

Health and Safety in Schools

An introduction to our four-pillar approach



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By law, schools must be run in ways that make sure, “so far as is reasonably practicable”, that employees, pupils and visitors are not exposed to health or safety risks under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974.

Risk assessments are vital in lawfully managing risk exposure.

They help school employers decide what steps should reasonably be taken to prevent or reduce the risks in their setting.

WorkNest’s extensive experience working alongside schools has led to the development and refinement of a General Risk Assessment structured around four key areas of health and safety in an education environment.

This guide is an introduction to our four-pillar approach, the considerations and risk areas for schools, and the ways we can help you.





1. Health and safety management

Just like in any other industry, schools have a duty to consider and manage health and safety appropriately. Time pressures, inconvenience, disinterested staff and a lack of expertise often make this a difficult and unwanted task, but the reality is that this is a non-negotiable aspect of school management.

So why should schools make health and safety a top priority?

Well, the fact of the matter is that whoever goes to work, in whatever industry, they should return home safe and well at the end of the day. Where children and other vulnerable people are involved, health and safety management is even more important.

According to [figures from the Health and Safety Executive \(HSE\)](#), 135 people were killed at work in 2022/23. While education is generally considered lower-risk, the cost of injuries at work is huge, as statistics consistently show. In addition, the rate of self-reported work-related ill health is significantly higher in the education sector than in the majority of other industry sectors.

In education, around 3 million working days (full-day equivalent) were lost in 2022/23 due to workplace injury (16%) and work-related illness (84%).

The requirements of health and safety are based on three things:

1. **A moral duty** to the people who work for you or who are in your care.
2. **A legal responsibility.**

This is split into criminal law, i.e. HSE prosecutions, and civil law, where a member of staff who is injured brings a civil claim.

Under criminal law, the cornerstone piece of legislation that is used to bring prosecutions, and which all employers must be aware of, is the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 (HSWA). Introduced five decades ago, the HSWA still stands today and is an umbrella Act under which other regulations are made.

There are also approved codes of practice which employers must either comply with or prove that they are doing something comparable or better.

In schools, the HSE is the enforcing authority and has extensive powers.

Potential consequences

It is a criminal offence to fail to comply with these duties, and in health and safety law, there is a reverse burden of proof. This means that everyone charged with a criminal offence is presumed guilty until proven innocent, and it is for the employer to demonstrate that they took all reasonable steps to prevent harm occurring. This makes record keeping and documented risk assessments vitally important.

For those at the top, there is a risk of being found guilty of corporate manslaughter or corporate homicide, and directors can be disqualified for up to 15 years. While all prosecutions (even improvement notices) are viewable on the HSE website, these types of prosecutions and particularly public; cases of corporate manslaughter and corporate homicide often make the news, with potentially devastating effects on the employer's reputation. For schools, this can affect stakeholder confidence and may mean less pupils to the school, thereby affecting funding. Plus, even where the local authority is the employer, schools can be fined too.

In terms of sentencing for these offences, courts can issue fines to virtually any extent – and fines are increasing. For example, if the HSE visits your school (or any workplace) and identifies a material breach of health and safety law, they will immediately start charging what's known as Fee for Intervention – an hourly charge of £174 – for the privilege of prosecuting you. This is before any fines or prosecution costs incurred, so missing the mark on health and safety definitely comes at a price. In this way, the cost of an incident is often far higher than the cost of support.

There have been numerous prosecutions brought against schools in the past few years resulting from failings to manage high-priority issues such as asbestos, violence and progression, and school transport.

3. The final reason, therefore, is the **financial impact** of poor health and safety management, including legal costs, prosecution costs and fines, lost time, staff absences, bad publicity and increased insurance costs, to name a few.

Developing a school safety management system

Safety management within schools can be broken down into four key principles: Plan, Do, Check, Act.

Plan:

Health and safety doesn't have to be complicated; it's all about process, getting organised and thinking about what you're doing. The planning process is about asking: 'Where are we?', 'Where do we need to be?' and 'What are we going to do to fill that gap?' Indeed, should an incident occur, the HSE is more likely to look on you favorably if you have a plan in progress that isn't completely implemented yet than if you have no plan at all.

Do:

The 'do' part of the process is about taking your plan and putting it into action. A central component of this is risk assessment. People often shy away from risk assessment, but we all risk assess in our daily lives – when crossing the road, for example, we stop, look, listen and decide whether it's safe to do so. In this way, it doesn't have to be complicated. There are five steps to risk assessment and five steps to eliminating or controlling hazards.

