

Bridging the safeguarding gap

Examining education's role in local children's safeguarding partnerships

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Executive summary

This report draws on formal and informal consultation with members of our Safeguarding Professional Community to explore how school trusts engage with local children's safeguarding partnerships (LCSPs), the barriers they face, and the case for strengthening education's role in local safeguarding arrangements.

We have confirmed that although trusts and their safeguarding leaders hold significant expertise, grounded in close and consistent contact with children and families, but that this insight is not always reflected in local partnership structures. Although the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 did not make education a fourth statutory safeguarding partner, it reinforced expectations that education should be fully involved at both strategic and operational levels. This report therefore examines the gap between education's contribution in practice and its position in local safeguarding governance and identifies practical steps that could improve participation and influence now.

- Engagement with LCSPs is uneven: some trusts are well connected, while others report little or no meaningful interaction.
- The main barriers identified were weak communication, limited access to decision-makers, gatekeeping of information, time pressures, and inconsistent understanding of the trust model within local safeguarding systems.
- Respondents across leadership levels said education's voice is too often treated as operational rather than strategic, despite schools' central role in identifying risk, vulnerability and need.
- There was strong support for strengthening education's role, including through statutory recognition, although some respondents also highlighted practical questions about representation, capacity and accountability.
- Members identified clear opportunities for improvement now, including stronger local relationships, clearer communication routes, better guidance on structures and escalation, and a practical toolkit to help trusts navigate their LCSPs more effectively.

In May 2026 the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act mandated statutory partners to fully include and represent education at all strategic and operational levels, but stopped short of making schools a formal fourth statutory partner. While the report makes the case for education as a statutory partner we acknowledge that for now alternative means to enhance collaboration will need to be explored until any further legislative change.

Recommendations

This report is deliberately restrained in its recommendations. Its purpose is to bring together relevant perspectives and establish the foundations for more robust safeguarding partnerships in the future. Nevertheless, we consider that the following actions would strengthen safeguarding:

- Trusts should collaborate to develop a toolkit to support effective engagement with their LCSP and to facilitate the sharing of best practice.
- Non-school safeguarding agencies should engage with trusts to develop toolkits for their own use.
- Government should collaborate with CST and the wider education sector to investigate routes to establishing education as statutory partner.



Part 1: Background to local children's safeguarding partnerships

Summary of current arrangements

In England, safeguarding is underpinned by a statutory framework rooted in the Children Act 1989 and 2004 and operationalised through *Working together to safeguard children*.¹ This guidance establishes three statutory safeguarding partners—local authorities, police and health (Integrated Care Boards)—with joint and equal responsibility for coordinating multi agency safeguarding arrangements. Education settings are not designated as statutory partners; instead, they are defined as “relevant agencies”, with duties to cooperate and contribute to safeguarding activity.

Working together also sets clear expectations that safeguarding partners should engage, involve and work closely with education settings, recognising schools, colleges and early years providers as central to effective multi agency practice. Safeguarding partners are expected to make arrangements that enable relevant agencies, including education, to contribute meaningfully to local safeguarding systems, with an emphasis on inclusive, collaborative and multi disciplinary working. This reflects a position in which education holds significant operational responsibility and is expected to play an active role within safeguarding arrangements, albeit without equivalent statutory authority within partnership governance.

This structural position has been largely preserved in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, which represents a notable legislative development but one that consolidates rather than fundamentally reconfigures safeguarding accountability. The Act strengthens multi agency expectations, including closer integration of education within child protection and family help systems, and enhanced duties around identification and information sharing. However, it does not designate education as a statutory safeguarding partner, thereby reinforcing its role within existing partnership structures rather than altering formal governance arrangements.

This continuity is significant in light of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, which identified the absence of education from statutory safeguarding partnership arrangements as a weakness within the system.² The review highlighted that schools' central role in children's daily lives is not consistently reflected in strategic decision making and called for a strengthened and more formalised role for education within multi agency safeguarding systems, including consideration of how this could be reflected in governance and accountability arrangements.

