Top 10 safeguarding priorities for schools

Safeguarding work requires a mix of detailed planning ahead and effective and responsive working practices. In this *Best Practice Focus*, *Elizabeth Rose* considers 10 priorities for schools to help create a strategic safeguarding plan and embed a culture of safeguarding

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How can schools establish a culture of safeguarding?

Elizabeth Rose

…is an independent safeguarding consultant and the director of So Safeguarding. She has worked in education for more than 15 years and is a former secondary designated safeguarding lead and local authority safeguarding in education advisor. Visit www.sosafeguarding.co.uk or follow her on Twitter @sosafeguarding. Find her previous articles for SecEd via https://bit.ly/seced-rose

Effective safeguarding practice relies on a careful balance between regular, planned work – such as updating policies and delivering training – and being aware of emerging trends and latest learning.

There are many things that safeguarding leads and headteachers can plan in advance because we know that they are coming, such as updates to statutory guidance in September and training throughout the year.

However, unfortunately children are continuously affected by new and changing risks that can emerge at any time. It is not enough to rely only on the "plan" that we make for training at the start of the year, update our policies, and then forget about them until next year. We need to build in opportunity for flexibility and responding to new information.

Conversely, we cannot just take the approach of "we will take action at the point that we need to", because safeguarding, at its very heart, is about preventing harm and not just taking action when something is already happening to a child or children.

A blend of both approaches can significantly improve the level of confidence that all staff have in safeguarding, the experience of pupils in school, and can contribute significantly to the ultimate goal: establishing a "culture of safeguarding".

This is a good time to consider developments over the course of the academic year so far and forecast what might be a priority for development next year – both to get ahead to make September more manageable and because right now there is often a bit more time to think creatively about what could be developed within safeguarding in your school to further enhance practice.

Safeguarding priorities will, of course, vary according to your location and wider context, but there are some distinct areas I have identified through research, discussions with schools, changes to guidance, and child safeguarding practice reviews that I would suggest considering in more depth this year, alongside the usual statutory practice that you will have in place in school already.

In this *Best Practice Focus*, I will explore these "top 10" issues in more detail to help you to create an effective and strategic plan for safeguarding.

1, Behaviour and safeguarding

Safeguarding is increasingly – and quite rightly – discussed in statutory guidance through the prism of a "whole-school approach". We saw this notion woven throughout the last updates to *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (KCSIE) (DfE, 2021a) and there are increasingly references to the need to make sure that safeguarding is evident in all areas of school life – the curriculum, training, work with parents, and across a wide range of policies. I will discuss some of these points in more detail later, but here I want to focus on the links between behaviour and safeguarding and how to embed a safeguarding approach within your behaviour systems.

In response to the updates around child-on-child abuse (and child-on-child sexual abuse more specifically) and our increasing understanding of issues such as child criminal exploitation, there is more of a focus than ever on the links between our approaches to behaviour and our approaches to safeguarding.

Ofsted's February 2022 update to the inspection handbook makes it clear that it "will expect schools to have effective behaviour policies in place regarding harmful sexual behaviour. The policies should include details of appropriate sanctions that should be consistently applied" (Ofsted, 2022).

We know that "safeguarding is everyone's responsibility", but the nuance and understanding of what that actually means is developing all the time and is likely to be a key focus over the next 12 months and beyond.

In March, we saw the publication of the "Child Q" safeguarding practice review from City and Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership (CHSCP, 2022), which revealed that a black female child of secondary age was strip-searched by female police officers because school staff believed she smelled of cannabis and suspected that she was carrying drugs.

The search was undertaken by police officers but took place at the child's school and involved exposure of her intimate body parts. No appropriate adult was present for the search.

This has raised serious questions about the response to incidents that are first and foremost safeguarding issues but are treated and managed with a behaviour or even criminal response.

There are a number of important findings that should inform practice but "Finding 4" states: "School staff had an insufficient focus on the safeguarding needs of Child Q when responding to concerns about suspected drug use." The focus appeared to be on whether Child Q had breached the rules as opposed to what the alleged substance misuse might mean for her safety and welfare.

The recommendation that a safeguarding response is paramount when dealing with substance misuse issues is pertinent to this case and many others, but so is the idea of taking a "safeguarding first" approach to any issue presenting as a serious behaviour incident.

