Tes safeguarding report 2026 international edition

From compliance to culture: building a proactive safeguarding future

Based on 2,415 responses from British international, IB and other international schools.



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This report is designed to be read in full or consulted by section. It's written specifically for heads, principals, safeguarding leads, board members, proprietors and group leaders in British international, IB and other international school settings.

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Why this report matters

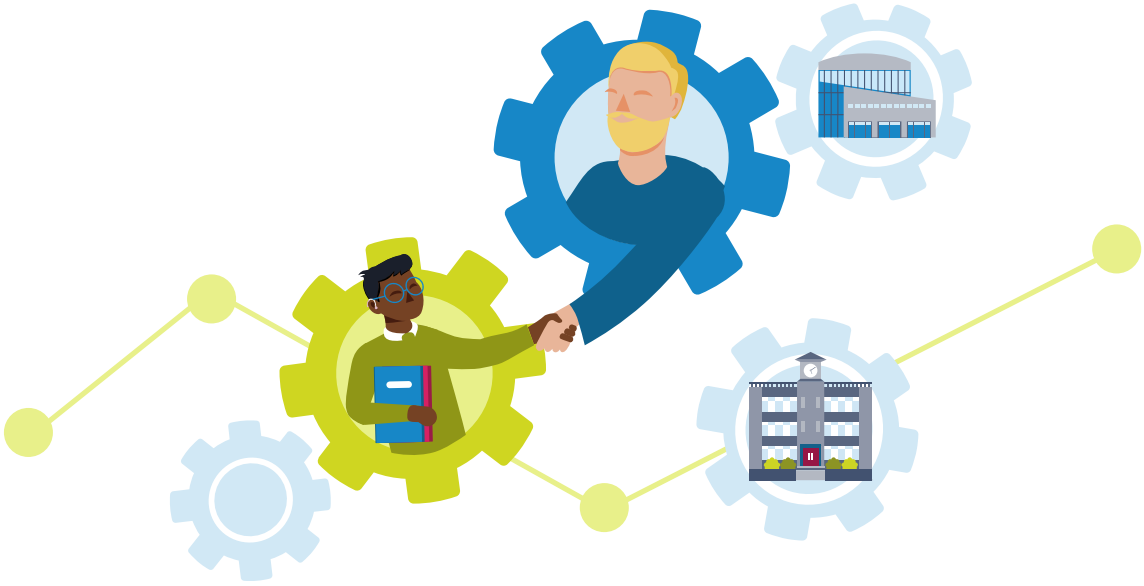
For international schools, safeguarding in 2026 is no longer defined only by policy documents, safer recruitment checklists and the requirements of the nearest accreditation body. It's defined by whether a school can build a culture that catches concerns early, responds consistently, appropriately and quickly, and creates enough trust for concerns to be noticed and reported before they escalate. In an international school, that challenge is more complex than it sounds.

International schools can't rely on compliance alone because the compliance environment itself is variable. Law, mandatory reporting obligations, local child protection services, cultural definitions of harm, police response quality and social care infrastructure vary significantly across host countries. That variability means the school's own governance, culture and systems must carry more of the safeguarding burden. Where the external safety net is absent or unreliable, what happens inside the school is what children and families depend on.

This report is designed for the people who carry that responsibility: heads and principals navigating complex communities, board members and proprietors setting governance expectations across contexts, group leaders standardising practice across multiple schools and jurisdictions, and the safeguarding leads and DSLs who hold the operational weight of child protection in some of the most demanding working environments in international education.

What makes this edition different

This is the most comprehensive international school safeguarding survey Tes has conducted. With 2,415 respondents drawn from British international, IB and other international schools across more than 50 countries, it's the largest globally gathered school safeguarding dataset Tes has produced. It combines that survey evidence with the most current guidance from CIS, COBIS, ITFCP, ECIS, UNESCO and UNICEF to produce a report that goes beyond description. Every section answers four questions: What does the evidence show? Why does it matter in an international context specifically? What does strong practice look like? And what should leaders do next?



About this survey

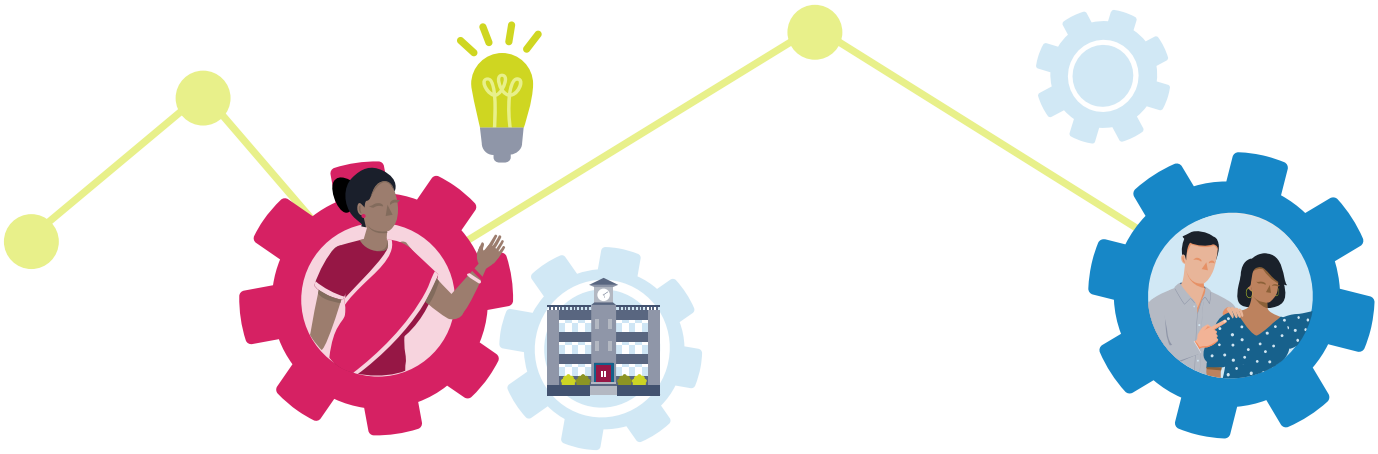
In early 2026, Tes conducted its most expansive global safeguarding survey to date, gathering 4,501 responses. The 2,415 international responses that form this report represent the largest internationally gathered school safeguarding dataset Tes has produced. They draw from British international schools, IB World Schools and other international settings across every major region of international education.

All 2,415 international responses are included. Sensitivity analysis comparing the full base against a speed-filtered subset showed a maximum difference of 0.2 percentage points across all key indicators. The full-response base is a defensible and stable foundation.

Indicator	Result
Total international respondents	2,415
British international schools	912 (37.8%)
IB World Schools	479 (19.8%)
Other international schools	1,024 (42.4%)
Open-text responses on excellent safeguarding culture	1,589
Open-text responses on what they would change	1,529
Best-practice examples shared	1,225
Descriptions of biggest concern for next 12 months	1,413

A truly global dataset: where respondents came from

One of the most striking features of this survey is its geographic reach. Respondents came from more than 50 countries across six world regions. This isn't a dataset dominated by a single region or school type. It reflects the full breadth of international education: from established British international schools in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific to IB schools across Africa, Latin America and Europe, and independent international schools across every inhabited continent.



Regional distribution of identified international respondents

Region	Percentage of respondents
South and Southeast Asia (Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, India, Philippines, Myanmar, Brunei, Pakistan, Laos, Cambodia)	27%
Sub-Saharan Africa (South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda, Ghana, Togo, Zimbabwe, Mauritius, Seychelles, DRC, Cameroon, Sierra Leone)	21%
Middle East and North Africa (UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Iraq)	17%
Europe (Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Netherlands, Germany, France, Norway, Poland, Italy, Austria, Cyprus, Albania, Czech Republic, Moldova, Romania, Montenegro, Azerbaijan)	15%
Americas (Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Panama, Canada, Costa Rica, Honduras, Peru, Venezuela, Guatemala, Haiti, Trinidad, Jamaica, Caribbean)	11%
East Asia and Pacific (China, Hong Kong, Japan, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Australia, Fiji)	10%

The top individual countries by identified respondents were: UAE and wider Middle East (89), South Africa (51), Thailand (39), Singapore (38), Portugal (37), Mexico (34), Kenya (30), Malaysia (29), Nigeria (25), Vietnam (22), Indonesia (21), China (18), Egypt (18), Spain (16), India (16), New Zealand (14), Brazil (14) and Panama (12). Respondents who didn't identify a specific country, comprising the majority of the IB and British international sub-samples, are distributed across these regions and beyond.

This geographic diversity is itself a finding. The challenges this report describes, the confidence-consistency gap, the governance imperative, the staff turnover risk, the parental engagement complexity and the absence of reliable external support services, aren't regional phenomena. They're experienced across the full spectrum of international education, from Abu Dhabi to Auckland, from Nairobi to Amsterdam, from Bangkok to Bogota.



Executive summary

For international schools, safeguarding in 2026 is shaped by a distinctive version of the same challenge facing domestic systems: how to build trusted, consistent and proactive safeguarding practice in communities where legal frameworks, cultural expectations, service infrastructure and governance arrangements don't always align. That tension makes culture not a nice-to-have but the fundamental operating mechanism. Where the external system is variable, internal culture is what safeguarding depends on.

The survey doesn't suggest international schools are unaware of this. 56.4% of respondents place their school at Stage 4 or 5 on the safeguarding culture maturity model. But the implementation picture is less secure than in the UK sample, and the gap is largest where it matters most.

Staff confidence in recognising concerns sits at 87.1% and confidence in reporting at 84.1%, but consistency across staff falls to 72.4% and confidence after whole-school training drops to 71.3%. That's a 14.7 percentage point gap between recognising and reliably doing. In international settings, where turnover is high, regulatory oversight is variable and local services may be unavailable, that gap carries more risk than in domestic systems.

The pressure points are also distinctively international. Parental engagement is the third highest challenge (38.7%), ahead of both its UK ranking and most domestic equivalents. This reflects the reality that international school communities often navigate competing cultural assumptions about privacy, discipline, the role of the school and the definition of harm itself. At the same time, online harms, mental health and inconsistent staff practice are all highly prominent, in a context where many schools can't access the external specialist services that would relieve those pressures.

56.4%
Stage 4 or 5 on culture maturity model

87.1%
Staff confident recognising concerns

72.4%
Practice consistent across all staff

83.8%
Support a global safeguarding charter

87.1%
Support mandatory lead-role training

64.3%
Would likely or possibly sign the charter

The three international tensions this report explores

Culture ambition is ahead of operational consistency. International schools understand the need for whole-school safeguarding, but practice is less evenly embedded than in the UK, and the gap between awareness and reliable delivery is wider.

Context variability makes governance more important, not less. Where law, local services, cultural norms and regulatory frameworks differ, boards, owners and leadership teams carry a heavier safeguarding responsibility than their domestic counterparts.

