

Paper T1

Annual Safeguarding Report 2020

Safeguarding Advisory Group

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Adrian Bulley adrian.bulley@urc.org.uk
Action required	To note.
Draft resolution(s)	None.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	Analysis of Safeguarding Annual Church Returns.
Main points	Please see overview.
Previous relevant documents	Annual Safeguarding Report 2019.
Consultation has taken place with...	Synod Safeguarding Officers.

Summary of impact

Financial	N/A
External (e.g. ecumenical)	N/A

Overview

This report will give the following:

- Background information about the collation of the data from the Safeguarding Annual Church Returns (ACR)
- Information about statistics
- Highlight areas of interest
- Detail areas of vulnerability
- Provide a summary
- Detail areas for development.

Background information

Annual Returns that are specific to safeguarding are sent to churches every year in November / December with a request that they are returned in January. Churches are not always able to return them by then but the bulk of them are generally returned by April.

Synod Safeguarding Officers (SSOs) complete a report that analyses the information contained in these forms and make comments where requested. The reports are usually

sent to the Assembly Safeguarding Advisor (ASA) who then compiles a report, drawing on the information contained in the SSO reports. In the absence of the ASA this task has been completed this year by an SSO.

Statistics

This year the writer considered that it would be useful to have an overview of statistics for each synod. In this way it can be seen for instance how many churches there are in each synod, the numbers of active Ministers, the numbers of volunteers and paid workers, and the numbers of serving Elders. Thanks go to Gillian Jones for providing these statistics which are crucial in putting a context to the figures gathered from the SSO reports.

Attached therefore as Appendix One are the global statistics by synod, together with some key statistics gathered from the SSOs' reports.

It is important to bear in mind that the statistics in the reports are based upon the information contained in the forms returned by churches. Some forms are incomplete in certain areas, hence some boxes state that there is no data available. Some synods have found that the pandemic has severely affected the ability of churches to complete and return the forms, so the statistics are lower for those most affected.

All SSOs are in the process of following up with churches which have not returned forms and have considerable follow-up work generally, as will be seen below.

Areas to highlight

Completion of forms

Forms state that they are to be completed by the Church Safeguarding Co-ordinator (CSC). SSOs record that this task is often completed by the Church Secretary. It is hoped that there has been consultation with CSC, to ensure accuracy of data, although some churches do not have a CSC.

Church Safeguarding Co-ordinators

It will be seen from Appendix One that some churches do not have CSCs, although the numbers may vary once SSOs have had the opportunity to chase missing forms. It is noted that some of these posts are being filled by Ministers or their spouses. This is contrary to Good Practice 5 (GP5). SSOs will be following up with churches and supporting them to find appropriate people to fill these posts. Some churches have already been supported by their SSO to arrange to share CSCs as it is sometimes difficult for churches to find people.

The numbers of churches who have CSCs are significantly higher than when these forms were first sent to churches.

Elders' responsibilities

The ACR asks whether the church follows a process to assess the suitability of Elders to engage with children and Adults at Risk. It does not ask what process is followed. All Elders who are engaging with vulnerable groups would need a safer recruitment process to do so. The tick on the form that a process is followed is therefore less meaningful than it would be if information about the process was requested or known via another route.

The form that SSOs are asked to complete asks if churches assess whether Elders understand their safeguarding responsibilities as trustees. This is of course an entirely different question. The two forms need to be aligned.

Some synods have been running, or will be running, training for Ministers and Elders who are Trustees, by solicitors within the Safeguarding Unit of Farrer & Co. Funding has been provided for this by successful application to the Synod Development Fund managed by the Safeguarding Advisory Group. Feedback so far is huge gratitude for the training and a greater understanding of trustee responsibilities as far as safeguarding is concerned. This suggests that Elders who are trustees, and Ministers, welcome being informed of their responsibilities and value the information in order to be able to carry them out effectively.

Work is being carried out by Ministries about recruitment of Elders generally which will include information about recruitment requirements for Elders who are also trustees.

Numbers of concerns and referrals to outside agencies

It is clear from the reports that the numbers of concerns and reports to outside agencies are higher in respect of Adults at Risk than children. In terms of the concerns recorded within the reports, the percentage is 32% higher in respect of Adults at Risk. In terms of referrals, those to Adults Services are 44% higher than referrals to Children's Services.

The types of abuse recorded are Domestic abuse, physical abuse, self-neglect, sexual abuse of children and bullying.

Training

Online training via Zoom has proved very popular, and a successful way of delivering training during the pandemic. All SSOs quickly learnt how to deliver the training, making use of Zoom features such as polls, whiteboards, and breakout rooms. Following training sessions, many SSOs report an increase in being contacted to discuss concerns. This suggests that awareness has been increased and that the relationship with the SSO is built upon through interacting with participants of the training.