Our [SafetyNest software](#) very much assists the 'doing' part of health and safety management, allowing you to create risk assessments, assign tasks and monitor your risk status in real time. When it comes to risk assessment in particular, instead of starting with a blank piece of paper, SafetyNest gives you access to a suite of sample risk assessments which can be adapted to your environment.

All employers also need to ensure they have access to competent advice – that means appointing someone with the necessary skills, training, qualifications, experience and technical ability to support you in complying with health and safety requirements. Many schools don't have this level of competence in-house – or have somebody centrally but not at school level – which is where WorkNest comes in.

Staff training is also vitally important, and schools should have a training matrix detailing who's trained in what. Not only is providing training a legal requirement under the HSWA, but it can help to develop staff awareness, competence and confidence around school safety management, ultimately reducing the potential for accidents and incidents. We have a number of courses to help you upskill staff, including our exclusive [IOSH Managing Health & Safety Risk in the Education Sector](#) course, which has been specially designed by based on our extensive knowledge and experience of working with schools, colleges and other education and training providers.



Check:

Once you have implemented your plan, you will need to measure your health and safety performance, and there are many ways to do that: monthly walk-arounds; documenting what you're doing; monitoring accidents, incidents and near misses to identify patterns and problem areas, etc. The ultimate question, of course, is 'Are we doing enough?' Is what you're doing preventing issues? Are your processes and procedures being followed as intended? Are they still effective? If not...

Act:

This is about reviewing performance, revisiting documentation and making changes. Risk assessments and policy documents, for example, require updating on an annual basis.

This is a continuous process, at the centre of which is good leadership.

RIDDOR

Employers must keep a record of all accidents, but certain health and safety incidents must also be reported under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013 (RIDDOR). This includes accidents that result in the person being incapacitated for over seven days, fractures (other than fingers and toes), occupational diseases and dangerous occurrences and fatalities.

Not everything is reportable. In regard to schools for example, injuries sustained during contact sports such as rugby are to be expected and don't need to be reported to the HSE, provided they aren't related to a fault within the organisation or an issue with the premises.

With SafetyNest, you can report any accidents to us in the first instance and we can then advise whether a report needs to be made.

Health and safety management: How WorkNest can help

As part of our unique, education-specific General Risk Assessment, our safety specialists can analyse your existing management structure and its appropriateness for delivering a high standard of health, safety and wellbeing. For example, we will examine: committees, audits and monitoring, risk assessments, training, accident books, methods of communication, and your current certification.



5 steps to risk assessment

1. Identify hazards
2. Decide who may be harmed and how
3. Evaluate the risks and decide on precautions
4. Record your findings and implement them
5. Review your assessment regularly (and always after an incident or whenever there are changes to the workplace) and update it if necessary



5 steps to controlling hazards

1. Eliminate the hazard
2. If this isn't possible, substitute it with something less likely to cause harm
3. If this isn't possible, introduce control measures to reduce the risk to a minimum, for example by isolating the hazard
4. If this isn't possible, change the way people work through training, supervision, signs, etc.
5. If this isn't possible, provide personal protective equipment as a last resort



2. Facilities management

Facilities management is another area that all organisations – not just schools – must consider, and there are examples of good and bad practice.

Here are some areas that schools must manage:

- **Car parks** – Safe vehicle movement on site is essential. To prevent interaction between people and vehicles, schools should use safety zones, crossing points, demarcated bays and signage. Lighting should be sufficient, surfaces should be kept in good condition, and deliveries should be made out of hours where possible.
- **CDM (Construction, Design and Management Regulations 2015)** – Schools often believe that CDM doesn't apply to them, but it does. While some local authorities may manage projects for schools, there will inevitably be school-managed projects. You must therefore make suitable arrangements, including making sure that:
 - Other duty holders are appointed as appropriate and provided with relevant information;
 - Sufficient time and resources are allocated;
 - The principal designer and principal contractor carry out their duties; and
 - Welfare facilities are provided.
- **Contractors** – Anybody appointing a contractor in a business environment needs to ensure they are competent. This means carrying out due diligence on them in the form of contractor appraisals, pre-qualification questionnaires, making sure they have insurance in place and their staff are trained, obtaining risk assessments and method statements for the work to be carried out, etc. Contractor management is an area where schools often fall down when it comes to following the correct process.
- **COSHH** – COSHH is commonly misunderstood. Often, employers feel they have done what they need to do because that have the material safety data sheet; however, this is only part of the process. We recommend a three-step approach:
 1. List the products you have, then determine what you actually need. Dispose of anything that you don't use safely.
 2. From your list of products, obtain the up-to-date material safety data sheet.

