



KCSIE 2026 – KCSIE 2026: Briefing Document

Anticipated changes for the 2026/2027 school
year and what you can do to prepare

A briefing for school leaders from Ativion

Draft for information only | February 2026 | Not yet statutory



Introduction

The summer holidays are approaching, and attention is already turning to preparations for the autumn term. As expected, a new edition of Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) is due to come into force on 1 September 2026.

The draft guidance was published for consultation in February this year, and although the consultation has now closed, the proposed changes give a strong indication of the themes likely to appear in the final version. This summary highlights the areas most likely to require updates to your school policy, training, and practice, within a relatively short timeframe.

Executive Summary

This section provides a high-level overview of the most significant changes introduced in KCSIE 2026 and the implications for schools. It is intended for senior staff who need to understand the strategic impact before reviewing the detailed guidance.

1. Summary

KCSIE is updated each year, but this new edition carries more weight than most. It arrives at a moment of heightened political attention on children's safety online, growing concern about misogyny and exploitation in schools, and a recognition that guidance written before the mass adoption of generative AI tools needs to catch up with current reality. As a result, the 2026 revision is **the most substantive in several years**.

Before unpacking the individual changes, it is worth noting that much of the update work is cross-cutting: language and framing that runs throughout the document has been refreshed to reflect the way safeguarding is understood and practised today. Getting those foundations right matters because inconsistent terminology in a school's policies and training can create gaps that are difficult to spot until something goes wrong.

This section describes the general updates throughout the document and their implications for policy and school administration.

What has changed: Language and terminology

Language and terminology have been updated throughout the guidance to reflect current best practice, align with related legislation and guidance, and use more precise terminology.

Examples include:

- “Consensual and non-consensual self-generated intimate images and/or videos including those generated using AI e.g. deepfakes” replace previous wording for youth produced sexual imagery
- Specific inclusion of misogyny, modern slavery and racism across the guidance where relevant

What has changed: EYFS

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is now explicitly referenced as guidance that should be read alongside KCSIE.

What has changed: Annex A

Annex A has been removed following feedback that Part One was the most commonly used section by all staff and volunteers.

2. What This Means for You

- Schools should update policies, training, and day-to-day safeguarding practice to reflect the revised terminology. Where relevant to your setting, make sure EYFS guidance is considered alongside KCSIE and that Part One is used with all staff and volunteers, regardless of the level of their contact with children.

3. Our Take

Many of these changes are about precision and alignment rather than new obligations. However, terminology matters in safeguarding: using outdated language in policies or training can create confusion and undermine consistency. A terminology audit ahead of September is a low-effort, high-value step that we recommend that you put in place.

Safer Recruitment

1. Summary

Safer recruitment is the set of practices schools and colleges use to ensure that only those suitable to work with children are employed or volunteering in their setting. KCSIE has long required schools to carry out pre-employment checks, maintain a Single Central Record (SCR), and **apply appropriate scrutiny to everyone who works with children**.

The principles are long-established, but the landscape keeps changing. The rise of flexible staffing models, increased use of supply teachers, and the growing presence of trainee teachers across more schools has created new edge cases that previous versions of the guidance did not fully address. The 2026 draft tightens several requirements in response.

What has changed

Safer recruitment guidance has been strengthened, including updates to the Single Central Record template, clearer expectations around DBS checks (Disclosure and Barring Service) for volunteers and visitors, and the inclusion of trainee teachers within the allegations process.

2. What This Means for You

- Review Single Central Record to confirm it reflects the requirements laid out and apply guidance to emerging situations, for example being aware of where it is appropriate or inappropriate to request a DBS check for visitors to the school site.
- Update policies and procedures to include trainee teachers, including liaising with their supervising body where needed as part of responding to allegations.

3. Our Take

The inclusion of trainee teachers within the allegations process closes a gap that has existed in previous versions of the guidance. Schools hosting trainee teachers should ensure their safeguarding processes are explicit about how those individuals are included, both as potential subjects of concern and as members of staff who need safeguarding training.

The updated Single Central Record template is a practical prompt to review your current record-keeping before the new guidance comes into force.

Child-on-Child Abuse, Child Criminal Exploitation and Child Sexual Exploitation

1. Summary

Child-on-child abuse refers to any form of abuse perpetrated by a child against another child. It includes physical violence, sexual harassment and violence, emotional abuse, and online harm. It is not new, but the 2026 guidance reflects a more sophisticated understanding of how it occurs and how schools should respond.