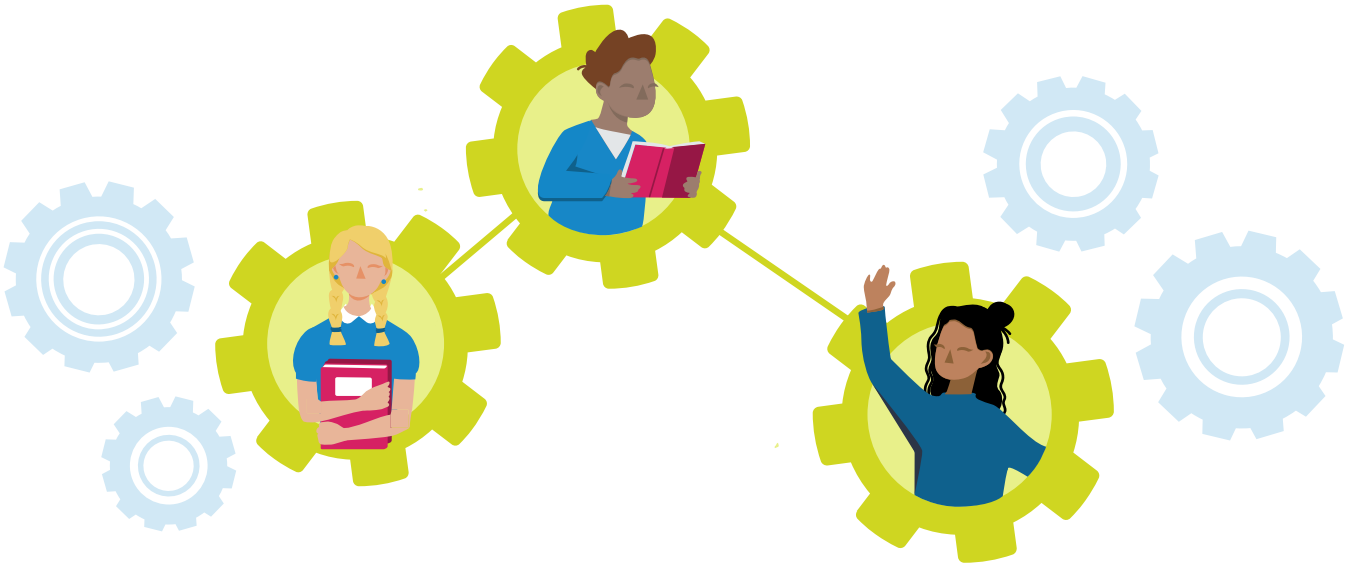
The sector wants coherence. The highest reform appetites in the entire dataset are in the international sample. Schools aren't resisting accountability. They're asking for shared standards that reduce ambiguity across diverse contexts.

What this report gives you

If you're a **head or principal**, this report should help you identify where your current safeguarding culture relies too heavily on goodwill, familiarity or local custom, and what more disciplined infrastructure looks like in practice.

If you're a **board member, proprietor or group leader**, it should sharpen your governance questions: about oversight, role design, reporting routes, safer recruitment and your own understanding of what the ITFCP, CIS and COBIS frameworks actually require of you.

If you're a **group safeguarding lead,** it should help you decide what must be standardised across all your schools, and where contextual adaptation is genuinely necessary rather than simply unavoidable.



1. Why international schools need a culture-led safeguarding model

The most important structural difference between safeguarding in a UK school and safeguarding in an international school isn't a matter of commitment or capacity, it's a matter of what the external environment provides.

In England, KCSIE sets a statutory baseline that every school works from. In international settings, there's no single equivalent. Law, mandatory reporting obligations, police response quality, social care infrastructure, cultural definitions of harm and language for safeguarding can all vary significantly depending on where the school operates.

That variability doesn't make safeguarding less important. It makes the school's own governance, culture and systems more important. When the external safety net is absent or unreliable, what happens inside the school walls is what children and families depend on.

1.1 The variable compliance environment

CIS membership standards place whole-school safeguarding, child protection and wellbeing explicitly within the school's core standards framework, requiring policies and procedures to support safeguarding and safe learning environments across the whole community[1].

COBIS requires the highest standards of safeguarding and safer recruitment as conditions of membership, and expects regular training in both child protection and safer recruitment practices from all member schools[2].

From 1 September 2025, the British International Schools Safeguarding Consortium (BISSC), which brings together COBIS, FOBISIA, BSME, LAHC, NABSS, AoBSO and the Safeguarding Alliance, introduced a unified Safer Recruitment Code of Conduct as a benchmark for all member schools[2].

But even with these frameworks in place, the critical point stands: in international settings, schools are often operating without the local statutory scaffolding that UK schools can call upon. There's no Ofsted visiting with a clear inspection framework. There's no Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) provision to refer to. There's no local authority children's social care with a defined threshold. The school is, in many cases, the first and most capable safeguarding institution in a child's immediate environment.

1.2 What the standards bodies now expect

The ITFCP Expectations for School Communities (2021) define a clear operational standard for international school safeguarding: schools should provide multiple avenues for reporting concerns, centralise reports of suspected or disclosed abuse, securely archive records regardless of outcome, review them periodically to identify patterns, and create meaningful partnership opportunities with families and guardians[3].

The 2025 ITFCP and ECIS Safeguarding Governance Resource Pack for International Schools goes further, adding strategic board oversight, safeguarding risk registers, named safeguarding board members, annual safeguarding reports to the board and clear protocols for managing critical incidents[4].

ECIS's child protection certificate programme, aligned to the enhanced Child Protection Standards, treats safeguarding culture as a community responsibility, explicitly requiring that every stakeholder, from classroom teacher to board member, understands their role. This approach is recognised by NEASC, MSA and Cambridge Assessment International Education as evidence of accreditation alignment[5].

1.3 Governance is the foundation

These frameworks point in a single direction. In international settings, governance isn't the administrative layer on top of safeguarding. It's the structural foundation that safeguarding rests on. Where there's no external regulatory enforcement, boards, owners and school leaders carry the responsibility that in domestic settings is partly carried by statute.

What culture-led safeguarding means in an international context

In an international school, 'culture' should never mean informality or relational goodwill alone. The international version of culture-led safeguarding is disciplined: strong governance, multiple reporting routes, rigorous record-keeping, safer recruitment that works across borders, regular scenario-based training and a whole-school understanding of how to act when local systems are unclear or unresponsive. The culture is the system, because often there is no other system to rely on.

"A culture where everyone feels responsible for safeguarding, staff feel comfortable raising concerns, students feel safe to speak up and clear procedures are followed. It also includes good communication with families and regular staff training."

International school respondent

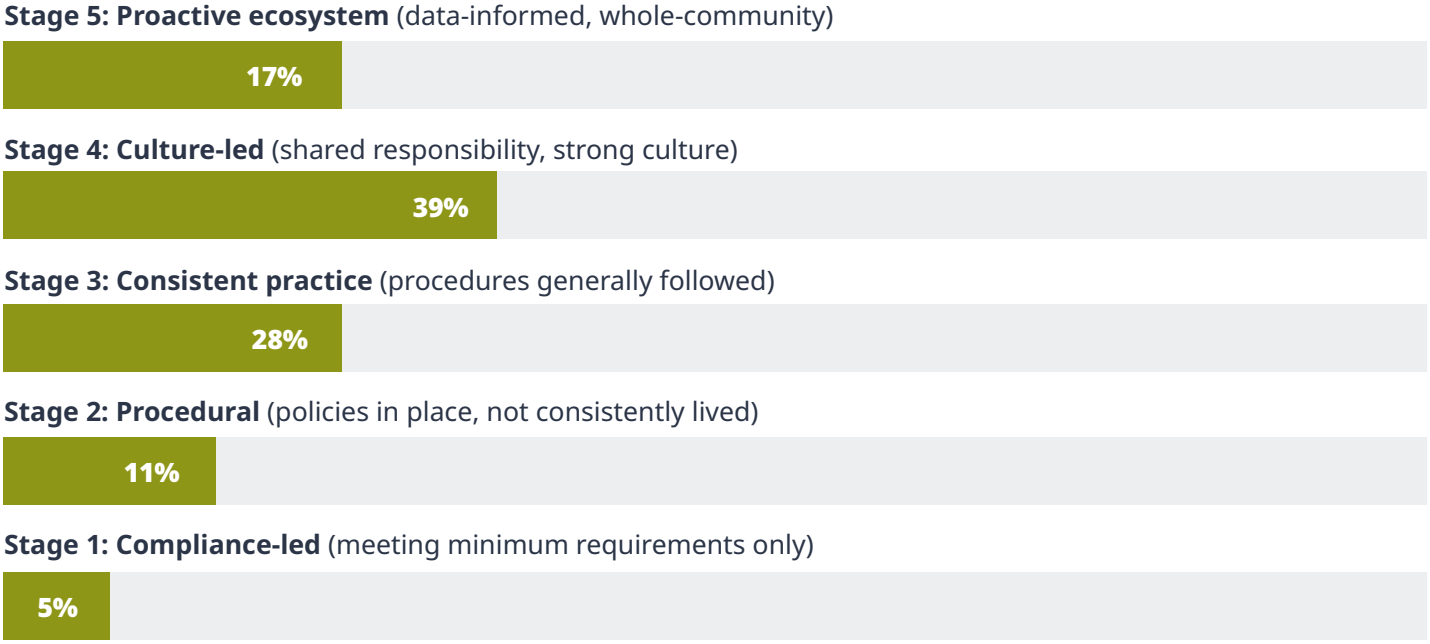
"When the community has a shared understanding of what safeguarding means for the school, in spite of the host country having varied practices."

International school respondent

2. The culture shift: visible but uneven

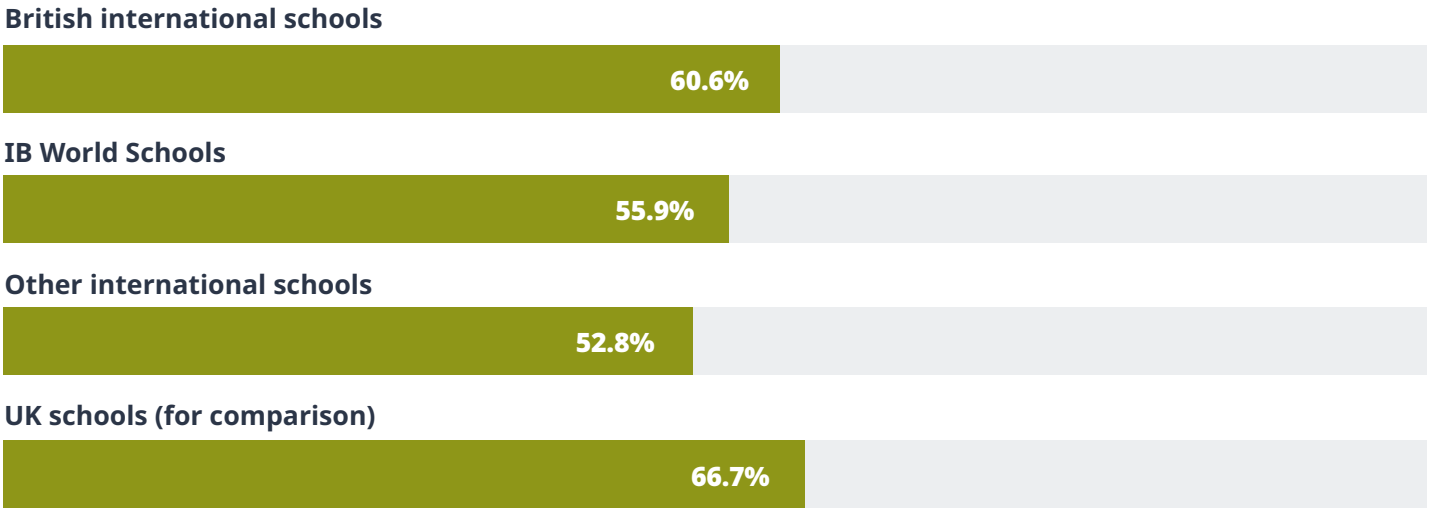
International schools aren't one safeguarding story. The 2026 survey asked respondents to place their school on a five-stage safeguarding culture maturity model, from Stage 1 (compliance-led: meeting minimum requirements only) to Stage 5 (proactive ecosystem: anticipatory, data-informed, whole-community approach). The results show a common direction of travel across all international school types, but with meaningful variation that reflects different operating frameworks, different access to external support and different organisational cultures.

