Tes safeguarding report 2026 UK edition

From compliance to culture: building a proactive safeguarding future

Based on 2,086 UK responses from the Tes global safeguarding survey 2026



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Why this report matters

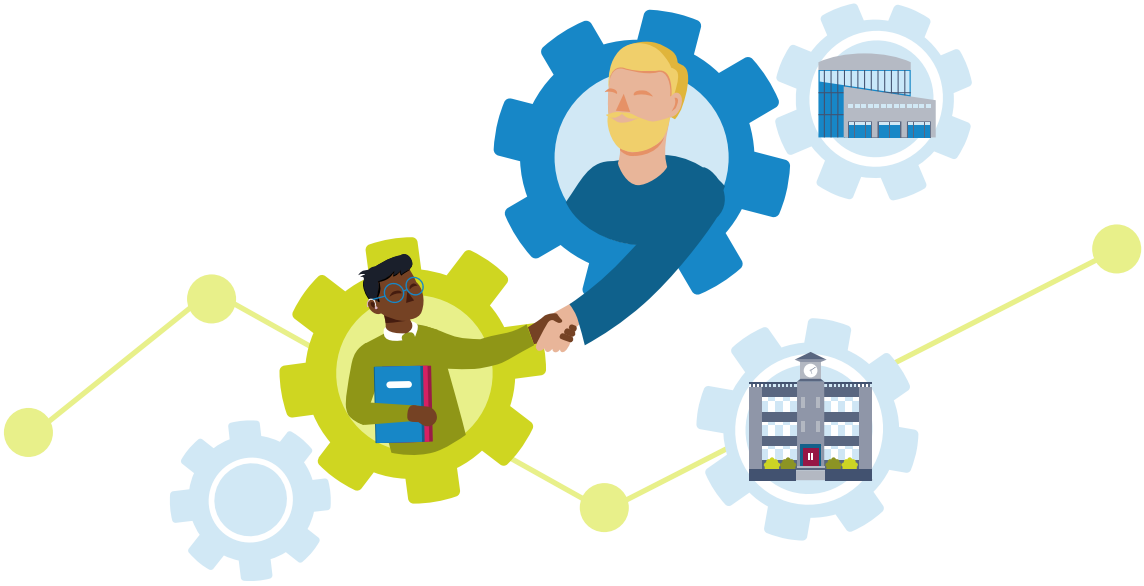
Safeguarding in schools in 2026 is no longer defined only by policy compliance, referral thresholds and statutory process. It's defined by whether schools can build cultures that notice earlier, respond more consistently, appropriately and quickly, and creates enough trust for concerns to be noticed and reported before harm escalates.

That's a much bigger ask than it was even a few years ago. School leaders are working in an environment shaped by heavier statutory expectations, more complex peer dynamics, a deepening mental health crisis among young people, persistent attendance vulnerability and digital harms that evolve faster than most systems around them. At the same time, schools in England accounted for roughly one in five referrals to children's social care in 2025. Schools aren't on the periphery of child protection. They're at its operational core.

The question for 2026 isn't whether safeguarding should move beyond compliance. For most schools, that shift has already begun. The more urgent question is whether they have the capacity, consistency, confidence and infrastructure to sustain that shift under real pressure. And whether the wider system is helping them do so.

What makes this edition different

This is the most comprehensive UK safeguarding survey Tes has conducted. Our 2,086-respondent UK sample draws from all school contexts and every staff role: teachers, DSLs, teaching assistants, governors, pastoral leads, office teams and lunchtime supervisors. The dataset is triangulated with the latest external evidence from DfE, NHS England, Ofsted, Ofcom, the Internet Watch Foundation and the NSPCC to produce a report that goes beyond description. Every section answers four questions: What does the evidence show? Why does it matter? What does strong practice look like? What should leaders do next?



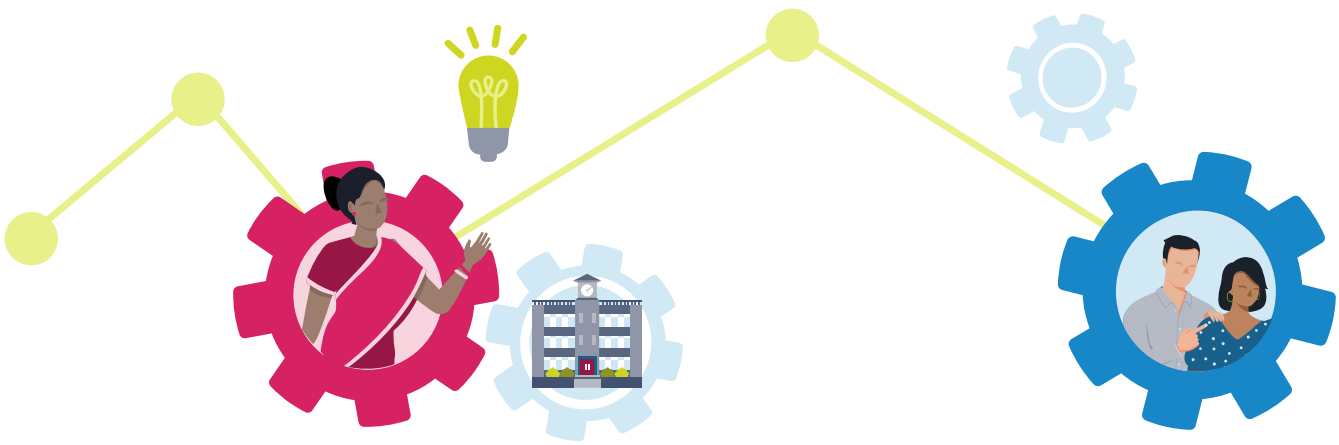
About this survey

In early 2026, Tes conducted its most expansive safeguarding survey to date, gathering 4,501 responses from school professionals across the UK and internationally. The 2,086 UK responses forming this report represent the largest nationally gathered school safeguarding dataset Tes has produced, drawing from state schools, academies and MATs, independent schools and alternative provision settings.

All 2,086 UK responses are included. Sensitivity analysis comparing the full base against a speed-filtered subset showed a maximum difference of 0.6 percentage points across all key indicators: a negligible margin that validates inclusion of every voice. This was a deliberate methodological choice. The quieter respondent who completed the survey quickly isn't a less valid respondent.

Indicator	Result
Total UK respondents	2,086
State/maintained schools	727 (34.8%)
Academy/MAT schools	640 (30.7%)
Independent schools	603 (28.9%)
Alternative provision	116 (5.6%)
DSLs and deputy DSLs	approx. 440 (21.1%)
Teachers and teaching assistants combined	approx. 1,095 (52.5%)
Support, pastoral, admin and governor roles	approx. 550 (26.4%)

The breadth of roles in the sample is itself a finding. This isn't a DSL-only dataset. The fact that teachers, teaching assistants, office teams, lunchtime supervisors, pastoral leads and governors all contributed in meaningful numbers gives this report a genuine whole-school credibility that most safeguarding surveys can't claim.



Executive summary

Safeguarding in UK schools in 2026 is no longer defined only by statutory compliance, referral thresholds and whether a school can evidence the right policies on paper. It's defined by whether a school can build a culture that notices earlier, responds consistently, appropriately and quickly, and creates enough trust for concerns to be noticed and reported before harm escalates. That is a bigger ask than it was even a few years ago.

The Tes survey doesn't suggest that schools are still stuck at a compliance-only stage. Quite the opposite: 66.7% of UK respondents place their school at Stage 4 or 5 on the safeguarding culture maturity model, while only 9.6% place themselves at Stage 1 or 2. Staff confidence is strong. The challenge lies elsewhere. Consistency across staff drops to 83.4%, and post-training confidence falls further to 81.4%. The gap between knowing and doing is where the most important work now sits.

The survey also shows that the biggest barriers are structural, not rhetorical. The top UK pressures are workload and capacity for key staff (55.3%), mental health and wellbeing needs (50.3%), attendance and persistent absence (41.5%), parental engagement (31.5%) and online harms (27.6%).

Among safeguarding leads, the picture is sharper still: 61.3% describe safeguarding workload as challenging or worse, 59.4% say the work affects wellbeing at least moderately, and 22.1% spend more than 30 hours a week on safeguarding. This isn't evidence of a sector without intent. It's evidence of a sector with real cultural ambition, held back only by the pressure on its capacity to deliver.

66.7%
Stage 4 or 5 on culture maturity model

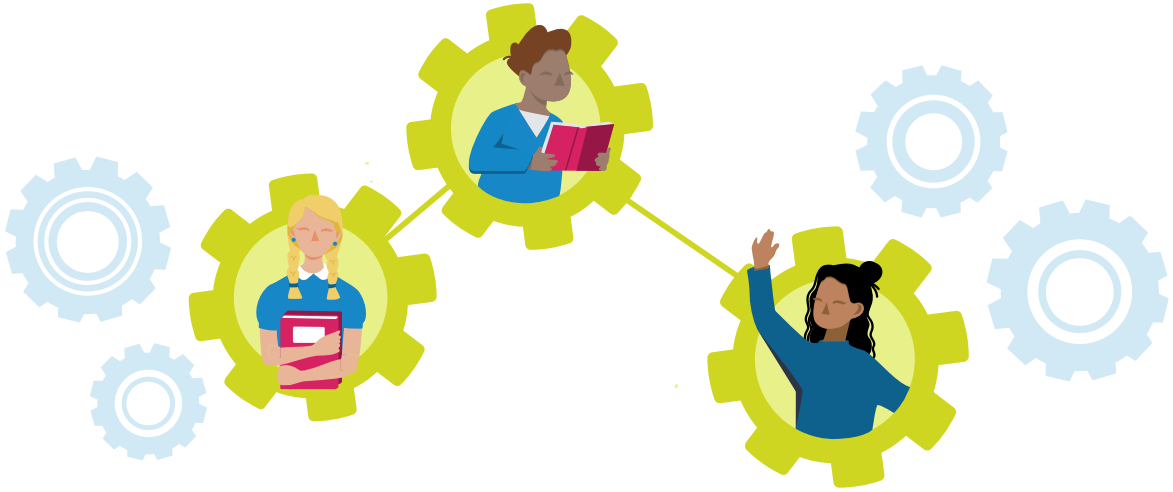
94.2%
Staff confident recognising concerns

83.4%
Practice consistent across all staff

41.5%
Citing attendance as a top challenge

82.1%
Support mandatory lead-role training

47.4%
Would likely or possibly sign the charter



The three international tensions this report explores



Culture ambition is ahead of operational reality. Many schools already see themselves beyond compliance, but consistency and protected strategic capacity are weaker than headline confidence scores suggest.



The safeguarding burden is increasingly relational and cumulative. Attendance, mental health, peer conflict, online harms and parental engagement are consolidating rather than appearing as separate problems.



The sector wants clearer standards and stronger capability. Support for lead-role training, stronger expectations and charter-style reform is high; the challenge is translating appetite into implementation.

What this report gives you

If you're a **trust leader or headteacher**, this report should help you decide what to standardise, where to invest training and where your current culture may be more fragile than you think.

If you're a **DSL or deputy DSL**, it should give you language for the implementation gap between policy and practice, plus a stronger case for protected time, the importance of supervision and better system support.

If you're a **governor or trustee**, it should sharpen the questions you ask about consistency, reporting routes, oversight and strategic capacity, helping to create a triangulated approach.

How to use this report

This report is intended to be read in layers. The executive summary gives a strategic reading of the landscape. The middle chapters explain what the survey says, why it matters and where the most important tensions lie. The later sections translate those findings into best-practice guidance and a 90-day agenda for trusts, schools and boards.

It's not a league table. The more useful reading is comparative and diagnostic: where is safeguarding already culture-led, where is it still too dependent on process or individual effort, and what needs to change if schools are to become more proactive, not just more compliant?

1. The safeguarding landscape in 2026

To understand what the survey is telling us, we first need to understand the environment UK schools are working in. The external landscape has shifted in five significant ways since the previous Tes report, and each shift raises the stakes for the culture question at the heart of this research.

