

Briefing Paper:

Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 - 2026: Summary and Analysis for Safeguarding Partners

Newcastle Safeguarding Children Partnership (NSCP)

Date: March 2026

Audience: Statutory and relevant safeguarding partners across education, local authority services, health, police, voluntary and community sector

Purpose of this Briefing

This briefing provides safeguarding partners with a detailed and integrated overview of the changes introduced in Working Together to Safeguard Children (WTSC) 2026, comparing them directly with the 2023 guidance. It draws on the full statutory guidance documents, the official Summary of Changes, and the DfE's implementation support materials. Its purpose is to support strategic understanding, local alignment, and preparation for implementation.

Context and Rationale

WTSC 2026 represents a significant shift toward a more integrated, anti-discriminatory, child-centred safeguarding system. Compared with 2023, the 2026 edition strengthens expectations around multi-agency accountability, inclusive practice, Family Help, and recognition of multiple and overlapping harms.

Key drivers for change include:

- Evidence from national reviews indicating the need for earlier and more coherent support for families.
- Stronger expectations for multi-agency leadership, data use, learning cultures and independent scrutiny.
- National reforms across children's social care, including the Children's Social Care National Framework and investment in local system improvements.

The 2026 guidance also extends clarity that safeguarding duties apply to all children—those living with birth families, in kinship care, adopted, looked-after, in custody, and unborn children where vulnerabilities are known.

What This Means in Practice

Stronger Expectations for Inclusive, Anti-Discriminatory Practice

WTSC 2026 reinforces that all safeguarding practice must be actively anti-racist and anti-discriminatory. Leaders and practitioners are expected to challenge racism, recognise how discrimination affects engagement and outcomes, and adapt practice accordingly.

This marks a shift from 2023's general emphasis on equality duties toward 2026's explicit requirement for anti-racist, culturally competent practice embedded throughout assessment, Family Help and child protection processes.

Introduction and Consolidation of the Family Help Model

WTSC 2026 integrates targeted early help and Section 17 support into Family Help, creating a unified system with:

- One multi-disciplinary team around the family
- One shared assessment
- One co-produced Family Help plan

This explicitly replaces the more fragmented early help/statutory CIN split in 2023. The expectation is for relational, consistent practitioners and seamless pathways as needs change.

Clearer Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA)

WTSC 2026 provides:

- Clearer definitions of roles of Lead Safeguarding Partners (LSPs)
- Strengthened accountability structures
- Explicit expectations for analysis of disproportionality and racism
- Stronger expectations for data sharing and evidencing impact in annual reports

Compared to 2023, MASA responsibilities now explicitly include looked-after children and require deeper integration with education, early years, probation, and voluntary sectors.

Expanded Guidance on Specific Harms and Contextual Safeguarding

WTSC 2026 significantly strengthens guidance on:

- Child sexual abuse (CSA)
- Domestic abuse and coercive control
- Teenage relationship abuse
- Online harm
- Group-based exploitation
- Harm outside the home (extra-familial harm)

Section 47 procedures now emphasise:

- Robust, joint multi-agency assessments
- Direct work with children
- Strategy discussions that explicitly consider CSA and contextual factors

Compared to 2023, 2026 adds extensive detail about infants, unborn children, and intersections between harms.

Strengthened Child-Centred Practice Across All Ages

WTSC 2026 emphasises:

- Specific vulnerabilities of babies
- Pre-birth assessment
- Observing non-verbal cues

This expands the 2023 position where unborn children were referenced but not embedded throughout the guidance.

Education and Early Years as Central Safeguarding Partners

WTSC 2026 gives early education and childcare settings a significantly expanded role, with:

- Clear expectations for participation at strategic and operational levels
- Integration into MASA
- Recognition of their role in early identification and ongoing support

This is a notable strengthening from 2023, which emphasised engagement mainly at operational levels.

Learning Culture and System Improvement

In contrast with 2023's emphasis on learning from reviews, 2026:

- Establishes expectations for a continuous learning culture
- Strengthens expectations for timely learning from serious incidents
- Embeds data-driven impact evaluation

This aligns with national reforms to support multi-agency improvement.

Conclusion

The shift to Working Together 2026 represents a significant step change in how partners work together to safeguard children, placing greater emphasis on earlier support, integrated Family Help, and more consistent, equitable responses across the system. Through the introduction of new structures and ways of working in 2025 the Newcastle SCP is well positioned to respond to these reforms, particularly our multi-agency culture and shared commitment to improving practice. However, WTSC26 also challenges the partnership to work on those areas that we know remain to be addressed in 2026/27.

Challenges for partner organisations include adapting in areas such as information sharing, identifying the impact of their direct work with children, and the analysis of disproportionality and lived experience. As partners build confidence in these new expectations, the system should see clearer pathways, reduced duplication, and improved responsiveness to children experiencing multiple, overlapping risks.

Over the coming months, the Partnership's focus will be on responding to WTSC26 in a coordinated and purposeful way. Agencies will need to work together to review their policies, strengthen workforce training, ensure education and early years have a more central role in decision-making, and test understanding to resolve operational barriers. Maintaining strong communication and transparent learning across agencies will be essential, supported by robust scrutiny that helps us stay focused on impact rather than process.

By approaching implementation collaboratively and with a shared commitment to children's lived experience, Newcastle is well positioned to deliver the outcomes that Working Together 2026 seeks to achieve.