One of the figures requested in the ACR is the number of people who have attended non-URC training. This data does not allow an assessment to be made as to the appropriateness and quality of the training for the people who have attended. For instance, there is no information about who provided the training, the level of the training itself or what roles people hold who are attending the training.

SSOs highlighted that the numbers of people recorded by churches as needing training may be different once the Training Framework has been approved by General Assembly and the roles of people requiring training are made clear.

SSOs consider that future provision of training will need to be carefully considered. Many participants have found it a real advantage to attend online training. However, it has been a barrier to some, and many have expressed the desire for face to face training. The reality is that a hybrid of delivery methods will be an advantage for churches once the opportunity for face to face training is safely available to us.

Pastoral care and support

There is a difference between the information requested of churches in the ACR and that of SSOs in the report they complete. Churches are asked how pastoral care and support is exercised within the congregation. SSOs are asked more specific information about how pastoral care is exercised in relation to people suffering abuse and how support is given to survivors of abuse, both recent and non-recent.

Most SSOs record that churches state that there is pastoral care provided by Elders and Ministers within congregations. Synods operate a variety of systems for general pastoral support of churches such as pastoral committees or groups. Pastoral care has been, without exception, available to everyone within churches. Many have commented upon how essential this has been during the pandemic and is a testament to everyone within Churches and synods that this has been possible, despite the challenges for everyone.

No specific process for supporting survivors of abuse was identified although some SSOs have supported those who have made allegations whilst an investigative process is ongoing. Pastoral support is also arranged for those about whom allegations have been made.

Two SSOs are working with Elizabeth Gray King of the Safeguarding Advisory Group (SAG) to formulate guidance as to how support can be provided to survivors of abuse. The group will meet with survivors to obtain their views. The group will look at ensuring that appropriate support is available within the church, as well as highlighting the need at times to signpost to external agencies.

Ecumenical relationships

Some SSOs record formal process for working with ecumenical colleagues such as Ecumenical Safeguarding Forums. Many SSOs meet ecumenical colleagues on a regular basis. Working ecumenically is an added protection for vulnerable groups as it facilitates the sharing of legally permissible information between colleagues where necessary. Additionally, it is a further source of support for SSOs.

Blemished disclosures

Some SSOs have conducted risk assessments in respect of blemished disclosures. Where the post is a ministerial one there is an excellent process in place where Ministries work with SSOs requesting risk assessments. This means that there is consistency of approach between ministerial and lay posts.

LEPs

LEPs can follow whichever denominational policy they choose. This sometimes follows who owns the building, although can also depend upon the denomination of the Minister. Completing annual returns can be very problematic for people within LEPs as they will have to complete at least two different forms and sometimes more. This is because denominations can insist upon their own form being completed which increases the work for the church. Many CSCs, and one Synod Clerk, have requested that work is done between denominations to agree a form that could be completed and circulated to each denominational safeguarding officer within the LEP, avoiding the need for duplication.

Areas of vulnerability

Safer recruitment

This is the area where all SSOs identified a need for further work with churches. Most churches now do DBS checks on those who work with vulnerable groups. However, all identified an over reliance on DBS checks. Sometimes this is the only part of the safer recruitment process that is carried out and the process includes application forms, references being taken up and an interview.

There is an urgent need for raising awareness in most synods of the need to complete all parts of the process in relation to volunteers. Fortunately, the Appendix regarding this is likely to be completed this summer and there will therefore be considerable resources available to support churches in this process.

Some SSOs highlighted a lack of awareness about the levels of DBS checks meaning that sometimes people were having checks where the activity does not meet the criteria for a DBS check to be carried out. Additionally, some people are having barred list checks when the activity being carried out is only entitled to have an enhanced check. Training needs to take place to emphasise that it is not the role that attracts the need for a DBS check, but the activities carried out by the person within that role. SSOs have already been mindful of this and training has been arranged for verifiers with DDC. This will be an additional support for churches to assist them in navigating this very complex area.

The ACR form requests the numbers of DBS checks in respect of paid staff and volunteers working with children or Adults at Risk. However, no data is requested as to the number of people within each church needing these checks. This makes the collected data less helpful than it could be.

Policies

The ACR form asks if churches have a policy whereas the form SSOs complete does not request this information. It has therefore been impossible to get an accurate reflection of the position within churches by the deadline for this report as this would involve some SSOs having to review every form returned.

However, this has been identified as an area of weakness by many SSOs within the comments they make. It is a requirement that policies are reviewed annually. SSOs reported that many policies are out of date, some not having been reviewed for a number of years; the most overdue being almost nine years. Additionally, reports reveal that some churches have policies in respect of either adults or children, rather than both.

The pandemic will of course have had an adverse effect on the ability of churches to review their policies over the last 18 months. SSOs are aware that churches will need additional support to ensure that their policies are up to date, and include both adults and children.