When a safeguarding practice review is published we have a responsibility to draw down learning to improve practice and the national discourse around this review has led to many schools questioning their protocols in relation to behaviour, possible criminalisation, the "criminal justice approach", and safeguarding.

This will be a priority in the coming months as we all learn from this review and from wider examples of how to respond to incidents that require a safeguarding and behaviour management approach.

When dealing with behaviour and/or criminal incidents, it is vital that as safeguarding professionals we take the time to think about the wider safeguarding and child protection implications of what is presented in front of us, but also consider how we safeguard children through our responses. This is an important area for self-reflection and evaluation.

Things to consider

- The links between safeguarding and behaviour policy. Do the behaviour policy and your searching and screening procedures advocate a "safeguarding first" approach?
- The use of language within safeguarding concerns, records and responses. Avoiding victim-blaming or shaming is crucial and seeing children as victims in issues such as child exploitation is essential.
- How the school works with other agencies, including whether they are confident to work with and alongside the police to ensure children are kept safe when incidents are reported.
- How the voice of the child can be embedded within school behaviour and safeguarding structures.

2, The curriculum

Schools have a responsibility to teach children about the challenges and risks that they may encounter as young people and throughout their lives. Statutory guidance for relationships, sex and health education makes it clear that "children and young people need to know how to be safe and healthy, and how to manage their academic, personal and social lives in a positive way" (DfE, 2019) – obviously not a new concept in schools and colleges.

However, as mentioned, there is an increasing focus on the whole-school safeguarding approach and how schools establish a culture of safety. When we think about the term "culture of safety" we often think about how we set this up in school – through safer recruitment, training, reporting mechanisms, and recording procedures. But it is also important – and I would assert that it is a priority as RSHE curricula develop following changes over recent years – to consider how we can establish a culture of safety for children within their wider contexts.

This links to online safety of course, and the work of the Contextual Safeguarding Network (University of Bedfordshire) has really influenced our understanding of the extra-familial risks faced by children. Now that we have more information and understanding about the risks children face outside of school, safeguarding curricula need to be more focused, robust and extensive to equip children with the skills to understand these risks, manage them, and seek help as soon as possible – all in a world where the risks are ever-changing.

Curriculum priorities

- Embedding online safety education. Review curricula across the board to ensure that the "4Cs" (KCSIE) are covered. They are Content, Contact, Conduct and Commerce and broadly cover the main areas of risk faced by children online.
- It is important to embed online safety in all areas of school life and across a range of lessons throughout the year – not just on Safer Internet Day or drop-down days.
- Seek pupil voice: children in

Ofsted's review of sexual abuse in schools were not positive about RSHE and felt it didn't equip them with the information needed to stay safe (Ofsted, 2021; *SecEd*, 2021a). Ensuring that the curriculum reflects the needs of children and how they perceive risk is essential and seeking their opinions and feedback on this is invaluable.

- Train staff effectively. RSHE is often delivered by lots of different members of staff with varying skills, expertise and confidence. When addressing difficult concepts (such as FGM and forced marriage, which are now mandatory for secondary RSHE for example) it is vital that staff are able to do this effectively. Dedicated time for staff CPD in this area will make a significant difference to how well pupils understand and assimilate content and, ultimately, how well they can respond to risk.
- Plan to review this curriculum regularly and implement changes based on new learning and updates to guidance.

3, Managing concerns about members of staff

This is always an essential part of school safeguarding and procedures should be in place already of course – but it is something that schools approach with varying degrees of confidence.

There is a difference between a "low-level concern" about a member of staff and an allegation against them and generally I find that schools are much more confident in their procedures for responding to allegations rather than low-level concerns.

KCSIE was updated in September 2021 to provide more information about how to identify, respond to and record low-level concerns but this continues to be an area for development in many settings.

Essentially a "low-level concern" is one where the behaviour of an adult is inconsistent with the staff code of conduct, but does not meet the allegations threshold or is not considered serious enough for referral to the local authority designated officer.

This could include staff using inappropriate language, taking photographs of children on their phone, or being overly friendly ▶

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for example. These examples of concerning behaviour warrant intervention and need to be recorded to ensure that any patterns of emerging harmful behaviour are identified, even if at the point of identification no children have been harmed.

