

Paper T1

Safeguarding Committee 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Highlights• Risk areas• Areas of development• Summary of Safeguarding Strategic Plan• Summary of Annual Church Safeguarding Returns for 2024.
Previous relevant documents	None.
Consultation has taken place with...	Synod Safeguarding Officers.

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
External (eg ecumenical)	N/A

Background

The Safeguarding Committee meets four times a year with one of these being a full day in-person meeting, the pattern of meeting fits in with work flow for Assembly Executive and General Assembly.

The committee is made up of 15 people, with various roles both within the URC, and external representatives. In this year we have had vacancies because of two resignations due to their 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

The team have remained the same since General Assembly 2024 with the following people still in role:

- 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 supporting both the Safeguarding and Ministries teams).

During 2024 the committee supported the recruitment of a Case Work Supervisor who was appointed in July 2024. Matt Knowles joined the team with a wealth of knowledge from both within safeguarding in the denomination and with the police. Matt supports Synod Safeguarding Officers (SSOs) on cases. There has been a varying level of engagement from each Synod but Matt is available to all SSOs. He has support with the development of the denomination-wide case management system for safeguarding and has been able to offer support on Section O and Compliance cases.

Please make contact with any of the team; they are here to support the work of safeguarding across the denomination in partnership with the Synod Safeguarding Officers.

Safeguarding Team Residential

The Synod Safeguarding Officers and the Church House Safeguarding Team met for their annual two-day residential; this is a great opportunity for the teams to come together to learn, develop and build positive relationships with each other, as the roles are often quite isolated. We had a session led by Diana Taylor, SSO for the National Synod of Wales on Crisis Prevention Intervention, the Revd Dr Adam Scott, Principal of Northern College on Survivor Psychology, and the Revd Cham Kaur-Mann. Cham was the first Asian woman Minister with the Baptist Union of Great Britain and is the Co-Director of Next Leadership; she spoke to the group on the topic of Equality in Safeguarding.

Joint meetings and collaborative working

The wider safeguarding team have been meeting annually with the Moderators, building relationships and working and learning together to look at areas of work that need collaboration. The safeguarding team also met with the CYDO+ team last year at one of their gatherings to look at real-life case studies and look at training related to children, young people and online abuse.

Training

Carrie offers the bespoke training courses to anyone across the denomination and these have been really well received and attended, with 390 people attending the online courses. The Foundation eLearning course also has a high take-up, with 1134 courses completed during the past year.

Synods continue to offer intermediate and advanced safeguarding training. The Church of Scotland deliver equivalent training to churches in the National Synod of Scotland,

and the National Synod of Wales offer slightly varied courses to meet the new framework expected by Social Care Wales.

There are some changes to the Training Framework being brought to General Assembly 2025; see separate paper for further detail.

Policy

The URC's Good Practice documentation was reviewed in 2023. During 2025 any relevant amendments will be made. It is expected that these will be minor so a supplementary sheet will be shared to go alongside GP6. Kerry has supported reviewing GP6 and its supporting documents in line with the variations that are needed for the National Synods of Wales and Scotland.

Kerry has also published updates on the following documents:

- So They've Asked Me to be a Church Safeguarding Coordinator
- Lone Working Guidance
- DBS/PVG Matrix
- Guide to Domestic Abuse
- A suite of resources on supporting those that pose a risk in church
- General Assembly and a URCT Safeguarding Policy
- Template Synod Safeguarding Policy.

She also continues to work on the Quality Assurance Framework, the future Strategic Plan as discussed further below, and the DBS update service guidance.

Risk areas

Risk Register

As with all committees, the group submit a risk register biannually; the two highest risk areas that were identified in the URC's risk register for safeguarding in 2023 were:

1. Compliance with the reporting of safeguarding serious incidents to external agencies including the Charity Commission. This may involve the need for local churches, Synods, Synod Trusts and the URC Trust (URCT) to make reports and notifications. There is now a URCT Policy for Serious Incident reporting, which will be adapted to reflect the requirements of Synods and local churches. 'Good Practice 6', along with training and the resource of Synod Safeguarding Officers should enable churches to have a clear understanding of when safeguarding concerns should be referred out to external agencies and how.
2. Ministerial discipline process, particularly around safeguarding practices, risk management and timescales. Both of these areas are being addressed, firstly the review of the Disciplinary Process, which is ongoing, and the use of an external HR company to carry out the investigation stage of the Section O process.

Due to both these areas having measures put in place to reduce the risks they are likely to be deemed lower risk when reviewed in 2025.

