Filtering and monitoring

Introduction

The Keeping Children Safe in Education updated guidance for September 2023 does not have that many amendments for the new school year, but the Department for Education's update does ask schools to be clearer about how they manage their online monitoring and filtering systems.

This is an area of renewed focus for the DfE due to, in part, campaigning by Judy and Andy Thomas to raise awareness of the importance of these technologies after the tragic death of their daughter, Frankie, who viewed content online at her school unmonitored because its systems were broken.

To further support schools and colleges in England to meet digital and technology standards, the Department for Education published Filtering and Monitoring Standards in March 2023. In addition to aspects of both filtering and monitoring systems, these standards detail the allocation of roles and responsibilities, and that schools and colleges should be checking their filtering and monitoring provision at least annually. Most schools should already have the right systems in place and the new requirement will hopefully mirror existing best practices.

What is filtering and monitoring?

Filtering and monitoring systems are used to keep pupils safe when using your school's IT system.

- Filtering systems: block access to harmful sites and content.
- Monitoring systems: identify when a user accesses or searches for certain types of harmful content on school and college devices (it doesn't stop someone accessing it). Your school is then alerted to any concerning content so you can intervene and respond.

No filtering and monitoring system is 100% effective, so you need to use it alongside your existing safeguarding systems and procedures.

Governing bodies and proprietors have overall strategic responsibility for filtering and monitoring and need assurance that the standards are being met.

To do this, they should identify and assign:

- a member of the senior leadership team and a governor, to be responsible for ensuring these standards are met
- the roles and responsibilities of staff and third parties, for example, external service providers

Designated Safeguarding Lead

The DSL should take lead responsibility for online safety, including understanding the filtering and monitoring systems and processes in place - this is part of their role in taking the lead responsibility for safeguarding.

The IT service provider should work with the senior leadership team and DSL to:

- procure systems
- identify risk
- carry out reviews
- carry out checks

A do-list for schools.

Ideally, your school should implement the following:

1. Clear responsibilities for all staff

Paragraphs 14 and 124 of KCSIE 2023 talk about the need for appropriate safeguarding training for staff, including "applicable roles and responsibilities in relation to filtering and monitoring". It is likely the day-to-day management of this online system will fall to your ICT team and senior leaders, who will receive any concerns raised by the filtering and monitoring system.

It is important, though, that all teachers are fully aware of how these systems work, and schools should make sure that this is part of their start-of-year safeguarding training in September. In part this is so they can ensure that they are periodically reiterating to their pupils the importance of bearing in mind the school's systems.

All staff should be clear on:

How to report safeguarding and technical concerns, such as if:
- They witness or suspect unsuitable material has been accessed
- They are able to access unsuitable material
- They are teaching topics that could create unusual activity on the filtering logs
- There is failure in the software or abuse of the system
- There are perceived unreasonable restrictions that affect teaching and learning or administrative tasks
- They notice abbreviations or misspellings that allow access to restricted material

2. Updating DSLs' job specifications

Paragraph 103 notes that the DSL should take lead responsibility for safeguarding, "including online safety and understanding the filtering and monitoring systems and processes in place", and this should be explicit in their job description.

This is a small but significant change, adding yet another responsibility to the role of the DSL. Quite possibly, if you are a school with a team of DSLs then this might be a responsibility that could be, in practice, deferred to a deputy DSL on a day-to-day level. However, it is important that schools do not just leave the filtering and monitoring systems to be overseen by the ICT team, and DSLs should both be able to understand how their monitoring system works (in non-technical terms) and have an input into them.

This is especially the case around the requirement that the level of filtering and monitoring that happens in school should "block harmful and inappropriate content without unreasonably impacting teaching and learning" (paragraph 142 of KCSIE).

Ideally there will be a different level of access available to teachers compared with pupils, so that pupils cannot access inappropriate material but a teacher could show a video for PSHE on extremism or sex education.

3. Links to other policies

Paragraph 138 adds that the school's safeguarding policy should include "appropriate filtering and monitoring on school devices and school networks" and reflect this in other relevant policies, such as the ICT policy, Safer Internet Use Policy, Behaviour Policy etc.

4. Conduct annual reviews

Paragraph 142 of KCSiE sets out other key areas for schools to consider.

The first relates to the importance of reviewing filtering and monitoring provision at least annually. Companies that run these systems already seem to be responding to this by offering an annual review with the school themselves. Given the rapid development of new technology, particularly AI, it is particularly important school leaders remain well informed in this area.

5. Get governors involved

As with so many other areas of safeguarding now, it is specified that "governing bodies and proprietors should review the standards and discuss with IT staff and service providers what more needs to be done to support schools and colleges in meeting this standard".

This follows the broader movement to ensure that governors are far more actively involved with the safeguarding supervision of the school and Governing Bodies should identify a governor to take responsibility for online safety, filtering and monitoring.

Additional guidance and further reading

- Keeping children safe in education –statutory guidance for schools and colleges (September 2023)
- DfE Filtering and Monitoring standards
  https://www.gov.uk/guidance/meeting-digital-and-technology-standards-in-schools-and-colleges/filtering-and-monitoring-standards-for-schools-and-colleges
- UK Safer Internet Centre
  https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/teachers-and-school-staff/appropriate-filtering-and-monitoring/appropriate-filtering
- Test filtering
  http://testfiltering.com/
- TES article
  https://www.tes.com/magazine/analysis/general/kcsie-2023-safeguarding-schools-online-filtering-and-monitoring