Tackling disadvantage in education

A toolkit for governing boards

Vulnerability

Contents

For Schools & Trusts

NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning. Together, we're raising standards and shaping stronger governance to ensure every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.

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The Children's Society

NGA would like to thank *The Children's Society* for providing their expertise to produce this toolkit.

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

childrenssociety.org.uk

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, and offers 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 school(s). [Other toolkits in the series](#) cover **special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)**, **mental health and wellbeing**, **ethnicity** and **poverty**.

Making the link

Children who are identified as vulnerable have experience of issues that compromise safety or wellbeing. These are typically due to factors outside of school, such as witnessing domestic abuse, being a young carer, or committing a crime – a full list is given below.

Many vulnerable children still make good progress and achieve well. This is especially the case where schools and trusts embed a culture of support rather than 'othering.' However, as vulnerable children are at a greater risk of underachievement, they may need targeted support.

The governing board's strategic leadership is vital in supporting a culture of safeguarding children (both in school and beyond the school gate) and boards need to ensure that rigorous systems and processes are in place.

The quality of data that leaders present to boards is as important. Boards should use this to explore how vulnerability is impacting attainment, behaviour, attendance and exclusion. This helps to ensure there is a good match between the school's strategic direction, budget planning and the needs of vulnerable children. It also helps boards to provide critical challenge and support to school/trust leaders.

Defining vulnerability

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

- Children on a child protection, child in need or early help plan
- Looked after children (LAC)
- Previously looked after children (PLAC)
- Children who have a family member in prison
- Children assisted by the Youth Offending Service (YOS)
- Young carers
- Any other child who does not fall into any of the above categories but that the school deems to be vulnerable. This could be, for example, pupils who are experiencing family breakdown or bereavement

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1. What the evidence tells us

- **Children with a social worker** do worse than their peers at every stage of education. They are half as likely to achieve a strong pass in maths and English than their peers. They are much less likely to go to university (DfE, 2019).

- **Children who have a child in need plan** are four times more likely to be permanently excluded than their peers (Timpson Report, 2019).

- Only 9% of **looked-after children** achieve a good GCSE pass in English and maths, with over 50% identified as having SEND. For previously looked-after children, this figure rises to 16%, still well below the 45% of all pupils who achieve a good pass. (Become / 9000 Lives, 2024)

- Between October 2021 and October 2022, there were an estimated 192,912 **children with a parent in prison** (Ministry of Justice, 2024). These children are at risk of stigma and isolation.

- Only 58% of respondents to a Carers Trust survey agreed that all staff in their setting (school/college) have a good **understanding of young carers** and how to identify them (Carers Trust, 2024).

    - **Over 50% of young carers are persistently absent** (attendance less than 90%), (Caring and Classes, 2024).
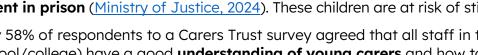
    - Vulnerable children are more likely to worry about **gang violence, bullying and becoming a victim of exploitation**. They are also more likely to be unhappy with their **mental health** (Big Answer report, 2021).

2. Identifying vulnerable groups

Identifying vulnerable groups, acknowledging their vulnerabilities and recognising how this can impact on behaviour and attainment is an essential starting point. By understanding these unique challenges, schools and boards can develop targeted strategies to address pupils' needs.

This includes creating an inclusive environment, implementing tailored interventions, and ensuring that policies and practices are designed to remove barriers to learning. Such an approach not only supports individual pupils but also contributes to a culture of equity and high aspirations across the school community.

Questions to explore:

- How does the school identify pupils and families that may be vulnerable and in need of extra help and support?

- How do leaders stay informed about local risks that may lead children to becoming vulnerable (growth of a local county lines network, for example)? How is this learning used to proactively identify vulnerable pupils?

- How do staff seek information on vulnerability from previous schools or settings (especially in the weeks and months before pupils join the school?

3. Staff training and development

Staff training can significantly impact the success of vulnerable pupils. While safeguarding awareness is well established in most schools, how confident are staff in addressing sensitive issues, such as a child with a parent in prison? Similarly, how proactive are leaders in identifying and supporting young carers?

Governing boards should ensure that the needs of vulnerable pupils are prioritised when developing policies, as these policies shape staff knowledge and behaviour.

Effective training should help staff understand how vulnerable children's challenges may manifest in their behaviour, so that staff can recognise those pupils as 'a child with a problem' not 'a problem child.'

Questions to explore:

- How does the school identify pupils and families that may be vulnerable?
- How do senior leaders ensure that staff are equipped to address safeguarding issues?
- How do we make sure that safeguarding training develops existing staff rather than re-visiting the same content simply because it is time for renewal?
- How confident are staff in talking with children about vulnerability issues (such as parental imprisonment or bereavement)?

Relevant resources

Keeping Children Safe in Education makes clear that vulnerable groups can be at greater risk of harm, including the risk of underachieving in both their academic and wider development, as well as a greater risk of neglect and abuse.