Culture maturity: international sample self-placement (2,415 responses)



56.4% of international respondents place their school at Stage 4 or 5. That's a real signal of ambition and progress. But it's 10.3 percentage points below the UK figure of 66.7% and the gap at the lower end is equally significant: 14.9% of international respondents place themselves at Stage 1 or 2, compared with 9.6% in the UK. These aren't small differences. They reflect the additional challenge of building consistent culture in environments where the external compliance landscape doesn't provide the same baseline.

Respondents placing their school at Stage 4 or 5 by school type



British international schools sit closest to the UK pattern, possibly reflecting closer alignment to the English safeguarding framework, its language and expectations. IB schools often demonstrate strong student-wellbeing orientation and mission-driven culture, but more mixed operational standardisation. Other international schools face the widest variation in local systems and safeguarding terminology, and are most likely to be building practice with fewer external reference points.

The important insight for group leaders and proprietors isn't that one type is inherently safer. It's that the same cultural aspiration is playing out under different operating conditions and that what produces reliable safeguarding in one context may not produce it in another. That's why standardisation decisions at group level matter so much.

"A culture where safeguarding is proactive, consistent and viewed as everyone's responsibility. Reporting should be easy, built on facts and prepared for worst-case scenarios."

International school respondent

"An excellent safeguarding culture is one where safety and child protection are lived and breathed rather than just policy."

International school respondent

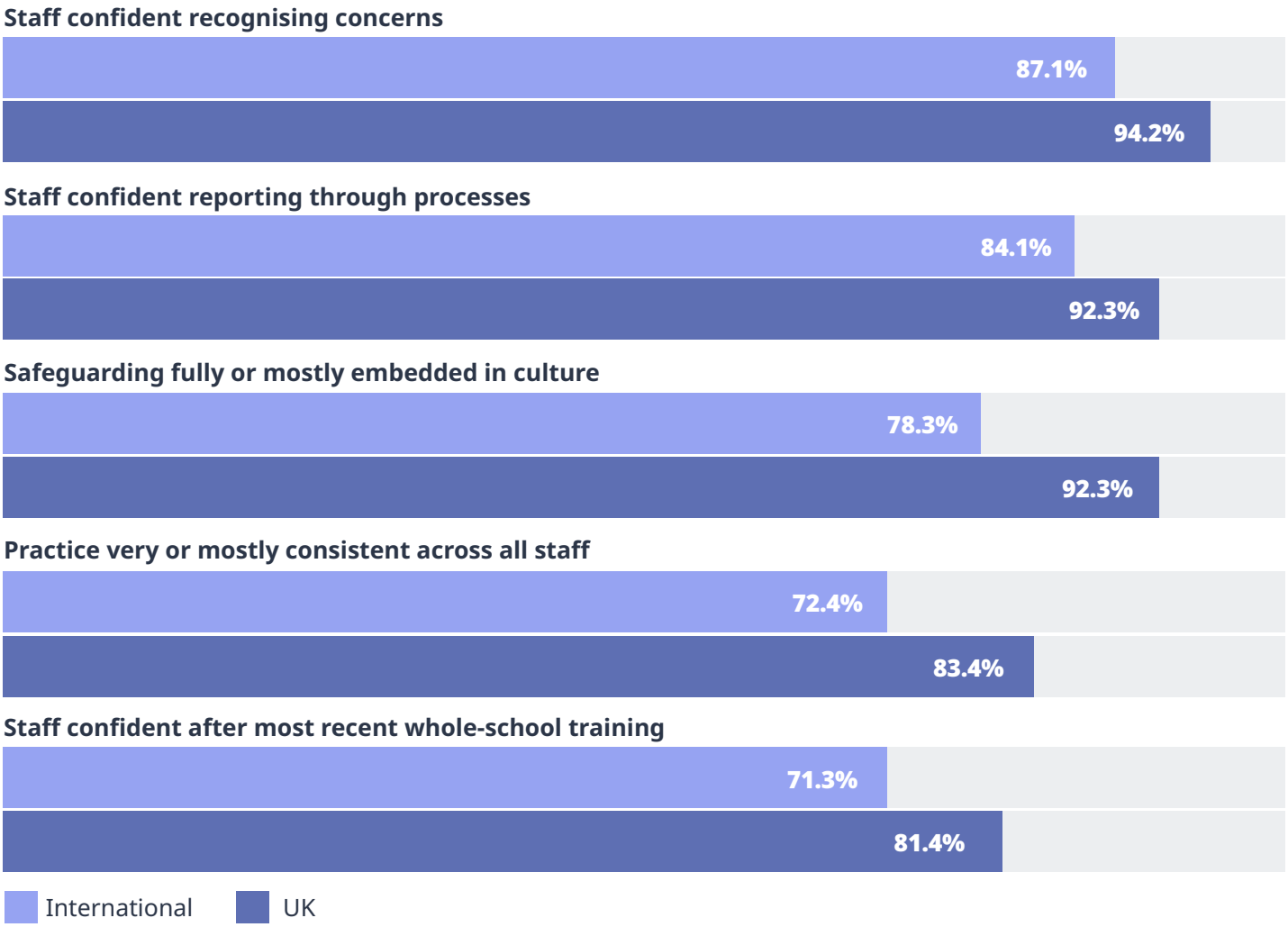
So what? Using maturity as a diagnostic

A Stage 4 self-assessment isn't assurance. An international school can feel culturally strong and still be operationally fragile when a lead role changes, when a new cohort of staff arrives mid-year, or when a case arises that requires interaction with an unfamiliar local authority or agency. The diagnostic question isn't 'What stage are we at?' but 'Where is our culture most likely to break down when tested by turnover, pressure or ambiguity?'

3. The confidence-consistency gap: larger than in the UK

The single most important operational finding in the international data is a recognition-to-delivery gap that's meaningfully larger than in the UK. Awareness of safeguarding is comparatively strong. Shared, repeatable practice across all staff and contexts is less secure. And because international schools often operate without the external regulatory infrastructure that helps reinforce domestic practice, that gap carries more risk.

International versus UK: confidence and consistency profile



The gap between recognition confidence (87.1%) and practice consistency (72.4%) is 14.7 percentage points. In the UK, the equivalent gap is 10.8 points. The international gap is wider because international schools combine a higher baseline variability in staff backgrounds, training histories, language and cultural reference points with a lower level of external enforcement. The result is that even where awareness is reasonable, it translates into reliable whole-staff practice less consistently.

In thematic analysis of 1,589 international responses to the question on excellent safeguarding culture, the most common themes were shared responsibility (30.4%), wellbeing and support (23.9%), training and confidence (19.9%), clear reporting (19.5%) and trust and student voice (12%). In the 'what would you change' responses, training and confidence rises further. Respondents aren't describing policy gaps, they're describing confidence and consistency gaps, which is exactly what the quantitative data shows.

"The whole school speaking the same language of how school needs to be a safe place for every child. Not just a policy. A lived understanding."

International school respondent

"If I could change one thing, it would be to strengthen the culture of early reporting and professional curiosity among all staff. Sometimes teachers or support staff hesitate to report small observations because they are unsure if they are significant enough. Normalising that conversation changes everything."

International school respondent

What the consistency gap looks like in practice

The practical test for an international school is whether a newly arrived teacher, a part-time support worker, a boarding supervisor, a teaching assistant whose first language isn't English and the principal would all make broadly similar decisions when facing a low-level concern, a student disclosure or an online incident. In many international schools, the survey suggests, the honest answer is, not reliably. Not because people don't care, but because the shared language, the shared training and the shared expectation has not yet become deeply enough embedded across all roles.

The consistency standard for international schools

International safeguarding culture passes the test not when senior leaders respond well to high-profile incidents. It passes the test when a newly recruited teacher three weeks into their first international posting knows what to do with a quiet disclosure from a Year 9 student on a Saturday afternoon in a boarding school. That level of consistency requires more than a policy document. It requires scenario-based training, clear induction, visible reporting routes and a culture where it's normal rather than exceptional to raise concerns.

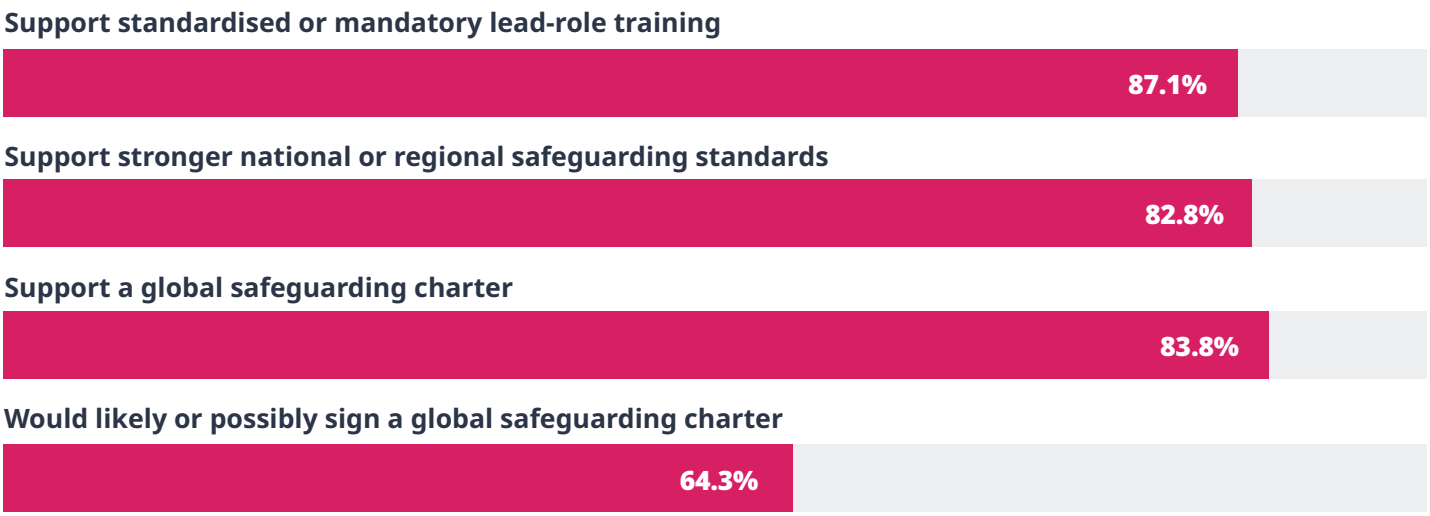
4. Governance is safeguarding: not separate from it

The governance dimension of safeguarding is more prominent in the international context than in any domestic equivalent. This isn't because international boards are less capable or less committed. It's because they carry a heavier load. In the absence of a single statutory framework, the board or ownership structure is often the only body with the authority to set, enforce and quality-assure safeguarding expectations across the school.

The reform appetite in the international survey reflects this. 87.1% of international respondents support standardised lead-role training, 82.8% support stronger national or regional standards, 83.8% support a global safeguarding charter and 64.3% say their school would likely or possibly sign one.

This is the highest reform appetite across the entire 4,501-response global dataset. International schools aren't resisting accountability. They're asking for clearer, shared standards that reduce ambiguity and help boards, owners and school leaders make better decisions.

Support for safeguarding governance reform: international respondents



What the ITFCP and ECIS governance frameworks require

The ITFCP and ECIS Safeguarding Governance Resource Pack published in February 2025 is the most operationally specific governance framework available to international schools. It includes a governance safeguarding audit, example wording for the board's role in safeguarding, a designated safeguarding board member role profile, a board safeguarding training checklist, a safeguarding risk register template, an annual safeguarding report checklist and case studies for board-level discussion[4].

This isn't aspirational guidance. It describes what a competent board of an international school should be doing. The board or owner is ultimately responsible for safeguarding students from harm. It oversees and monitors the school's strategic safeguarding risks. Without that oversight, the DSL or equivalent lead is operating as the entire safeguarding system, with no governance layer to provide scrutiny, resource decisions or quality assurance.