Subsequent government policy signalled recognition of this issue but did not deliver structural reform. The 2023 strategy *Stable homes, built on love* committed to consulting on how to strengthen the role of education, including exploring “whether and how” this might be achieved.³ However, this remained at the level of policy development and consultation intent, and no legislative change followed.

Taken together, the current position is best understood as one of incremental strengthening rather than substantive reform: expectations of education's contribution to safeguarding have been clarified and extended – particularly through stronger expectations on partnerships to engage and involve education – yet its

1 DfE (2026), [Working together to safeguard children](#)

2 MacAllister J (2022). [The independent review of children's social care: final report](#)

3 DfE (2023), [Guide for children and young people: Stable Homes, Built on Love](#)

absence from statutory partnership status, and therefore from formal system accountability, remains unchanged. As such, the framework continues to reflect an unresolved tension between the centrality of education in a child's lived experience and its more limited positioning within safeguarding governance.

Education therefore continues to carry significant safeguarding responsibility without a commensurate role in strategic decision making.

The case for statutory status

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act did not include making education a statutory partner, despite the misalignment between where a significant proportion of safeguarding intelligence and expertise sit in practice, and where statutory accountability is located in law. Schools and colleges occupy a central position in children's lives, with regular contact creating significant opportunities for the early identification of need, emerging risk, and contextual harm. This generates not only relational knowledge and longitudinal insight, but also a substantial body of safeguarding expertise across the education workforce. Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs), pastoral leaders and senior staff routinely manage complex safeguarding concerns, contribute to multi agency processes, and build detailed understanding of vulnerability within their communities. However, education does not hold a corresponding role within statutory safeguarding governance and does not share the same level of responsibility for coordinating or directing local safeguarding arrangements.

In addition, the development of trust level safeguarding leadership further strengthens the depth of expertise within the system. School trust safeguarding leads often operate across multiple schools, providing strategic oversight, consistency of practice and the ability to identify patterns, risk trends and systemic issues across diverse settings. This role enables a broader, system level understanding of safeguarding that extends beyond individual institutions, and supports the translation of operational experience into strategic insight. The growth of this model, supported by sector bodies including CST, reflects an increasing capacity within education to contribute at both operational and system leadership levels.

This creates both practical and strategic implications. At an operational level, while *Working together* sets expectations that safeguarding partners should engage and involve education, the absence of statutory partner status means that the nature and extent of that involvement can vary across local areas. At a strategic level, there is a risk that decision making does not consistently draw on the full range of professional knowledge within education, particularly in areas such as early help, attendance, exclusion and contextual safeguarding. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care highlighted that education's central role in children's lives is not always reflected within strategic safeguarding arrangements, and called for a strengthened and more formalised role for education within multi agency systems.

There is also a strong argument grounded in early intervention and prevention. Education professionals are often among the first to identify changes in behaviour, attendance, peer relationships and overall presentation – indicators which may precede statutory intervention. The interpretation of these indicators reflects developed safeguarding expertise within the education workforce. Where this expertise is not consistently embedded



within strategic decision making, there is a risk that safeguarding systems remain more reactive than preventative, despite wider policy emphasis on early help and family support.

Emerging practice from the Families First for Children Pathfinder programme provides insight into how education's role within safeguarding governance might be strengthened in practice.⁴ Pathfinders are testing enhanced multi agency arrangements, including models that give education a more prominent role in strategic leadership. In some areas, such as Wirral, this has included the development of an education focused delegated safeguarding partner role, intended to support more systematic input from education into safeguarding governance and decision making. These approaches illustrate how education's expertise can be more directly integrated into local safeguarding systems, although they currently operate through local arrangements rather than statutory designation.

Such developments demonstrate both the practical feasibility of strengthening education's strategic role and the value of incorporating its professional knowledge within safeguarding decision making. However, they also highlight that this remains dependent on local implementation, rather than being consistently embedded across the national system. As a result, the influence of education within safeguarding governance continues to vary between areas.