Contracts with those that pose a risk

Several SSOs record that they have discovered that a contract is in place which they have not been aware of until seeing the annual return. GP5 states that SSOs need to be involved in all contracts as this is a key area of risk management. This is an area that churches can gain considerable support by involving the SSO and working with statutory agencies. This shares the responsibility as agencies such as Police and Probation are willing to be signatories to the contracts if they are involved.

The SSO report asks only for data about contracts that are managed by the URC. One synod had three such contracts but 13 listed overall. It would be useful to have information about contracts being managed by other denominations as they remain URC churches even though within a LEP. Our Synod Trustees need to be able to satisfy themselves, through their SSO, that risk is being managed. They cannot do this if no information is known about these contracts.

Summary re areas of vulnerability

These areas are highlighted mainly because following procedures assists in protecting vulnerable groups. However, it is also important for reputational risk management as not following our policies, and the Charity Commission requirements, could negatively impact liability and insurance.

Overall summary

All involved in church life, either by being part of a local church or synod, paid or volunteer, lay and ordained, have experienced considerable impact during the pandemic, practically, psychologically, and spiritually. It is therefore a huge testament to our churches' and synods' dedication that, overall, such a high number of annual returns has been received. The average returned this year is 82.4% compared to 84.8% in 2019.

There are areas of vulnerability, as set out above. SSOs have already started putting in place support for churches in these areas and will follow up churches that either have not returned forms or who they have identified as needing extra support because of the detail within the forms.

Areas for development

Many SSOs raised that the forms could be produced electronically, particularly as some platforms automatically collate data if the correct questions are inserted. This might greatly assist churches and would certainly assist administrators and SSOs, particularly those SSOs without administrative support. If this concept is accepted there would, of course, always be the option for churches to have paper copies if preferred.

All acknowledge that the statistics gained are vital to the denomination having an overall picture of safeguarding, identifying risk, and knowing where support is most needed. Thanks go to Jane Dowdall, now a member of SAG, for originally instigating this essential process of Quality Assurance.

There is a review process in place in respect of the forms. SSOs will be working with SAG to ensure that the forms are as easy as possible for churches to complete and that the data requested is relevant to the denomination as a whole and to SSOs in order that they can identify where their churches most need support. All are particularly conscious that these forms are completed by volunteers who sometimes have full-time jobs elsewhere, or many roles within the Church. All are committed to streamlining the form where possible.

Conclusion

The last 18 months have been exceptionally challenging. This report has been compiled with particular thanks to all of those who contributed to completing the ACRs and analysing data.

However, safeguarding is a whole church responsibility. Thanks therefore also go to all those who contribute to making our churches as safe as possible, either by the specific roles they have in churches and synods or by their presence in our churches as members or adherents.

Appendix One

Table of general statistics by synod

Synods	Numbers of churches	Numbers of active Ministers	Number of additional ministers needing DBS checks	Numbers of Active CRCWs	Volunteers working with Children and Adults at Risk	Paid workers with under 25	Numbers of serving Elders	Numbers of LEPs
01 Northern	63	14	2	2	206	7	395	14
02 North Western	120	34	1	3	535	3	807	25
03 Mersey	77	26	29	0	411	12	409	20
04 Yorkshire	93	23	27	2	733	26	559	29
05 East Midlands	127	31	4	1	653	6	490	41
06 West Midlands	108	44	25	1	630	24	640	35
07 Eastern	119	47	2	2	575	12	600	38
08 South Western	102	41	17	0	385	17	520	32
09 Wessex	120	57	38	0	798	46	637	33
10 Thames North	120	40	19	1	643	42	726	35
11 Southern	141	64	12	1	918	50	836	35
12 Wales	86	19	7	1	200	3	388	32

13 Scotland	42	21	11	1	142	1	447	8
Grand Total	1318	461	194	15	6829	249	7454	377

Table of statistics obtained from SSO reports collating data from the Annual Church Returns

Synods	Percentage of forms returned	Percentage of churches that have Safeguarding Coordinators (from the forms returned)	Numbers of people being managed on contracts	Numbers of people recorded as needing training (from the forms returned)	Numbers of people recorded as having received training 2020-2021
01 Northern	94%	95%	0	289	102
02 North Western	92%	93%	5	612	227
03 Mersey	95%	97%	2	334	107
04 Yorkshire	90%	99%	7	353	162
05 East Midlands	82%	97%	1	421	138
06 West Midlands	97%	94%	1	430	92
07 Eastern	93%	88%	4	304	115
08 South Western	86%	94%	3	310	155
09 Wessex	94%	100%	4	Data unavailable to SSO	195
10 Thames North	45%	Data unavailable to SSO	2	Data unavailable to SSO	103
11 Southern	67%	97%	8	595	177
12 Wales	56%	89%	4	153	107
13 Scotland	80%	97%	2	Data unavailable to SSO	34