"A school where leaders at every level, from the board to the classroom, understand their safeguarding role and actively model the culture they want to create. Not just a policy on the wall."

International school respondent

What strong governance looks like in practice

Strong international school governance isn't about quarterly safeguarding compliance checks. It's about the board having genuine visibility of how safeguarding culture is operating in practice: whether reporting routes are trusted, whether training is reaching all staff, whether the lead role is sustainably resourced, and whether the school's safeguarding assumptions hold across the cultural and linguistic diversity of its community.

The governance question that changes the conversation

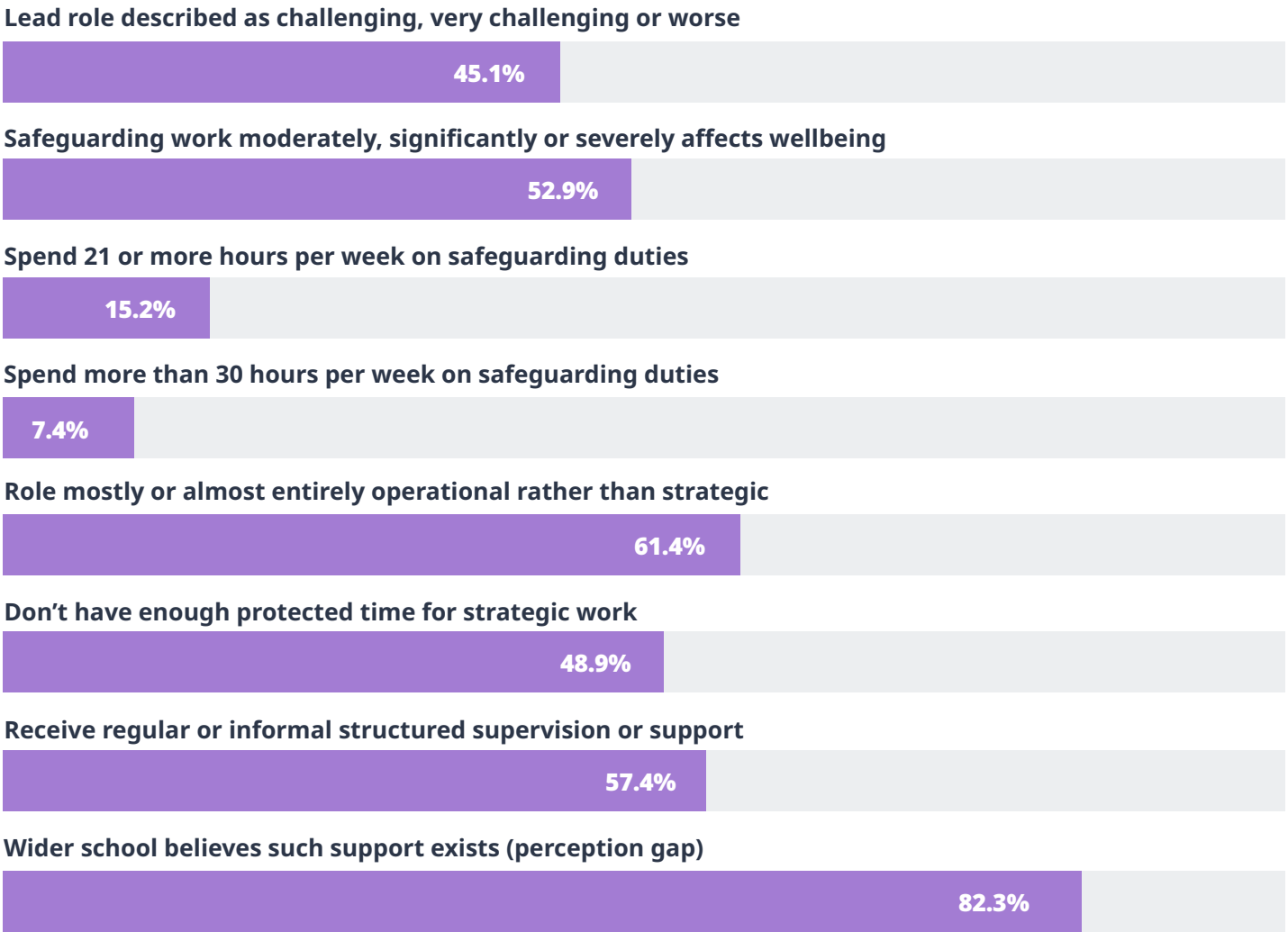
Not: 'Do we have a safeguarding policy and a named DSL?' Better: 'How does the board know that safeguarding expectations are understood, lived and overseen consistently across recruitment, induction, reporting, student voice, family engagement and critical incidents? And what would we see if that assurance was misplaced?'



5. The lead role under strain

The international report confirms the same broad finding as the UK: proactive safeguarding culture is difficult to build when the lead role is too operationally stretched. But it adds a second and specifically international warning: boards and school leaders may significantly overestimate how well supported that role currently is.

Safeguarding lead role: capacity, workload and support gaps



The perception gap is the most striking finding in the lead-role data. 57.4% of international safeguarding leads say they receive some form of structured support. But 82.3% of the wider international sample believe such support exists in their school. That 24.9 percentage point discrepancy suggests that boards and senior leaders significantly overestimate the quality of support their lead is receiving. In a domestic context, that gap is concerning. In an international context, where the lead often has limited or no local professional network, no Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to consult, no local authority guidance to call upon and no UK-style inspection to incentivise improvement, it's a serious structural risk.

5.1 Operational overload and the strategic gap

The majority of international safeguarding leads, 61.4%, describe the role as mostly or almost entirely operational. That means they're managing cases, completing records, responding to incidents and administering processes. The strategic activities on which culture depends, such as pattern analysis, training design, staff coaching, community reporting route development, board briefings and governance partnerships, are being displaced by operational demand. And in an international school where the lead may also be teaching full-time and covering pastoral responsibilities, that displacement can be total.

"If I could change one thing, it would be to give the DSL more dedicated time and space to focus on safeguarding work. The role carries enormous responsibility but is too often squeezed around other duties."

International school respondent

"Safeguarding needs are increasing but the DSL does not have the time or space to deal with each case robustly. The fear of missing signs and symptoms due to lack of time is real and constant."

International school respondent

5.2 The supervision and support gap

The supervision picture in international schools is as concerning as in the UK and potentially more so. DSLs in international settings are often managing sensitive cases involving abuse, exploitation and family violence without the professional network, peer supervision or specialist consultation that domestic DSLs can access. Only 33.2% of UK DSLs have regular structured supervision. The international figure of 57.4% receiving some form of support sounds better but masks the 24.9 percentage point gap between what leads report and what their leaders believe.

5.3 Staff turnover: the hidden safeguarding risk

Staff turnover is one of the most consistently cited safeguarding challenges in the international open-text responses, and one of the most underappreciated in formal risk frameworks. In international schools, annual staff turnover can be significant. Each new cohort of staff brings different training histories, different cultural understandings of safeguarding, different language for harm and different assumptions about their professional obligations. A school that has built a strong safeguarding culture over several years can see significant fragility emerge quickly if induction is inadequate, training isn't embedded and the lead role itself changes.

CIS's 2025 research on professional challenges facing school leaders globally confirmed that board turnover, governance instability and financial pressure are among the most significant challenges international school leaders face[6].

> **"High turnover of staff throughout the year can leave gaps in training, awareness and student supervision, especially out of class time and in boarding contexts."**
>
> **International school respondent**

What strong lead-role design looks like in international settings

- Protected time specifically for strategic safeguarding work, separate from case management and administrative duties, built into the role definition rather than aspirationally stated
- A structured deputy or team model so the lead is never the single point of failure when turnover occurs or workload peaks
- Regular structured supervision with a qualified safeguarding professional, whether in-house, virtual or through a professional network such as CIS, COBIS or ECIS
- A robust safeguarding induction programme that's mandatory before staff begin work, not a box to tick after joining. BISSC's September 2025 Safer Recruitment Code of Conduct sets the standard for what this should include
- Board-level visibility of lead-role capacity, not just policy compliance. An annual board report should include data on caseload, training coverage, supervision and DSL wellbeing

6. Safer recruitment: the foundation that culture depends on

No safeguarding culture can be stronger than the people it depends on. Safer recruitment isn't a pre-employment administrative process: it's the first and most fundamental act of safeguarding that a school performs. In international settings, where verification of qualifications, references and criminal record checks crosses multiple jurisdictions and languages, safer recruitment is also more difficult, more variable in quality and more consequential when it fails.

The ITFCP was formed in 2014 partly as a direct response to the William Vahey case, in which a paedophile abused potentially hundreds of students across international schools around the world while moving between institutions without appropriate checks. That history is why COBIS, FOBISIA, BSME and other leading organisations now treat safer recruitment not as a condition of membership but as the bedrock of safeguarding governance[7].

The BISSC Safer Recruitment Code of Conduct, which came into practice on 1 September 2025, provides a unified benchmark for safer recruitment across British international schools. It covers the full recruitment process from advertisement to induction, standardised application forms, mandatory safeguarding interview questions, reference verification protocols and pre-employment checks[2].

The International Child Protection Certificate

For individuals moving from the UK to work in international schools, or returning, the International Child Protection Certificate (ICPC) provides a criminal record check covering UK history. COBIS, as the ICPC Global Ambassador, helps schools understand when this check is required and how to use it alongside in-country checks[2].

The survey's data on staff turnover and training consistency makes the safer recruitment case directly. A school can't compensate for poor pre-employment screening with training alone. And in contexts where external verification is difficult, the quality of the school's own recruitment process, its application forms, its interview panels, its reference protocols and its induction programme, is the primary safeguard.

The six non-negotiables of international safer recruitment

At minimum:

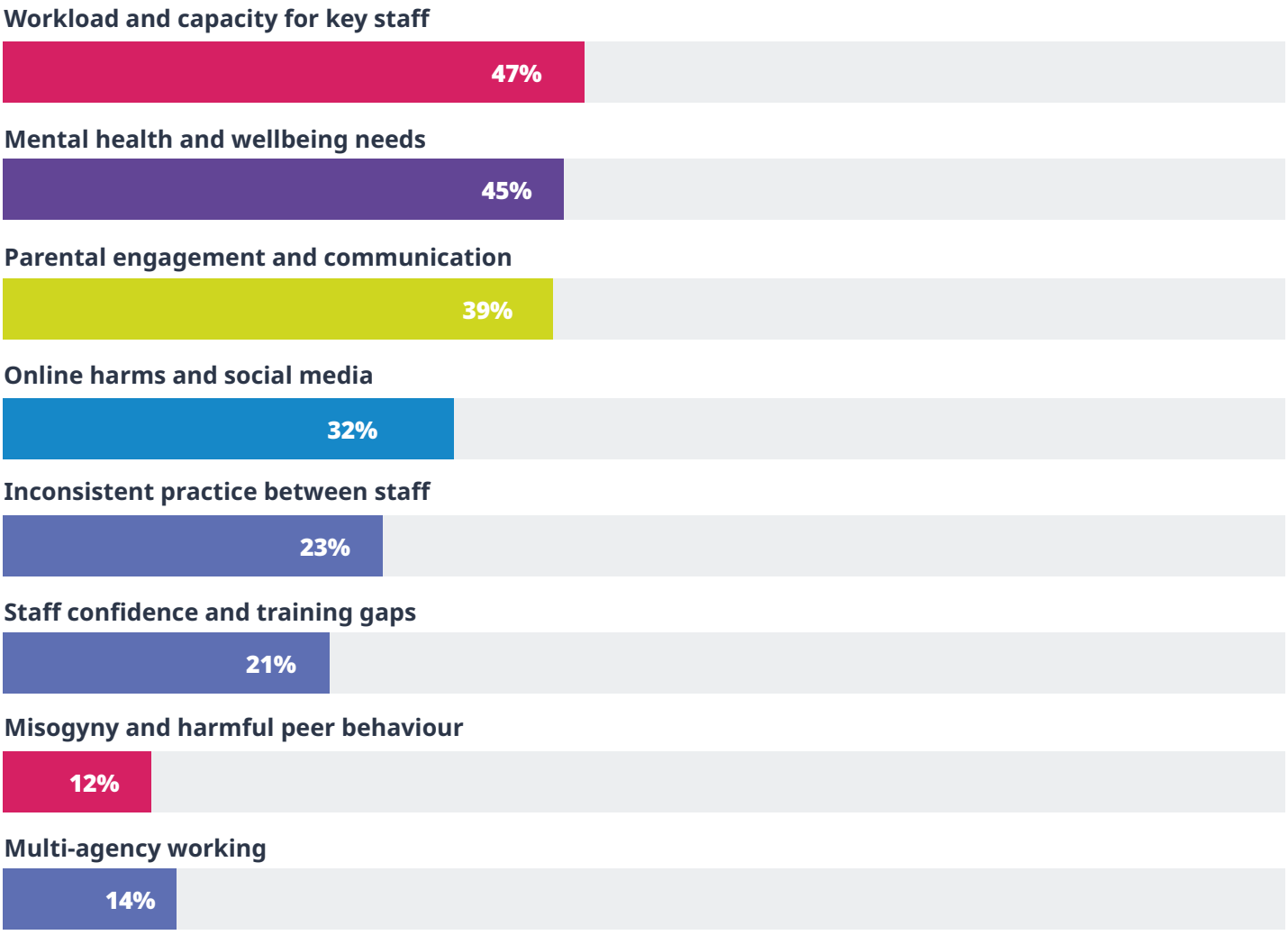
- A standardised application form with a name-change question
- A safeguarding question at every interview
- At least two verified references, including a call to the most recent employer
- An ICPC or equivalent international check where applicable
- An in-country police check
- A safeguarding induction before the staff member has unsupervised access to students

The BISSC Code of Conduct provides the detailed framework. These aren't best-practice aspirations, they're baseline requirements.

7. The pressure points: relational, cultural and digital

The international pressure profile resembles the UK picture in some respects but diverges significantly in others. The pattern matters not only for diagnosis but for what it tells international school leaders about the kind of safeguarding infrastructure they most need to build.

Top safeguarding challenges: international respondents (choose up to 3)



7.1 Mental health without a safety net

Mental health and wellbeing needs rank as the second highest challenge for international schools (44.6%). The challenge is structurally different from in the UK. In the UK, CAMHS exists, however overstretched. In many international settings, there's no equivalent public specialist service. Schools become the default welfare provider not because they choose to, but because nothing else exists within accessible distance or at accessible cost.

For students in boarding contexts, this is particularly acute. A boarder who is struggling doesn't go home at the end of the day to a parent who might notice. The school is, for significant stretches of time, the entirety of their support environment. That creates a safeguarding responsibility that goes beyond what most schools are staffed or resourced to carry alone.

> **"Student mental health continuing to worsen due to stress and social media. And in our setting, there is nowhere to refer them that is truly accessible. We carry more than we should, because there is nobody else."**
>
> **International school respondent**

7.2 Online harms and AI: the boarding context and the global threat

UNESCO's most recent data on school violence and bullying confirms that globally, one in three students is bullied at school every month and cyberbullying now affects one in 10 young people[8]. Among girls and young women, the picture is more severe: 58% face online harassment globally, and victims of bullying are twice as likely to suffer from severe loneliness, insomnia and suicidal thoughts[9].

In international schools, online harm carries a distinctive dynamic. Boarding students are online in their living spaces, in their dormitories and recreational areas, often late at night and without the family oversight that day students have. But these issues aren't limited to boarding. Respondents also described concerns in day-school contexts where parental oversight is reduced by long working hours, frequent travel, delegated care or the false assumption that affluence lowers safeguarding risk. The device that enables students to stay connected with family and friends across time zones is also the device through which harm can reach them around the clock.

On AI-generated harm, the Internet Watch Foundation's 2025 report documented 3,443 AI-generated child sexual abuse videos in that year alone, representing a 26,385% increase on 2024. 65% were classified Category A, the most extreme level under UK law. This material isn't confined to the dark web. IWF analysts have now identified AI-generated child sexual abuse images on mainstream AI chatbot services on the open internet[10].

For international schools, the AI risk has a specific dimension: staff in many international settings receive no training on how to handle a disclosure involving AI-generated content, how to assess the credibility of a deepfake image or how to support a student who has been threatened with synthetic intimate imagery. 11.7% of international respondents have already dealt with an AI-generated safeguarding incident. A further 43.9% haven't yet dealt with such an incident but are concerned they will. Preparation needs to happen before the first case arrives.

"One of the biggest concerns is the increasing impact of online risks and social media on students' wellbeing and safety. Schools need to continue strengthening education and awareness around digital safety, but this is not a curriculum problem alone. It is a safeguarding problem that requires protocols, not just lessons."

International school respondent

7.3 Misogyny and peer harm in international contexts

UNESCO also reports that 246 million children and adolescents experience some form of gender-based violence in and around school every year globally. Up to 25% of adolescent girls experience gender-based violence and up to 40% of these incidents occur at school[9].

In international school communities, where students come from multiple cultural backgrounds with differing norms around gender, relationships and social behaviour, harmful attitudes can be harder to address when they are framed as 'cultural differences'. The survey's open-text responses flag misogynistic language, child-on-child sexual behaviour and the normalisation of harmful attitudes as emerging concerns. Addressing these requires schools to be confident and consistent in naming what's not acceptable, regardless of cultural origin.

"Education of families and students about potential harms. Many are unaware of why some actions are wrong, particularly around misogyny and online behaviour. Families from certain backgrounds do not see this as a school concern. We need to engage them differently."

IB school respondent

What this means for international leaders

The international safeguarding challenge is less helped by assuming that 'policy will solve this' and more helped by building stronger local coherence: better family communication across cultural difference, stronger role clarity for all staff including boarding staff, more consistent training that reflects the specific pressures of your community, more trusted and multiple reporting routes, and more explicit governance oversight of how these domains connect in the lives of real students.

8. Parental engagement: The defining international challenge

The single most distinctive difference between the UK and international pressure profiles is the prominence of parental engagement. In the UK survey, parental engagement and communication ranks eighth in the list of top safeguarding challenges. In the international survey, it ranks third, at 38.7%. That shift isn't incidental. It reflects one of the most genuinely difficult operational realities of international school safeguarding.

International school communities are frequently diverse in ways that directly affect safeguarding. Different cultural assumptions about privacy, disciplinary norms, the role of the school, definitions of harm and the appropriate age for autonomy aren't peripheral to safeguarding practice. They shape whether families see the school as a safeguarding partner or as an intrusive institution. They shape whether a parent reports a concern to the school or handles it privately. They shape whether a student who discloses harm at school then returns home to a family environment that dismisses the concern.

Why parental engagement is a safeguarding issue, not a communications problem

The ITFCP Expectations are explicit that family partnership is a core component of proactive safeguarding, not an optional enhancement. Schools should create meaningful partnership opportunities with families and guardians. That partnership is harder to build when families arrive with different expectations about what the school's safeguarding role is. It's harder still when language creates barriers, when cultural norms make direct safeguarding conversations feel threatening, or when parents believe that raising concerns with the school risks social embarrassment or family exposure.

"Parents and teachers need to be on the same page about safeguarding. Some parents see it as interference. Some think the school has no business asking about home life. Building that partnership is one of the most important and most difficult things we do."

International school respondent

"My biggest concern is ensuring we communicate effectively with families from different cultural backgrounds. Not every family understands or accepts our safeguarding framework. We have to work much harder than a UK school would to build that shared understanding."

International school respondent

Building family partnership that works across cultural difference

Practical steps for culturally competent family engagement in safeguarding

- Translate key safeguarding communications into the primary community languages. A parent who can't read the safeguarding policy can't be a partner in implementing it
- Hold annual community safeguarding conversations rather than just distributing documents. An assembly, a family event or a series of class-level meetings normalises the conversation and signals that the school sees parents as partners
- Train staff in culturally competent safeguarding communication: how to raise concerns with families from different cultural backgrounds, how to listen for different expressions of distress and how to avoid assumptions that harm always looks the same
- Create anonymous reporting routes for students and families who may face cultural or family pressure not to disclose. Student voice tools that allow confidential concern raising are particularly important in communities where speaking directly to authority is culturally complicated
- Be explicit with families about the school's legal obligations and professional duties. Some families disengage from safeguarding conversations because they misunderstand the school's position. Clarity about what the school will and will not share, and why, builds trust rather than eroding it
- If children and families are to receive the right help at the right time, everyone who comes into contact with them has a role to play in identifying concerns, sharing information and taking prompt action. They should consider at all times what's in the best interests of the child. This principle is enshrined in Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child



9. What schools say they need: A detailed look

When international school respondents are asked what would most help them strengthen safeguarding culture, they are specific, consistent and practical. The responses don't describe a sector asking for abstract inspiration or additional policy documents. They describe a sector asking for the conditions that make proactive culture operationally deliverable: protected capacity, better systems, more consistent training and clearer governance.

In the 'what would you change' open text, 1,529 international respondents were clear about their priorities. Training and confidence improvements dominated, ahead of system changes and policy reform. This reinforces the quantitative finding: the international safeguarding gap is primarily a confidence and consistency gap, not a policy gap.

47%
1st priority

More time and capacity for safeguarding leads

Workload and capacity is the top challenge for international schools, as it is for UK schools, but the context amplifies the pressure. In international settings, the lead often has no local professional network to call on, no statutory body to escalate to and may also carry a full teaching timetable alongside safeguarding responsibilities. Protected time for safeguarding is not optional infrastructure. It's the precondition for everything else.

"If I could change one thing, it would be to give the DSL more dedicated time and space to focus on safeguarding work. Currently they have too many other responsibilities and the safeguarding work gets squeezed around everything else."

Staff, British international school

"There is never enough time or resource for the DSL to focus strategically. The role becomes firefighting. We need dedicated DSL time that is protected from teaching and pastoral duties."

Staff, international school

Higher quality and more contextually relevant training

44.6%
2nd priority

Training is the second most prominent challenge and the most prominent improvement request in the open-text data. Respondents aren't asking for more training. They're asking for better training that reflects the specific risks in their setting, the cultural context of their community, the challenges of boarding life and the realities of operating without a reliable external support system. Generic safeguarding courses built for UK domestic settings aren't sufficient for the international context.

"I would strengthen ongoing staff training and awareness to ensure all staff feel confident in recognising early signs of concern and responding appropriately. Continuous training builds consistency and confidence across the whole team."

Staff, British international school

"If I could change one thing, it would be to create more regular spaces for staff to talk openly about safeguarding throughout the year. Small conversations and shared reflections help us stay more aware of students' needs and support each other in responding early."

Staff, British international school

More consistent and culturally competent family engagement

38.7%
3rd priority

Parental engagement is the defining international challenge in this survey, and it generates more open-text comment than almost any other topic. The need isn't simply more communication with families. It's for culturally competent communication: a shared understanding of what safeguarding means, why the school has professional obligations that supersede cultural norms and how families can be partners rather than barriers. Schools that treat parental engagement as a communication task tend to get more polished policies. Schools that treat it as a cultural partnership task tend to get more effective safeguarding.