Often perpetrators of harm against children will begin by "testing the water" – breaking the code of conduct in small ways and pushing boundaries. By identifying concerning behaviour early and acting quickly in all cases, schools can minimise the risk of child abuse and deter potential perpetrators.

Things to consider
- Ensure that induction processes are robust. Staff should be provided with a copy of the code of conduct and training on appropriate behaviour should be built into induction training.
- Revisit safer working practice with staff in training regularly. Building a safe culture is not just about understanding and responding to risks to children outside of school or perpetrated by peers, but also creating an on-going culture of vigilance and high expectations.
- Ensure that staff understand what low-level concerns are, how to report them, and to whom.
- Think about your record-keeping procedures for low-level concerns. Ensure they are compliant with KCSIE.

4, Child-on-child abuse
Peer-on-peer abuse has been close to if not at the top of the agenda for strengthening practice over the last 12 months. However, it remains a high priority as our understanding of this issue is developing over time and this will take time to embed with staff.

At the time of writing, it has been proposed in draft changes to KCSIE, currently being consulted upon and due to come into force in September 2022 (DfE, 2022), that the term "peer-on-peer abuse" in statutory guidance will be removed and replaced with the term "child-on-child abuse".

If this happens then at the most basic level we will need to update policies and training slides, but on a more fundamental level we need to ensure that all staff understand what "child-on-child abuse" is, how it can manifest from the earliest

stages in a child's life through to leaving education, and how we can actively minimise opportunities for it to happen.

There is likely to be a shift in deepening understanding following the upskilling process that has been expected since Ofsted published its review into sexual abuse in schools (Ofsted, 2021). This has mainly focused on ensuring schools understand the issue, have clear policies on how to minimise, respond and support children, and how this issue might be addressed in the curriculum.

Things to consider
- A greater focus on the early development of attitudes that lead to sexual harassment, such as active promotion of equality and anti-discriminatory practice towards women and girls across the school and in the wider world.
- The need for richer pupil voice in relation to racism, sexism, homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying and discrimination or bullying in relation to SEND.
- Establishing a range of reporting mechanisms. How can children seek help? Do methods support children with differing needs? We know that many children will not think to report sexual harassment, so do mechanisms rely on children coming forward or are we proactively tackling this issue, even where there are no reports?
- Consideration of abuse faced by children in extra-familial contexts other than school or online. This year there has been a real focus for schools to consider what is happening on their own sites, but this issue is also affecting children within their local areas and social spaces. It is important to consider the role of child-on-child abuse within sexual or criminal exploitation, for example, and consider how we can educate children, parents and staff on this issue.

5, Governors
Governors and trustees have a very important role to play in safeguarding and significant statutory roles, as outlined in Part 2 of KCSIE.

It is essential that they are

confident in their role, understand what should be happening in schools in relation to safeguarding, and have the skills and knowledge to both support and challenge staff. As such, safeguarding training for governors is crucial.

The governance handbook (DfE, 2015) states that: "It is best practice if everyone on the board has safeguarding training, to make sure they have the knowledge and information needed to perform their functions, understand their responsibilities and assure themselves that their own organisation's safeguarding arrangements are robust."

However, this requirement is noticeably absent from KCSIE at this point in time. The proposed changes to KCSIE from September 2022 will stipulate that governors and trustees should receive "appropriate" safeguarding and child protection training at induction and that this training should be regularly updated.

This will be happening to varying degrees in different schools currently, with some governors attending local authority training, some attending training online and some attending the whole-school

annual update training along with staff.

I would guess that some governors will not have attended any safeguarding training and if this is the case it should be urgently addressed regardless of whether KCSIE is updated or not.

Governors and trustees should undertake training to:
- Ensure that they understand what safeguarding and child protection is and what school responsibilities are.
- Build an awareness of local protocols and procedures in relation to safeguarding and child protection, as outlined by local safeguarding children partnerships.
- Understand their own responsibilities, either as a trustee or as a local governor, and how to discharge these responsibilities effectively.
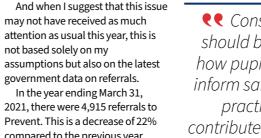
This is a priority area as it is likely to be a key change in statutory guidance. By considering this now and planning for governors to attend specific training in September, schools will ensure that they are immediately responding to the updated guidance and governors and trustees will be equipped with the skills to provide robust governance in this area.