1.1 Policy context: KCSIE 2025, the Children's Wellbeing Bill and the KCSIE 2026 consultation

Keeping children safe in education 2025 (KCSIE 2025) came into force in England on 1 September 2025. The 2025 revision strengthened expectations around filtering and monitoring, clarified that absence can be a safeguarding signal rather than merely a pastoral issue, incorporated updated DfE guidance on AI and generative tools, and reinforced schools' safeguarding responsibilities when placing pupils in alternative provision.

Before schools had finished implementing the 2025 guidance, the DfE opened a consultation on KCSIE 2026 revisions in February 2026 with a closing date of 22 April 2026[1]. This signals a policy environment in which the guidance will continue to evolve rather than settle. Safeguarding leads are being asked to implement, embed and simultaneously anticipate further revision: a genuine capacity pressure on top of an already demanding role.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, progressing through Parliament at the time of publication, would formally include schools in local safeguarding partnerships and introduce a unified child identifier to accelerate information sharing across agencies[19]. This reflects the direction of policy travel: schools embedded more deeply in child protection systems, with greater expectation that they contribute to and benefit from multi-agency information flow.

1.2 The scale of child need: 633,000 referrals and rising

The DfE's 2025 Children in Need statistics recorded almost 633,000 referrals to children's social care, up 1.8% from 2024, representing the latest data point in a long-term pattern of high and sustained demand. More than 400,000 children were recorded as children in need at 31 March 2025: roughly one in every 30 children in England[3].

More striking still is the trajectory of section 47 enquiries, where there's reasonable cause to suspect the child is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm. There were more than 230,000 in the year to March 2025: up 14.7% since 2020 and the highest figure on record in this data series[3].

Re-referral data tells an equally important story. DfE analysis published in February 2026 showed that of 551,060 children referred in 2024, 21% had also been referred in the previous 12 months[13]. These aren't isolated incidents. They're recurrent, layered episodes of need that require consistent and sustained school-level attention over extended periods.

Schools account for approximately one in five of all referrals to children's social care, making them the second largest single referral source after police[3]. The implication is direct: schools aren't at the edge of the child protection system, they're at its operational heart.

1 in 5 **referrals to children's social care originate from schools. Schools are the second largest referral source in England, after police.**

1.3 The mental health emergency

NHS England's 2023 Mental Health of Children and Young People survey found that 20.3% of 8 to 16-year-olds had a probable mental health disorder. Among 17 to 19-year-olds, the rate was 23.3%: more than double the 10.1% recorded for the same age group in 2017[5].

By early 2025, over one million children under 18 were in contact with secondary NHS mental health services: more than double the figure from January 2020. Yet 385,540 children were still waiting for a first contact from community mental health services in the three months to March 2025, up 14.4% year on year[15].

For schools, this gap between need and provision isn't abstract. It's the reason why 50.3% of UK survey respondents cite mental health and wellbeing needs as one of their top three safeguarding challenges. Schools are managing the space between the point at which a young person's mental health becomes a safeguarding concern and the point, sometimes months or years later, at which specialist services are available.

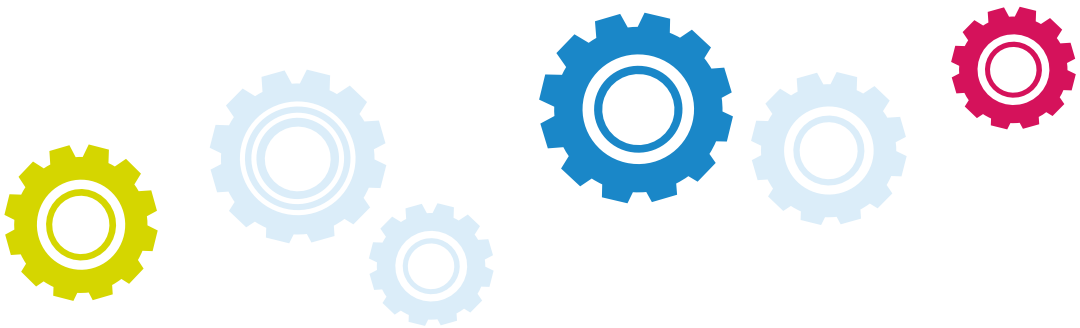
1.4 Online harms: a dynamic and accelerating threat

Internet Matters research published in January 2026 found that 77% of UK children aged 9 to 17 had experienced harm online: an 8% increase in a single year[9].

The Online Safety Act's Protection of Children Codes came into force in July 2025, imposing new statutory duties on platforms operating in the UK. Ofcom's 2025 Online Safety report confirms that meaningful changes are being made, but significant gaps in child protection persist, particularly around recommender systems that can route children toward self-harm, suicide and eating disorder content[10].

On AI-generated harm: the Internet Watch Foundation's 2024 Annual Report recorded a 380% year-on-year increase in actionable AI-generated child sexual abuse imagery. Their March 2026 report then documented 3,443 AI-generated child sexual abuse videos in 2025 alone: a 26,385% increase on 2024[11]. This isn't a future concern. It's a current and escalating crisis that will increasingly reach schools through disclosures, distress and the harmful behaviour of students who encounter or produce this material.

Ofcom's Online Nation 2025 report also confirmed that seven in 10 secondary school-age children had seen harmful content online, and that encounters with fake or deceptive images rose year-on-year[12]. Ofcom's companion children and parents media use research for 2025 further illustrates how central digital life is to identity, peer connection and late-night use patterns for children and teenagers: the context in which many of the safeguarding concerns described in this report begin[6].



1.5 Ofsted's sharper inspection lens

Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework, in use from November 2025, places greater emphasis on leadership quality, inclusion and whether safeguarding is genuinely embedded in a school's culture, not simply whether the right documentation exists[2]. Significantly, Ofsted now reports on safeguarding separately, on a 'met' or 'not met' scale, raising its visibility in conversations about school quality and governance. For leaders, inspectors are increasingly asking about consistency, about how concerns are followed up and about whether every adult plays an active role. The question for schools is no longer 'Does your policy comply?' it's 'Does your culture hold?'.

Why this matters for MATs and school groups

For MATs and school groups, the 2026 challenge isn't only compliance assurance. It's whether safeguarding expectations are translated into a repeatable operating model across schools: induction, training, low-level concern reporting, board reporting, attendance escalation, student voice, online-harm response and DSL support. The strongest trusts in this survey are those that treat each of these as a system, not as individual school decisions.

"Communication is strong, recording is timely and purposeful, and leaders model the right values by prioritising safety over convenience. We work closely with external partners, keep children's voices at the centre and maintain a culture that is compassionate, boundaried and relentlessly focused on what is best for the young person."

UK respondent, secondary school DSL

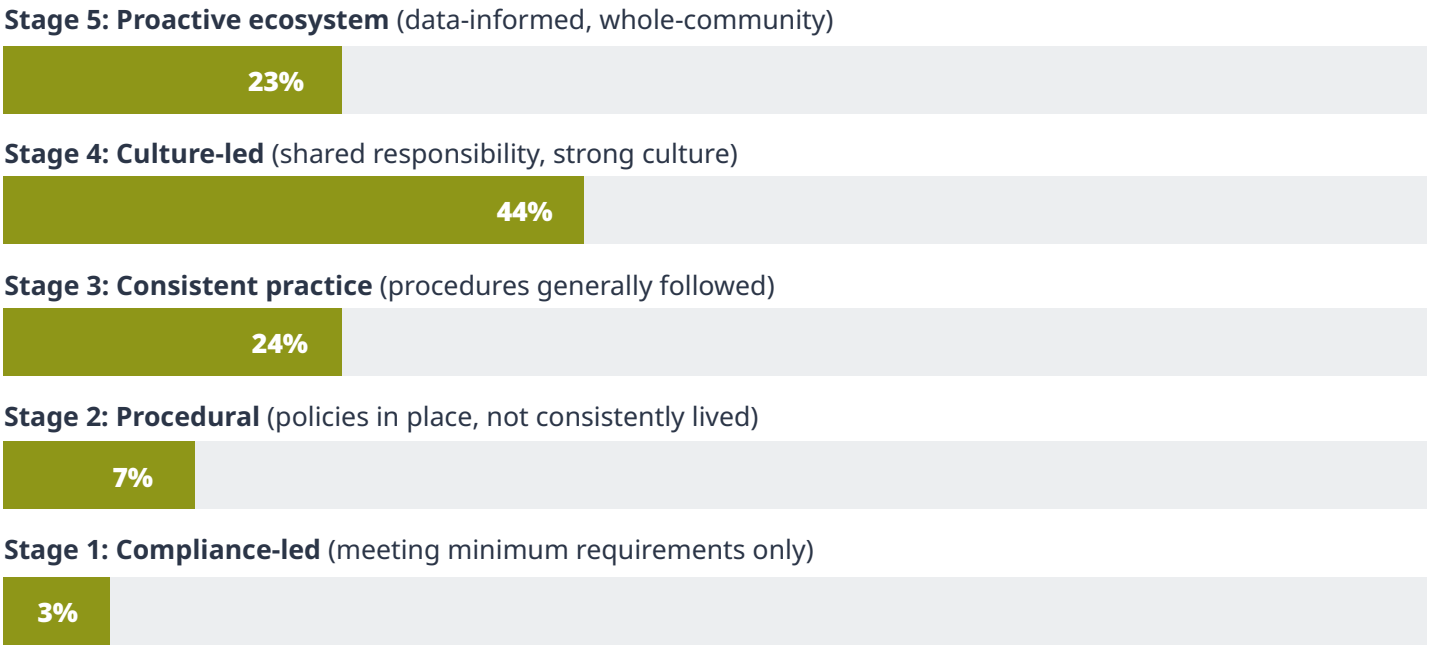


2. From compliance to culture: where UK schools are now

The 2026 survey asked respondents to place their school on a five-stage safeguarding culture maturity model, from Stage 1 (compliance-led: meeting minimum requirements only) to Stage 5 (proactive ecosystem: anticipatory, data-informed, whole-community approach).

Alongside this, Tes has developed a safeguarding confidence index drawing on the confidence, consistency and training data across the full survey to give a composite view of where UK schools are on the journey from compliance to culture. The results from both measures are both encouraging and revealing.

UK culture maturity distribution (2,086 responses)



Of UK respondents, 66.7% place their school at Stage 4 or 5. That's not a picture of a sector still debating whether culture matters. Most UK schools have already made that philosophical shift, in aspiration, in policy and in the language their leaders use. The more important question is whether that aspiration is being reliably delivered by every adult, in every interaction, every day.

The variation between school contexts tells its own story. Independent schools report the highest maturity (71.6% at Stage 4 or 5), while state-maintained settings sit at 63.3% and academy/MATs at 66.1%.

Alternative provision shows some of the strongest practice consistency scores (87.9% reporting mostly or very consistent practice), which may reflect more established partnerships with external agencies and more specialist environments.

This is where external guidance and survey evidence meet. NSPCC's overview of school safeguarding responsibilities is explicit that schools should create a culture where children feel confident to speak out and adults feel confident to recognise and respond to concerns[7].

What ‘culture-led’ actually means in practice

When respondents describe excellent safeguarding culture in their own words, three themes emerge with striking consistency: shared responsibility, professional curiosity and a child-centred approach. These aren’t abstract values. They show up in daily interactions between every adult and every student, and they’re most visible in schools where safeguarding isn’t the DSL’s job but the culture of the whole community.

“Excellent safeguarding culture is calm, alert and relational rather than reactive. It is not driven by fear of inspection but by a shared moral clarity that children come first. Staff are professionally curious. They notice small changes. They record consistently. They follow up. Most importantly, pupils feel known. They can name at least one adult they trust.”

Deputy principal, independent school

“Safeguarding is everyone’s business and responsibility. Professional curiosity is the key and no concern is too small to report.”

UK respondent, academy/MAT

An excellent safeguarding culture in a college setting is one where the safety and wellbeing of pupils is a shared responsibility across all staff. Everyone is vigilant, well-trained, and confident in recognising and reporting concerns, understanding that even small worries should be recorded and acted on appropriately.”