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child into criminal activity, in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, or through violence or the threat of violence. Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) follows the same power-imbalance dynamic but involves sexual activity. Both can be facilitated by individuals or organised networks, and victims frequently do not identify themselves as victims.

The scale of the problem is significant. Government data published in 2025 recorded CCE as a factor for children in tens of thousands of social care assessments, with estimates suggesting between 30,000 and 50,000 children are currently victims of criminal exploitation by county lines networks alone. In the same year, over 12,000 children were assessed as having been affected by CSE. **Schools are often the first institution to notice the early warning signs.**

These sections have been substantially rewritten in the 2026 KCSIE draft. The revisions recognise the complexity of safeguarding both victims and alleged perpetrators in cases involving child-on-child abuse, criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation. Overall, the aim is to help schools identify risk earlier, respond more effectively to harmful behaviour, and support children appropriately in the aftermath of serious incidents, including sexual or physical violence.

What has changed: Child-on-child abuse guidance strengthened including sexual harassment and violence

- Terminology changes to ensure harassment and violence is included in the scope of child-on-child abuse
- Child-on-child sexual harassment and sexual violence has substantial changes:
 - Incorporated the continuum of harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) into the structure of the section to highlight the progressive nature of sexual violence
 - Zero tolerance to sexual harassment and early intervention in emerging challenging behaviours and misogyny are crucial to containing escalation of sexual violence
 - Clear but non-exhaustive examples of sexual harassment have been provided across the spectrum, including criminal offences, with a reminder that HSB, harassment and violence can occur in person, solely online or in combination
 - Clarification on support systems including descriptions of universal services and referrals to Family Help

What has changed: Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) updated to strengthen trauma-informed practice

- Recognition that CCE and CSE can be facilitated by organised networks and gangs that the victim may identify as being part of, as well as individuals known to the victim
- Victims of criminal and sexual exploitation can be criminalised for actions taken under coercion
- Wording updated to align definitions of rape and sexual assault with legal definitions to avoid confusion
- Serious violence involving children can be a safeguarding issue regardless of whether the child is victim or perpetrator

2. What This Means for You

Child-on-child abuse

- Ensure clear, accessible and well-promoted policies and processes for reporting and responding to abuse, including robust behaviour policies; review against Part Five and align with the best practice guidance
- Train staff to recognise and address emerging signs and behaviours of concern for both potential perpetrators and victims; how to avoid dismissing concerns and normalising abuse; to recognise that sexual violence disproportionately victimises girls and students with disabilities and is mainly perpetrated by boys
- Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) should be prepared to carry out regularly reviewed risk and need assessments for both victim and alleged perpetrator, ensuring safety and fair access to education is maintained for all students

CCE and CSE

- Ensure policies and processes reflect the updates and include provision for safeguarding children who are victims of serious violence as well as those exhibiting violent behaviours
- Update training to include reporting concerns that a child carries or uses a weapon or expressed intent to do so as a safeguarding concern
- Maintain professional curiosity when children are involved with the criminal justice system to consider if displaying violent behaviour may be an indication of risk of exploitation or unmet need
- Schools and colleges play a vital role in early intervention with evidence-based support for students considered at risk of exploitation and serious violence

3. Our Take

The rewriting of Part Five is the most substantive structural change in the draft. Schools that have existing child-on-child abuse processes should treat this as a prompt to review them against the new framework, not simply to update references.

The explicit link between escalatory misogynistic behaviour and more serious harm is significant. It places a clear expectation on schools to intervene early, and creates accountability for instances where warning signs were visible but not acted upon.

The coercion dimension in CCE and CSE requires a shift in professional mindset: a child involved in the criminal justice system may simultaneously be a victim. Professional curiosity is not optional.

Children Who Are Questioning Their Gender

1. Summary

Gender questioning refers to children and young people who are exploring or uncertain about their gender identity, which may or may not differ from the sex recorded at birth. The 2021 NHS survey found that referrals to gender identity services for under-18s had risen sharply over the preceding decade, and schools have increasingly been navigating requests for social transition, changes in name and pronoun use, and questions about facilities and participation in single-sex activities, often without clear statutory guidance to draw on.

