

Safeguarding Advisory Group

URC Safeguarding Strategy 2020-2025

Basic Information

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Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Resolution 29 Having already endorsed the safeguarding strategic plan 2020-2025 through Mission Council, General Assembly acknowledges that safeguarding is everybody's responsibility in the United Reformed Church.</p> <p>General Assembly directs all local churches and synods and those who oversee safeguarding arrangements in the Church to implement the safeguarding strategic plan in ways that promote the welfare of the URC and the well-being of the community in which the Church is placed.</p>

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	General Assembly calls all local churches, synods and bodies of the URC to work together on the six objectives of the safeguarding strategic plan (2020-2025) with the oversight and support of the Safeguarding Advisory Group.
Main points	<p>The Church has already set up a strategy to change the internal ethos, prevent abuse, work with survivors and support those who might be affected by child protection and safeguarding risks.</p> <p>In recognition of our challenges to ensure public accountability and compliance with our safeguarding policy (GP5) in all parts of the Church, change needs to begin with an overt and proactive message of the General Assembly about the priority given to keeping people safe, and with a clear stance that abuse in any form will not be tolerated.</p> <p>General Assembly, in its vital role to oversee the total work of the Church, marks the launch of the delivery stage of the safeguarding plan following planning and preparations in the last year.</p>
Previous relevant documents	<p>Paper R1, Mission Council, March 2020</p> <p>Paper R2, Mission Council, November 2019</p> <p>Paper R2, Mission Council, May 2019</p> <p>Paper R2, Mission Council, November 2018</p>
Consultation has taken place with...	<p>Members of the SAG</p> <p>Synod Safeguarding Practice Group</p> <p>URC General Secretary</p> <p>Synod Moderators, Synod Clerks and CYDOs</p> <p>Finance Committee</p>

Summary of Impact

<p>Financial</p>	<p>There will be financial implications that require effective planning and management of available and shared resources among the synods. In addition to funds already secured to support synods, the costs of administration and further work with adult survivors of abuse will be additional to existing budgets and structures of the Church in the five-year period of the plan.</p>
<p>External (e.g. ecumenical)</p>	<p>Building constructive partnerships with other denominations and faith-based communities constitutes one of the strategic objectives of the plan. A guidance on safeguarding in Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) is under development by a joint working group with the Methodist Church and the Baptist Union.</p>

- 1.1 In anticipation of the Past Case Review final report, General Assembly 2018 noted that the Church needs to be more systematic, careful and attentive in matters of safeguarding, and to nurture a culture where needs for protection and support for children, young people and vulnerable adults are given due priority. After the courageous process of the two phases of the Past Case Review (2016-2017) and the publication of the PCR Learning Group Report, Mission Council, acting on behalf of General Assembly, endorsed the URC’s safeguarding strategic plan (2020-2025) (an appendix to this paper) as the next step of the journey. Mission Council had already made proactive decisions towards this direction; it directed the Safeguarding Advisory Group to oversee the development, implementation, review and monitoring of the plan, and approved new terms of reference for the Group to enable its members to manage this considerable task for the Church and deliver the plan in fuller and more holistic ways.

- 1.2 The adoption of the plan reflects the continuing awareness of the need to protect adults at risk and vulnerable children in society. According to statistics published by the Office of National Statistics in January this year, around 7.5% of adults aged 18 to 74 years in England and Wales experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16, which is around 3.1 million people.¹ Additionally, in the year ending March 2019, an estimated 2.4 million adults aged 16 to 74 years experienced domestic abuse (1.6 million women and 786,000 men). Although the figures do not show the personal experiences of people affected by any form of abuse, the Church should be aware that abuse happened and might happen again in any congregation, synod, office, school, property and community of the Church. As survivors of abuse alerted us in November 2019, when one suffers in the Church, the whole body suffers.

- 1.3 URC’s collaboration with governments and Parliament in terms of child protection and safeguarding adults has been another aspect of the development of the plan, bringing into force issues of public accountability and media scrutiny. Apart from the involvement of the Synod of Scotland with the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, the URC is engaging with the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), having been granted core participant status for their investigation into

¹ Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) 2019

child protection in religious organisations and settings in England and Wales. The URC had also played an active and formal role within investigations set up by governments in the UK. The Church has contributed to public inquiries and to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Safeguarding in Faith Settings by providing information and offering insight into matters relating to child sexual abuse and protection, both within this denomination and in religious organisations and settings more widely. Our denominational Safeguarding Adviser has already submitted a witness statement to IICSA to account for the policies and procedures the Church follows to protect children from sexual abuse. The public hearing of the investigation into child protection in religious organisations and settings in England and Wales, after a break in March due to Coronavirus, is to resume virtually on 11 May 2020.