UK respondent, SENCO, independent school

“At my school safeguarding is about really knowing our children and the lives they are living. Staff notice concerns, act early and talk to each other, so things are picked up and passed on rather than carried by one person. Families see that we work with them and bring in outside support when it is needed.”

Principal, academy/MAT

Why maturity doesn't guarantee delivery

A school can accurately self-assess at Stage 4 and still have critical gaps in delivery. Maturity is a description of culture at its best, not a guarantee of consistency under pressure. The gap between aspiration and reliable whole-staff delivery is where the real work of 2026 lies.

"All staff take responsibility for safeguarding. All children are able to name trusted adults. There is understanding of low-level concern procedures and a culture of self-reporting."

DSL, independent school

"A culture where safeguarding is proactive, consistent and viewed as everyone's responsibility. Reporting should be easy and staff should be prepared for worst-case scenarios."

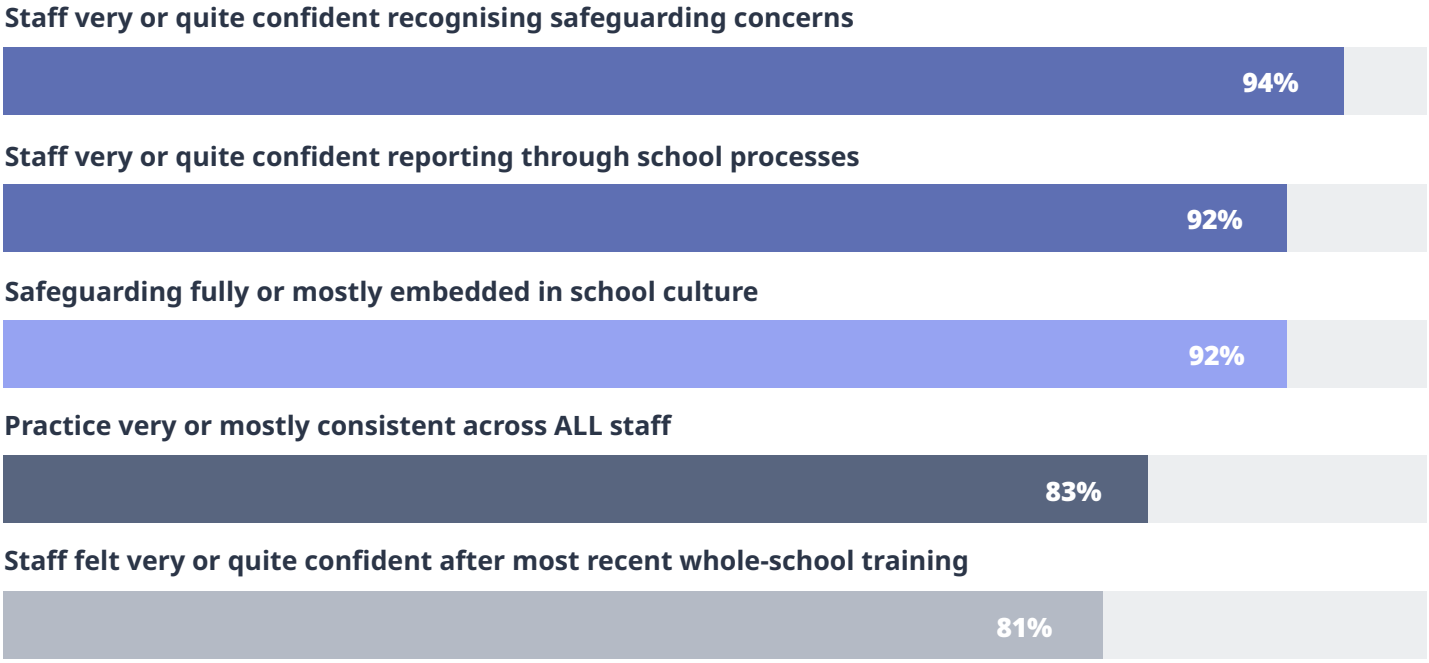
UK respondent, academy/MAT



3. The confidence-consistency gap: the central implementation challenge

The single most important structural finding in the UK survey is the gap between how confident staff feel about safeguarding and how consistently they actually deliver it. This distinction is the central implementation challenge for UK leaders in 2026.

UK confidence and consistency profile



94.2% of respondents say staff are confident recognising concerns. But only 83.4% say practice is very or mostly consistent across all staff. That 10.8 percentage point gap represents the distance between 'most of our staff probably handle this well' and 'every adult, every time, reliably.' At scale, particularly in a large secondary school or a multi-site trust, that gap costs children.

The open-text responses reinforce this reading. In thematic analysis of 1,233 UK responses to the question on excellent safeguarding culture, the most common themes were shared responsibility (31.6%), wellbeing and support (22.8%), training and confidence (18.3%) and clear reporting (18.0%). Respondents describe excellent culture in practical rather than rhetorical terms: everyone knows their role, adults act consistently, reporting routes are clear, and pupils feel heard. The same pattern appears in improvement responses, where training, time, support and communication recur more often than requests for additional policy.

This distinction matters to trusts and groups. Compliance can generate awareness; culture is what turns awareness into repeatable behaviour. The risk in 2026 isn't that staff have never heard the safeguarding message. It's that schools mistake familiar language for embedded practice.

The practical test is whether the newest teacher, the most stretched teaching assistant, the lunchtime supervisor, the pastoral lead and the DSL would all respond in materially the same way to a concern. That's the consistency standard. Many schools are closer to it than they were. Very few can be certain they've reached it.

The training data reinforces this picture. Even after the most recent whole-school training, only 81.4% say staff felt very or quite confident. That means roughly one school in five has just completed mandatory safeguarding training and still has a meaningful proportion of staff feeling uncertain. Not because the training was poor, but because annual training alone can't build the habit, the reflex and the shared culture that consistent safeguarding requires.

"All staff being trusted adults who can respond confidently and effectively to disclosures or concerns with professional curiosity at an appropriate level. Recording accurately and taking swift, appropriate action where needed and reviewing as needed."

DSL, state-maintained school

"If I could change one thing, it would be strengthening the consistency of safeguarding practice across all staff. Most colleagues do an excellent job, but refining that 'every adult, every time' approach, especially around early recording and professional curiosity, would make our safeguarding culture even stronger and ensure no child is ever missed."

UK respondent, secondary school

"I would focus on creating more protected time for staff to engage with safeguarding training and reflection, rather than squeezing it into already overloaded schedules. When people have the space to properly absorb guidance, discuss real scenarios and reflect on their practice, safeguarding becomes something lived and understood, not just a compliance exercise."

UK respondent, academy/MAT

Why consistency matters more than confidence

In a compliance-led model, the key safeguarding question is whether staff have completed training, signed the policy and know where and how to submit a concern. Those are baseline requirements, not outcomes. In a culture-led model, the better question is whether responses are dependable, timely and coherent across all adults, in circumstances not covered by the training scenario, at the moment when a pupil who has never disclosed before finally says something.

Strong culture isn't simply high confidence scores. It's confidence that survives staff turnover, handovers, lunchtime incidents, concerns raised by support staff, repeated low-level worries and the pressure of competing priorities. The point at which safeguarding culture most commonly fails isn't in the dramatic disclosure. It's in the quiet build-up that precedes it: the declining attendance, the small behaviour changes, the repeated concerns from different adults about the same child, that nobody formally connected until it was too late and the child became another statistic.

> **"Staff are encouraged that no safeguarding concern is too small. That single expectation, consistently applied, is what changes the culture."**
>
> **UK respondent, state school**

Building consistency across the whole school

- **Scenario-based refresher training** focused on the real risk patterns your school is currently seeing, not last year's safeguarding case studies
- **Consistent recording expectations for every adult:** teaching staff, lunchtime supervisors, administrative teams, site staff, after-school coordinators and governors alike
- **A regular DSL-led briefing** that closes the feedback loop with staff who raise concerns, so they know their concern was taken seriously and acted upon
- **Case review culture:** structured reflection on what happened and what could have been noticed earlier, not just documentation of the outcome
- **Quarterly consistency audits** that probe how different staff groups actually respond to low-level concerns, not just whether they remember completing their training

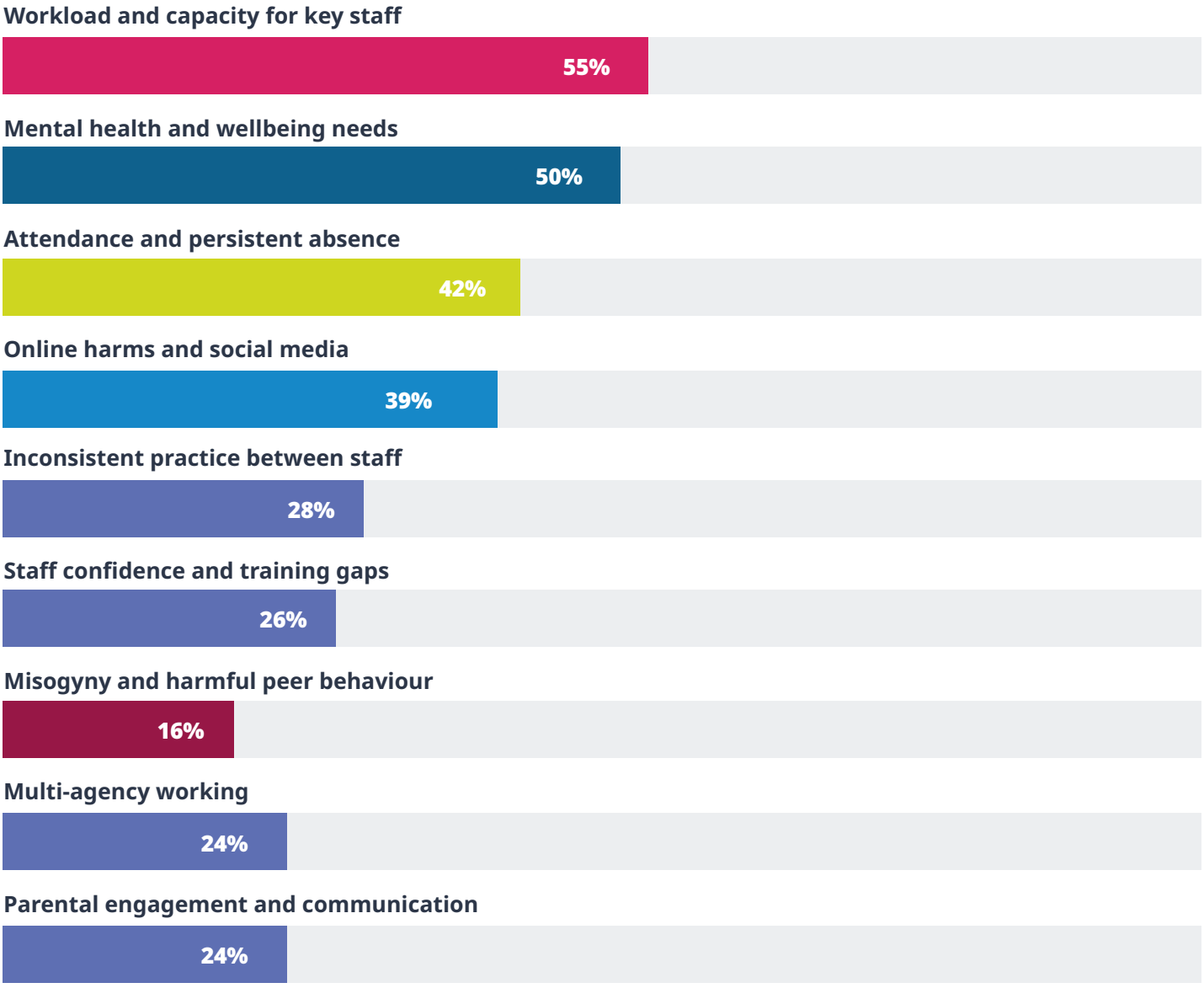
What strong practice looks like

High-performing schools in the UK data tend to combine clear low-level concern expectations, regularly refreshed scenario-based training, easy reporting routes, visible leadership backing and a child-centred culture in which pupils know who to go to. In short: fewer assumptions, more consistency.

