National Governance Association
KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

Tackling disadvantage in education

A toolkit for governing boards

November 2022

Vulnerability



The expert organisation for school governors, trustees and governance professionals

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National Governance Association

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees and governance professionals of state schools in England.

We are an independent, not-for-profit charity that aims to improve the educational standards and wellbeing of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. We are expert leaders in school and trust governance, providing information, advice and guidance, professional development and e-learning.

We represent the views of governors, trustees and governance professionals at a national level and work closely with, and lobby, UK government and educational bodies.

With thanks to The Children's Society

NGA would like to thank The Children's Society for providing their expertise and support in the production of this toolkit.

The Children's Society are a national charity working to transform the hopes and happiness of young people facing abuse, exploitation and neglect. They campaign tirelessly for the big social changes that will improve the lives of those who need hope most.

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How to use this toolkit

This toolkit is part of a series aimed at tackling disadvantage in education. It identifies the link between vulnerability and educational disadvantage, signposts resources to help tackle disadvantage, and includes questions for governing boards to explore.

We recommend that you first read our Widening the lens guidance which explains how to identify key areas of disadvantage in your organisation. Other toolkits in this series cover **special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)**, **poverty, mental health and wellbeing** and **ethnicity**.

Making the link

Children who are identified as vulnerable have often either encountered or are experiencing a circumstance that has compromised their safety, or they may be in a situation that has the potential to have a negative impact on their welfare.

The governing board's strategic leadership is vital in supporting an overarching culture of safeguarding and checking that the culture has become embedded. This means having assurances that the correct systems and processes are in place as well as rigorous monitoring.

The quality of the data that senior leaders present to boards is an important part of getting the strategic response right. Exploring how vulnerability is impacting on areas such as academic attainment, behaviour, attendance and exclusions will ensure that strategies put in place match the need.

As vulnerable children are at a greater risk of being disadvantaged in their education, they may need targeted interventions to address these risks.

Defining vulnerability

For the purpose of this toolkit, we define vulnerable children and young people as:

- children assisted by the Youth Offending Service (YOS)
- children on a child protection, child in need or early help plan
- looked after children (LAC)
- young carers
- any other child that does not meet the threshold for these services but that the school deems to be vulnerable

School and trust staff know their pupils and local context best and may identify children in their care that do not fall into any of these categories but recognise them as vulnerable. This may include, for example, pupils who are experiencing family breakdown, bereavement, female genital mutilation (FGM), or domestic abuse.

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What the evidence shows

- Children with a social worker do worse than their peers at every stage of education. Those in their GCSE year are around half as likely to achieve a strong pass in maths and English than their peers, three times less likely to study A levels and five times less likely to go on to higher education at age 18 (DfE, 2022).
- 27% of young carers (aged 11 to 15) miss school or experience challenges in their education. They achieve an average of one grade lower than their peers at GCSE and are more likely to not be in education, employment or training (NEET) between the ages of 16 to 19 (The Children's Society, 2022).
- Young carers are often 'hidden', with 39% saying nobody in their school was aware of their caring responsibilities (The Children's Society, 2022).
- Vulnerable children are more likely to worry about gang violence, bullying and becoming a victim of exploitation (The Big Answer report, 2021).
- Vulnerable children are more likely to be unhappy with their mental health (The Big Answer report, 2021).
- Children on a child in need plan are four times more likely to receive a permanent exclusion than their peers (Timpson, 2019).

Identifying vulnerable groups

Identifying vulnerable groups, acknowledging their vulnerabilities and recognising how this can impact on behaviour and academic attainment is an essential starting point to creating an equitable learning environment. However, it is also important to recognise that not all children who are vulnerable meet the threshold to access statutory services/external support.

Questions to explore:

- How does the school identify pupils and families that may be vulnerable and in need of extra help and support?
- Does the school/trust work with other schools and agencies to stay informed about local risks?
- What support has the school put in place to support vulnerable children who do not meet the threshold to access relevant external services/support?

Whole staff training and CPD

Questions to explore:

- Do school and trust leaders ensure that the workforce is equipped to address issues around safeguarding, including prevalent and contextual safeguarding issues?
- Do staff know what their duties are in relation to concerns around safeguarding and vulnerable children? How is this evidenced?
- Are gaps in CPD and knowledge recognised and addressed?