6, Radicalisation and extremism
Radicalisation and extremism is always a priority within safeguarding, but I include it here as we need to be realistic about the increasing breadth of safeguarding risks, topics and issues that staff and safeguarding leads have to be aware of and receive training on over the course of the year.

With ever-diminishing time available, it is understandable that many schools may have concentrated their training on the highly topical and pressing issues of child-on-child abuse, mental health and online safety over the past year, as well as the core safeguarding messages around spotting the signs of abuse and how to report concerns.

"Prevent" – as schools generally term radicalisation and extremism – should always be included in safeguarding training, but if it has been crowded out by some of the other equally pressing issues then now would be a good time to revisit this and ensure that your approach remains strong and effective.

And when I suggest that this issue may not have received as much attention as usual this year, this is not based solely on my assumptions but also on the latest government data on referrals.

In the year ending March 31, 2021, there were 4,915 referrals to Prevent. This is a decrease of 22% compared to the previous year (6,287) and the lowest number of referrals received since comparable data has been available (2015/16). On top of this, 2020/21 also saw the lowest proportion of referrals from the education sector (Home Office, 2021).

The number of referrals is likely to have been significantly impacted by the Covid restrictions, of course, but the data serves as a useful reminder that schools play a significant role in identifying radicalisation concerns and are a protective factor for young people in many different ways.

We have also seen emerging and changing risks over recent years and it is important to consider if staff knowledge in this area is fully up-to-date in relation to topics such as the extreme right wing – for the first time since comparable data are available there were more extreme-right wing referrals under

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Prevent than Islamist referrals in the year ending March 2021 – and specific issues such as "incels" (see Rose, 2022).

Things to consider
- What are the threats in your local area? Seek information from your local authority, consider if you have had and used any relevant information from your counter-terrorism local profile (ask your local authority if you aren't sure what this is), and keep up-to-date with local news stories and incidents.
- Ensure staff have been reminded of the Prevent Duty (Home Office, 2015), school responsibilities, threats and

what to look out for if children are being radicalised.
- Review designated safeguarding lead (DSL) training in this area. Have the DSL and deputies attended recent and specific radicalisation and extremism training?
- How are you promoting the key values of tolerance, equality and understanding throughout the curriculum and through your school ethos?
- Are incidents of racism or xenophobia fully documented, analysed and reported to governors?
- Do you have a Prevent risk assessment in place? Contact your local authority for more advice and to enquire about a template if not.

7, Pupil voice
I have already touched upon pupil voice, but it is so vital that it deserves to be a standalone priority and consideration should be given to how pupil voice can inform safeguarding practice and contribute to a culture of safeguarding in many different ways.

When I ask schools about their pupil voice opportunities I am often

met with a huge array of different ways this is being done and can be done, but examples almost always begin with the "pupil council".

Having a pupil council is an important part of pupil voice, teaching children about democracy and giving them opportunity to shape their educational experience. This happens in different ways and has differing levels of impact on school culture depending on the set-up, but it is an important part of school life and links into "fundamental British values".

However, if the examples of pupil voice stop there, there is a problem.

Safeguarding guidance, policy and practice has never been so extensive and the core message in all of this guidance and in our safeguarding work is to operate with the "best interests" of the child at heart, to really listen to their wishes and feelings and understand their day-to-day lived experience.

There are areas we could consider to enable us to seek more information (or more useful information) about how children feel about a range of safeguarding and pastoral issues (see below).

But remember, this is not necessarily about overhauling all of your systems. Many structures ➤

will already be in place, but we can always improve approaches and extending practice in this area will strengthen understanding of the lived experience of children and their feelings about their interactions both within and outside of the school context.

Things to consider
● Consider how different groups and demographics are represented within your pupil voice opportunities. Are you able to seek views on safeguarding issues from children with SEND, children in receipt of Pupil Premium, those attending alternative provisions, those who identify as LGBT+, those from different ethnicities and religions?
● Think about ways that you seek pupil voice – are they inclusive? Do children with additional needs require support to share their views? Do you track participation in surveys (for example) to identify if any children are unable to take part?
● Is pupil voice recorded as part of your child protection records? As well as including direct disclosures, do your records reflect on-going support for children and how they feel about it?
● Have you asked children directly about their experiences in relation to particular issues such as sexual harassment? This needs to be carefully

planned and approached but, as we touched on earlier, the findings may be surprising and could significantly inform your approach going forward.
● How does pupil voice feature within your behaviour policy and system of sanctions? Do you record how children feel after positive handling or restraint incidents, for example?