4. The biggest blockers: capacity, mental health and attendance

The dominant barriers to proactive safeguarding in UK schools in 2026 aren't attitudinal. Staff understand the importance of safeguarding and want to do it well. The barriers are structural and systemic, and they're compounding rather than easing.

Top UK safeguarding challenges (respondents chose up to 3)



4.1 Workload and capacity

More than half of all UK respondents (55.3%) selected workload and capacity as one of their top three challenges. This isn't a complaint about individual busyness. It's a structural signal that the safeguarding function, particularly for DSLs and deputies, is under-resourced relative to what it's now expected to deliver.

"The expectations around safeguarding have grown exponentially while in real terms school funding has been cut. There is simply not the money to make the job anything other than unsustainable."

Headteacher, academy/MAT

"Due to a reduction in support from other services the school has had to take on a much wider remit. The demand for support is far outweighed by the capacity to provide it."

Deputy DSL, state school

4.2 Mental health: from context to operational crisis

The NHS data establishes the scale. One in five eight to 16-year-olds has a probable mental health disorder[5]. Among 17 to 19-year-olds, the rate has more than doubled since 2017. Emergency referrals for mental health crisis in children and young people rose 10% between 2023 and 2024[14]. And 78,577 young people were still waiting over a year for NHS mental health treatment in 2023 to 2024[15].

For schools, this creates an impossible position. They're identifying need, increasingly at the point where that need has become a safeguarding concern, but can't access the specialist services that would relieve the pressure. The survey confirms this directly: 50.3% cite mental health needs as a top challenge and 46.6% say mental-health-linked safeguarding concerns are among the student trends they're seeing increase most rapidly.

"The emotional need and trauma-related concerns have escalated in the last two years. It is becoming unmanageable. Staff have left and not been replaced."

UK respondent, state school

"Workload is getting in the way of having time to form positive, trusted relationships with pupils. And those relationships are precisely what makes safeguarding work."

Deputy principal, academy/MAT

4.3 Attendance: safeguarding's invisible pressure point

Attendance is now the third most commonly cited safeguarding challenge for UK schools (41.5%), and it's particularly acute in state-maintained (46.2%) and academy/MAT (48.4%) settings. Under the statutory attendance guidance that came into force in August 2024, schools have an explicit duty to ensure attendance processes are connected to safeguarding systems rather than treated as separate administrative functions[4].

Poor attendance is frequently a signal, not just a problem in its own right. A pupil who begins missing sessions may be experiencing abuse, mental health deterioration, family breakdown, exploitation or peer harm. Schools that can't see attendance data alongside safeguarding records in one joined-up view risk missing those connections until escalation becomes unavoidable.

4.4 Misogyny and harmful peer behaviour

Misogynistic and sexist language and attitudes appear explicitly in the trends data, with 34.6% of UK respondents reporting an increase among pupils. This isn't a niche concern. The Ofsted review of sexual harassment in schools, peer-on-peer abuse guidance in KCSIE 2025 and the DfE's work on violence against women and girls all position schools as a critical intervention point for harmful attitudes that, if left unaddressed, escalate into serious safeguarding incidents.

16% of UK respondents also cite misogyny and harmful peer behaviour as one of their top three challenges overall. Yet training on addressing misogyny and harmful gender norms ranks among the less-commonly selected training priorities despite being one of the areas where the survey's own data suggests confidence and consistency are weakest. Schools that aren't deliberately building staff capability in this area are likely underestimating a risk that's already present in their setting.

"Misogynistic or sexist language and attitudes among students has increased noticeably. It is often dismissed as 'banter' but it is a safeguarding concern and it shapes the environment in which more serious harm can occur."

UK respondent, secondary school

"Online safety is becoming a big concern and the risks our children are exposed to are often hidden. By the time we find out about an incident, it has often been happening for some time."

UK respondent, state-maintained school

What this means for leaders

The 2026 safeguarding question isn't 'which issue should we prioritise?', it's 'how do our attendance, behaviour, pastoral, online-safety and DSL systems work together?'. The strongest schools will be the ones that reduce fragmentation rather than add more separate initiatives. When attendance data, behaviour records, wellbeing information and safeguarding concerns sit in different systems reviewed by different people at different times, the school is always reacting. The school that joins them up can start to anticipate.

4.5 What schools say they need

When asked what would most help them strengthen safeguarding culture, UK respondents gave clear, specific and consistent answers. The findings below go beyond the headline percentages to explore what each priority actually means in practice and what respondents said about it in their own words.

44.9%
1st priority

Improved support for staff wellbeing

This is the highest ranked ask in the entire survey and it connects directly to the DSL data. More than six in 10 safeguarding leads describe their role as challenging or worse. Nearly six in 10 say it affects their own wellbeing moderately or more. 60% are exposed to distressing or traumatic content weekly. Only one in three receives structured supervision. Staff can't deliver compassionate, consistent safeguarding from a position of depletion.

"The work is emotionally heavy. As a DSL, you are constantly exposed to disclosures, complaints, family crises and complex safeguarding concerns. It can feel isolating because much of the information you hold is confidential. You carry the weight of it alone. Over time, that can lead to compassion fatigue that no amount of annual training can address."

Headteacher, independent school

"I regularly work 13-hour days on site. I am exhausted and close to burn out. Safeguarding has become all-consuming. I have to compensate for colleagues just to allow them a work-life balance."

Principal, independent school

More time and capacity for safeguarding leads

42.3%
2nd priority

The second most commonly cited need is closely related to the first. Protected time for DSLs isn't a luxury or a scheduling preference. It's the structural precondition for everything else in this report: pattern analysis, staff coaching, case review learning, community reporting route development and multi-agency relationship management. None of these happen reliably when the DSL function is entirely consumed by case administration and immediate response.

"Exhaustive record-keeping, which is absolutely crucial, exceeds the time and funding allocated to the DSL and DDSL roles, both of which are often voluntary additional responsibilities on top of teaching and other duties. Schools are managing more higher-level risks and more complex multi-agency coordination with the same limited resources."

UK respondent, state school

"There is never enough time or resource to make effective and lasting change. We keep responding but we never have the time to build the systems that would reduce the number of responses needed."

UK respondent, state school

More consistent support from external agencies

31.8%
3rd priority

The third most common ask reflects a frustration that runs through the qualitative data with remarkable consistency. Schools refer, they escalate, they flag and repeatedly, they're told the case doesn't meet the threshold for statutory intervention. The result is that schools are holding increasingly complex and high-risk cases without the specialist partner support they were designed to work alongside.

I lead a team of DSLs at a large SEMH school for pupils aged four to 16. The complexities of pupils' home lives, social circumstances and special educational needs require multi-agency working, which is often not forthcoming. There are so many different systems and referral routes across different local authorities. It can be overwhelming knowing where to signpost staff, parents and pupils."

Proprietor, state school

"We have a high number of children in care, high numbers on child protection and child in need plans, and we are in an area in the bottom 1% on the deprivation index. Referrals do not meet threshold. Services are overstretched. There are not enough hours in the day."

UK respondent, state school

Higher quality or more targeted training

29.6%
4th priority

Nearly three in 10 schools say the quality or targeting of safeguarding training needs to improve. The open-text responses make clear what this means in practice: not more training, but better training. Training that reflects the actual risk patterns staff are seeing in their setting. Training that uses scenarios, discussion and reflection rather than compliance presentations. Training that reaches every adult, not just qualified teachers. Training that's updated to reflect AI, misogyny, peer conflict and the mental health landscape of 2026.

"I would improve communication and regular safeguarding training so that all staff feel confident to report and respond to concerns quickly. The content needs to be about what is actually happening in our school, not generic case studies from five years ago."

UK respondent, state school

"Update training, for example through refresher modules in small, regular doses rather than one large annual session. People absorb more when it is frequent and contextual."

UK respondent

Better systems and data insights

28%
5th priority

More than a quarter of schools say better analysis and reporting tools would help them identify concerns earlier. For schools operating digital case management systems, the challenge has moved beyond adoption. The next frontier is intelligence: using case records, attendance data, behaviour patterns and wellbeing information together to recognise risk earlier, not only to record what's already happened.

"We have a weekly inclusion meeting where all vulnerable pupils are discussed and monitored. This takes three hours after school every week and generates considerable follow-up recording time. The data is there. What we need is a way to see it in one place and use it to act proactively rather than reactively."

UK respondent, state school

Stronger leadership focus and accountability

22%
6th priority

More than one in five respondents cite the need for stronger leadership focus. This isn't a reflection on individual headteachers. It's a signal that, in some settings, safeguarding is still experienced by frontline staff as the DSL's job rather than the whole school's shared responsibility. Leadership that treats safeguarding as a culture question, not only a compliance question, creates visible permission for every adult to take it seriously.

"An excellent safeguarding culture is one where safeguarding is not treated as a policy on a shelf but as part of everyday behaviour. Vigilance is normal, not exceptional. Leaders model the right values and everyone follows because they see it from the top."

Deputy DSL, state school

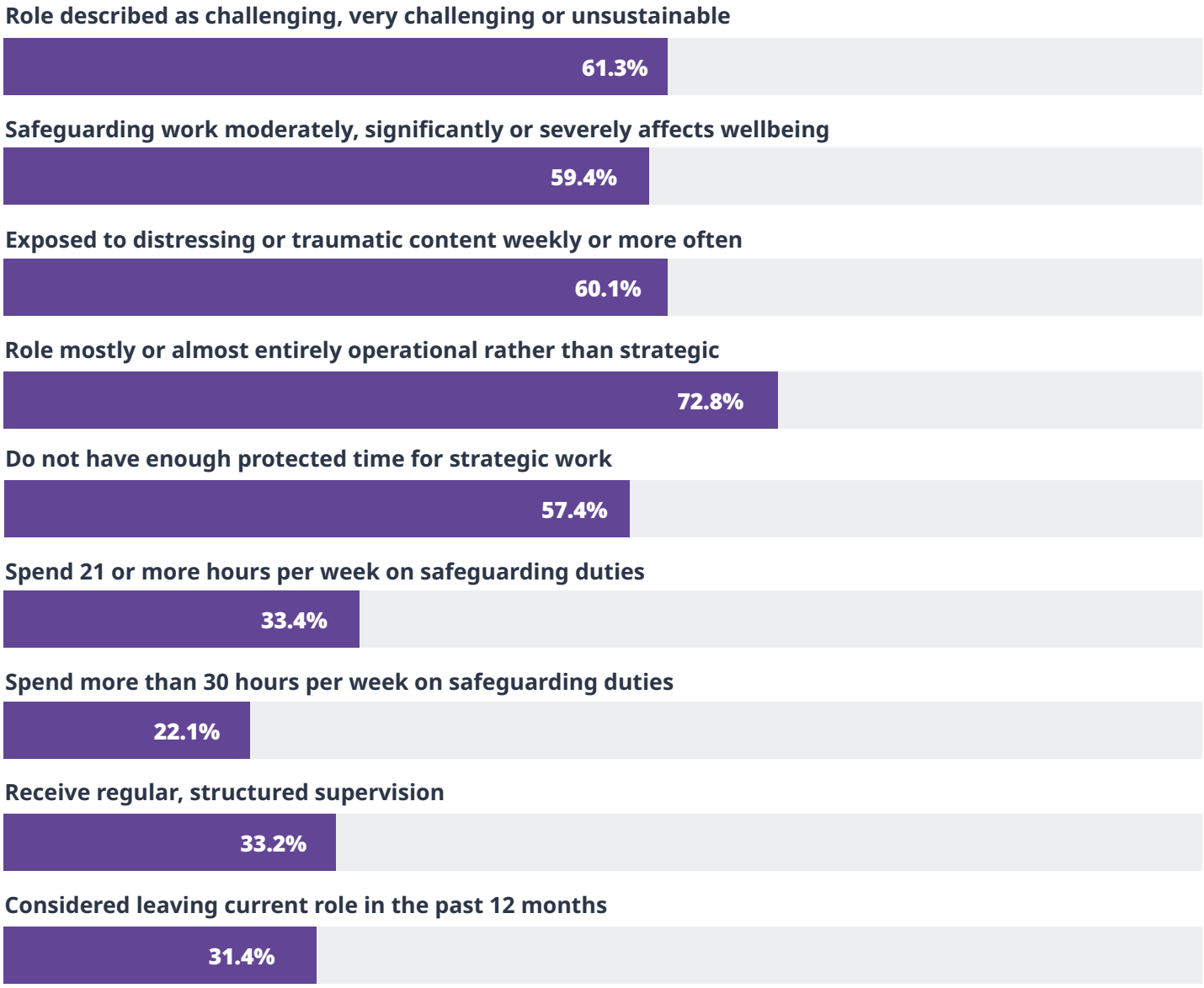
The integrated safeguarding argument

The data makes a strong case for treating safeguarding, attendance, behaviour, mental health and online harm as one integrated operational picture rather than separate workstreams. Schools that have achieved this integration consistently report higher maturity scores, more consistent practice and earlier identification of emerging risk. The tool that enables it isn't more forms, it's a shared, connected data view that makes patterns visible before they become crises.

