment checks must be satisfactorily completed before an individual commences regulated activity or takes up post.

16. This is a strengthened message within the refreshed guidance and reflects the Department's continuing focus on robust recruitment and vetting arrangements.

Education Authority Support

17. The [Education Authority's Child Protection Support Service \(CPSS\)](#) remains the principal source of safeguarding advice, training and support for schools and education settings and will continue to support implementation of the refreshed guidance.

Actions for Schools and Education Settings

18. Boards of Governors, proprietors, management committees, principals and leaders should review the refreshed guidance carefully and ensure that local safeguarding arrangements, policies, procedures and training programmes are updated as necessary for the 2026/27 academic year.

19. Particular consideration should be given to the strengthened areas outlined above and to ensuring that safeguarding remains embedded within governance, leadership and daily practice.

PUPIL SUPPORT TEAM