

Paper T1

Annual report

Safeguarding Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Roger Jones – Convenor rjones@urcsouthern.org.uk Sharon Barr – Secretary sharon.barr@urc.org.uk
Action required	To note.
Draft resolution(s)	None.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	Overview of safeguarding in the URC.
Main points	Highlights Risk areas Areas of development Summary of Annual Church Safeguarding Returns for 2023.
Previous relevant documents	Paper S1 URC roles eligible for a criminal record check from Assembly Executive 2024.
Consultation has taken place with...	Synod Safeguarding Officers.

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
External (eg ecumenical)	N/A

Background

The Safeguarding Committee is now into its second year of formation, and has established a pattern of meeting to fit in with workflow for Assembly Executive and General Assembly. The committee meets four times a year, with one of these being a full-day in-person meeting. The committee is made up of 15 people with various roles, both within the URC and external representatives. We have recently had two resignations because of outside commitments; for one place, we have a nomination to fill the role; the other, which is for an independent external representative, will need further work to identify the most appropriate person.

Outside of the formal meetings, the Convenor and Secretary meet regularly to review and monitor the work of the Safeguarding Committee.

Highlights

Church House Staff Team

Following a period of instability within the central safeguarding team, the current team has been working together since February 2023, and are made up of the following members:

Sharon Barr – Designated Safeguarding Lead (part time)

Carrie Kaunda – Training and Development Coordinator (part time)

Kerry Baker – Policy Development Coordinator (part time)

Emma Pearce – Administrative Assistant (full time)

Do please make contact with them; they are here to support the work of safeguarding across the denomination in partnership with the Synod Safeguarding Officers.

We are soon to add to the team, with a part time Case Work Supervisor joining over the summer period. This role was created in response to the findings of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) and following the URCs Past Case Review (PCR), where the need was identified for consistency, the introduction of a denomination-wide case management system for safeguarding, and accountability in the work the safeguarding teams undertake denominationally and at Synod level. We hope that all Synods will engage with this new role, and that the post-holder will be key to the internal auditing process that is explored further in the Areas of Development section of this report.

Safeguarding Team Away Days

Last year, the Synod Safeguarding Officers and the Church House Safeguarding Team met for the second time for a two-day residential; again, it was well received by all who attended, and the coming together to learn as a team has been a positive for a group of people supporting the Church who are often quite isolated in their roles. We had a session led by Anna Chaplaincy on supporting older people in church, Northern College led us in a session on Burnout, and there was a self-led session on Victim Blaming Psychology. Due to the benefits of these events, the plan is to continue to run them annually.

Case Management System

The URC's Past Case Review, and subsequently the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, highlighted the importance of effective recorded systems for safeguarding, and it was with much anticipation that the United Reformed Church's case management system came into being last year. Feedback from the safeguarding team who are using it to log concerns has been positive, and the system is being well used. The system will ensure consistency across the denomination for recording, and allow for far better auditing and compliance management of cases which, alongside the new case work supervisor role, will be invaluable.

Training

Carrie has continued to offer specialist training courses to anyone across the denomination, and these have been really well received and attended, with 600 people attending the various courses, which include adult safeguarding, domestic abuse, and supporting survivors. The foundation eLearning course also has a high take-up and, at the time of writing, 680 courses have been completed during the past year. Most Synods are now offering the Advanced Safeguarding course.

It has been identified that Paper T5 the Safeguarding Training Framework adopted by General Assembly 2021 needs amendments to better fit the developing work of the

church; this is currently being undertaken by Carrie and the training reference group, supported by the safeguarding committee; the hope is to bring the revised document to General Assembly 2025 following a period of consultation.

Policy

The URCs Good Practice documentation was robustly reviewed and launched in 2023. A new format was introduced and, following feedback from churches and Synods, the documentation aimed to be clearer on where safeguarding responsibilities lie. The positive feedback that has been received about the documentation has been huge, and work continues on other safeguarding documents such as DBS/PVG and the update service, and the safe management of those that pose a risk, and template policies. The updated paper *S1 URC roles eligible for a criminal record check from Assembly Executive 2024* can now be found on the URC website.