"Parents and teachers need to be on the same page about safeguarding. Some parents see any concern raised by the school as interference or think their cultural norms should override the school's professional obligations. Building that shared understanding is one of the most important and most difficult things we do."

International school respondent

Stronger online safety systems and clearer digital safeguarding protocols

32.4
4th priority

Online harms rank fourth in international challenges, but the open-text responses suggest this understates the daily operational concern. Social media, group messaging apps, AI-generated content and the particular vulnerability of boarding students to late-night online contact are cited repeatedly. Schools need clear protocols for online harm disclosures, AI-generated content incidents and digital harassment, not only curriculum content about online safety.

> **"Staying on top of online safety risks. Students are spending increasing time online through social media, gaming and messaging platforms. The risks are growing and our staff do not always have the training to identify or respond to them effectively."**
>
> **International school respondent**

More consistent whole-staff practice and shared safeguarding language

23%
5th priority

Inconsistent practice between staff ranks fifth. The international version of this challenge is more acute than its domestic equivalent because international schools draw staff from many countries, each with different training histories, different professional expectations around safeguarding, and different cultural reference points for what harm looks like and what intervention requires. Creating a genuinely shared safeguarding language across a multilingual, multinational staff isn't a training problem alone. It's a culture-building task that requires sustained, scenario-based, context-specific investment.

> **"The whole school speaking the same language of how school needs to be a safe place for every child. Not different understandings depending on where a staff member trained or what culture they come from. One consistent professional standard."**
>
> **International school respondent**

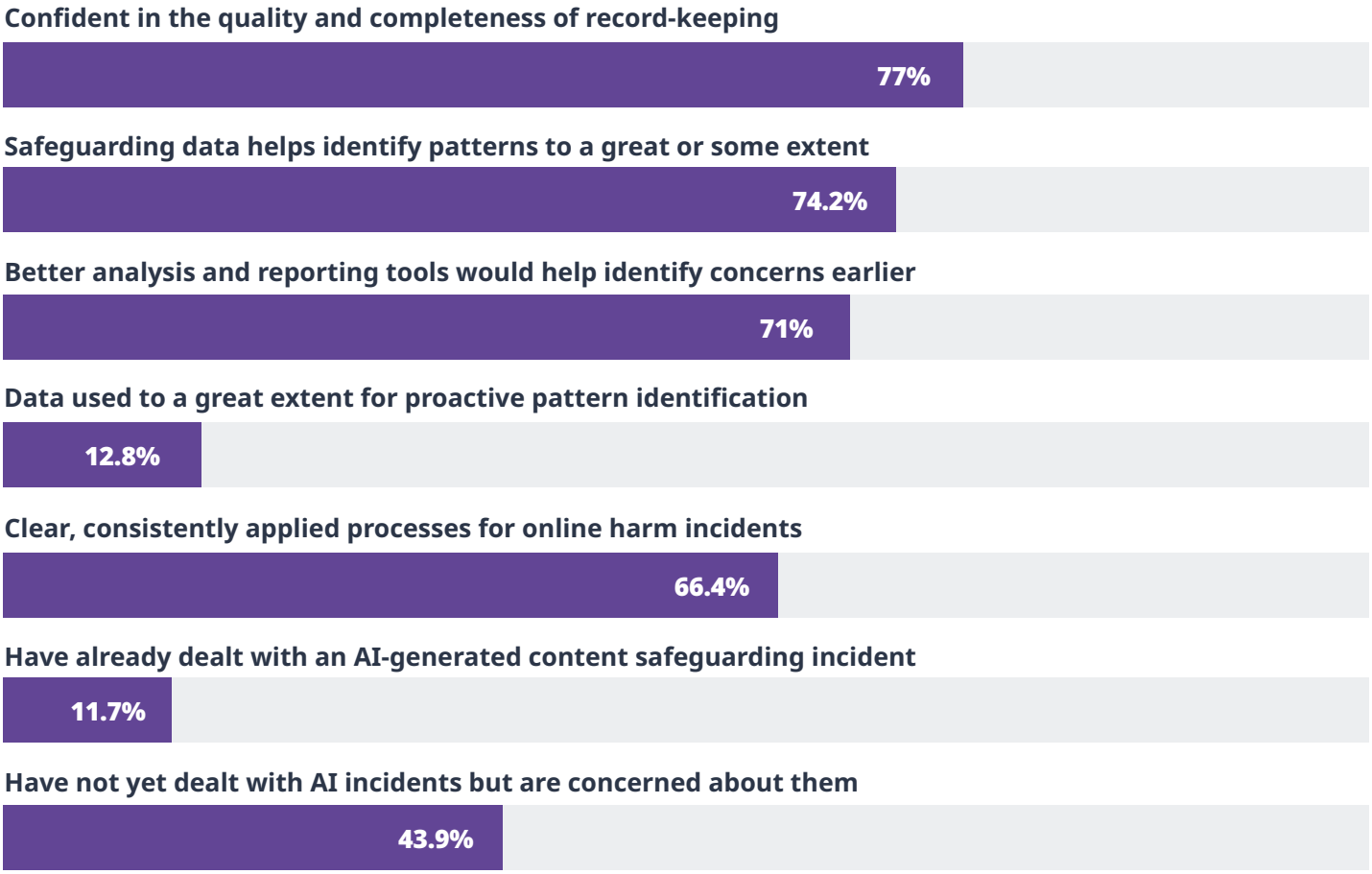
What the open-text data tells us

In thematic analysis of 1,529 international responses to the question on what respondents would change, training and confidence (mentioned by 34.7%) substantially outpaced system and policy changes (18.2%). Respondents describe their ideal improvement not as 'a new policy' but as 'regular, scenario-based training that reflects what we actually deal with in our setting'. That distinction matters. It means the international sector already understands that culture is built through repeated, contextual professional practice, not documentation.

10. Records, reporting routes and pattern recognition

International schools often say they want a stronger reporting culture. The survey suggests this is the right instinct, but that the route to it is more specific than it sometimes appears. The challenge isn't only that concerns go unreported. It's that when concerns are reported, they may not be centralised, connected and reviewed in a way that makes patterns visible.

Safeguarding data maturity: recording, analysis and early identification



77% of international respondents are confident in their record-keeping. 74.2% say their data helps identify patterns to a great or some extent. That is encouraging. The more important finding is that only 12.8% say their data is used to a great extent for proactive pattern identification, against 71% who say better tools would help. Schools are recording information. Most are not yet converting it systematically into early warning.

The ITFCP standard: why multiple reporting routes matter

The ITFCP Expectations are specific: schools should provide multiple avenues for reporting concerns, centralise reports regardless of outcome, archive them securely and review them periodically to identify patterns[3].

In international school communities, multiple reporting routes aren't administrative redundancy, they're safeguarding infrastructure. A student who can't approach a specific adult because of cultural barriers, language, power dynamics or shame needs another route. A staff member who's uncertain whether a concern meets the threshold needs a clear low-level concern route that doesn't require a formal judgment. A parent who wouldn't call the school directly may use an anonymous digital channel.

For international school groups operating across multiple sites, the data picture is even more important. Without a consolidated view across schools, a group leader has no visibility of whether safeguarding is working consistently, whether patterns are emerging in specific schools or regions, or whether the reporting culture that senior leadership believes is in place is actually functioning as intended.

"Where students and staff school-wide feel confident and safe speaking about their concerns and reporting them. And where that information actually goes somewhere. The response matters as much as the reporting."

International school respondent

The proactive data habit in international settings

The rhythm of review is as important as the technology. Strong international safeguarding data practice means regularly asking:

- Which students are appearing most frequently across concern records?
- Are there patterns by dormitory, year group, activity context or nationality?
- Which low-level concerns are clustering around particular staff, settings or time of the year?
- Which concerns have been open longest without escalation?

In a diverse international community, those patterns may reveal cultural dynamics, staffing vulnerabilities or structural risks that no single incident discloses on its own.

11. What strong international safeguarding culture looks like

The open-text responses in the international survey are among the most valuable content in the dataset. They show that international school professionals already understand what strong safeguarding culture requires. The task for leaders is not to introduce new concepts but to translate that understanding into disciplined, repeatable infrastructure.

The most commonly cited elements of excellent international safeguarding culture, drawn from 1,589 responses, are: shared responsibility across all staff and roles, a proactive rather than reactive orientation, student voice and multiple trusted routes to speak up, rigorous records and timely responses, strong family partnership and governance that's genuinely engaged with safeguarding as a leadership question rather than a compliance exercise.

"A perfect safeguarding culture is one where protection is not just a policy, but the school's heartbeat. It is a vigilant, whole-school community where every adult is trained to spot subtle signs of concern, every child feels genuinely empowered to speak up and leaders prioritise the wellbeing of students above all other considerations."

Staff, British international school

"Excellent safeguarding means that the safety and wellbeing of every student is a shared responsibility across the whole school community. Staff are well trained, confident to report concerns and there are clear procedures consistently followed. Students feel safe, listened to and know who they can speak to."

Staff, British international school

"In my setting, excellent safeguarding means that every adult understands that protecting students is everyone's responsibility. Students feel safe, respected and confident to speak to adults. Staff are attentive, maintain confidentiality appropriately and follow clear procedures consistently regardless of their cultural background or first language."

Staff, British international school

Framework domain	What strong practice looks like
1. Governance and values	Boards, owners and leaders can explain not only the policy, but how safeguarding is overseen, reviewed, resourced and communicated. There's a named safeguarding board member, an annual board report and a risk register that's actively used.
2. Safer recruitment and induction	Recruitment processes meet the BISSC Code of Conduct standard. All staff complete safeguarding induction before unsupervised access to students. Induction is adapted to reflect the school's specific context and community.
3. Consistent staff capability	Training is regular, scenario-based and adapted for different role groups including boarding staff, sports coaches, administrative teams and contracted external providers. The goal isn't annual compliance but shared professional judgment.
4. Multiple trusted reporting routes	Students, staff, parents and community members know multiple ways to raise a concern. Digital and anonymous routes are available and actively promoted. Low-level concerns are recorded, not only formal disclosures.
5. Records and pattern recognition	Concerns are centralised, securely archived and periodically reviewed for patterns, not just recorded for compliance. The DSL or equivalent lead has time and tools to identify emerging risk before it becomes crisis.
6. Family and community partnership	Schools invest in culturally competent communication with families. Safeguarding expectations are explained in accessible language. Anonymous routes exist for families who face cultural or social barriers to direct disclosure.
7. Local adaptation with clear standards	Schools adapt safeguarding practice to legal and cultural context but never use context as a reason to lower standards. The ITFCP Expectations, CIS standards and COBIS requirements set the floor, not the ceiling.

12. What leaders should do next

The survey and the external evidence converge on a small number of high-leverage priorities. These aren't universal prescriptions because international school contexts vary enormously. They represent the most impactful investments leaders, groups and boards can make in the next 12 months to make proactive safeguarding culture more consistent, more visible and more sustainable.