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Addressing disadvantage caused by prevalent safeguarding issues

Keeping Children Safe in Education makes clear that vulnerable groups are potentially at greater risk of harm than others. Such risks are not limited to adverse effects on development and educational outcomes but can also include being at great risk of safeguarding issues, including neglect and other forms of abuse (Public Health England, 2020).

NGA's safeguarding guide for governing boards sets out how boards meet their responsibilities to keep children safe.

Governing boards – particularly link safeguarding governors and trustees – should have conversations with designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) about the training available to staff, with a particular focus on specific safeguarding issues impacting their pupil demographic.

The below resources cover key contextual safeguarding topics. They are designed by experts in the field to support school/trust leaders in understanding the link between safeguarding issues, vulnerabilities, indicators and appropriate interventions. The DSL could also use them as the basis for whole staff training.

Topic	Resources
Child sexual exploitation (CSE) and child criminal exploitation (CCE)	An online toolkit to help school staff develop their understanding of exploitation and how best to respond (The Children's Society) This guide from the Children's Society is for using appropriate language when discussing children and their experience of exploitation in a range of contexts
Child on child abuse	Resources on peer-on-peer sexual abuse in education and healthy relationships from NSPCC Learning
Serious violence	This toolkit from the Youth Endowment Fund summarises the best available evidence about different approaches to preventing serious youth violence
Domestic abuse	Domestic violence resources from Mentally Healthy Schools cover how to identify the signs and the impact on children
Female genital mutilation (FGM)	Female genital mutilation resource pack – signposts online training that can be carried out by all staff

Governing boards should seek assurance that the needs of vulnerable pupils feature in the development and review of both the behaviour and safeguarding policies. Staff training should equip staff to understand how behaviour of vulnerable children may present at school, so that staff can recognise those pupils as 'a child with a problem' not 'a problem child.' This should tie in with your mental health and wellbeing training.

Top Tip

Sharing best practice and collaborative work with other schools, local statutory and non-statutory services is essential when addressing contextual safeguarding issues that may be prevalent in your local area or region.

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Interventions and support

Questions to explore:

- Do you explore data on the attainment, safeguarding concerns, behaviour and exclusions of vulnerable children?
- Are evidence-based interventions in place to address disparities between vulnerable groups and their peers?
- Does the school/trust work with other schools and agencies to provide the right level and expertise of support to pupils?
- Do pupils know who they can go to for support? And do they feel confident in doing so?

Most vulnerable children (as defined in this toolkit) will have external agencies involved and working with the relevant staff to support the child. The right level of support will link closely to mental health and wellbeing, but wider stakeholder engagement is also important here. External agencies and local community groups may offer additional support and expertise.

Schools and trusts receive pupil premium plus which is paid for every pupil who has left local authority care through adoption, a special guardianship order or child arrangements order. While the funding isn't ringfenced for individual pupils, governing boards should monitor its use and ensure it is being spent in ways that directly benefit the pupils. It should be spent on academic interventions as well as pastoral support that address barriers to learning.

This blog from Inside Government explores how pupil premium plus can be spent to ensure a positive impact.

Curriculum

Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) and relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education lessons play an important role in educating all pupils on staying safe and accessing support.

Questions to explore:

- Does the PSHE and RSE curriculum effectively educate children on how to keep safe and signpost where to get help?
- Are external agencies with expertise on specific topics involved in the design and/or delivery of the PSHE/RSE curriculum?
- Does the school work with local external stakeholders, such as community groups and services to provide expertise and signposting on issues linked to vulnerability?

Resources and recommendations:

NGA's guide to PSHE education explains how governing boards can influence and support the planning of PSHE education in their school/trust.

The PSHE Association has produced a range of PSHE teaching resources and lesson plans that allow teachers to sensitively cover a range of safeguarding issues with pupils.

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Further reading

- Young Carers In Schools Award – The Children's Society
- The Big Ask - The Big Answer – Children's Commissioner
- Timpson Review of School Exclusion (publishing.service.gov.uk)
- Promoting the education of children with a social worker (publishing.service.gov.uk)

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