NGA's safeguarding guide for governing boards sets out how boards meet their responsibilities. Governing boards, especially link safeguarding governors and trustees, should discuss staff training with leaders. This should include the specific safeguarding issues that affect pupils in their schools.

Contextual safeguarding means addressing the risk of harm to children beyond their families and home – for example:

- In their peer group (e.g. bullying).
- At school (e.g. sexual harassment).
- In the community (e.g. child criminal exploitation).

Partnership work with other schools and services in the area is essential when addressing contextual safeguarding issues that may be prevalent in the area or county.

4. Interventions and support

Many vulnerable children will have external agencies involved, collaborating with relevant school staff to provide support. Ensuring the right level of support is often linked closely to mental health and wellbeing, but engaging with wider stakeholders is equally important. External agencies and local community groups can provide additional expertise and resources to address the diverse needs of these pupils.

Schools receive additional funding for pupils who are looked-after children (LAC) or previously looked-after children (PLAC), known as pupil premium plus (PP+). Governing boards should carefully monitor how this funding is being used to enhance the achievement and wellbeing of LAC and PLAC pupils.

Questions to explore:

- How do leaders monitor 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? If so, what?
- Do pupils know who they can go to for support? And do they feel confident in doing so? How do we know?
- How does the school celebrate progress and achievements of pupils?

5. Curriculum

Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education and relationships sex and health education (RSHE) lessons play a vital role in helping vulnerable children to:

- learn to stay safe and healthy
- feel that they belong in our school/trust

Lessons can also address prejudice and stereotypes, such as those related to mental health. This not only prepares all pupils for adult life but can have a particularly positive impact on vulnerable pupils, for example, a looked-after child with a parent in hospital due to mental health challenges.

Relevant resources

- NGA's guide to PSHE explains how governing boards can influence PSHE in their school/trust.
- Curriculum: the governing board's role – this guidance helps boards to understand what the curriculum is, what it can do and how to evaluate curriculum outcomes

Questions to explore:

- How well is the PSHE and RSHE curriculum delivered? How do we know?
- Are external experts involved in the delivery of the PSHE/RSHE curriculum?
- How well does teaching help all pupils avoid stereotypes that can lead to stigma of vulnerable pupils?
- How do school staff engage with external services so that children have good access to specialist support (e.g. young carers groups)?

6. Parental engagement

Engaging with parents and carers on issues related to vulnerability can be challenging for staff, as these topics are often emotionally charged.

Building positive and trusting relationships with families is essential to create a safe and supportive environment where open, non-judgmental conversations can take place.

Questions to explore:

- How do leaders ensure that parents and carers are treated as partners in responding to the needs of a vulnerable child?
- What support or training is offered to staff who have key roles in parental engagement?
- How do key staff make sure that they have excellent knowledge of local services (e.g. early help teams, youth offending team)?
- How are parents and carers kept updated on safeguarding topics (e.g. online safety)? How do leaders hear their views?

Relevant resources

- [Joint guidance from NGA and Parentkind](#) explains why parent participation in pupils' learning is important, actions schools and trusts can take, and how boards monitor and support effective parental engagement.
- [Parentkind](#) resources for schools are designed to help build better partnerships with parents.
- [Shifting Mindsets](#): A tool for leaders and governing boards that helps to re-think how we work with families. The eight steps can help to remove barriers between schools and families.

Further reading

Designed by experts, these links support your understanding of each topic. By reading more, you will be better informed and thus better placed to offer critical challenge and support to leaders.

Children on a child protection, child in need or early help plan

- The NSPCC explain what Early Help means.

LAC and PLAC

- The Governors Guide to Children in Care: A DfE recommended guide to looked after children (also known as children in care).

- Blog on good use of *Pupil Premium Plus* funds

Children who have a family member in prison

- Children Heard and Seen: Info and resources.

- NICCO (National Info Centre on Children of Offenders): Info and resources.

Children assisted by the YOS

- Youth Endowment Fund: Research on children and violence. NB: Violence is the offence that is most often proven for under 18s.

- Youth Justice Board: Info for children which is also insightful for adults.

Young carers

- The Children's Society: Resources on young carers and link to the Young Carers in Schools Award.

Any other child that the school deems to be vulnerable

- Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE): Advice and tools from the Children's Society on this topic which can affect any of the vulnerable groups in this document. It also features a guide on the best language to use when discussing the CCE and CSE topics.

- Timpson Review of School Exclusion: A major 2019 report that remains interesting today.

- Anna Freud resources for schools and colleges – free mental health resources for those working in primary, secondary and FE settings.

- Bereavement: Advice for schools from Winston's Wish.

- Parental conflict: School staff are often the first professionals to see signs that children are being affected by conflict at home. This eif.org.uk briefing explains why it's an issue and gives some examples of good practice.