Taken together, the case for reform is not solely about representation, but about aligning safeguarding structures with where knowledge, expertise and insight are most consistently located. While education plays a central role in identifying and responding to risk in practice, its position within formal safeguarding governance remains more limited. This creates a continuing tension between education's contribution to safeguarding and its role in shaping strategic decisions, suggesting that further consideration of how this relationship is structured is warranted.

While the case for strengthening education's role within safeguarding partnerships is well established, there are structural and practical considerations regarding how this could be implemented effectively within a complex system. These relate primarily to representation, capacity, leadership, system design and funding, and should be seen as issues of implementation rather than barriers to development.

A key consideration is representation and system structure. Education is a diverse sector, comprising maintained schools, academies, school trusts, independent schools and colleges, which creates complexity in defining a single representative voice within safeguarding partnerships. However, comparable complexity exists within health, where system level representation has been established across varied provision.

Potential approaches include establishing a single system level education representative, drawing on trust or local authority structures, and developing clear national guidance on representation models to ensure consistency while allowing local flexibility.

There are also considerations around capacity and resource. Schools already manage extensive safeguarding responsibilities, and extending this into formal partnership roles would require additional leadership capacity and infrastructure to avoid unintended pressure on frontline provision.

Potential approaches include developing dedicated safeguarding leadership roles at partnership level, building shared infrastructure across trusts or clusters, and ensuring responsibilities are located at system rather than individual school level, supported by appropriate funding arrangements.

⁴ DfE (2024), [Families first for children pathfinder programme and family networks pilot](#)

A further issue is readiness for strategic leadership. While there is significant safeguarding expertise within education, this is often concentrated at operational level and not consistently embedded within system level governance.

Potential approaches include developing national frameworks for strategic safeguarding leadership, strengthening multi agency leadership development, and building on pathfinder and sector led improvement models to support phased implementation.

There are also potential role tensions, given education's primary responsibilities for teaching and learning, and the need to balance these alongside wider safeguarding system accountabilities.

Potential approaches include clarifying statutory role boundaries, embedding safeguarding within broader educational outcomes, and developing shared accountability frameworks and joint outcome measures across partners.

In addition, there are system design considerations, as extending statutory partnership would require careful alignment of governance arrangements, decision making and accountability structures.

Potential approaches focus on integrated partnership models, maintaining clarity and proportionality in governance, and prioritising impact and outcomes rather than structural change alone.

Finally, there are funding considerations, as existing safeguarding partnerships are supported by contributions from statutory partners. Extending this model would require clarity on how education's contribution is structured and resourced, particularly given variation in funding across the sector.

Potential approaches include developing system level or pooled funding models, aligning contributions with role and responsibility, and considering transitional or central support.

Recognising these considerations is essential to ensuring that any changes are deliverable and sustainable. However, they should be understood as matters of system design rather than reasons to defer further development of education's role.

Ultimately, safeguarding arrangements must be judged against their effectiveness in protecting children. Schools and colleges are the environments in which children are seen most consistently and understood most fully, placing education in a distinctive position within the safeguarding system. Ensuring that this insight is reflected within strategic decision making and system leadership is therefore central to creating safeguarding arrangements that are coherent, responsive and grounded in children's day to day experiences.



Part 2: Experiences of local children's safeguarding partnerships

Headline findings

Our consultation found that almost one in five respondents said they did not currently interact with their local children's safeguarding partnerships. Most members also reported having "a moderate amount" or "a little" influence over decisions in LCSPs.

Asked prior to the final wording of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act whether education should be a statutory partner an overwhelming majority of respondents strongly agreed or agreed. No respondents to the formal consultation disagreed, with some expressing no preference. In discussions with members, those who did disagree raised concerns about added duties that would come with the responsibility of being a statutory partner as well as the practical barriers of how to truly "represent" a diverse education sector on an LCSP.

Barriers to engagement with local children's safeguarding partnerships

While we asked respondents to categorise themselves as either practitioner, middle leader, or strategic leader; we acknowledged some will fit into multiple categories. They reported barriers common to all three categories and familiar to anyone working in the sector: lack of communication between partnerships and schools; structural systems which minimises the voice of education; and the time pressure for safeguarding professionals which prevents them from engaging.