5. The DSL role: still too operational to lead culture at scale

The designated safeguarding lead occupies the most complex welfare role in the school. The responsibility, which now encompasses identifying abuse and exploitation, managing referrals, liaising with multi-agency partners, coaching staff, maintaining records, building culture and managing the impact of AI harms, has expanded significantly faster than the resource design around the role has evolved. The survey shows this tension is reaching a critical point.

DSL role: capacity, workload and support gaps



Six in 10 DSLs and deputies say the role is challenging or worse. Nearly six in 10 say it affects their wellbeing moderately or more. Only one in three receives structured supervision. These aren't marginal pressures. They're structural failures in role design and they carry a real cost both for the individual DSL and for the school's safeguarding capacity.

5.1 The operational trap

72.8% of DSLs say the role is mostly or almost entirely operational. That means they're primarily managing cases, responding to disclosures, completing referrals, attending meetings and administering records. The activities that build culture, including pattern analysis, staff coaching, curriculum integration, case review learning and multi-agency relationship management, become things that happen when there's time left over and there's rarely time left over.

This matters at a structural level, not just a personal one. Culture-building is strategic work. If the DSL function is consumed entirely by operational case handling, the culture agenda becomes dependent on the personal qualities of individual DSLs working beyond sustainable limits. That's not an effective system, it's a considerable risk.

"Our DSL needs more support. The workload is relentless. There is simply not enough time to be both the person handling every individual case and the person building the culture, training the staff and analysing the patterns."

UK respondent

"All of the safeguarding team are also subject teachers and it is extremely difficult to fit strategic safeguarding work around lesson commitments, cover duties and the sheer number of immediate cases. Something always has to give. Usually it is the strategic work."

DSL, independent school

5.2 The supervision gap: a welfare and governance failure

Only 33.2% of UK DSLs report regular, structured supervision. This is one of the starkest data points in the entire survey. The NSPCC, DfE and Ofsted all emphasise the importance of supervision for safeguarding leads[16]. NSPCC's DSL training guidance explicitly emphasises new-to-role capability, refresher training and the importance of self-care and support for DSLs to prevent burnout[18]. The survey shows this expectation is being met for fewer than one in three. For leaders who carry daily exposure to disclosures of abuse, exploitation and serious harm, that's not just a welfare failure. It's a safeguarding risk in its own right.

"Increase hours given to provide safeguarding support and look at strategy and planning time. The current balance is not sustainable and means cultural work never happens."

UK respondent, alternative provision

Leadership implication

If a trust or school says it wants a more proactive safeguarding culture, it should test that ambition against role design. Does the DSL have enough protected time, enough trained deputies, enough analytical support and enough supervision to lead strategically? Or only enough time to keep the casework moving? The answer to that question tells you more about safeguarding culture than any policy document.

5.3 DSL wellbeing: the data behind the human cost

The report's DSL wellbeing data deserves its own reading. Of DSLs, 60.1% are exposed to distressing or traumatic content weekly or more often. A further 59.4% say the work affects their own wellbeing moderately or more and 31.4% have considered leaving their current role in the past 12 months. These aren't edge cases. They're describing the experience of more than half of the people carrying the most complex safeguarding responsibility in their school.

Compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress and professional isolation are recognised occupational risks for those working in child protection roles. The research on DSL wellbeing in school settings is clear: structured supervision, peer support, manageable caseloads and visible leadership backing all reduce the risk of burnout and role abandonment. The survey suggests most UK schools aren't yet providing these conditions reliably.

"The work is emotionally heavy. As a DSL, you are constantly exposed to disclosures, complaints, family crises and complex safeguarding concerns. It can feel isolating because much of the information you hold is confidential. You carry the weight of it alone. Over time, that can lead to compassion fatigue that no amount of annual training can address."

Headteacher and DSL, independent school

DSL wellbeing: what leaders should provide

- Regular, structured reflective supervision with a trained supervisor, separate from line management
- Peer networks and connection with other DSLs, within the trust or across local school networks, to reduce professional isolation
- Named, visible leadership backing: governors and headteachers who understand the emotional weight of the role and actively protect the DSL's capacity to manage it
- Access to Tes Safeguarding Awareness Week 2026's DSL wellbeing resources, launching 18–22 May at tes.com/safeguarding-awareness-week

The survey's most striking governance finding is that 82.1% of UK respondents support a mandatory or standardised qualification for those leading safeguarding in schools. That's an extraordinary consensus for a sector typically cautious about additional formal requirements. It reflects a clear professional judgment: the DSL role carries too much responsibility to be held without specialist training beyond an annual KCSIE update.

"I am forming a voluntary safeguarding development group and have had 25 staff sign up from a range of roles across the school. The aim is to build whole-school ownership of safeguarding by bringing staff together to reflect, develop practice, share insight and strengthen consistency. When leadership invests in that kind of structure, it changes the culture from the ground up."

UK respondent, academy/MAT

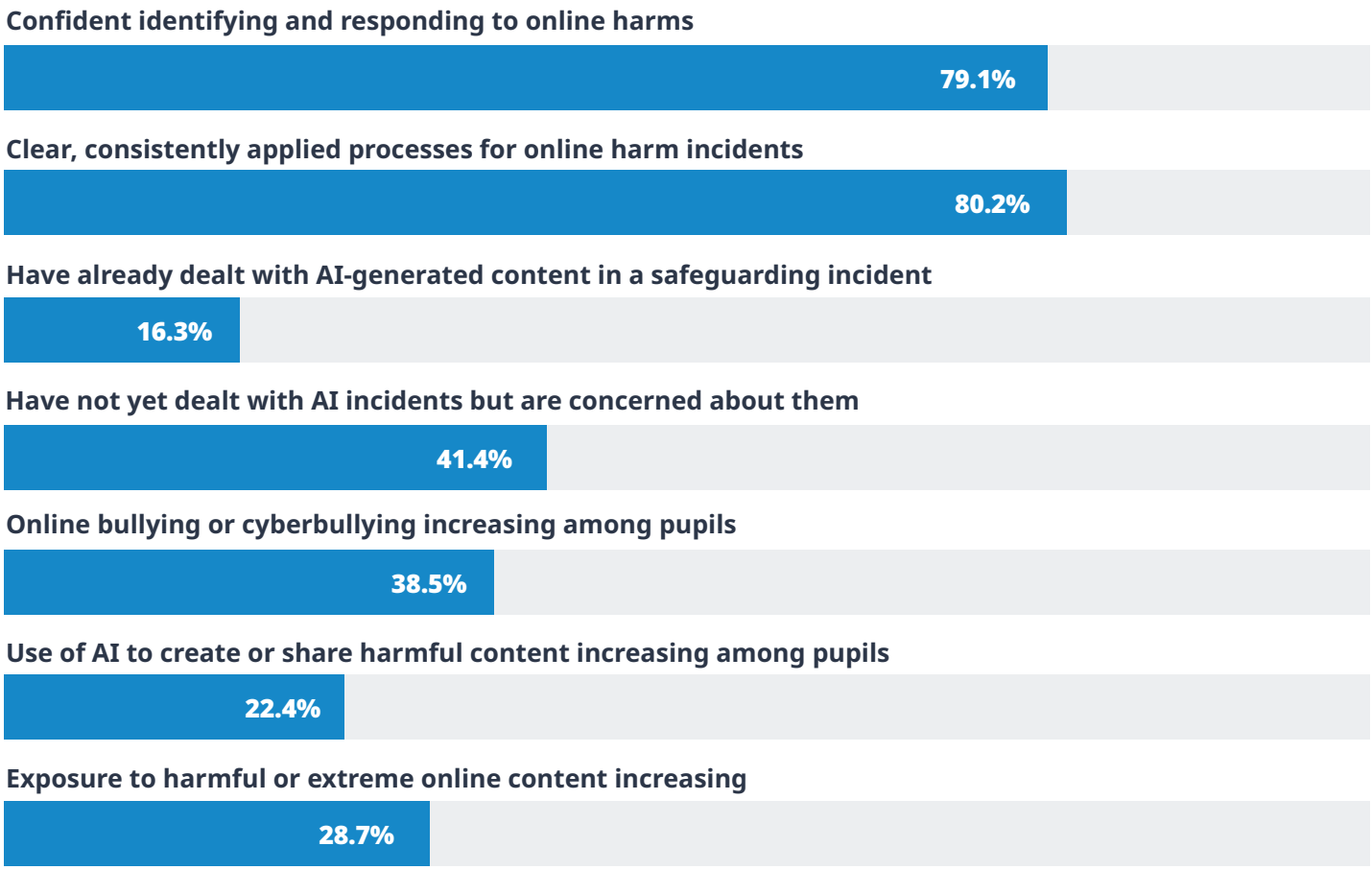
What strong DSL role design looks like

- **Protected strategic safeguarding time** built into the weekly timetable, not squeezed out of operational overload
- **A structured deputy or team model** so the DSL is not the single point of failure for urgent casework
- **Regular, structured reflective supervision** from a trained professional, not a line management meeting
- **A clear division between case administration,** which can be delegated or systemised, **and strategic safeguarding leadership**, which requires the DSL's experience and professional judgment
- **Trust-wide or network DSL peer support, professional development** and a clear pathway toward the mandatory professional qualification that 82.1% of respondents say is overdue

6. Online harms and AI: proportionate response to a real threat

Online harm occupies significant and growing attention for school safeguarding leads. The survey data offers a nuanced picture of where the immediate operational threat actually lies in 2026, and where schools most need to direct their limited preparation time.

Online harms and AI: confidence, exposure and incident experience



The threat is real and it has arrived

The IWF's 2024 Annual Report documented a 380% increase in actionable AI-generated child sexual abuse reports year-on-year[11]. In March 2026, the IWF published data showing a further 26,385% increase in AI-generated videos in 2025, with 65% classified at Category A: the most extreme level under UK law[17]. This material isn't confined to the dark web. IWF analysts have identified AI-generated child sexual abuse images being shared on mainstream AI chatbot services on the open internet.

For schools, the implications are direct. Pupils may encounter this material, produce it or be victimised by it, as real images of real children are increasingly used to generate or fine-tune synthetic abuse content. Schools need protocols in place now, before the first disclosure arrives.

"The use of artificial intelligence and other apps to create false information about individuals could be very harmful to our pupils due to the blame, shame and public exposure it generates. We need actions in place to prevent, stop and support targeted pupils and their families, because this kind of harm does not stop at the school gate."