3. Use this to inform your COSHH assessment. This should turn the technical document into a more practical aid, pulling out vital information for the user: what the product is, what you use it for, what the hazards are, what your first aid measures are, how you need to store it, how you need to dispose of it, etc. This assessment should be easily accessible at the point of use – not stored away in a cupboard.

This can be laborious, so it's a good idea to cut down on the number of products you use.

It's important that chemicals are stored securely, handled safely and that staff are trained.

Some environments, such as Science and Design and Technology, have the benefit of CLEAPSS, which provides lots of documentation to those types of curriculum areas.

- **DSE** – DSE assessments must be carried out and information, instruction and training provided to DSE users. This also applies to those working from home. You don't need to be a DSE assessor to do one – the person best placed to carry out a workstation assessment is the person doing the work, and this is normally a very straightforward task.
- **Electrical** – Have you got a fixed electrical certificate? This is a statutory document that, in most cases, has to be done every five years by a competent electrician to determine the adequacy of the electrical system and check that it is safe. In our experience, clients often get a certificate and file it away without properly looking at it. However, the report may raise actions that need to be addressed. This is something we can support you with, looking at immediate issues, 'should-dos' and 'nice to haves' and helping you to take remedial action or put programmes in place. Common electrical hazards within schools include overloaded sockets, portable heaters, laptop charging trolleys positioned in fire escape routes, and daisy chain extension leads. Note that in regard to PAT testing, only certain things need to be tested annually.

- **Fire safety** – With approximately 1,500 fires in schools each year, fire safety is a high-priority area for schools. Fires can have a significant effect on the community and individuals, from lost art work to disruption to pupils' learning and a loss of consistency. Every school should have a Fire Risk Assessment; these should be reviewed on an annual basis and we recommend a re-do every third year as a minimum. If nothing has changed, you can review at the intervening two-year mark. Common fire hazards in schools include artwork on walls and in fire escape corridors, which increase fire loading and can accelerate the spread of fire; clutter, such as books and coats; and locked fire escapes. Gas equipment also requires maintenance. In schools, it's particularly important to consider vulnerable occupants – a pupil with a broken leg, pupils with special needs, a disabled member of staff who cannot evacuate as quickly, etc. In those instances, you will need to produce a personal emergency evacuation plan to detail how they will get that person will get out of the building safely. In any business, staff should receive fire awareness training.
- **First aid** – All schools provide first aid. Depending on the nature of the school, there's likely to be an element of administering medication, although schools are increasingly trying to avoid this by having parents administer the medication out of school hours or at lunchtimes. Certain medication such as Ritalin may need to be administered by staff at school, and this is a controlled drug so much be kept under lock and key. Ultimately, you must document everything you do. Schools should have a number of first aiders, or paediatric first aiders in a primary school setting, and should have kits and notices around the school building. Our client portal, MyWorkNest, contains a First Aid Assessment which can be used by any employer to determine your need for first aid cover.
- **Housekeeping** – Day to day, it's important to maintain safe practices and keep an eye out for emerging issues or potential causes of harm. For example, fire exits/extinguishers should be unobstructed, trip hazards should be removed, etc. These are things you should be able to spot and keep on top of yourself through the right practices, but we act as a fresh pair of eyes during annual visits to your school to help make sure nothing is missed.
- **Legionella** – It is a legal requirement to have a Legionella Risk Assessment and this is not something you can do yourself. This risk assessment must be conducted by a specialist; it will determine what's going on with your water systems, whether your controls are adequate and the risk of somebody contracting Legionellosis and be accompanied by an action plan. We have specialists within our wider group of companies who can undertake this for you.
- **Kitchens and dining halls** – These are areas that are often overlooked. Common hazards including folding tables and chairs (which have manual handling implications), retractable seating (which requires maintenance), unguarded mixers (which pose a risk of injury), gas equipment (which should be serviced annually), floor surfaces (which should be maintained in good condition to prevent slips and trips) and roller shutters in the kitchen (which require maintenance). There are a lot of things to think about in regard to kitchens – if you have a contract caterer, you may not give these areas too much thought, but it's important to ensure the necessary checks are in place (depending on how the contract is set up).
- **Lifting equipment** – More and more schools are utilising some sort of lifting equipment. It could be a passenger lift, or if you have a first aid room or a care environment where staff need to assist pupils, then you might have a hoist. Any lifting equipment used for lifting people must have a maintenance scheme in place and will require thorough examination by a competent person (normally your insurer) every six months.
- **Lone working** - This is something every employer must consider. In schools, there is a fair amount of lone working, particularly in respect to caretakers, cleaners, etc. Schools should have a risk assessment in place for these activities, which should determine what cannot be done while alone (e.g. working at height) and decide on appropriate controls such as a buddy system, checking in and out, and methods of raising the alarm.