Where they differed was in the type of constraint. Practitioners identified not having a direct link to an LCSP or the education representation on an LCSP where one existed; middle leaders and practitioners identified gatekeeping of information and decisions bottlenecking at LCSP level; while strategic leaders identified a lack of understanding of the trust system by LCSPs.

This revealed an operational problem of access, an organisational problem of gatekeeping, and a structural problem of institutional understanding.

In addition to highlighting the barriers, our consultations also identified a knowledge gap among some leaders about the role of an LCSP and how it could interact with a trust.

Experience of practitioners

Communication between LCSPs and schools was a consistent theme in our findings, but particularly among practitioners. The lack of a clear line of communication between practitioners and the LCSP was reportedly due to complexity, outdated information, and also time pressures that prevent attending consultation events. All suggests a lack of education's voice being heard. Notably, not all respondents identified this problem, and some stated their partnerships were supportive and professional.

One respondent stated that although they felt "represented" by the county-level team, "we do not appear to have our own direct links". Other respondents commented that "Communication lines can sometimes be complex and unreliable" and that "Communication with the right person" was difficult to achieve while



others reported that "Frequent changes in staff or complex structures can also be a barrier."

Multiple respondents reported that information travelled exclusively in one direction, from the LCSP to the school or trust.

"[There is a] lack of engagement [which] is due to lack of contact/no invite to specific meetings. Information is given to rather than asked for opinion on how this would work... Education can be a lone voice at times..."

Another respondent noted that where there was information about engagement did exist, it could be inaccurate:

"[The LCSP] website highlights Education subgroup but no information available; website is outdated"

The impact of this was one-way information flow was that LCSPs had a poor understanding of reality "on the ground" and that schools are not consulted.

"The link between representatives on boards etc do not link to what it's like on the ground. Representatives don't really seek knowledge from schools, and this is key."

"Decisions already made. No consultation. "

Multiple members cited time pressure and lack of availability to attend engagement sessions with their LCSP or to respond to LCSP calls for evidence as a further barrier.

One respondent, and many community members have also acknowledged that their partnership is supportive and liaising with professions to find the best outcome for the child or children in question, but these acknowledgements were framed as believed to be atypical to the broader system. The perception of poor communication exists on a system level, albeit not in their individual experience.

Experiences of middle leaders

This was the smallest group of respondents, and the themes they identified reflected their place in the middle of the system. These respondents claimed that gatekeeping of information, bottlenecks in decision making, and lack of clarity over the role of LCSP – as a decision maker which must consent to actions such as referrals (even if this is not part of statutory guidance) were barriers they commonly faced

"I am fortunate that I run one of the county safeguarding groups and so have a good line into the leadership of education in the LCSP. However, for others the need to seek consent still being touted as a reason not to take referrals by some...when this has never been part of statutory guidance is frustrating. I am very clear with colleagues this should not stand in the way of referrals."

"Everything bottlenecks at the...Education Representative. When I try to challenge, I end up in the same place."

These respondents suggested that how middle leaders respond to barriers is crucial and advocated for them to reject bureaucratic interpretations of regulation which prevents secure safeguarding.

Others identified a lack of familiarity with the trust sector as a contributing factor:

"Once you have made connections with people it is quite straightforward, but you have to go and find the people to connect with. If you are within a trust they don't always seek you out."

Similar to practitioners, middle leaders found time pressure was a barrier to engagement, and finding the right individual with which to communicate.

Some reported a positive set up – when in a position to lead a county or LA group

it gives them a good line into leadership. Others found that once a relationship is identified and established, it is a productive relationship. Others did not identify any barriers.

Experiences of strategic leaders

One barrier uniquely identified by this group was an LCSP's misunderstanding of the school trust structure, complicating relationships. These respondents commonly reported that knowing whom to contact, as a strategic lead, was difficult, when many LCSPs which did engage tended to approach the DSL or operational and school level, bypassing the Trust.

Moreover, where there is an educational representative on an LCSP they are frequently from a local authority, and not from a trust – despite the majority of children now being educated in academies.