Lunchtime staff, alternative provision

Proportionate framing: AI isn't yet the dominant operational challenge

That said, 16.3% of UK schools have already dealt with an AI-generated content incident, meaning 83.7% haven't. The more important immediate challenge, the one consuming DSL time every week in most schools right now, remains the combination of peer-on-peer conflict, emotional distress, cyberbullying and the intersection of online behaviour with physical school life.

Internet Matters data confirmed that 77% of children aged nine to 17 experienced online harm in 2025 to 2026, an 8% increase year on year[9]. The Ofcom Online Nation 2025 report confirmed that seven in 10 secondary school-age children had encountered harmful content, and that fake and deceptive images were among the categories growing most rapidly[12]. Ofcom's children and parents media use research for 2025 further underlines how central digital life is to identity, peer connection and late-night use patterns for children and teenagers: the context in which many safeguarding risks begin and escalate[6].

The design challenge for schools is that most digital harm manifests in school through behaviour, attendance and emotional wellbeing, not through a clearly labelled 'online incident.' A pupil who was harassed in a group chat the previous night arrives at school withdrawn, distracted or angry. Safeguarding that treats online harm as a discrete category, separate from mental health and peer conflict, will miss these presentations consistently.

"AI and deepfakes are on everyone's minds and rightly so. But the cases I deal with every week are still primarily about online bullying, peer conflict and the mental health impact of social media. Both need attention, in proportion to the actual frequency of what we are seeing."

DSL, secondary school

Building online safeguarding that works in practice

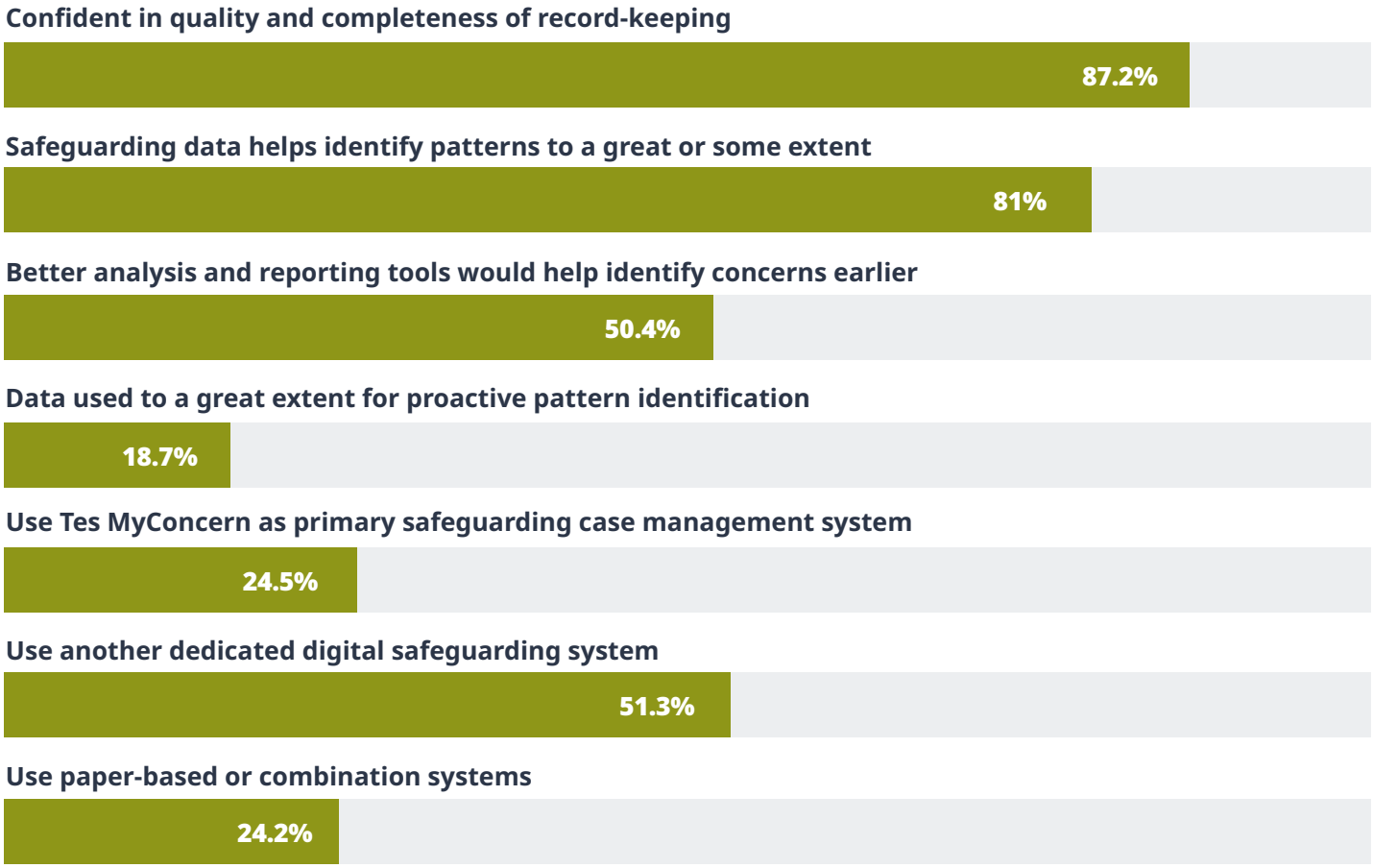
- Document clear protocols for AI-generated image disclosures, deepfake incidents and screenshot-based harassment so that when the first case arrives, staff know exactly what to do and in what order
- Embed digital safety in PSHE and RSHE across all year groups, including critical media literacy, AI ethics and responsible online behaviour: not as a one-off lesson but as an ongoing, age-appropriate conversation
- Provide anonymous digital reporting routes for pupils who can't face a face-to-face disclosure, particularly for online and sexual harm where shame is a significant barrier to coming forward
- Brief parents regularly on the intersection of online life and school wellbeing: what platforms their children are using, what to watch for, and who to contact at school if they're concerned
- Include AI-specific scenarios in DSL training: deepfake image disclosure, AI-generated threat assessment, and how to signpost students to the IWF Report Remove tool



7. Data, systems and the move towards earlier intervention

UK schools have made real progress in digital safeguarding infrastructure. The large majority now use dedicated digital case management systems and confidence in record-keeping quality is high. The next maturity step isn't simply better recording. It's converting records into patterns, patterns into risk signals and risk signals into earlier action.

Safeguarding data maturity: recording, analysis and early identification



The recording-to-action gap is visible in the data. 87.2% are confident in their record quality. But only 18.7% use their data to a great extent for proactive pattern identification. Most schools are recording information well but they're not yet systematically extracting intelligence from it.

From record-keeping to risk intelligence

Proactive safeguarding culture depends on pattern recognition: not only the serious disclosure that demands immediate response, but the quieter build-up that precedes most serious harm. The declining attendance across a peer group. The spike in lunchtime incidents. Repeated concerns from different adults about the same child. A pattern of behaviour that individually sits below threshold but collectively signals escalating risk.

Seeing those patterns requires more than a digital system that captures individual incidents. It requires a regular practice of looking across concerns, connecting them to attendance and behaviour data, identifying which children or cohorts appear repeatedly and asking whether there's something here that should be responded to before it escalates. For most UK schools, this kind of analytical review is still ad hoc rather than systematic.

"Our DSL analyses patterns monthly: peer groups, repeated low-level concerns, the same child appearing in multiple records from different adults. That analytical habit, more than any single protocol, is what lets us intervene early rather than react late."

Headteacher, primary school

"We have weekly inclusion meetings where all strategic leads review concerns flagged across attendance, behaviour, pastoral and safeguarding records. It takes time. But that joined-up view is what stops things slipping through."

Deputy DSL, state school

"Information sharing, pupil safety plans, safeguarding case review meetings and the regular triaging of school data to identify early signs of harm. When these practices are embedded in the weekly rhythm of the team, the culture shifts from reactive to proactive."

UK respondent, independent school

The trust-level data opportunity

For multi-academy trusts, the data opportunity is even more significant. Schools that operate within integrated data systems, where attendance, case records, behaviour and wellbeing information are available in a shared view, consistently report stronger early identification of emerging risk. Trust safeguarding leaders can identify patterns at school level, compare practice quality across settings, direct improvement support where it's most needed and demonstrate governance oversight with confidence.

Better analysis and reporting tools would significantly or somewhat help them identify concerns earlier, say 50.4% of UK respondents. In a sector where early identification is the difference between manageable intervention and serious harm, that's an investment case that deserves leadership attention.

Three questions to ask about your current system

- Are low-level concerns easy to log quickly and consistently for every adult, not only experienced staff with time to spare?
- Can leaders see patterns by pupil, cohort, location, type of concern or timing, rather than only reviewing individual cases in isolation?
- Is the resulting insight actually being used to change staffing behaviour and competence, supervision, communication, training or escalation decisions, or is it mostly recorded for compliance?

The proactive data habit

The rhythm of review matters as much as the technology. Strong safeguarding data practice means regularly asking:

- Which children are appearing most frequently?
- What connects attendance, behaviour and concern records for the same individuals?
- Which peer groups show emerging signals? Which concerns have been open longest without escalation?

That discipline, built into a weekly or fortnightly DSL review routine, is what makes early intervention possible rather than retrospective.



8. A sector ready for reform

The UK survey sends an unmistakable signal about reform appetite. The field isn't waiting to be persuaded that safeguarding matters. It's asking for clearer frameworks, stronger professional pathways and more consistent governance expectations.

UK reform appetite: qualifications, standards and charter support



82.1% backing for a mandatory qualification is remarkable in a sector that's typically cautious about additional formal requirements. It reflects professional honesty about the gap between what the DSL role demands and what the current qualification landscape provides. A one-day basic DSL training and an annual KCSIE update isn't adequate preparation for the role as it's now practised.

The governance reform signal is equally important. 76.3% want stronger national or regional standards. Translated into practice, this means respondents want governors, trustees and trust leaders to be held to clearer expectations: not just whether a policy exists, but whether culture is genuinely embedded and implementation can be evidenced.

This is where external guidance again helps interpret the survey. NSPCC's KCSIE 2025 briefing highlights that attendance is now statutory in the safeguarding ecosystem and that generative AI, misinformation and additional online content risks are being more explicitly named in guidance8. Leaders are responding to that expanding scope by asking for clearer capability-building, not simply more documents. The survey's 'what would help' responses make that clear: wellbeing support, protected time for leads, training, stronger leadership accountability and more consistent external-agency support all outrank abstract messaging.

8.1 The UK safeguarding best practice charter

In 2026, Tes is developing a UK safeguarding best practice charter: a set of shared standards that schools and trusts can use to benchmark and demonstrate their safeguarding culture. This is a direct response to what the survey data is asking for. 82.1% of respondents support a mandatory or standardised qualification for lead roles. 76.3% support stronger national or regional standards. 75.5% support a shared global charter of principles.

The gap between supporting a charter (75.5%) and being willing to sign one publicly (47.4%) tells a useful story. It's not opposition. It's a request for clarity: schools want to understand what signing means, how it connects to inspection and accountability, and whether it will genuinely improve outcomes for children or simply add process. The design of the charter matters: it needs to be practitioner-led, grounded in the survey evidence and explicitly linked to the six building blocks in Section 9 of this report.

What the charter needs to be to succeed

- Grounded in what schools are already doing at their best, not a new compliance requirement imposed from outside
- Directly linked to professional capability: structured lead-role training, supervision, and protected strategic time
- Useful as a governance and self-assessment tool, not just as a badge of endorsement
- Connected to the Tes Safeguarding Awareness Week 2026 campaign and the wider national conversation about raising safeguarding standards. Visit tes.com/safeguarding-awareness-week to register and take part

"More outside support. Systems are broken. Schools are being asked to carry responsibility that should be shared across the whole child protection system."

UK respondent, academy/MAT

"A mandatory qualification for DSLs. I have wanted this for years. The role is too important, too complex and too demanding to leave to good intentions and an annual update session."