For heads and principals

- **Review whether your school's reporting routes are genuinely trusted and truly multiple;** not only a DSL office door, but an anonymous digital route, a student voice channel and a parent-facing concern form. Multiple routes are a core ITFCP expectation, not an optional enhancement
- **Map where safeguarding culture depends on a small number of individuals.** If your current lead leaves, does the culture remain? If a cohort of experienced staff departs at the end of the year, what survives? The answer identifies your structural safeguarding vulnerabilities
- **Invest in training that reflects the specific pressures of your setting:** boarding dynamics, cultural diversity, parental engagement challenges, online harms in residential contexts, AI risks and peer-on-peer harm. Generic training doesn't build context-specific confidence
- **Treat induction as the primary safeguarding investment.** A staff member who begins work without adequate safeguarding induction is a risk from day one. This isn't a cost, it's the foundation

For boards, proprietors and group owners

- **Use the ITFCP and ECIS Safeguarding Governance Resource Pack 2025 as a self-assessment tool.** Identify where governance oversight of safeguarding is genuinely robust and where it's assumed rather than evidenced
- **Appoint a named safeguarding board member with specific training and a brief that goes beyond policy verification.** This person should be asking questions about culture, reporting routes, lead-role capacity and family engagement, not only whether the policy is compliant
- **Require an annual safeguarding report from school leadership that covers:** caseload patterns, training coverage, DSL wellbeing, reporting route usage, safer recruitment compliance and board-level safeguarding risk assessment. Don't accept a summary that tells you only what you want to hear

For group safeguarding leads and regional directors

- **Identify which safeguarding elements must be standardised across all schools in the group,** such as induction, reporting route minimum standards, training cadence, safer recruitment protocols, board reporting format, and which elements need intelligent contextual adaptation
- **Use group-level data to create comparative visibility.** Where is practice strongest? Where is the reporting culture weakest? Where does consistency fall furthest below the average? Target support where the evidence indicates fragility, not where schools are most vocal
- **Build a professional community for lead-role holders across the group.** Isolation is one of the most significant safeguarding risks for international school leads. A peer network that enables case consultation, professional learning and emotional support is a governance investment, not an optional benefit

For safeguarding leads and DSLs

- **Test whether your current record-keeping system enables proactive pattern recognition, not just compliance recording.** If the answer is no, make the business case to leadership for better tools
- **Conduct a low-level concern audit:** how many concerns are being recorded in the week between formal training sessions? If the number drops significantly outside formal training periods, the concern-raising culture is event-driven rather than embedded
- **Identify the cultural groups in your community where safeguarding disclosure is most difficult.** What are the barriers? Language, power dynamics, cultural shame, distrust of authority? Design specific reporting routes and family engagement strategies that address those barriers directly

13. How Tes360 supports international schools

Tes360

Connected platform · Deeper insight · Greater impact

This report has documented a clear and consistent set of challenges. International schools need better reporting infrastructure, stronger pattern recognition, safer recruitment that works across borders, training that reaches all staff in all roles and governance oversight that gives boards genuine visibility of safeguarding culture, not just policy compliance. Tes360 is built to address exactly those needs.

Tes360 is Tes' connected platform for schools and groups, bringing together the tools, data and insight that safeguarding leaders need in one place. For international schools and school groups operating across multiple sites, jurisdictions and cultural contexts, the connections between these products are especially valuable: one supplier, a shared data layer, a single login and a roadmap that is building toward an increasingly connected view of every child.

What Tes360 delivers for international schools

The challenge in international safeguarding isn't a shortage of good intentions but a shortage of connected infrastructure. Attendance patterns, safeguarding concern records, SEND provision data and behaviour information sit in separate systems reviewed by different people at different times.

Tes360 is building the connections that allow the right people to see the right information about each child, earlier, so that safeguarding is preventive rather than reactive.

Five Tes360 products are directly relevant to international school safeguarding. Each delivers value independently. As connections between them deepen, the insight compounds.

Secure safeguarding case management, purpose-built for international school settings

MyConcern

- Centralises all safeguarding concern records in a single secure platform, creating the archive that ITFCP Expectations require and eliminating the risk of paper-based records being lost in staff transitions
- Pattern identification across concerns by student, concern type, staff member, location and time period: the analytical capability that enables proactive safeguarding rather than reactive response
- Multiple reporting routes built-in – student voice, anonymous community reporting, staff concern logging and staff allegations – all on the same platform, so nothing is missed regardless of who raises it or how
- Secure transfer of records when students move between schools, including internationally, so safeguarding history follows the child rather than staying with the institution
- Directly integrated with Tes Clarity for cross-school and group-level reporting, and now includes direct access to Tes Safeguarding Training within the platform

Cross-school safeguarding intelligence for international school groups

Clarity

- Built directly on Tes MyConcern case data, providing group leaders and regional safeguarding leads with a consolidated view of safeguarding practice across all schools, not just the ones that are loudest
- Identifies where reporting culture is strongest and where it's weakest, enabling targeted governance attention and proportionate support rather than blanket intervention
- Produces the kind of evidence-based, group-level reporting that ITFCP and ECIS governance frameworks recommend: pattern data, trend analysis, site comparisons and risk flagging
- Particularly valuable for groups whose schools operate across multiple legal and cultural contexts: Clarity provides the consistent view that no individual school-level system can generate

Contextually appropriate, role-specific training for international school communities

Safeguarding Training

- Unlimited access to interactive online safeguarding courses updated continuously to reflect current guidance from COBIS, CIS, ITFCP and KCSIE for schools with British curriculum alignment
- Role-specific pathways designed for international contexts: boarding staff, sports coaches, administrative teams, early years practitioners and DSL advanced training all included
- Modules specifically addressing the international safeguarding challenges this report identifies: cultural competence, online harms in boarding contexts, AI risks, peer-on-peer harm and safer recruitment processes
- Training completion data available for governance reporting, providing boards with evidence that training has reached all staff groups including those most often overlooked
- Now available to purchase and manage directly within MyConcern, linking training needs identified through case patterns to targeted professional development

Behaviour and attendance intelligence that connects to safeguarding

Class Charts

- Real-time behaviour and attendance tracking that gives pastoral and safeguarding leads early visibility of students whose patterns are changing, including in boarding and residential contexts
- Safeguarding concerns can be raised from Class Charts directly into MyConcern, so that a behaviour or attendance signal and a safeguarding record are linked rather than filed separately
- Learning support data from Tes Learning Pathways is visible within Class Charts, giving every adult interacting with a student daily access to their full support context without switching systems
- Parent communication app: transparent, regular school-to-family communication that helps build the trust that makes parental engagement in safeguarding conversations more likely

Learning support, intervention and early help provision connected to the safeguarding picture

Learning Pathways

- Documents learning support, intervention and early help provision for individual students, creating the evidence trail needed to support multi-agency working in contexts where external agencies may be less familiar with the school's internal processes and support model
- Learning support and provision data feeds into Class Charts, so pastoral leaders and teaching staff can see a student's full support context alongside behaviour and attendance patterns in one view
- Supports the integrated approach highlighted in this report as most effective: safeguarding, learning support, mental health and early help understood as one joined-up picture of student vulnerability, rather than being addressed in separate conversations

Tes360: A connected vision, built for international complexity

For international schools, the Tes360 roadmap matters especially because the connections between data domains are especially consequential. Take a student who's struggling in a boarding house late at night, presenting with changing behaviour in class, flagged by a teaching assistant in a concern record and receiving a SEND intervention that their classroom teacher doesn't know about; that's not one story, it's one child in five separate systems. Tes360 is building the platform that connects those systems so the right adults can see the whole picture, earlier.

Schools and groups can start with the Tes360 product that solves their most urgent priority today. There's no requirement to adopt everything at once and no disruption to existing management information systems or core infrastructure. As connections deepen, the value compounds.

Join the movement:
Tes Safeguarding Awareness Week, 18–22 May 2026

Safeguarding Awareness Week 2026 brings together international school leaders, safeguarding professionals, board members and governance experts to explore what proactive safeguarding culture looks like in practice across diverse global settings.

This year's campaign includes the Global Safeguarding Principles Charter, expert webinars specifically designed for international schools, governance resources, practical toolkits for boarding and day contexts, and case studies from schools demonstrating excellence across diverse cultural and legal environments.



Register now: tes.com/safeguarding-awareness-week

Conclusion: The standard we hold

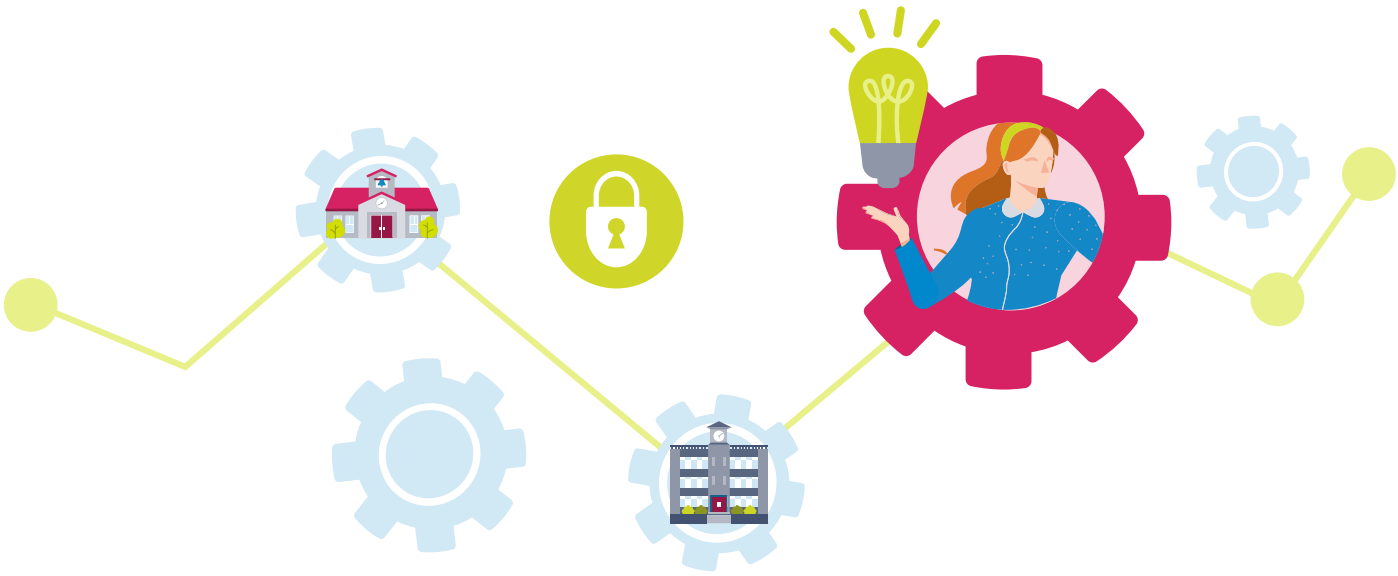
International schools exist in every corner of the world. They serve children from hundreds of nationalities, operate in dozens of legal jurisdictions and navigate cultural expectations about childhood, harm, authority and disclosure that are as varied as the communities they serve. The safeguarding challenge this creates is real. But the survey evidence is unambiguous: the international school community understands what needs to be done.

The 87.1% who support mandatory qualification for safeguarding leads. The 83.8% who want a global charter. The 56.4% who already describe their school as culture-led. The 1,589 respondents who described excellent safeguarding not in terms of policies but in terms of shared responsibility, trusted reporting, professional curiosity and child-centred relationships. These are not descriptions of a sector in denial. They are descriptions of a sector that knows what good looks like and is asking for the infrastructure and coherence to deliver it more reliably.

The standard that international schools are holding themselves to isn't 'compliance with whatever the host country requires'. It's the global standard that COBIS, CIS, ITFCP and ECIS have collectively articulated: whole-school safeguarding culture, safer recruitment across borders, trusted and multiple reporting routes, rigorous records, governance oversight and family partnership. That standard exists not because it's easy to meet in international contexts, but because the children in international schools deserve nothing less.

That is the standard Tes is committed to supporting. Through this research, through professional development, through technology and through the conviction that every child, wherever they're educated, deserves a school where they're genuinely, consistently and reliably safe.