Respondents reported there was a “constant change and lack of clarity”, “basic level knowing who to engage with”, and “Knowing who to go to and understanding where my role fits in with the wider local safeguarding providers” were barriers. Moreover, this communication issue had operational impacts:

“Attempts to follow up discussions are misdirected.”

“Communication, inconsistency with thresholds and families getting help when things have further escalated.”

This communication issue, similar to those already reported, also led to schools needing to escalate to be heard

“There is a breakdown in how things are communicated with schools... Many of the DSLs are headteachers and there are a number of small schools, so they wear a lot of hats... Many schools have support workers and often things are pushed back to them...[I] feel like to be heard we have to escalate rather than work with [the LCSP].”

Others stated when they were able to communicate the response it did not lead to further engagement. Some believed this communication issue was a sign of a misunderstanding by LCSPs of the structure of safeguarding at school trusts level.

“Really feel that the link between representatives on boards etc do not link to what it's like on the ground. Reps don't really seek knowledge from schools, and this is key. I feel the Director of Safeguarding [Trust lead] role is very different to DSL and local authorities have not all got on board with this.”

“Lack of understanding of trusts with schools in multiple LA areas”

One leader identified the current structure of three statutory partners, police, health, social care, as having a soft-power effect on the agenda and priorities of LCSPs to the extent that education, although nominally included, was not able to direct discussion or action.

“The three partners are very established, and the discussions are very much focused on the three areas alone, it is difficult to switch the switch the conversation around so the focus is education”

Strategic leaders recognised that while the LCSP did not create this barrier, but “trying to represent ‘education’ is complex, as there is no one ‘organisation’ to represent.” The practical matter of financial and time resource pressure was also identified.

More than respondent one stated there were “no barriers” and that they “work closely with all partnership and influence as part of sub-group with three partners.



The other two partners are building links as new to the trust.”

Potential future approaches

We asked our community about solutions to these barriers, from their own experience or from what they would like to see take place. One respondent succinctly summed the situation up as:

“I am not sure there is a simple solution. Educational establishments need to be held accountable for their participation in partnership matters so that if someone ‘representing’ education seeks feedback/responses/participation then it is given. It is too easy for settings to opt-out because there is no central accountability.”

All the solutions named came to the same conclusion: a need to respect and promote the role of education in LCSPs, whether by statutory or other means. All implicitly or explicitly acknowledge that school staff have a depth of knowledge of the children supported by social care, but that too often the voice of education is minimised or considered purely operational as opposed to strategic.

More specifically, to overcome the communication barrier, multiple members stated direct relationships with trust safeguarding staff would help. The lack of representation and engagement is evident in some of the more operationally focused responses we received. It reveals that in some cases an LCSP’s unequal engagement with education extends to some in the sector lack clarity on the functions of an LCSP and their potential role on it. The need for a strategic response to this issue is evident.

One respondent from a specialised education setting highlighted that often trust safeguarding leads and DSLs will understand cases better than an LCSP and should be respected.

“[A] greater understanding of SEND [would help]. [LCSPs] having confidence that we know our families and if we are saying consent would be a barrier to helping them, believe us. Accepting that our learners are already often under a triple or more layer of disadvantage.”

Others identified formal structural changes as necessary to provide a more balanced and wide-ranging view from education. One suggestion was including education in LCSP subgroups whose membership should include trust safeguarding leads, routine (potentially monthly) safeguarding updates open to all practitioners, and a new requirement for the education representative on an LCSP to be explicitly responsible for engagement, consultation, and widening education participation. Moreover, these subgroups and leads should ensure that full SEND representation exists where decisions are made, informed and represent more than exclusively the needs of the local authority PRU.

Broader concerns from the social care system were identified; such as the high turnover in social workers. While this is outside the control of an LCSP, this could be mitigated by establishing better direct links with education settings. Other respondents suggested training for education partners. More specifically:

“I think it will take time to understand the agenda items, various reports, a lot of which from an education perspective we have not had exposure to before”

Next steps to improve engagement

Developing an engagement toolkit

We asked our members what they would find most useful as components of a toolkit for effective engagement with their LCSP. Mostly commonly, members

identified information about the structure map of a typical LCSP, including its executive group, sub-group, as well as naming individuals and escalation routes. This could also include multi-agency pathways, referral pathways and examples of what “good” looks like in order to secure consistency. Further guidance on procedures, such as the professional challenge protocol in step by step, school friendly version that clearly covers recording expectations of all involved and when/how to raise disputes would enable schools to better interact with their LCSP.