That gap is now being closed. A new section has been introduced to absorb existing non-statutory guidance into KCSIE and consolidate the framework into a single document. Importantly, the guidance keeps safeguarding at the centre: the question is not primarily one of identity politics but of **how schools fulfil their duty of care** to children who may be vulnerable.

- Schools should not initiate action, but respond to circumstances where a child or parent raises a request for support, including for social transition, where those with appropriate clinical training should be involved

- Children who are questioning their gender may do so as part of normal developmental exploration which may change over time
- Safeguarding concerns can develop where children questioning their gender suffer mental ill-health from dysmorphia; where separate vulnerabilities impact their wellbeing; or because of discrimination and bullying for their gender expression
- Schools should, in most cases, engage with parents and carers as a priority to establish what is best for the child to promote their wellbeing, unless this would increase risk to the child
- Balance obligations to safeguarding and equality for all students, including maintaining single-sex spaces under the School Premises (England) Regulations 2012 and Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, whilst ensuring that no child is left at a relative disadvantage or without access to essential facilities

2. What This Means for You

- Consider policies that maintain flexibility and avoid rigid rules based on gender binaries and stereotypes; set out the steps a school will take when a child or their parent requests support for social transition; comply with interacting obligations of safeguarding legislation, equality and human rights laws
- Maintain professional curiosity about the full range of a child's experiences and vulnerabilities; focus on the best interests of the child, even where that may be contrary to their wishes
- Take a whole-school approach to developing a respectful, safe environment where bullying is never tolerated
- Engage parents and carers as a priority when a request for social transition is made; maintain confidentiality where gender-questioning feelings are disclosed without any request for different treatment, unless a related safeguarding risk emerges
- Remain sensitive to changes in circumstance over time, for example the emergence of safeguarding concerns, a decision resulting in unsustainable pressure on the school, or changing feelings towards an established gender identity

3. Our Take

The integration of non-statutory guidance into the 2026 KCSIE itself is significant: what was previously advisory guidance **now sits within the statutory safeguarding framework**. Schools that have not yet developed a clear approach to supporting gender-questioning children should use the period before September to do so.

The guidance is clear that the starting point is safeguarding and the best interests of the child. Policies that are too rigid in either direction risk failing that test.

Mobile Phones

1. Summary

Mobile phones are now present in most children's lives from an early age. Research by the Children's Commissioner published in April 2025, drawing on responses from nearly 19,000 schools and a YouGov poll of children aged 8 to 15, found that 23% of children spend more than four hours a day using an internet-enabled device. Separately, 58% of secondary school pupils reported mobile phones being used without permission in at least some lessons, rising to 65% among Key Stage 4 pupils.

The evidence on impact is clear enough to have driven legislative change. Section 36 of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, which comes into force on 29 June 2026, gives the government's mobile phone guidance statutory weight for the first time. Ofsted has confirmed it will assess schools' mobile phone policies and their implementation as part of every school inspection from that point. **This is no longer a matter of discretion.**

Government advice for Mobile phones in schools was updated in early 2026 as a standalone document to be considered alongside behaviour in schools non-statutory guidance and existing KCSIE requirements. The draft incorporates mobile phone expectations into the safeguarding framework explicitly.

- Schools should be mobile-phone-free environments by default, with limitations on mobile phone use throughout the school day
- Mobile phones are referenced in conjunction with appropriate filtering and monitoring and IT security throughout KCSIE

2. What This Means for You

- Review existing policies to align with the Mobile phones in schools guidance, including the expectation that pupils do not access phones during lessons, time between lessons, or at break and lunchtimes
- Establish clear expectations for staff, students and parents: that mobile phones will not be tolerated during the school day; how you will enforce the policy; and sanctions for breaching it
- Consider what adaptations or reasonable adjustments are appropriate for students due to disability, additional need, or to help maintain safety as students travel to and from school

3. Our Take

Mobile phone policy is now explicitly linked to the safeguarding framework rather than sitting solely within behaviour guidance. This means the rationale for your policy, and how it is enforced, is likely to come under safeguarding scrutiny from inspectors.

If you don't already have a robust IT monitoring and filtering system in place, research vendors such as us (Ativion) who specialise in these solutions.

Schools that have already implemented a mobile-free environment will find this straightforward to document. Those still operating a more permissive approach

should treat September as a firm deadline for review.