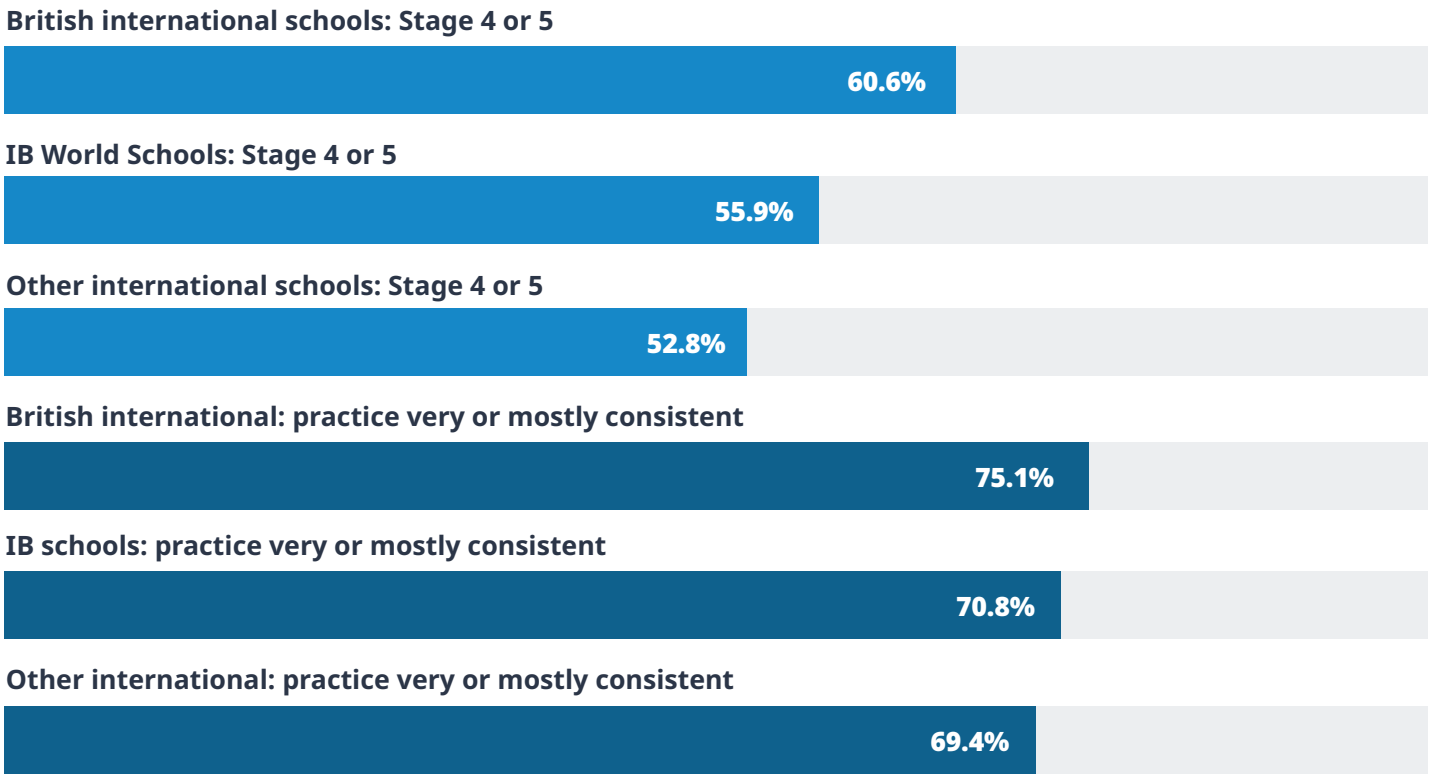
Safeguarding culture in an international school isn't defined by what the host country requires. It's defined by what the children in your care deserve.



Appendix A: International school-type snapshot

The international sample is strongest when read comparatively. British international, IB and other international schools are moving in the same broad direction, but not at the same pace or with the same operating assumptions. The subgroup readings below are directional rather than definitive.

Culture maturity and safeguarding practice by school type: international respondents



British international schools show closest alignment to the UK safeguarding framework, possibly reflecting more direct access to British safeguarding guidance, COBIS membership standards and KCSIE-informed training. IB schools often demonstrate strong student-wellbeing orientation and mission language, but less consistent operational standardisation. Other international schools navigate the widest variation in local systems and standards, and are most likely to be building culture in the absence of external reference frameworks.

For groups and proprietors, the value of this comparison isn't to rank school types. It's to calibrate which elements of your safeguarding model need to be more explicitly standardised across settings and hich need intelligent adaptation to context. The more variable the external environment, the more important it is to strengthen internal governance, training and reporting infrastructure.

Appendix B: Leadership question bank

These questions are designed to turn this report into a live leadership tool in school leadership meetings, governor and board sessions, and group safeguarding reviews.

For heads and principals

- If your current DSL or safeguarding lead left tomorrow, would the culture remain? What structural safeguarding vulnerabilities does that question reveal?
- Can every adult in the school describe their safeguarding responsibility in their own role, including boarding staff, sports coaches, administrative staff and external contractors?
- Are your reporting routes genuinely multiple? Is there a route for a student who can't approach a specific adult? A route for a parent who would not call the school directly? An anonymous option for staff?
- When did you last review whether safeguarding training content reflects the specific pressures your community actually faces, rather than a generic international template?

For boards members and proprietors

- Does the board have a named safeguarding member who receives specific training and asks informed questions about culture and implementation, not only policy compliance?
- When did you last receive an annual safeguarding report from school leadership that covered caseload patterns, DSL capacity and wellbeing, training coverage and reporting route usage?
- How does the board know that safer recruitment is functioning as intended across all staff groups, including contracted and support staff?
- How do you know that the safeguarding culture your senior team describes is the culture that students and junior staff actually experience?

For group leaders and regional safeguarding leads

- Which safeguarding elements are standardised across your schools and which are left to local school discretion? Is that boundary drawn in the right place?
- Do you have consolidated data that enables you to compare reporting culture, training coverage and concern patterns across schools in the group?
- Which schools in your group are most isolated from professional safeguarding support? What specific infrastructure do those schools need that others may take for granted?

For safeguarding leads and DSLs

- How many low-level concerns are being recorded between formal training events? If the number drops significantly, the reporting culture is event-driven rather than embedded
- Which cultural groups in your community face the highest barriers to safeguarding disclosure? What specific routes exist for them?
- When did you last have structured reflective support or supervision? If it's not available locally, have you asked leadership to fund it virtually?

Appendix C: 60-minute board or group review agenda

International schools often need a governance conversation, not just a safeguarding conversation. This report is designed to be the backbone of a focused board or group safeguarding review. Use the agenda below to structure a productive 60-minute session.

Time	Focus
10 minutes	Context check. Which parts of this report most closely match your legal, cultural and service environment? Where do you rely too heavily on informal assumptions or individual goodwill?
15 minutes	Reporting and record review. Do students, staff and families have multiple trusted reporting routes? Are records reviewed for patterns or only filed for compliance?
15 minutes	Workforce capability and turnover. Are training, induction and safer recruitment consistent across all staff groups? What happens to safeguarding culture when high staff turnover occurs?
10 minutes	Governance clarity. Is there a named board or proprietor role for safeguarding oversight focused on culture as well as policy? When did the board last review safeguarding with this lens?
10 minutes	Action decisions. Agree three actions for the next term: one about governance, one about workforce consistency and one about community and family engagement.

High-value governance questions for the board or group

- How do we know students trust our reporting routes? What evidence do we have, not assume?
- What evidence do we see of safeguarding culture beyond policy compliance? What do staff and students say?
- How are local legal expectations balanced with our international safeguarding standards when they conflict?
- Where is safeguarding ambiguity most likely to arise in our setting? What structural change would reduce that ambiguity?
- What happens to safeguarding culture in this school when significant staff turnover occurs? Is the culture held by the system or by the individuals?

Appendix D: Methodology and data quality

This report uses the full international subset of the 2026 Tes safeguarding awareness survey: 2,415 responses from British international, IB and other international schools. All responses are included, regardless of completion speed. Sensitivity testing against the response-quality flags shows that the core findings don't materially change when faster completions are removed.

Indicator	Result
Stage 4 to 5 culture maturity: full base versus filtered	**56.4% vs 56.3% (diff: 0.1 pts)**
Staff confident recognising concerns: full base versus filtered	**87.1% vs 86.9% (diff: 0.2 pts)**
Staff confident reporting concerns: full base versus filtered	**84.1% vs 84.0% (diff: 0.1 pts)**
Culture fully or mostly embedded: full base versus filtered	**78.3% vs 78.1% (diff: 0.2 pts)**
Practice very or mostly consistent: full versus filtered	**72.4% vs 72.2% (diff: 0.2 pts)**

The survey is self-reported and therefore reflects perception as well as practice. It's not an accreditation judgement or an audit against any single framework. Because international settings vary substantially by legal context and support infrastructure, the report should be read as a cross-context diagnostic rather than as an attempt to collapse all international schools into a single operating model.

Open-text responses were analysed thematically using keyword-led coding and close reading. In the international sample: 1,589 respondents answered the question on excellent safeguarding culture; 1,529 responded to the question on what they would change over the next year; 1,225 shared best-practice examples and 1,413 described their biggest concern for the next 12 months. All quotes are lightly edited for spelling, capitalisation or clarity only, and attributed at school type and role level to preserve anonymity.

Appendix E: References and external sources

1 Council of International Schools. Membership Standards: Whole-school Safeguarding. Your school ensures that policies and procedures support safeguarding, child protection, well-being, and safe learning environments, communicated and implemented across the community. cois.org/for-schools/membership-standards

2 Council of British International Schools. Safeguarding Statement and Safer Recruitment standards. BISSC Safer Recruitment Code of Conduct in practice from 1 September 2025. COBIS is the ICPC Global Ambassador. cobis.org.uk/services/safeguarding

3 International Task Force on Child Protection. Expectations for School Communities (2021). Schools should provide multiple reporting avenues, centralise records, securely archive regardless of outcome, review patterns, and create meaningful family partnership. cdn.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ITFCP-Expectations-for-School-Communities-Dec2021.pdf

4 International Task Force on Child Protection / ECIS. Safeguarding Governance Resource Pack for International Schools (February 2025). Includes governance audit, designated board member role profile, safeguarding risk register, annual report checklist and case studies. cdn.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ITFCP-Safeguarding-Governance-Resource-Pack-2025.pdf

5 ECIS. Child Protection Training and Certification, aligned to enhanced Child Protection Standards. Community responsibility model. Recognised by NEASC, MSA and Cambridge Assessment International Education. ecis.org/child-protection

6 Council of International Schools. Professional and Personal Challenges facing School Leaders around the World in 2025. 471 international school leaders in 103 countries. Board governance, financial pressure and staff management identified as leading challenges. cois.org/about-cis/perspectives-blog

7 Tes Magazine. Safer recruitment: the challenge for international schools (December 2024). ITFCP formed following the Vahey case. COBIS, FOBISIA and BSME cited as driving sector change on safer recruitment standards. tes.com/magazine/analysis/general/safer-recruitment-challenge-international-schools

8 UNESCO. Violence and bullying in schools: UNESCO calls for better protection (November 2024). Globally, one in three students reports being bullied at school monthly. Cyberbullying affects one in ten children. Victims twice as likely to suffer loneliness, insomnia and suicidal thoughts. unesco.org/en/articles/violence-and-bullying-schools-unesco-calls-better-protection-students

9 UNESCO. International Day against Violence and Bullying at School, including Cyberbullying (November 2025). 58% of girls and young women face online harassment globally. 246 million children experience gender-based violence in and around school annually. Up to 25% of adolescent girls experience gender-based violence; up to 40% of these incidents occur at school. unesco.org/en/days/against-school-violence-and-bullying

10 INEE Minimum Standards. Standard 9: Protection and Wellbeing. Learning environments should be free from physical and psychosocial harm; education and child protection sectors should work together. inee.org/minimum-standards/standard-9

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