Children's Social Care Reset 2026–2029
Summary for Headteachers – Key Messages for Schools

Purpose: This briefing summarises the key messages from *Delivering the Children's Social Care Reset: An Implementation Plan for Local Partners 2026–2029* and explains what the reforms are likely to mean for schools, Headteachers and safeguarding leaders.

1. Overall summary

The implementation plan sets out the next phase of national children's social care reform from 2026 to 2029. The direction is clear: earlier help for families, stronger child protection, greater use of family and kinship networks, and more stable care for children who cannot remain safely at home.

The four main reform strands are:

- Families First – reforming family help, child protection and kinship care.
- Enduring Relationships – improving foster care, residential care and support for care leavers.
- Adoption Support – strengthening therapeutic and practical support for adopted children and families.
- Supporting the Whole Workforce – improving workforce development, standards and capacity across children's social care.

The programme is backed by national investment, updated guidance, legislative change and revised accountability arrangements. For schools, this is important because the reforms will increasingly shape expectations around safeguarding, information sharing, early help, attendance, inclusion and support for children with a social worker or in kinship care.

2. What matters most for schools

For schools, the central message is that education settings will be drawn more firmly into the local child protection and family help system. This does not mean schools are expected to become social care services, but it does mean Headteachers, DSLs and wider pastoral leaders will need to be closely aligned with local safeguarding arrangements and prepared for stronger expectations around partnership working.

Schools will need to be particularly aware of:

- stronger expectations around multi-agency safeguarding and child protection;
- the new information-sharing duty for safeguarding and welfare;
- support for children in kinship care and children with a social worker;
- the role of schools in transition planning, attendance, inclusion and early identification of need; and
- changes to data, school census and local accountability arrangements.

The reforms are therefore not just a local authority or social care issue. They will affect how schools work with partners, how information is shared, how vulnerable children are identified and supported, and how local safeguarding arrangements involve education settings.

3. Biggest education-relevant changes

A. Families First and multi-agency child protection

Every local authority is expected to implement a single Family Help offer and establish multi-agency child protection teams through local safeguarding partners. Schools are explicitly part of this wider model, because they often know children and families well and are central to early identification, escalation and ongoing support.

During 2027, education providers and childcare settings are expected to become designated relevant agencies within safeguarding arrangements. This means schools should expect stronger and more formal involvement in local safeguarding partnership work, both through Headteacher engagement and through operational safeguarding practice.

A new information-sharing duty is due from Autumn 2026, requiring agencies to share information for safeguarding and welfare purposes. Schools will need to be confident that DSLs and relevant staff understand what information should be shared, when it should be shared, and how this fits with local safeguarding procedures and data protection requirements.

B. Kinship care and the role of schools

The plan gives kinship care much greater prominence. From Summer 2026, local authorities must publish a kinship local offer, and from Autumn 2026 a school census indicator for children in kinship care is expected, subject to final administrative requirements.

From Autumn 2027, the current non-statutory duty to promote the educational achievement of children in kinship care and children with a social worker becomes statutory. Schools should therefore expect a stronger role for the Virtual School Head in relation to these groups, alongside increased emphasis on educational outcomes, attendance, stability and support.

For schools, this means the Virtual School is likely to become a more visible partner in supporting a wider group of vulnerable children. Headteachers may want to consider how designated teachers, DSLs, SENCOs, attendance leads and pastoral teams work together around children with a social worker and children in kinship care.

C. Adoption and transition to secondary school

From Autumn 2026, the government plans a universal parenting offer for adopted children and eligible kinship children moving into secondary school, intended to improve school stability, family resilience and wellbeing.

For schools, this links directly to transition planning, pastoral support and the work of designated teachers, SENCOs and Virtual School colleagues. Headteachers should expect greater emphasis on planned, joined-up support at key transition points, particularly where children have experienced care, kinship care or significant family disruption.

D. Care leavers

From Autumn 2026, local authorities must publish an enhanced local offer for care leavers, including support with accommodation, financial literacy and homelessness prevention.

For schools and post-16 providers, this is relevant to participation, NEET prevention, transition support and the wider support available to young people leaving care. It reinforces the need for strong links between schools, colleges, Virtual School colleagues and leaving care services.

E. Home education and vulnerable children

From Autumn 2028, the plan proposes additional measures to protect the most vulnerable children in elective home education. For Headteachers, this reinforces the importance of clear safeguarding conversations before any move to home education, timely notification to the local authority, and careful consideration where children are already known to safeguarding, attendance, SEND or inclusion services.

4. What Headteachers may want to consider

A. What this means in school practice

For schools, the reform is likely to be felt less through one single new duty and more through a gradual increase in expectations around safeguarding, inclusion and partnership working. Headteachers, DSLs, SENCOs and designated teachers will increasingly be expected to work as part of a wider system around vulnerable children, rather than being brought in only at individual points of concern.

In practical terms, this means schools should expect continued focus on early identification, escalation, contribution to multi-agency planning, and timely responses to information requests. Many schools already do this well, but the direction of travel is towards greater consistency and clearer expectations across all education settings.

One of the main messages for school leadership teams is that safeguarding, attendance, inclusion, SEND and pastoral support need to be seen together. For many vulnerable children, these issues overlap. A child's attendance pattern, behaviour, exclusions risk, family circumstances and safeguarding history may all form part of the same picture.