Generative AI and Appropriate Filtering and Monitoring

1. Summary

Generative AI refers to artificial intelligence systems that can create text, images, audio and video in response to user prompts. Tools such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Microsoft Copilot have moved from novelty to everyday use at speed. Research by the National Literacy Trust in 2025, drawing on a survey of over 60,000 young people aged 13 to 18, found that two in three reported using generative AI, with nearly half using it at least weekly. The same research found that one in four admitted to copying AI outputs directly into homework without editing them.

The risks are not hypothetical. The NSPCC has documented cases where generative AI is being used to bully, sexually harass, groom, extort and mislead children, in addition to the well-publicised risk of AI-generated child sexual abuse material. Meanwhile, research commissioned by the Tony Blair Institute in 2025 found that 76% of teachers did not feel confident advising pupils on appropriate AI use, and nearly one in five did not know whether their school permitted pupils to use generative AI at all. Schools are being asked to manage a risk that is moving faster than most institutions can track.

Generative AI is now a major consideration across curriculum, behaviour and safeguarding. Used carefully, it can support education, but it can also introduce new risks. KCSIE 2026 reflects this by adding references to generative AI within sections on on-line safety and cyber security.

- Expanded examples within the 4Cs framework now incorporate the risks of harm prompted by generative AI, such as simulating harmful and inappropriate contact via chatbots
- Reference to the DfE's Generative AI in Education policy paper for further guidance
- Building on the existing expectation that filtering and monitoring systems should be reviewed regularly, there is now an explicit requirement that annual reviews take place and a record is kept of those checks
- Additional guidance is available in the core standard for Filtering and Monitoring

2. What This Means for You

- Set clear expectations for staff and students on approved and appropriate use of AI in education, and plan how use will be monitored and supervised; students should only use generative AI with appropriate safeguards in place
- Evaluate benefits and risk assess, bearing in mind that staff and students are likely to engage outside the permitted scope; ensure tools meet the DfE's generative AI product safety guidance

- Pay regard to the terms and conditions of software tools, KCSIE, filtering and monitoring standards, data protection and privacy in establishing your approach to generative AI, as well as AI-specific guidance
- Schedule at least annual reviews for filtering and monitoring efficacy, including confirming that filtering is working appropriately on all internet-connected devices in relevant locations; keep a record of checks and outcomes; consider incorporating into existing online safety risk assessments and reviews

3. Our Take

The inclusion of generative AI as a specific risk in statutory safeguarding guidance marks a meaningful shift. Schools using or piloting AI tools should review the DfE's product safety expectations document and ensure their filtering and monitoring approach applies to those tools.

The formalisation of annual filtering and monitoring reviews, with a requirement to keep a record, means this is no longer a matter of good practice. It is an expectation that inspectors will be able to ask for evidence of.

Conclusion

There is not yet a confirmed publication date for the final 'for information' version of Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026, which leaves schools and colleges with a limited window to prepare for the changes before 1 September. In the meantime, the draft guidance, the consultation documents, and Annex D's summary of changes provide a useful basis for early planning.

A practical next step is to review your safeguarding, behaviour and related policies against the proposed changes, noting both substantive gaps and terminology updates. Many of the revisions also point back to existing non-statutory guidance, which schools can use now to shape their approach and reduce pressure later in the summer.

This briefing is based on the KCSIE 2026 consultation draft published by the Department for Education on 12 February 2026. It is not legal advice and does not constitute current DfE policy. Schools should refer to the final guidance when published and take advice from their local safeguarding partners, legal advisors, or professional associations as appropriate. Primary Author: Natalie Cook | Drafted: 28 May 2026.

Additional Guidance

The external links included in this article are provided for your convenience and further reading. Ativion does not control or endorse the content of third-party websites and accepts no responsibility for their content, accuracy, or availability.

Why language matters: The NSPCC explains why changes in safeguarding terminology are important. [LINK](#)

Regulated activity: Guidance on the expanded definition of regulated activity and its implications for DBS checks [LINK](#)

Appropriate terminology: Learn how the *No Such Thing* campaign helped establish accepted terminology for reporting Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). [LINK](#)

Filtering and Monitoring: Explore the latest 2026 updates, including strengthened expectations for AI, user-generated content, mobile devices, and apps. [LINK](#)

DBS process review: Read about the review of the Disclosure and Barring Service process and its implications for safer recruitment and vetting. [LINK](#)

DBS Strategic Plan 2026–2027: View the Disclosure and Barring Service’s strategic priorities for the 2026–2027 business year. [LINK](#)