1.4 Safeguarding in the United Reformed Church (URC) is underpinned by Jesus' command to his followers and disciples to 'love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34-35). This command entails protecting the most vulnerable and upholding the rights of the least powerful as an expression of the love of God. The URC safeguarding policy states that we all have a responsibility to help prevent the abuse and neglect of children and adults, and to ensure the well-being and pastoral care of those who are, or may be, at risk. The overall aim of the strategic plan is to ensure that everybody who engages with our local congregations, synods, institutions, groups, properties and offices across the three nations of England, Scotland and Wales is committed to protecting children and adults who are, or might be, experiencing abuse or neglect. In Scotland, elements of the URC strategy (responses to disclosures/allegations and safeguarding training) will be delivered in accordance with the Safeguarding Policy and Procedures of the Church of Scotland, to stay in line with the specifics of Scots law. Further, in the next five years, people, councils, groups and committees of the United Reformed Church will work together on the following six strategic objectives:

1. Instil a safeguarding ethos of care and service within all congregations, synods and bodies of the URC.
2. Ensure initial and appropriate pastoral care and support to those who were impacted by safeguarding incidents and concerns.
3. Set up secure and appropriate systems and processes of data and information handling and reporting safeguarding.
4. Ensure that the safeguarding policies and procedures are updated, reviewed and implemented in practice throughout the URC.
5. Provide appropriate and accessible safeguarding training for all those who are accountable for and working with children, young people and adults.
6. Encourage and build constructive partnerships with statutory, non-statutory bodies, other denominations and faith-based communities.

1.5 Delivery of the Strategic Plan will occur in two phases. The first phase in Years 1, 2, 3 and 4 will focus on planning, delivery and evaluation. While we are still in the first year, many major developments have taken place in planning and making arrangements to enable our community to get child protection and safeguarding work right. Vital elements of the plan have been instigated and completed, such as the production of Good Practice 5 and the development of the basic safeguarding training course. Good Practice 5 was sent to 1125 churches, those that use URC's safeguarding policy and those that do not declare a safeguarding policy. It will enable the latter to move towards compliance, with the support of

synod safeguarding officers. The planning stage highlights that there are actions that require a sensitive approach and careful preparation, such as continuing to provide a space for the voices of survivors to be heard and continuing to map the theological foundations of safeguarding in the context of the United Reformed Church. Access to URC database for all synods and the establishment of a common safeguarding case management system are other vital elements in the delivery of the plan that require further work and resources.

- 1.6 Additional funds have been added to the safeguarding budget (£40,000 per delivery year) and a dedicated (non-Church House based) staff member has been appointed to support synods. Social Worker Penny McGee has been employed full-time to collaborate with synods to implement the plan over the next three years, and coordinate safeguarding training and development opportunities tailored to the needs of each synod. The remit is to source and co-deliver with synods, identify what works well, and embed a culture of safeguarding throughout the denomination.
- 1.7 The Safeguarding Advisory Group intends to deliver the tasks and actions of this strategy in ways that align with the conciliar traditions and policies of the Church, as well as with safeguarding statutory requirements and regulations. The Safeguarding Advisory Group will remain responsible and accountable for overseeing the priorities and activities in the plan and approving additional funding requests from synods. The synods will make their own strategic arrangements related to the whole-Church strategy, depending on available resources and existing safeguarding practices, and they will have access to continuous Assembly-level support. The local churches will feel more equipped in their mission and discipleship to serve those in need, ensure pastoral care and promote the welfare of their local church congregation.
- 1.8 Safeguarding is not just about reading and adopting policies and procedures. In order to make a difference, those policies and procedures must be put into practice. The URC's strategy for safeguarding offers direction about how this can be achieved: safeguarding people is a core part of the URC's mission. We safeguard the integrity of creation, and we develop as one Church and one body to ensure the Church is a sustained community of care where everyone – particularly the most vulnerable – finds a place of love, pastoral care and support. We are mindful that the Church is characterised by limited resources, and therefore that the growing demand for safeguarding arrangements might be restricted by our capacity to make a difference. However, the safeguarding strategic plan (2020-2025) (appendix I) and the first annual denomination safeguarding report (appendix II) chart the way forward, and provide a starting point to celebrate and co-evaluate. These documents follow as appendices to this paper. The URC's strategy instigates a learning process for all to safeguard people as well as to build consistency and trust in working together, to protect children and adults from any form of abuse, harm or neglect.