

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 Summary for Schools

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, in force from 29 April 2026, introduces significant changes for schools, strengthening safeguarding, reducing costs for families, and increasing accountability across the education system.

1. Strategic Intent of the Act

The Act is the most significant reform of schools and safeguarding legislation in a generation. For schools, it aims to:

- Strengthen safeguarding and early intervention
- Ensure no child is invisible to services
- Reduce cost-of-living pressures on families
- Increase accountability and collaboration, particularly for academies.

2. Safeguarding: Strengthened Expectations on Schools

What has changed:

- Schools now have a clear statutory role within multi-agency child protection teams, alongside local authority children's services, health and police.
- The Act provides a stronger legal basis for information sharing, including sharing without consent where necessary to safeguard a child.
- A Single Unique Identifier for children will be introduced (via regulations), improving consistency of records across agencies.

What governors and leaders should note:

- Safeguarding remains a whole-school leadership responsibility, not solely the DSL.
- Expect greater scrutiny of decision-making, timeliness of referrals and engagement in multi-agency processes.
- Safeguarding policies will need alignment with updated statutory guidance (including *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026*).

3. Children Not in School and Attendance Accountability

What has changed:

- A statutory Children Not in School (CNIS) Register is established, held by local authorities.
- Schools are expected to provide more robust and timely information when pupils leave roll.

- The Act strengthens oversight of home education and unregistered settings as a safeguarding measure.

Governance implications:

- Boards should ensure leaders can evidence lawful and transparent pupil moves.
- Increased risk and reputational exposure around off-rolling.
- Attendance strategy and data quality are now more clearly linked to safeguarding duties.

4. Free Breakfast Clubs (Primary Schools)

Statutory duty:

- All state-funded primary schools must deliver a free breakfast club, for at least 30 minutes before the school day.
- Provision is universal, not means-tested.

Leadership considerations:

- Staffing, supervision, safeguarding and premises arrangements must be formally planned.
- Governors should seek assurance on sustainability, funding use, and quality.
- Breakfast clubs are now part of the school's core statutory offer, not an optional enrichment activity.

5. School Uniform Affordability

Legal requirements:

- Schools may mandate no more than three branded uniform items (excluding ties).
- Applies to maintained schools and academies alike.

Governance role:

- Boards must ensure the uniform policy is compliant.
- Expect potential parental challenge if policies are non-compliant.
- Links directly to equality, inclusion and cost-of-living responsibilities.

6. Admissions, Place Planning and Academies

Key changes:

- Local authorities gain stronger powers to direct academies to admit specific children, particularly vulnerable pupils.

- Increased statutory expectation of co-operation on admissions and place planning.
- Repeal of the automatic requirement to issue academy orders for schools causing concern, allowing more flexible intervention models.

Implications for trusts and governing boards:

- Reduced scope for operating independently of local systems.
- Admissions decisions increasingly framed around fair access and inclusion, not solely organisational preference.

7. Accountability, Inspection and Teaching Workforce

The Act also introduces:

- Multi-academy trust inspections, strengthening system-level accountability.
- Updated provisions on teacher misconduct, qualifications and induction, including in academies.
- Powers to intervene where an academy proprietor fails to meet statutory duties.

8. Key Questions for Governors and Trustees

Boards should assure themselves that:

- Safeguarding arrangements reflect new multi-agency expectations.
- Attendance and pupil movement processes can withstand external scrutiny.
- The school is compliant on breakfast clubs and uniform rules.
- Admissions practices reflect lawful co-operation requirements.
- Leaders understand the strategic and financial implications of the Act.

Summary for Schools

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026:

- Raises expectations of school leadership accountability
- Reduces autonomy where this conflicts with child wellbeing and inclusion
- Places safeguarding, attendance and affordability at the heart of governance oversight