B. Attendance, CME and elective home education

Although the implementation plan is centred on children's social care reform, there are clear implications for attendance, children missing education and elective home education. In local practice, these cohorts frequently overlap with safeguarding vulnerability, family stress, unmet need, exclusion risk and weak engagement with services. The reform programme therefore reinforces the need for strong education oversight of children who are harder to see and easier to lose from view.

For Headteachers and DSLs, this means attendance and children missing education should remain firmly connected to wider safeguarding oversight. Attendance concerns may be where risk first becomes visible, or where weak multi-agency working has the greatest impact. Schools should be confident that escalation routes, thresholds and links with the local authority are understood and used consistently.

This also reinforces the importance of bringing together attendance, CME, elective home education, alternative provision, inclusion and safeguarding information within school systems. Where the same child is known across several areas of concern, the response needs to feel joined-up for the child and family, not fragmented between different processes.

C. Virtual School, vulnerability and school leadership

The extension of the Virtual School role should not be seen simply as a technical change. It signals a wider expectation that the education system will focus more deliberately on children whose outcomes are poorest and whose lives cut across school, family support, social care and wider services.

For schools, the children now in scope may not sit neatly in one category. Children with a social worker, children in kinship care, children at risk of exclusion, children with poor attendance and children with SEND will often overlap. Headteachers may want to ensure that internal systems recognise these overlaps and that staff do not view each issue in isolation.

Used well, the Virtual School can help schools with challenge, training, data interpretation and support for vulnerable cohorts. The key issue for Headteachers will be knowing when and how to draw on that support, and making sure the school's designated teacher, DSL, SENCO and pastoral leads are connected to the right local networks.

5. Practical actions for schools

Suggested priorities for Headteachers and senior leaders

1. Keep safeguarding reform visible at senior leadership level

- Ensure that governors, senior leaders and DSLs are aware that schools are expected to become more formally embedded in local safeguarding arrangements.
- Consider how the school will stay connected to local updates on Families First, multi-agency child protection and the role of education settings as designated relevant agencies.

2. Prepare for the new information-sharing duty

- Review how safeguarding information is recorded, shared and escalated within the school, particularly between DSLs, attendance, pastoral, SEND and senior leadership teams.
- Make sure DSLs and relevant staff are ready to respond to updated local guidance and training when the new duty is introduced.

3. Strengthen links with the Virtual School

- Ensure designated teachers, DSLs, SENCOs and pastoral leads understand the likely expansion of the Virtual School role to include children in kinship care and children with a social worker.
- Identify any children where Virtual School advice, training or support may already be helpful, particularly where vulnerability, attendance, SEND or exclusion risk overlap.

4. Get ready for greater focus on kinship care

- Consider how the school identifies and supports children living in kinship care, while ensuring this is handled sensitively and in line with local guidance.
- Prepare for future changes to school census reporting and local signposting through the kinship local offer.

5. Review transition support for vulnerable children

- Review transition arrangements into secondary school for adopted children, children in kinship care, children with a social worker and other pupils where family circumstances may affect stability or wellbeing.

6. Maintain oversight of post-16 and care leaver links

- For schools with sixth forms, make sure staff understand the importance of participation, transition planning and links with Virtual School and leaving care colleagues for young people who are care experienced.

6. Risks and watchpoints for Headteachers

There is a risk that the reforms feel like a series of separate changes rather than one broader shift in how vulnerable children are supported. For schools, the key will be to connect the messages across safeguarding, attendance, inclusion, SEND, kinship care and the Virtual School, rather than treating each as a separate agenda.

A second risk is that expectations on schools increase without enough clarity or support. Headteachers will need clear local guidance about what is changing, what remains the same, and how new duties and initiatives fit together. The local authority will need to communicate this in a way that is practical and proportionate for schools.

There is also a capacity risk. DSLs, SENCOs, attendance staff, pastoral teams and designated teachers are already carrying significant responsibilities. Schools may need to think carefully about internal coordination, staff confidence and where further training or local support will be needed.

Finally, there is a communication risk if schools receive different messages from different parts of the system. A clear, joined-up local message will be important so Headteachers can understand the implications and lead the response in their own settings.

7. Questions for Headteachers and senior leaders

As local implementation develops, Headteachers may want to test current arrangements against a small number of practical questions:

- Are safeguarding, attendance, inclusion, SEND and pastoral leaders in school working from a shared understanding of vulnerable pupils?
- Do DSLs and senior leaders know how and when to share information with partners, and are escalation routes clear?
- Do we have good oversight of children whose vulnerability spans attendance, CME, elective home education, exclusion risk and social care involvement?
- Are designated teachers, DSLs, SENCOs and pastoral teams clear about how they work with the Virtual School?
- Are governors sighted on the direction of travel and the implications for safeguarding, inclusion and vulnerable children?
- Are there pupils where the school needs a more joined-up internal plan across safeguarding, attendance, SEND, behaviour and pastoral support?
- What do we need to understand now, what can wait, and what further local guidance or training would help?

8. Overall message for Headteachers

This is not simply a social care reform programme. It will shape how schools, local authorities and safeguarding partners work together around vulnerable children and families. For Headteachers, the main issue is not to absorb every national detail now, but to understand the direction of travel and prepare school systems accordingly.

The main messages for schools are:

- Schools will become more formally connected to local safeguarding partnership arrangements.
- Information sharing, early identification and escalation will become even more important.
- Children in kinship care and children with a social worker will be more visible in national and local education expectations.

The broader direction is towards more joined-up, relationship-based support around children and families. Schools are already central to that work. These reforms make that role more explicit and will require clear

local communication, practical guidance and continued partnership between schools, the local authority and safeguarding partners.