Areas of development

Quality Assurance Framework

The committee are supporting the development of a safeguarding quality assurance framework for safeguarding. This is crucial to ensure the denomination consistently and effectively fulfils its duties to protect individuals at risk. It will provide a structured approach to assessing the effectiveness of safeguarding practices, identifying areas for improvement, and demonstrating accountability.

The working group developing the framework – which is made up of people from all areas of the Church – are creating it to be person-centred, purposeful, flexible, and open. We understand that resources are limited across the denomination and will ensure that this is reflected in the approach that is taken. The committee are grateful to all local churches and Synods for the work they complete on the annual safeguarding return. Over the coming year the group will continue to work with key stakeholders, with the aim of presenting the final framework to General Assembly 2026.

Past Case Review

Mission Council May 2015 instructed the General Secretariat to put in place a safeguarding review. The review was completed in two phases:

Phase One aimed to ensure that the URC appropriately addressed any cases of historical abuse and examined the processes and procedures at the time of any complaints or grievances, which applied to both the Roll of Ministers and the Roll of Church-Related Community Workers; this included all who had been added to the Roll since 1972.

Phase Two invited individuals connected to the United Reformed Church to report any concern that they could have been a victim of abuse. It was concerned for allegations involving any lay, ordained or commissioned member of the URC which could suggest that someone: behaved in an abusive or inappropriate manner with a child or adult; may have committed a criminal offence against, or related to, a child or adult; or behaved towards a child or children or adult(s) in a way that indicates they were unsuitable to work with children or adults

The Past Case Review was concluded and reported back to Mission Council 2018. The current Safeguarding Committee are grateful to all those who worked on PCR1 and the mammoth task they undertook.

The Safeguarding Committee are proposing that the denomination carries out another past cases review and are in the early stages of working on how this would be carried out and will consult with the appropriate councils of the church to develop this review.

There are a number of reasons for the need for another review:

- Record keeping and management
 - Recording keeping for PCR1 is not robust and it is difficult to understand the outcome of cases that needed action;
 - PCR1 Phase Two call for people to come forward was short-reaching;
 - Ministers' and CRCW's files were not centrally located or digital at the time so there is a concern that not all available documents were read, some files had more contents than others and therefore some documents may have been disposed of over the years;

- There was a large number of volunteers with varying levels of safeguarding knowledge and experience who read files; there is a concern that this may mean that there was not consistency when reviewing files.
- Change in culture and personnel within the URC
 - There has been a positive cultural shift in recent years towards safeguarding within the URC and this is evidenced through the annual safeguarding returns data, the additions to the Rules of Procedure, Safeguarding Statement and implementation of the Safeguarding Committee made at General Assembly 2021, having SSOs now in all Synods who are from safeguarding backgrounds, and having built confidence in safeguarding.
- High profile cases across the faith sector
 - There have been a number of high-profile reviews of cases across various faith sectors and denominations. In turn this had led to an increase in people coming forward to the URC to ask us to review their cases that are known to the denomination but also to share allegations previously unknown to the denomination. This has evidenced that PCR1 Phase Two did not reach all those that have undisclosed cases to share.

Summary of Strategic Plan 2020-2025

The Safeguarding Strategic Plan was adopted by General Assembly in 2020.

There has been a significant transformation of safeguarding during this period, including changes in personnel at denominational and Synod level, changes to the structure and rules of procedure related to safeguarding, the change from a reference group to a committee of General Assembly and the cultural shift in attitudes to all of our safeguarding responsibilities.

Since the current DSL came into role the plan has been reviewed regularly and formally on an annual basis at the Safeguarding Committee. We are proud of the work that has been undertaken to achieve the key tasks outlined in the plan. There has been varying use of the plan by Synods and their safeguarding governance groups.

Below is the Strategic Plan in its entirety with an additional column for final comments on the plan from the committee. The Success Indicator and Final Comments columns have been RAG (Red, Amber, Green) rated. The plan attached is the original agreed at General Assembly 2020 so some of the terms and reference will relate to 2020 and may be different now.

Looking forward to a future plan, the Safeguarding Committee have delegated to a working group the task of looking at a future plan. The aim of the new plan will be to make it user-friendly for all councils of the Church, for it to be linked to the URC's Safeguarding Statement, Rule of Procedure and Structure additionally from General Assembly 2021 and the Good Practice Document.



URC's Safeguarding Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Final review for General Assembly 2025

Safeguarding people is a core part of the URC's mission. We safeguard the integrity of creation, and we all go together as one Church and one body to ensure the Church is a sustained community of care where everyone – particularly the most vulnerable – find a place of love, pastoral care and support.