Safeguarding Symposium

In 2023, the URC's second Safeguarding Symposium was held, which attracted almost 300 attendees, double that of the first symposium in 2020, and we hope this is a reflection of how important safeguarding is to the denomination. Kerry Baker launched *Good Practice 6* and we had a guest speaker, Dr Leroy Logan MBE, who spoke on the topic *Recognising unconscious bias: overcoming barriers of equality in safeguarding*. The hope is that this symposium can be a bi-annual event where we focus on two areas, one related specifically to safeguarding in the URC, and then a guest speaker who can help us explore topical safeguarding issues outside of the denomination.

Safeguarding Strategic Plan

The wider safeguarding team, including Synod and local church staff and volunteers, continue to achieve and work towards the objectives of the plan, sometimes unknowingly. Synods work with the plan differently, and the hope from the committee is that any subsequent plan would be engaging, understandable and achievable for all areas of the church. The current plan is due to conclude in 2025, and the Safeguarding Committee will be considering the future of a strategic plan in its meeting in September 2024.

Collaborative working

Last year and continuing into this year, there appears to be a real shift in the culture and value of safeguarding within the denomination. There has been some productive collaborative working across the teams at Church House, and this has included:

- Children's and Youth Work, where we have worked with them on training, resources and the URC's guidance on overnight trips.
- Ministries, where we have produced guidance on the safer selection of those who lead worship, following feedback from the safeguarding returns in 2022. The designated safeguarding lead is also part of a working group looking at the disciplinary process for ministers.
- Moderators' meeting, which the wider safeguarding team has attended once a year for the last year two years; this year's focus was thresholds for reporting to external agencies and those agencies that we may come across in safeguarding.

Risk areas

Risk Register

As with all committees, the group submits a risk register biannually; the two highest risk areas that were identified in the URC's risk register for safeguarding are:

1. Compliance with the reporting of safeguarding serious incidents to the Charity Commission; this may involve the need for local churches, Synods, Synod Trusts and the URC Trust (URCT) to make notifications. The URCT is having a policy drafted for Serious Incident reporting, which will not cover the process for any other area of the church. The DSL will continue to work with the Compliance team at Church House to ensure we are offering guidance to other areas of the church to support them in their work.
2. Ministerial Discipline process, particularly around firstly how it should complement safeguarding practice and risk management, and secondly the length of time that Section O processes have been taking. Both of these areas are being addressed, firstly the review of the Disciplinary Process, which is ongoing, and then trial of the use of an external HR company to carry out the investigation stage of the Section O process.

Areas of development

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse Working Group

Following the conclusion of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) and its final report being published, a working group was set up with key safeguarding personnel from the URC to review the report's findings related to faith organisations, looking particularly at the recommendations from these reports, and drawing upon any learning and action points that should be implemented by the URC. The group's findings were presented to the committee in January 2024, with eight recommendations for consideration. The committee decided to move forward with six of these, most notably:

- the development of work with survivors
- producing resources for children and young people to increase their understanding of keeping themselves safe
- support the work of the children and youth work in young people being represented at Synod and local church level.
- the need for internal and external auditing of our safeguarding practices and case management.

The committee and the wider safeguarding team will work on these in the coming years, and bring any relevant papers and recommendations to future General Assemblies.

Training framework in Wales

There have been some changes introduced by Social Care Wales (sponsored by the Welsh government) around safeguarding training requirements that third sector organisations need to comply with. A piece of work is being carried out by the Synod of Wales and the denominational safeguarding team to see where these new requirements fit, and where they diverge from current URC safeguarding training. It is likely that there may need to be a different training framework and training materials for those requiring safeguarding training within the URC in Wales.