Stronger Health & Safety for Schools Ahead

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A Safer Tomorrow: Why 2025/26 Demands a New Standard for Health & Safety in Schools

As we enter the 2025/26 academic year, health and safety has emerged as a top priority for school leaders across the UK. With shifting policy landscapes, heightened accountability, and growing environmental pressures, schools are now expected to adopt a more strategic, embedded approach to managing risk.

This article outlines the key drivers behind this shift, the policy expectations that schools must meet, and the practical steps leaders can take to embed proactive safety into every aspect of school life. It aims to be a valuable resource for those navigating this increasingly complex—but crucial—domain.

Understanding the Changing Landscape of School Safety

School health and safety has traditionally focused on the fundamentals—fire drills, risk assessments, first aid, and incident reporting. While these remain critical, today's expectations extend much further.

Recent guidance from the Department for Education, alongside intensified scrutiny from Ofsted and local authorities, has redefined what "good practice" looks like. Health and safety is now seen as a leadership function—on par with

safeguarding, finance, and curriculum.

Key changes include:

- **Strengthened Policy Requirements**: Schools must have up-to-date, written health and safety policies that clearly outline roles, responsibilities, and governance structures. These must be reviewed annually and be tailored to the individual risk profile of the school.
- **Comprehensive Risk Management**: It's no longer acceptable to have generic risk assessments. Schools must evaluate a wide range of site-specific risks—across science labs, PE departments, trips, kitchens, and more.
- **Enhanced Fire Safety Compliance**: Fire risk assessments must now be completed or reviewed annually, with attention to fire doors, evacuation plans, and staff training. In older buildings, fire strategy documents are expected.
- **Improved Reporting and Investigation Standards**: Schools must demonstrate they are RIDDOR-compliant, including robust processes for incident investigation and evidence-led reporting.
- **CDM (Construction Design and Management) Duties**: Any construction work—even small refurbishments—must comply with CDM regulations, requiring documented responsibilities and risk controls.

Environmental and Emerging Risk Factors

School safety concerns are no longer confined to slip hazards and science goggles. The education sector is grappling with a range of new challenges:

- **Air Pollution**: A recent study found that every new school being built in England is located in an area exceeding WHO air pollution guidelines. Schools must now factor environmental data into site risk assessments.
- **PFAS in School Uniforms**: These "forever chemicals"—used to make uniforms stain-resistant—are under review due to potential long-term health effects. Schools are being encouraged to review supplier certifications and product safety disclosures.
- **Climate Resilience**: During extreme heat events, many schools have restricted outdoor play or even closed early. This has prompted calls for new premises standards, incorporating shaded outdoor spaces and

revised thermal comfort strategies.

- **Inclusion, Accessibility, and Wellbeing**: The concept of safety now includes the physical and psychological wellbeing of pupils and staff. Inclusive design, sensory spaces, and mental health risk assessments are gaining traction in school planning.

What School Leaders Should Be Doing Now

1. **Audit and Assess**
    - Commission a full-site health and safety audit, covering classrooms, external spaces, equipment, storage, and transport.
    - Review existing risk assessments for relevance and update all documentation to reflect changes in activities or premises.
2. **Revise Policies and Procedures**
    - Update your written health and safety policy to meet 2025 standards, clearly outlining who is responsible for what.
    - Include new sections on emerging risks, like heat, air quality, and chemical exposure.
3. **Engage Certified Professionals**
    - Use external specialists for fire risk assessments, CDM consultancy, and accident investigation to ensure full regulatory compliance.
    - Consider appointing a competent person to oversee the health and safety portfolio at a strategic level.
4. **Plan for Construction and Change**
    - Any refurbishment, build, or installation project should be accompanied by a CDM-compliant risk management plan.
    - Ensure responsibilities between client, contractor, and designer are contractually documented and reviewed.
5. **Promote a Culture of Safety**
    - Embed health and safety into school culture, including staff CPD, student awareness, and leadership visibility.
    - Ensure that safety discussions are a standing item in SLT meetings and governor reports.

Preparing for Policy Developments

The DfE is expected to issue revised statutory guidance by early 2026, with

Ofsted potentially incorporating more robust health and safety checks into inspections. Schools that act now will be better prepared to:

- Demonstrate compliance under scrutiny
- Qualify for capital funding linked to infrastructure safety
- Reduce insurance premiums through proactive risk management
- Avoid disruption due to preventable incidents or non-compliance

Conclusion: Leading Safely Into the Future

Health and safety is no longer a peripheral function—it is a core pillar of effective school leadership. By embedding proactive, evidence-led safety practices, schools can ensure not only legal compliance but also a more resilient, inclusive, and future-ready environment for all pupils and staff.

2025/26 presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The best-prepared schools will be those that recognise safety as a driver of trust, stability, and long-term success—not just a box to be ticked.

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