8, Mental health
Mental health and wellbeing has been a significant focus for schools recently as a direct result of the Covid-19 restrictions and also because of wider pressures on children and young people – whether they are social (online and offline), linked to education or from increasingly challenging familial circumstances exacerbated by the pandemic and pressures on things like household finances.

NHS data tells us that rates of probable mental disorders have increased since 2017 – in six to 16-year-olds from 11.6% to 17.4% (one in six) and in 17 to 19-year-olds from 10.1% to 17.4% (one in six) (see *SecEd*, 2021b).

Many schools will have a member of staff that has undertaken mental health "first aid" training and the increasing awareness of the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences is increasingly evident in school policy and practice. This is a priority area as we continue to unpick the impact of recent and on-going events on children and

Things to consider
● The government is funding senior mental health lead training for state-funded schools and colleges in England, including those in receipt of pre-16 revenue, high needs block, or 16 to 19 programme funding. Details of this and a list of quality-assured training providers is online (DfE, 2021).
● Free Home Office-funded adverse childhood experiences training can be accessed online and is useful for all staff (see further information).
● Mental health problems can be an indicator of abuse. Ensure that staff have been trained to notice this and report concerns.
● It is important to consider the mental health and wellbeing of staff and put structures in place for staff to receive support as required – whether that is through employee assistance programmes, in-school support or supervision (particularly for safeguarding teams).

9, Attendance and children missing from education
After two years of extreme turbulence, forced partial school

hone our responses to this issue, while trying to balance the increasingly significant needs of children against a child mental health system under significant pressure.

> ❝ *Think about safer working practice and how you will revisit this with staff, either before the summer if possible or when you return* ❞

closures, changes to attendance recording codes and rules around Covid-19 isolation, many schools are struggling with attendance. This has been widely reported in the media over recent months and the Children's Commissioner published interim findings from an attendance audit revealing that there were an estimated 1,782,000 pupils persistently absent and 124,000 pupils severely absent in the autumn term 2021.

The report – *Where are England's children?* (2022) – also states that, "children have told us that they face a number of additional barriers to attendance, including lack of support around mental health, emotional and care needs, and problems around feeling safe and supported in school".

Many of the threads through that short but impactful sentence are reflected in some of the priorities discussed in this article – mental health, pupil voice, and reporting mechanisms, for example.

It is clear that attendance is high on the agenda for the DfE and it ran a school attendance consultation earlier this year (*SecEd*, 2022) focusing on four main areas:
● School attendance policies and statutory guidance.
● Expectations of local authority attendance services.
● A national framework for the use of legal intervention in attendance issues.
● The standardisation of leave of absence requests.

At the time of writing, this consultation is still being analysed, but it is clear that there is a drive to ensure children are back in school. As such, schools are working hard to ensure that attendance is improving for all children and this will continue to be a priority from an education perspective as well as a safeguarding one.

Things to consider
● Provide all staff with

information about children missing education at induction and update staff regularly.
● Work with your local authority, early help team, school nurse and welfare officers to ensure a joined up approach.
● Consider the barriers to attendance and use other agencies as necessary to provide additional support.
● Ensure that you have at least two contact numbers for every child.
● Ensure that there is a clear home visits policy and/or procedure in place and safer working practice is adhered to in the event that children are transported to and from school.

10, Planning ahead
At this point in the year we should use the summer term to get ahead. There are many things I have discussed in this article that you may wish to consider and you will of course have your own priorities and areas for development.

Although it is always busy, the autumn term can be particularly challenging so getting ahead now is crucial. Key things to consider doing this term include:
● Read the KCSIE consultation (DfE, 2022), or familiarise yourself with the draft document (depending on when you are reading this article). Highlight changes and make a list of what you need to change and cover in September.
● Think about your September training now and prepare it as far as you can. Some things will change when the new statutory guidance is published, but the core messages, your school approach, and detail about safeguarding issues will remain the same.

Drawing practice together
These 10 priorities cover a wide range of different areas within school and although the DSL retains responsibility for safeguarding overall, it would be impractical to suggest that all of this needs to be implemented by one person alone.