- **Manual handling** – Manual handling isn't something that is very heavily considered in schools and it might appear that there isn't a lot of manual handling activities involved in a school environment. However, things like books, tables and chairs, PE equipment, and deliveries will necessitate some degree of lifting. Ideally, manual handling should be avoided where at all possible, and if not, aided by the use of mechanical aids. Risk assessments should be in place, and staff should be trained in correct lifting techniques.
- **Vulnerable people** – Certain categories of people require individual risk assessments that are specific to that person. This includes new and expectant mothers and any young people you employ. In the case of a pregnant employee, for example, once you are notified that they are pregnant, you should carry out a risk assessment that is unique to them; some women will sail through their pregnancy, while others may experience health issues that make it harder for them to work, so the assessment must consider specific risks and be reviewed regularly (on at least a monthly basis).
- **PPE** – There are many different kinds of PPE that may be used in schools, from those associated with classroom activities to those used by cleaners and catering staff. PPE should be provided free of charge and maintained and, where appropriate, staff should be shown how to use it through information, instruction and training.
- **Security** – Security is vitally important in schools. This is based around ensuring that people can't get into the school when you don't want them to and, similarly, pupils can't get out when you don't want them to. Schools should have robust security arrangements in place, including emergency procedures for lockdown.
- **Stress** – Stress is a significant and increasing issue and a key focus of the HSE. [Statistics show](#) that stress, depression and anxiety is the leading cause of occupational ill health and the education sector reports significantly higher rates of stress than the average for all industries, with 2,720 cases per 100,000 workers. It's therefore important that schools have processes in place and are actively considering the risk of stress for their staff.
- **Violence and aggression** – This is one of the major contributors to stress in schools and a growing problem, particularly in secondary schools. Schools should have in place a policy, risk assessment, training and monitoring.
- **Welfare and access** – Hazards include broken pavers and steps without handrails. Window restrictors should be checked on a regular basis and records kept. Bins should be secured away from the building.
- **Work at height** – This is an area that is often dismissed in schools, as you may get a contractor in to do roofing work and therefore believe you have covered it off. However, don't forget teachers also work at height – putting up displays, using a chair to access the board, etc. and this presents a risk of falls. Ultimately, as dictated by the hierarchy of controls, the goal is to avoid working at height where possible. By outsourcing jobs to a contractor, you avoid the risk to staff, but don't forget that you must also control that contractor to ensure work is carried out safely. As with all of the areas in this list, all work at height should be risk assessed.

Facilities management: How WorkNest can help

We will take a detailed look at your approach to managing your facilities. We will consider asbestos surveys, contractor management, maintenance, COSHH, Legionella, electricity, gas, fire, window cleaning, working at height, lifts, catering, PPE, first aid, and your approach to new mothers.





3. Curriculum-related risk

Curriculum-related risk is most relevant in secondary schools, where there are a wider range of subjects taught and a higher degree of risk involved.

Things to consider by subject include:

- **Art and Design** – Kilns need to be serviced annually. Hazards include pottery dust and fumes from spraying, which requires extraction systems, and there's also risks associated with sharps, roller presses, photography chemicals, etc. Any activities you are teaching should be risk assessed.
- **Classrooms** – A general classroom is relatively low-risk, but teachers can inadvertently increase risk in the teaching method they employ, such as hanging paper chains from the ceiling and using washing lines to display work. In relation to fire safety, a blank wall has a 'zero spread of flame' (meaning flames will spread slowly); by covering walls in paper, you increase the speed at which a fire will spread. Similarly, another common issue within classrooms is tables blocking exits, resulting in no direct means of escape.
- **Design and Technology** – There are lots of potential hazards in DT: hot works, laser cutters, metalworking, woodworking machinery, sharp items, etc. Schools can access information and specific DT guidance from CLEAPSS. Checking, equipment maintenance and extraction systems are particularly important.
- **Educational visits** – Whenever you take pupils away from the normal learning environment – whether as simple as a trip to the zoo or a higher-risk activity such as a week skiing or volunteering abroad – you need to consider risk. You should have a policy in place that deals with educational visits; each trip/visit should be risk assessed; an Educational Visits Coordinator (EVC) should be appointed to control the activities and manage the process; parental consent should be obtained; emergency arrangements should be in place (including considering medical needs of staff and pupils); pre-site visits may need to be conducted; and pupil/teacher ratios should be considered depending on the nature of the trip.
- It's important to note that schools cannot eliminate all risks and that's not what the HSE expects; indeed, children need to be exposed to a degree of risk, but it's important that this is under a controlled environment. **We've produced a helpful Guide to Safe School Trips, available [here](#).**
- **Food Science** – Fire extinguishers/blankets should be accessible; there should be adequate first aid, including blue plasters; knives should be controlled (counting knives in and out); gas cookers should be secured to prevent them from being pulled out too far and putting stress on the pipes; and equipment should be maintained.
- **Nursery** – For primary schools with an attached nursery, there are other considerations: door jamb protectors, the protection of electrical equipment, hot surfaces, sharps, etc.
- **Outdoor play** – Schools should have a policy; any equipment should be appropriate and checked by a third party as well as in house; ponds should be secured; and risk assessments should be in place.
- **PE** – There should be risk assessments in place for each activity; equipment should undergo an annual inspection; guidance for high-risk sports should be followed (Safe Practice in PE gives guidance from governing bodies on different types of sports and appropriate controls); fitness suites should be managed; and staff should be trained (particularly in relation to higher-risk activities such as trampolining, which should only be taught by competent staff).
- **Science** – This is a higher-risk area but generally well controlled in schools. Make sure that gas has an isolation switch by the door; eye wash is available; chemicals are controlled; fume cupboards are serviced annually; radioactive sources are controlled; and appropriate PPE is provided.
- **Textiles** – Things to think about include the risk of Batik pots falling over; how things are displayed in the room; hot items such as presses/irons; and ensuring sewing machines are maintained (moving sewing machines around may also present a manual handling risk).
- **Work experience** – Where pupils are leaving the school to go on work experience, this must be controlled. Normally in secondary schools, one person is responsible for placements and all the control measures required to keep pupils safe.

Curriculum-related risk: How WorkNest can help

The third part of our assessment examines how curriculum activities impact on staff, students and visitors. We will take a close look at how you are managing curriculum-related risks across different subject areas, including DT, PE, Science, Art and Graphics, and Food Tech.



4. School-specific risk

Lastly, it's important to consider those risks that are specific to your school environment.

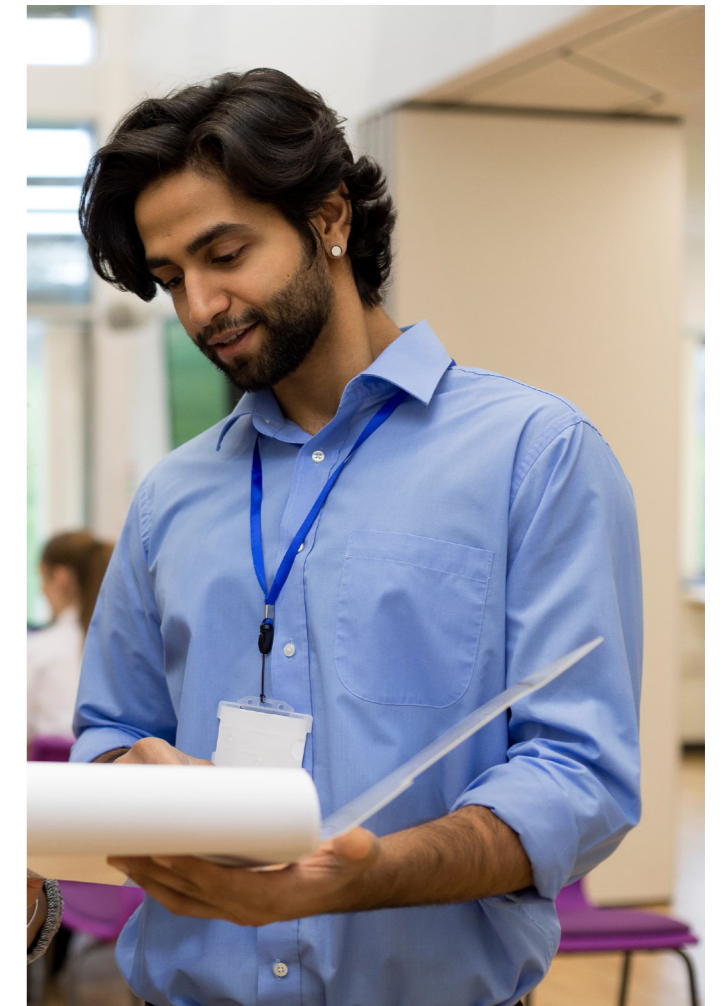
Examples include:

- **Asbestos** – A large percentage of schools will have asbestos in them and it isn't feasible to remove it all. This is due to the fact that it needs to be put somewhere, specifically a designated landfill site, and this is very tightly controlled. However, all schools should be controlling the risk of asbestos to their staff, pupils and contractors. In practical terms, this means having an asbestos survey and asbestos management plan in place and making sure teachers and other staff know the locations of asbestos-containing materials (ACMs). If there is asbestos within a wall panel, for example, a new teacher may decide to move classroom furniture around and push chairs back against the wall; this may damage the wall, disturbing the asbestos and increasing the risk. Information is therefore essential.
- **Boarding schools** – Boarding schools present their own risks, primarily sleeping risk, Legionella and fire.
- **Grounds maintenance** – Some schools will outsource their grounds maintenance, while others will keep this in house. If this is an in-house activity, it will need to be controlled as there are a number of risks involved, including the use pesticides and potentially dangerous equipment such as strimmers, chainsaws, grinding wheels and ride-on mowers. Any chemicals must be appropriately stored in a designated cupboard.
- **Minibuses** – School minibuses must be adequately insured and properly maintained, and vehicle checks should be carried out. Drivers must be suitable (this means confirming they are capable of driving a minibus through license checks and training) and risk assessments must be carried out.
- **Shared premises** – In PFI schools, cooperation and coordination is particularly important. Consider what the arrangements for health and safety are, what the agreements are, and who is responsible for what to prevent crossed wires and miscommunication.
- **Swimming pools** – Swimming pools are another high-risk area and risk assessment is essential. Control measures include lifeguards and training, as well as proper procedures for rescue, raising the alarm, cleaning, and chemical treatment of the pool.

- **Tree and wall management** – In September 2020, a pupil was tragically killed at a school in Newcastle after a tree fell on her. Naturally, there will have been many more near misses. These incidents are difficult to pre-empt, so we recommend having tree surveys in place. These are normally done every three years (depending on the growing cycle). As a specialist activity, they must be carried out by a competent third party. In forest schools, the outdoor learning environment may contain things such as pizza ovens or fire pits which again.

School-specific risk: How WorkNest can help

The fourth and final part of our school-specific General Risk Assessment examines issues that are specific to your school, including all those outlined above.





Specialist safety support for schools

Unfortunately for schools, a lack of understanding in regard to risk often leads to health and safety law being misinterpreted. This in turn leads to inadvertent breaches and poor safety decisions being made.

Conversely, we also see a lot of overly-cautious behaviour, which stems from school employers being afraid of the potential costs of failing to comply with health and safety legislation and the requirements placed upon them.

At WorkNest, our solutions-focused safety support enables schools to strike the right balance, un-complicate health and safety management, and ultimately keep pupils, staff and visitors safe. Delivered by dedicated professionals with a wealth of sector expertise, our flexible, personalised service gives schools confidence in their compliance, helps them overcome a lack of a time and resources, and can be adapted to suit your needs.



Our unlimited, fixed-fee service includes:

- 24/7 telephone and email support from a named, highly-qualified consultant
- Regular visits to your school to conduct our unique, education-specific General Risk Assessment which covers the four key areas of school safety management outlined in this guide
- A prioritised action plan to help you understand what needs to be done to ensure safety and compliance
- Regular updates on any regulatory changes that may affect how you operate
- All the essential health and safety documentation you require, including a bespoke health and safety policy and staff handbook
- Access to our comprehensive library of materials, which includes guidance notes for employers and employees, helpful checklists, and risk assessment templates
- Access to our award-winning software, SafetyNest, to help you manage health and safety and monitor compliance day to day

For more information and to discuss your specific requirements, contact our team:
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