Multiple respondents said clearly defined thresholds for escalation would be useful, including guidance and scenarios explained for schools. This should include agreed terminology, examples of the LCSP working with schools that has been effective, and a clear outline of the duties of the LCSP. Moreover, others argued for a clear breakdown of where legislation supports school involvement, examples of good practice, advice on how to challenge to secure involvement. Other respondents went further, asking for a detailed list of the statutory responsibilities of the LCSP; clarity on the role of education in multi-agency task forces, Child Protection and Families First.

A guide on what could and should be devolved to education to prevent gate keeping of information in other agencies was also welcomed.

Other future steps

While welcome, a toolkit for education to engage it is not the only step the sector can take now, nor are immediate actions limited to those directly employed in education. LCSPs are a partnership, and it is to the benefit of the police, health, and social care to have education at the table. A dedicated and formal effort by these partners to bring in education on an equal status in strategic decision-making is necessary.

Moreover, respondents and colleagues who contributed to this report expressed interest in working groups on developing leadership, funding issues, and other ways to enhance the engagement of education in LCSPs and ultimately, better safeguard children.

The sector is willing to identify the issues and collaborate to find solutions. We can work with LCSPs and government to implement them.

Conclusion

This report shows that school trusts and their safeguarding leaders bring substantial expertise, insight and day-to-day knowledge of children's needs, yet their influence within local children's safeguarding partnerships remains too inconsistent.

Members described barriers of access, communication, representation and system understanding, but they also identified practical ways these can be addressed.

Taken together, the findings strengthen the case for a more deliberate and better-supported role for education within local safeguarding arrangements.

While statutory change remains one route, there is also a clear opportunity to improve practice now.

Our next step is therefore to design a practical toolkit to help members navigate their LCSPs more confidently, understand local structures and escalation routes, and engage more effectively in the strategic and operational safeguarding decisions that affect children and families.

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Methodology

This report is an effort to capture the views of the members of CST's Safeguarding Professional Community. This report is a result of formal and informal consultation with our members, including a sector led discussion of multi-safeguarding arrangements, a consultation launched at the 2026 CST Safeguarding Conference, and contributions from leaders in the sector.

This report draws on a small but substantive body of survey evidence from members. While limited in number, the responses were detailed and insightful and have therefore been used to identify recurring themes rather than to make claims about prevalence across the sector. The findings are used here to surface themes, experiences and practical concerns, not to imply representativeness across all trusts or practitioners. The report should be read as qualitative insight rather than representative survey data.

CST's member trusts educate more than four million children through the dedicated work of their 600,000 staff. Our membership includes more than 1,000 school trusts, together responsible for more than 9,700 schools. As a diverse sector we recognise that there can be legitimately held differences in views between trusts depending on their individual circumstances. The report seeks to present the range of views held by our members, both those who did and did not formally respond.

This report is both a summary of findings from formal and informal consultation of members and is intended to kick-start a longer-term discussion of how best practitioners can engage in their local children's safeguarding partnerships. To this end, we asked members about the barriers they experienced, and instances of ways these barriers were overcome.

We asked members of our community to identify themselves at one of three levels – practitioners, middle leaders, and strategic leaders. This is in recognition of the heterogeneity of safeguarding systems and structures, as well as the differences in lived experiences between people operating at different levels. We heard from trusts with as few as five schools and as many as over 50, the majority of which were in the mainstream sector, but included specialist resource bases, special, alternative provision, and other setting types.

This included respondents with nursery, primary, secondary, and post-16. The majority of individual respondents were trust safeguard leads.

In addition to consulting with leaders in the sector, we also used our members' discussion from a members' meeting with officials from the Department for Education's multi agency safeguarding arrangements team.





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