Keeping people safe

The Past Case Review (2015-2017) indicated the need for the Church to undertake systemic changes. Responding to instructions given by Mission Council, the Safeguarding Advisory Group reviewed all the PCR Learning Report's recommendations, consulted with Synods and produced this comprehensive strategic safeguarding plan for the Church to take effect from 2020 to 2025. Having already accepted the recommendations of the Past Case Review Learning Group Report, Mission Council in November 2019, acting on behalf of General Assembly, endorsed the URC's safeguarding strategic plan as the next step of the journey and directed the safeguarding advisory group:

- a) to oversee the development, implementation, review and monitoring of the plan
- b) to advise Mission Council/General Assembly on progress at subsequent meetings.

Moving towards a five-year strategy

This strategy with its six clear objectives aims to effect cultural change and improvements in the safeguarding policies, practices and procedures of the United Reformed Church over the next five years. According to the URC's mission, the aim of the Church is to proclaim the love of God in Jesus Christ in word and deed. A main strategy to achieve that overall aim is to ensure that anyone who engages with our congregations, Synods, institutions, 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.

The strategy for safeguarding at the URC places ethos, shared responsibilities and collaborative action at the forefront of delivering 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. Central to this is the view of safeguarding as being everyone's responsibility, to support the welfare and wellbeing of people across the denomination, along with a commitment to a common policy – *'Good Practice 5 – Safeguarding for children and adults at risk'* – as the only safeguarding policy of the Church. In Scotland, elements of the URC strategy will be delivered in accordance with the Safeguarding Policy and Procedures of the Church of Scotland due to the specific Scots law. For instance, safer recruitment and disciplinary processes are not covered in the current safeguarding agreement with the Church of Scotland.

Delivery of the Strategic Plan will occur in two phases: years one, two, three and four will focus on planning, delivery and evaluation. Finally, in year five the Safeguarding Advisory Group (SAG) will review progress against its published objectives and will undertake planning and consultation to develop a new Strategic Plan for 2025 onwards. The Safeguarding Advisory Group will be responsible and accountable for overseeing the priorities and activities in the plan, approving additional funding requests from Synods and reporting to Mission Council through its secretary (the Safeguarding Adviser of the Church). 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 Assembly-level support throughout the years in delivering the plan.

Red = Not completed, Amber = partially achieved, Green = Full achieved

Outline of six strategic objectives: Charting the way forward

1. Instil a safeguarding ethos of care and service within all local congregations, Synods and bodies of the URC.

Key tasks	Rationale	Success indicators	Deadlines	Key people	Wider issues and possible implications	Final comments
1.1. Ensure that each local church and community has safeguarding designated persons committed to protecting children and adults who are or might be at risk of experience abuse or neglect.	All URC churches have at least a single point of contact to protect places of worship and all those who are working for and affiliated with them.	Each local church has identified and appointed safeguarding coordinators to whom safeguarding incidents and concerns are reported.	March 2022	CSC Data/Admin staff Elders Pastoral Committees	Not enough and able volunteers to undertake the role – one CSC can be shared across a pastorate or group of local churches. A transparent approach to local safeguarding arrangements is valued in practice. Good examples of active safeguarding coordinators, elders and volunteers be acknowledged.	4.5% of local churches do not have a CSC SSOs and the central team continue to raise awareness of the need to have this role in place. The ACR gives us the opportunity to monitor this and for SSOs to then approach those without at CSC. The aim would be to have someone in every church in this role but is this realistic? We need to prompt alternatives more widely, such as sharing CSC across pastorates.
1.2 Raise awareness of child protection and safeguarding adults at risk with guidance, resources and	Keep every minister, children's and family worker, youth worker, elder, staff member and volunteer	Materials downloaded from websites, distributed and used. More requests for training made by churches.	Ongoing	SSOs CSCs S/G Adviser	Constant changes in public policy and legislation. The use of the website, new technologies, video clips, social media, newsletters and free resource packs to disseminate new knowledge	The national safeguarding team produce a quarterly safeguarding newsletter, they share with CH contact and with SSOs to share within Synods.