KCSIE makes it clear not only that safeguarding is everyone's

● As well as your September training, now is good time to sit down and think about the whole year and how you will ensure that staff are kept up-to-date in relation to safeguarding over the course of each term. Make a list of all of the areas you want and need to cover, arrange them into a calendar that makes sense for your school and context, take into account events that exacerbate certain issues (for example, you may wish to cover domestic abuse at Christmas time), and plan what you can now. Even if this is just creating a slide with some definitions or gathering relevant links into a folder it can save time later and help to ensure that you do not forget any important issues.
● Think about safer working practice and how you will revisit this with staff, either before the summer if possible or when you return in September.
● Plan in your review and self-assessment work. Find out when your local authority audit is likely to be and plan to present information to governors around the same time, for example. This means that you are maximising the impact of work you are doing and minimises the need to do the same thing twice, just in a slightly different format.
● Consider completing a review of particular areas, such as online safety.
● Consider parent newsletters or ways that you share information with families. Create a list of topics about which you want to share information and gather some links and resources now.
● Make plans for children over the summer and communicate with social workers now to ensure that support will be in place when the school is closed.
● Consider when you will update your safeguarding policy and block in time to do this.

responsibility, but also that there should be "a whole school or college approach to safeguarding, (which) means involving everyone in the school or college, and ensuring that safeguarding and child protection are at the forefront and underpin all relevant aspects of process and policy development".

This core statutory guidance is not only for safeguarding leads and governing bodies, but also for senior leadership teams (a change brought in with the 2021 version of this document).

Although the safeguarding lead should continue to provide oversight, the delegation of some aspects of safeguarding – such as taking responsibility for building in safeguarding content across each curriculum area – will ensure that it truly permeates all areas of school life and is not just a culture of "pass

it on and someone else will take action".

As I discussed at the beginning, it is not enough to only have responsive mechanisms in place. Staff should, of course, pass any concerns about children to the safeguarding lead in line with school policy, but the world that children must navigate is too complex and there are too many risks for schools not to take the approach of embedding pastoral and safeguarding education as deeply as possible.

Hopefully, by taking the time to consider the points and priorities above, you will be able to plan in where these things will be addressed in your school across the whole school year and crucially how you will ensure that all staff are able to do as much as possible to keep children safe. **SecEd**

ⓘ INFORMATION & REFERENCES
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▶ *Children's Commissioner: Where are England's Children? March 2022:* **https://bit.ly/3EnApdb**
▶ *CHSCP: Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review: Child Q, March 2022:* **https://bit.ly/3r9Ol57**
▶ *Contextual Safeguarding Network (University of Bedfordshire):* **https://contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/**
▶ *DfE: Guidance: Governance handbook and competency framework, November 2015:* **https://bit.ly/3M4mrzA**
▶ *DfE: Statutory guidance: Relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education, June 2019:* **https://bit.ly/2kQwtgL**
▶ *DfE: Keeping children safe in education: Statutory guidance for schools and colleges, September 2021a:* **https://bit.ly/3rjHV41**
▶ *DfE: Senior mental health lead training, June 2021b:* **https://bit.ly/3JUve5s**
▶ *DfE: Keeping children safe in education 2022, draft for consultation: January 2022:* **https://bit.ly/37psHTG**
▶ *Home Office: Prevent Duty, March 2015:* **https://bit.ly/3vuAzey**
▶ *Home Office: Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, England and Wales (April 2020 to March 2021), November 2021:* **https://bit.ly/36s1AqM**
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▶ *Ofsted: School Inspection Handbook, last updated April 2022:* **https://bit.ly/2U4dUan**
▶ *Rose: Safeguarding: Incels and radicalisation, SecEd, January 2022:* **https://bit.ly/3IBYNsA**
▶ *Safer Recruitment Consortium: Guidance for safer working practice, February 2022:* **https://bit.ly/3IP6NHe**
▶ *SecEd: Sexual harassment & abuse: How are schools responding? June 2021a:* **https://bit.ly/3h5AhVR**
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▶ *SecEd: School attendance: National thresholds for fixed penalty notices, January 2022:* **https://bit.ly/3IB9mfp**
▶ *SecEd Podcasts: Effective safeguarding practice in schools, April 2021 (https://bit.ly/3tyyY5r); Everyone's Invited and safeguarding in schools, September 2021 (https://bit.ly/3gSgE2R).*

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