Experienced DSL, UK respondent

What the 2026 UK signal actually says

The UK signal isn't 'schools want more policy'. It's 'schools want clearer standards, stronger lead-role capability and a system that helps them implement good safeguarding more consistently.' The reform appetite in this survey is practical in character. It's about capacity, professional development and the infrastructure to deliver culture, not about generating new statutory documentation.

The governance question to ask now

Are we testing the consistency of our safeguarding culture, including pupil voice, staff confidence, practice patterns and DSL capacity and wellbeing, or are we only reviewing policy compliance and case counts? And would we know if things were fragile before they became serious?



9. The Tes proactive safeguarding culture framework

To turn this report into a practical leadership tool, Tes has distilled the UK survey evidence, combined with the most current guidance from DfE, Ofsted, NSPCC, NHS and Ofcom, into six building blocks of proactive safeguarding culture. These aren't a replacement for statutory guidance. They're a framework for identifying where your school is strong, where delivery is fragile and what to prioritise next.

Framework domain	What strong practice looks like
1. Leadership and governance	Safeguarding is discussed through the lens of culture and implementation, not only compliance. Governors and trust leaders test consistency, pupil voice, parent and community inclusion, DSL capacity and staff confidence, not just policy paperwork and case counts.
2. Role design and protected time	DSL capacity is treated as a strategic design decision. Deputies, structured supervision and protected analytical time are built in rather than bolted on. The role is resourced to enable strategic leadership, not only crisis response.
3. Consistent whole-staff practice	Training is refreshed around real risk patterns, reinforced through scenario-based reflection, regular briefings, external speakers and case review discussion, and expected of every adult: teaching and non-teaching staff alike. Consistency is audited, not assumed.
4. Integrated risk picture	Attendance, behaviour, wellbeing, online harm and safeguarding records are read together rather than in isolation. Pattern recognition and early identification are built into the regular rhythm of DSL and leadership review.
5. Trusted reporting and pupil voice	Pupils, families and staff know how to raise concerns, believe they will be taken seriously and experience timely follow-through. Multiple reporting channels, including digital and anonymous options, are available and actively promoted.
6. System, governance and external coordination	Schools have clear escalation pathways, effective multi-agency relationships and trust-wide expectations for case handling, data quality, supervision and professional development consistency.

How to use this framework

Use the six building blocks as a self-assessment lens at school, trust or board level. For each block, ask: 'Is this genuinely in place, or is it aspirational? Where is delivery fragile? Who owns this block and what would it take to strengthen it?' The framework is most powerful as a leadership conversation tool, used in trust team meetings, governor safeguarding reviews and DSL development sessions, rather than as a compliance checklist.

10. What leaders should do next

The UK survey and external evidence converge on a small number of high-leverage priorities. These aren't universal prescriptions: every setting is different. They represent the most impactful investments leaders can make in the next 12 months to move from good intent to reliable, visible culture.

For headteachers and school leaders

- **Protect strategic safeguarding time for DSLs and deputies.** If the role is entirely operational, culture can't be built. Identify what can be delegated, systemised or reassigned
- **Treat consistency as your next maturity test.** Conduct a practical audit of how support staff, lunchtime teams, administrative staff and pastoral leads respond to low-level concerns. Culture lives in those interactions
- **Integrate attendance, behaviour and wellbeing data into regular safeguarding review.** A pupil appearing in all three domains is sending a signal that deserves a joined-up response
- **Connect safeguarding more deliberately to attendance, pastoral, SEND, behaviour and online-safety work.** Fragmentation is now a safeguarding risk in its own right
- **Review pupil-facing reporting routes:** are they visible, trusted and genuinely accessible for the young people least likely to approach an adult directly?

For trust leaders and MAT executives

- **Standardise the non-negotiables across all schools:** induction, refresher training, low-level concern expectations, DSL supervision, board reporting, attendance escalation and response to peer-on-peer harm
- **Map maturity variation across your schools.** Where is practice strongest and most fragile, and what specifically accounts for the difference? Address structural causes, not only symptoms
- **Build trust-wide DSL professional development, supervision infrastructure and peer network support** rather than leaving this to individual school circumstance
- **Invest in cross-school data capability:** attendance, behaviour, wellbeing and case records in one shared view, enabling proactive trust-level oversight rather than reactive escalation
- **Set trust-wide expectations for DSL protected time, deputy structures and supervision** as minimum standards, not local variables

For governors and trustees

- Ask not only whether statutory requirements are met, but whether **staff practice is consistent, reporting routes are trusted and lead-role capacity is sustainable**
- **Update your annual safeguarding review** to include culture, implementation and consistency indicators alongside policy compliance: What do students say? What does the DSL say they need? What patterns are emerging? Make sure this is all evidence-led
- **Ask the DSL:** 'What are you seeing and what do you need from us?' rather than 'Is the policy up to date?'
- **Ensure the named link governor for safeguarding receives specific training** and asks informed questions, not just verifying documentation

For DSLs and deputies

- **Review whether current recording and review practices make patterns genuinely visible.** If not, simplify the logging route and increase routine pattern-review time
- **Identify the part of your role consuming the most time for the least strategic impact.** Build a case to your headteacher or trust for structural support: protected time, stronger deputies or systemised administration
- **Establish a regular pattern review routine:** monthly analysis of who's appearing repeatedly in concern records, attendance data and behaviour referrals, and what the connections mean
- **Advocate for, or establish, structured reflective supervision.** This isn't a luxury. It's what enables the role to be sustained over time without personal and professional cost

"A whole school approach to wellbeing and inclusion, with effective and rigorous reporting systems, strong leadership and staff who are well trained, show confidence and vigilance throughout their daily practice. It is pupil-centred, where pupils feel safe, empowered and heard."

DSL, state-maintained school

The UK safeguarding challenge in 2026

The UK safeguarding challenge in 2026 is not convincing schools that culture matters. It's helping them build enough consistency, capacity and leadership bandwidth to make proactive culture real: repeatable across every adult, visible to every child and sustained beyond the next inspection cycle.

11. The tools that make it possible: How Tes360 helps schools deliver proactive safeguarding culture



This report has documented a clear ambition and a persistent gap. UK schools want to move from compliance to culture. They know what excellent safeguarding looks like: it's described with remarkable consistency and clarity in the open-text responses throughout this survey. The challenge isn't understanding, it's delivery: having the systems, time, data and infrastructure to make proactive safeguarding culture consistent, visible and sustainable across the whole school.

That's exactly the problem Tes has spent years building the expertise and technology to address. Tes360 is Tes' connected platform for schools and trusts, bringing together the tools, data and insight schools need in one place. The products in this section are not standalone tools: they're part of a connected suite that shares data, a single login and a common purpose, giving schools and trusts the infrastructure to turn safeguarding aspiration into reliable, visible practice.

Tes360: One supplier. One shared view of the child. A roadmap that connects.

The biggest barrier between the safeguarding culture schools aspire to and the one they can reliably deliver is disconnected information. Attendance in one system. Behaviour in another. Safeguarding concern records somewhere else. SEND provision in a fourth place. No joined-up view. No pattern recognition. No early warning.

Tes360 is building toward a future where that picture is connected. Today, meaningful connections already exist. A safeguarding concern raised in Tes Class Charts can be sent directly to Tes MyConcern. SEND data from Tes Provision Map is visible inside Class Charts. MyConcern and Tes Clarity are connected, giving trust safeguarding leads a cross-school view built on the same case data. Tes Safeguarding Training can be purchased and managed directly within MyConcern. And across all Tes360 products, a single login means one entry point for every user.

Over the coming months, these connections will deepen further. The vision is a school where the people responsible for children's welfare can see the whole child: their attendance pattern, behaviour trajectory, SEND provision, wellbeing concerns and safeguarding records together, rather than as fragments in separate systems.

What Tes360 delivers for safeguarding today

You don't need to wait for a fully connected future to benefit from Tes360. What matters now is having one trusted partner who holds the same data on your children, understands how these domains connect in their lives and is building the roadmap to bring them together. Every product below works independently. Each one is stronger when paired with others. And the roadmap makes each investment more valuable over time.

Tes360 supports schools across five safeguarding and pupil success domains. Each can be adopted in the sequence that makes most sense for your school or trust.

The most trusted safeguarding case management platform in UK schools

MyConcern

- Secure, centralised recording for every safeguarding concern, with a clear audit trail and evidence record that supports both internal review and Ofsted scrutiny
- Pattern identification across records: repeated low-level concerns, the same child appearing from multiple staff members and the small signals that individually sit below threshold but collectively demand attention
- Pupil voice reporting: anonymous, any-time concern raising for pupils, parents and the wider community via customised forms shared by link or QR code, removing the barrier of face-to-face disclosure
- Staff allegations management on a dedicated, separate platform, protecting pupils, staff and the school's reputation with clear process and secure records
- Connected to Tes Clarity for cross-trust reporting and now offers direct access to Tes Safeguarding Training within the platform itself

Safeguarding reporting and intelligence for multi-academy trusts and school groups

Clarity

- Cross-school safeguarding reporting built directly on MyConcern case data, giving trust safeguarding leads a consolidated and consistent view across all schools
- Surfaces patterns, inconsistencies and emerging risks before they escalate to crisis, supporting the kind of proactive trust-level oversight the survey data says is urgently needed
- Data-driven governance: boards and trustees can see evidence of safeguarding culture quality, not just policy compliance, across every school in the trust
- Designed specifically for the governance and oversight questions that trust leaders and link governors need to ask, and that Ofsted's framework now specifically tests

Current, flexible, evidence-based training for every staff role

Safeguarding Training

- Unlimited access to a wide range of interactive online safeguarding courses, updated continuously to reflect the latest KCSIE guidance, emerging risk areas and Ofsted expectations
- Role-specific pathways: from basic safeguarding awareness for all staff, including lunchtime supervisors and office teams, to advanced DSL leadership training and specialised modules on AI harms, misogyny, online exploitation and trauma-informed practice
- Built-in progress tracking and reporting: robust evidence of staff training that can be produced on demand for Ofsted, governors or trust-level quality assurance
- Now available to purchase and manage directly within MyConcern, closing the gap between identifying a training need and acting on it

Behaviour and attendance intelligence that brings safeguarding into daily practice

Class Charts

- Real-time behaviour and attendance tracking across the whole school, giving pastoral and safeguarding leads an early view of pupils whose patterns are changing
- Safeguarding concerns can be raised from Tes Class Charts directly into MyConcern, so that a behaviour or attendance signal and a safeguarding record are linked rather than siloed
- SEND data from Tes Provision Map is visible within Class Charts, so that staff managing daily interactions can see a pupil's full support context without switching systems
- Parent app: transparent, daily communication between school and family, building the trust and dialogue that makes parental cooperation in safeguarding conversations more likely

SEND, early help and wellbeing provision: connected to the safeguarding picture

Provision Map

- Documents SEND, intervention and early help provision for individual pupils, creating the evidence trail that supports multi-agency working and demonstrates schools are meeting their duty of care
- SEND and provision data feeds into Class Charts, meaning the adults managing daily pupil interactions can see a pupil's support context alongside behaviour and attendance patterns
- Supports the integrated approach the survey evidence most strongly endorses: safeguarding, SEND, mental health and early help read together as one picture of pupil vulnerability, not managed in separate workstreams
- Helps schools demonstrate to Ofsted that their approach to inclusion, vulnerability and safeguarding is coherent, documented and consistently delivered

Tes360: One connected vision. More value as connections deepen.

Each Tes360 product delivers immediate, independent value. The advantage is that as you adopt more of this platform, the connections deepen and the insight compounds. Today's live connections, Class Charts to MyConcern, Provision Map to Class Charts, Safeguarding Training within MyConcern, Clarity built on MyConcern data, are the foundation. The Tes360 roadmap builds on that foundation to give schools and trusts an increasingly joined-up view of every child.

This is what the survey's most advanced schools are working toward when they describe proactive safeguarding culture. Not more forms, more policies or more separate dashboards. A shared understanding of which children are most vulnerable, built from connected data, reviewed regularly and acted on earlier than any fragmented system would allow.