material within the worship, care and life of the URC.	regularly updated and well supported to place safeguarding at the heart of church life.	Training intake from children/youth workers, SSO and CSC.		S/G Training/ Development Coordinator Comms team Assembly and Synod staff and leaders Church Ministers and Elders	and examples of promoting good practice. Churches with no electronic systems are recorded and supported accordingly. Pay attention to identifying and defining spiritual abuse at the URC. A working group to look at the contested nature and theological implications of this form of abuse for the benefit of the whole denomination.	The central team have now produced and review the foundation, intermediate and advanced training which is rolled out by SSOs. Bespoke courses are mainly delivered by the central team, who have also worked with the children and youth team to produce training for young people and resources. In 2023 there were 3000 attendees of training across the denomination. GP6 has now been launched and includes updated links to resources both inhouse and external.
1.3 Develop shared awareness of safeguarding, and what counts as a safeguarding concern across the denomination in alignment with legislation and internal ethos.	Build on common understanding of protection and safeguarding among leaders, ministers, frontline staff, elders and other volunteers and encourage teamwork and collaboration in dealing with safeguarding incidents and concerns.	Training material and resources produced and accessed. Working groups crossing boundaries between different departments and roles within the URC.	June 2023	S/G Adviser S/G Training/ Development Coordinator SSOs	A culture of deference and inaction to be alarmed of and discouraged. A URC-standardised basic safeguarding training that reflects the needs of our Church. The opportunity of updating GP4 and recognise it as the only safeguarding policy and guidance document for the whole church. The vital role of keeping up with the regular meetings of SSOs.	The changes to the URC Constitution and the Safeguarding Policy Statement adopted by GA 2021 and 2022 gives weight to the importance of safeguarding in all areas of the church and describes the responsibility of different groups within the church, this continues to be shared with local churches by SSOs and the central team. Feedback from the 2023 and 2024 annual safeguarding returns evidenced a shift in thinking around safeguarding

						<p>that it isn't a compliance and governance issue but a fundamental Christian value.</p> <p>The central team have now produced and review the foundation, intermediate and advanced training which is rolled out by SSOs. Bespoke courses are mainly delivered by the central team.</p> <p>The Safeguarding Committee, Training Review Group and Policy Review Group are all made up of people from different roles and departments within the URC nationally and Synod level.</p>
1.4 Improve safeguarding communications between Church House, Synods, local churches and URC safeguarding designated persons.	Enable better information cascade, sharing of expertise and good practice in handling safeguarding incidents and concerns internally and externally.	<p>Agreed flow chart for sharing information within the URC.</p> <p>Number of Synods using the main database.</p> <p>Use of URC recording form is standardised and increased.</p>	January 2023	S/G Adviser SSOs CSCs	<p>Recording and Sharing Information principles are clear and standardised in all parts of the Church.</p> <p>Three national meetings with all SSOs annually.</p> <p>Periodic 1-2-1 conversations of SSO with SA.</p> <p>Synod meetings and networks of local churches.</p> <p>Relevant events, training courses and conferences are shared within the Church.</p>	<p>An information-sharing document for the main LEP stakeholders has been released for use.</p> <p>All Synods now have access to the case management system and feedback has been positive about its capacity. The CMS also have the capacity to share information between departments such as ministries, communications etc.</p>

						All Synods are now using the URC database.
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2. Ensure initial and appropriate pastoral care and support to those who are impacted by safeguarding incidents and concerns

Key tasks	Rationale	Success indicators	Deadlines	Key people	Possible issues and wider implications	Comments
2.1 Establish ways of support that contribute to a lasting healing process for survivors and those affected by abuse, harm or neglect from the time of disclosure.	This allows individuals who disclose abuse or neglect to feel they are listened to and that the Church is ready to meet their pastoral care and support needs and/or signpost them to appropriate specialist services or other sources of support.	<p>Positive feedback and evaluation by survivors.</p> <p>Reduced number of complaints and reports about the URC not supporting survivors.</p> <p>Increased number of referrals to external specialist support.</p>	January 2021	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>SSOs</p> <p>CSCs</p> <p>Active Ministers</p> <p>Elders</p> <p>Synod/CH Pastoral Care Committees</p>	<p>Limited resources. Not enough people at the church or Synod to provide pastoral support and strong funding implications.</p> <p>Access to local help and/or relevant local services to be identified and offered.</p> <p>The ongoing impact of abuse on survivors. Avoid re-traumatisation of processes, which compounds the original abuse.</p> <p>Standardised training established for those with pastoral care responsibilities within URC.</p>	<p>Survivors work in the URC is in its infancy and needs to be developed.</p> <p>DSL to link in with external survivor groups, and also approach any URC survivors that may want to form a group.</p> <p>Feedback from the 2023 annual returns is that pastoral and specialist support for survivors is managed well at Synod and local church level.</p>
2.2 Co-produce with Synods an appropriate case management	This helps assess and prevent safeguarding risks	Number of individual cases.	July 2021	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>SSOs</p>	<p>Not sharing the same understanding of what counts as a case –</p>	The case management system is now in place