Schools can start with the Tes360 product that solves their most urgent priority today. There is no requirement to adopt everything at once and no disruption to existing management information systems or core infrastructure. Tes360 works alongside what you already have, connecting it over time.

Join the movement:
Tes Safeguarding Awareness Week, 18–22 May 2026

Safeguarding Awareness Week 2026 is about collaboration, not judgement. Whether you work directly with pupils, lead safeguarding, sit on a governing board or support schools in another role, your experience matters.

By taking part, you're helping to shape a safer, more proactive future for schools and the children they serve. This year's campaign includes the UK safeguarding best practice charter, expert webinars, proactive safeguarding toolkits, behaviour and online harms guidance, DSL wellbeing resources and practical case studies from schools demonstrating what strong culture looks like in action.



Register now: tes.com/safeguarding-awareness-week

Conclusion: The promise we keep

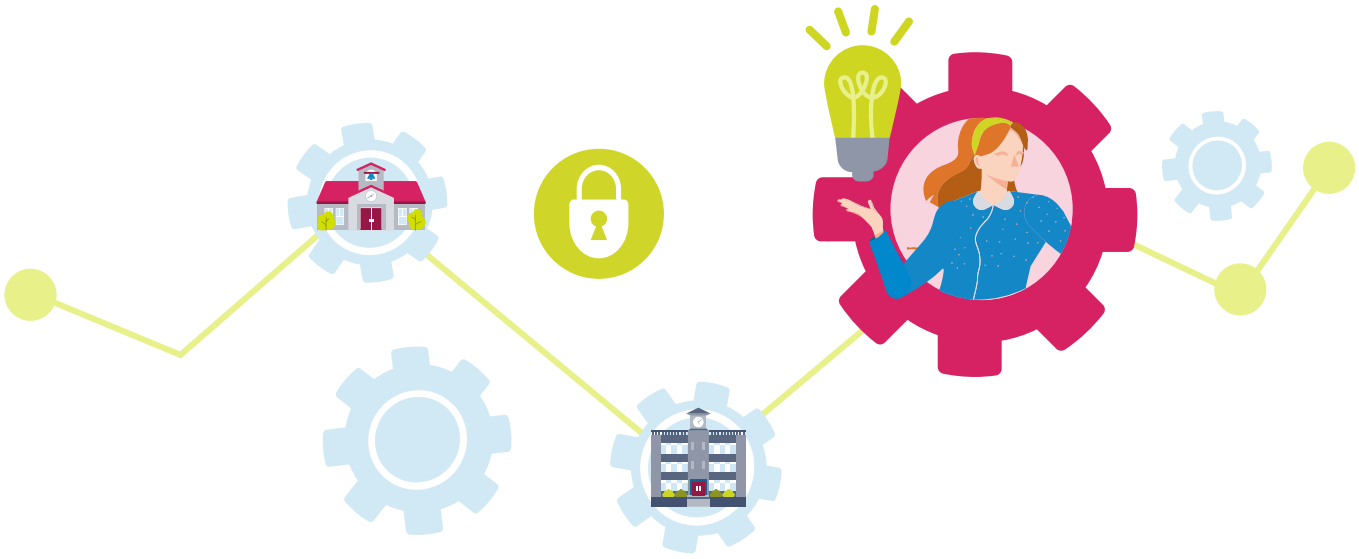
The numbers in this report represent real children. The 633,000 referrals to children's social care. The one in five young people with a probable mental health disorder. The 77% of children who experienced online harm in the past year. The 16.3% of schools that have already dealt with an AI-generated content safeguarding incident. These aren't statistics about a problem that might emerge. They're descriptions of what's happening right now, in communities and families across the country, in schools that are doing their best with less resource than the task requires.

And yet, the UK survey also tells a story of professionals who are deeply committed, increasingly sophisticated and clear about both what they're trying to achieve and what's holding them back. 66.7% of schools describe themselves as culture-led or proactive. 94.2% have confident staff. 82.1% are ready for stronger professional standards. The ambition is real. The challenge is systemic: capacity, consistency, connectivity and the infrastructure to sustain culture under pressure.

The work of 2026 is to close the gap between aspiration and reliable delivery. Between the school that says it has a strong safeguarding culture and the school that can prove it through consistent practice across every adult, through the DSL who has time to think as well as respond, through the trustee who asks the right questions, through the pupil who knows someone will listen and through the data that makes emerging risk visible before it becomes a crisis.

That isn't a political ambition, it's a practical one. And it's one that Tes is committed to supporting through research, professional development, technology and the conviction that every child deserves a school that isn't just compliant with safeguarding requirements, but genuinely, visibly and reliably safe.

Safeguarding isn't just a duty. It's a promise we make to every child who walks through the school gate. That promise is kept or broken not once, in a policy document, but hundreds of times every day, by every adult in the building.



Appendix A: Leadership question bank

These questions are designed to turn this report into a live leadership tool: in governor meetings, trust leadership sessions and DSL development conversations.

For head teachers

- Are attendance, behaviour, wellbeing and safeguarding data reviewed together or treated as separate functions?
- Can every adult in the building describe their personal safeguarding responsibility, including lunchtime supervisors, office staff and after-school coordinators?
- If a new member of staff joined tomorrow, would your safeguarding culture be visible to them within the first week? Do you have a structured induction programme?
- When did you last audit how non-teaching staff respond to low-level concerns?

For trust leaders

- Where is practice strongest and weakest across your schools and what specifically accounts for the variation?
- Is DSL strategic time protected consistently across the trust or left to local circumstance?
- Do you have cross-school data that enables proactive pattern identification before individual schools escalate a concern?
- What would it take to implement trust-wide DSL supervision as a minimum standard?

For governors and trustees

- Are you testing implementation and culture or only verifying policy compliance?
- Are low-level concerns captured early enough and do reporting routes work equally well for all staff groups?
- How visible is safeguarding in school-improvement planning, staffing decisions and budget allocation?
- How often are patterns reviewed, not only individual cases?
- What evidence do you have that pupils and families feel able and willing to speak up?
- What is the plan for reducing DSL operational overload and have you seen evidence it is working?
- What has changed in your school's safeguarding approach as a result of learning from the previous year's cases?
- Does your named safeguarding governor receive role-specific training and ask informed, probing questions?

For DSLs and deputies

- How much of your time is consumed by administration that could be systemised, delegated or redesigned?
- Which patterns are repeating across your concern records and do you review them regularly enough to catch them early?
- When did you last have structured reflective supervision? If the answer is 'never', what would it take to change that?
- What part of your role most needs protected time, stronger deputy support or wider leadership backing to be done properly?

UK context snapshot: directional readings by school type

The overall UK story is coherent, but the pressure profile varies by context. These subgroup readings are directional rather than definitive and should be used as a leadership prompt rather than a ranking.

UK context	Directional reading
State/maintained	63.3% at Stage 4 or 5. Top challenges: workload, mental health, attendance. Strongest need for external agency support.
Academy/MAT	66.1% at Stage 4 or 5. Similar challenge profile to state schools with a strong case for trust-wide standardisation of safeguarding expectations.
Independent	71.6% at Stage 4 or 5. Strongest culture-led self-assessment in the UK sample but still reporting high workload and online-harm concern. Access to external agency support is more limited.
Alternative provision	65.5% at Stage 4 or 5. Small base, but a clear reminder that proactive culture matters most in high-complexity settings, not least. Highest practice consistency scores despite the most complex operational context.

For MAT and trust leaders, the most useful question from this comparison isn't 'which sector performs best?', it's 'which elements of strong safeguarding practice need to be more consistent across our schools and which need to be adapted intelligently to context?'

Appendix B: 90-day action plan

Timeframe	Action
Days 1 to 30	Review whether attendance, behaviour, wellbeing and safeguarding data are being read together. Identify one repeated pattern currently being missed or reviewed too late.
Days 1 to 30	Audit DSL protected analytical time in practice, not just on paper. If structural change is needed, identify what can be reallocated or delegated immediately.
Days 31 to 60	Run a consistency audit across all staff groups: office team, pastoral staff, support staff, lunchtime staff and teachers. Test whether everyone knows what to record, when to escalate and who follows up.
Days 31 to 60	Refresh training to address the real pressures staff are seeing now: mental health, attendance signals, online harms, misogyny, peer conflict and early identification of abuse and exploitation.
Days 61 to 90	Update governance reporting to include culture and implementation indicators, not only policy compliance and case counts. Present the Tes proactive safeguarding culture framework to the governing board.
Days 61 to 90	Review family and community reporting routes: are they visible, trusted and easy to use for families who may distrust formal processes or whose children aren't disclosing directly?

Appendix C: 60-minute leadership review agenda

One of the most useful ways to use this report isn't to circulate it and move on, but to use it as a structured discussion tool with the right people in the room. The following agenda is designed for a trust leadership team, governing board safeguarding session or senior leadership team meeting.core findings don't materially change when faster completions are removed.

Time	Action
10 minutes Context check	Ask: which parts of this report most closely resemble our current safeguarding reality? Which findings feel surprisingly high or low for our setting? Are there findings that should prompt immediate action?
15 minutes Consistency check	Review whether staff confidence, training confidence and practice consistency in your setting feel genuinely aligned. Where is the gap widest? Who are the staff groups where inconsistency is most likely and what would improve it?
15 minutes Capacity check	Map the DSL role against operational casework, strategic time, deputy support, supervision and access to external agencies. Is the role designed to enable strategic culture leadership or only case management?
10 minutes Risk integration check	Discuss how attendance, behaviour, wellbeing, online harms and peer culture are currently joined up in your school or trust and where they still sit in silos. Fragmentation is a safeguarding risk in its own right.
10 minutes Action decisions	Agree three actions for the next term: one about people and capacity, one about consistency and reporting and one about leadership and governance. Assign an owner and a review date to each.

High-value board and trust questions to carry into this session

- Are low-level concerns captured early enough and do our reporting routes work equally well for all staff groups?
- How visible is safeguarding in school-improvement planning and budget decisions?
- How often are patterns reviewed, not only individual cases?
- What is our plan for reducing DSL operational overload and do we have evidence it's working?
- Can we demonstrate that reporting routes are trusted by pupils, families and all staff groups equally?

Appendix D: Methodology and data quality

This report uses the full 2026 Tes safeguarding awareness survey base of 2,086 UK respondents across all four school contexts. All responses are included, regardless of completion speed. Sensitivity analysis confirmed a maximum difference of 0.6 percentage points between the full base and a speed-filtered subset across all key indicators: a negligible margin that validates inclusion of all responses.

Indicator	Result
Stage 4 to 5 culture maturity: full base versus filtered	**66.7% vs 67% (diff: 0.3 pts)**
Staff confident recognising concerns: full base versus filtered	**94.2% vs 94.3% (diff: 0.1 pts)**
Staff confident reporting concerns: full base versus filtered	**92.3% vs 92.5% (diff: 0.2 pts)**
Culture fully or mostly embedded: full base versus filtered	**92.3% vs 92.9% (diff: 0.6 pts)**
Practice very or mostly consistent: full base versus filtered	**83.4% vs 83.5% (diff: 0.1 pts)**

The survey was self-selecting rather than nationally weighted. Results should be read as a large, credible and highly practical insight base rather than a strict population estimate. Some questions asked about the school rather than the individual respondent, which means findings should be read as directional and diagnostic rather than absolute.

Open-text responses were analysed thematically using keyword-led coding and close reading. In the UK sample, 1,233 respondents answered the question on excellent safeguarding culture; 1,173 responded to the question on what they would change over the next year; 712 shared best-practice examples and 1,063 described their biggest concern for the next 12 months. All open-ended responses quoted in this report are anonymised and lightly edited only for spelling, capitalisation or clarity, and are attributed at the level of school context and role to preserve anonymity.

Appendix E: References and external sources

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From insight to action.

This report shows that safeguarding in UK schools depends on what happens inside the school, not just the frameworks around it.

Through Tes360, we help schools build the visibility, consistency and confidence needed to make that standard real in practice.

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