system that provides prompt and proportionate support to those children, young people and adults in greatest need.	with pastoral care needs established as early as possible and followed up.	<p>Number of occasions that pastoral support was offered.</p> <p>Number of cases that pastoral care and support has taken.</p> <p>Number of referrals to internal or external support.</p>		<p>CSCs</p> <p>Synod/CH Pastoral Care Committees</p> <p>Synod and CH admin staff</p>	<p>Definitions be provided in GP5 and internal protocols.</p> <p>Access for all Synods and Church House's relevant staff to a centralised recording system of allegations and cases of abuse, harm and neglect.</p> <p>Expectations and challenges of managing workload.</p> <p>Need for extra specialist support and supervision for those who handle serious cases.</p>	<p>and being accessed by all Synods.</p> <p>The central team now have a case work supervisor in place to support with case management.</p>
2.3 Consult and engage with survivors and relevant groups and organisations in all safeguarding developments.	This ensures that the URC co-produces with survivors, develops and adopts appropriate approaches to supporting survivors and preventing abuse.	<p>Number of consultations and reviews with survivors and relevant groups.</p> <p>New services of care and support.</p>	Ongoing	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>SSOs</p> <p>SAG</p>	<p>Budget implications.</p> <p>Ethical considerations – Principles of confidentiality and integrity are paramount.</p> <p>Voices are heard in meaningful and non-tokenistic ways in all future developments.</p> <p>Learn from/work with other denominations, organisations and specialist agencies (eg NAPAC).</p>	<p>Survivors work in the URC is in its infancy and needs to be developed.</p> <p>DSL to link in with external survivor groups, and also test the water for any URC survivors that may want to form a group.</p> <p>We do have 'survivors' on various groups that don't identify themselves as that but are valued members of group that are enabled to have input.</p>

2.4 Use internal or external specialists to support local congregations affected by serious incidents of abuse.	A whole-congregation approach will enable local church communities to recover from trauma and crisis in a supportive environment for all.	<p>Lessons drawn and impacted on local safeguarding practice.</p> <p>Sharing good stories of church community work in the area of safeguarding.</p>	Ongoing	<p>Elders</p> <p>Active Minsters</p> <p>SSOs</p> <p>Synod Moderators</p>	<p>Capacity problems – The vital role of leadership and collaboration (including GA appointed officers and Interim Moderators).</p> <p>High risk of stigma and conflicts to inflict more trauma to the lives of those affected by serious safeguarding situations.</p> <p>Principles of informed consent, confidentiality and transparency to be applied.</p> <p>The interrelated work of pastoral committees and LEPs.</p>	<p>The URCs approach is to not have a one size fits all response to supporting survivors and congregations but this should be bespoke to the individual to situation.</p> <p>The annual church safeguarding return now allows a space for churches to share good practice.</p>
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3. Set up secure and appropriate systems and processes of data and information handling and reporting safeguarding

Key Tasks	Rationale	Success indicators	Deadlines	Key people	Wider issues and possible implications	Final comments
3.1 Develop and implement a centralised, standardised electronic system to record and follow up safeguarding	This protects the rights of individuals and relationships across the URC and ensures individual cases, and ministerial and case files are integrated,	<p>All Synods access the system</p> <p>Adoption of Appendix A8: Reporting</p>	June 2023	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>SSOs</p> <p>Ministries office</p>	<p>No clear lines of accountability and duties to record and report. Guidelines to align with Sharing Information Policies and Legislation.</p> <p>Not all Synods accessing the main database. Added</p>	<p>The CMS is now in place and all Synods have made use of it.</p> <p>Feedback has been positive and tweaks to the system have been implemented.</p>

cases and concerns from the beginning of the process to resolution.	monitored and securely stored in one unified system.	<p>concerns form across the URC.</p> <p>Number of resolved cases.</p> <p>Positive reviews from those who access the system.</p>		IT and admin staff	<p>costs for new systems/training to be considered at early stages of delivery. Access and permissions to appropriate staff are granted</p> <p>Disintegration of data in different parts of the church. Protocols are developed, applied and reviewed</p> <p>Different context in Scotland.</p>	DSL has access to all cases and can pull of reports.
3.2 Ensure there are clear lines of accountability by use of standard reporting forms and procedures on a regular and annual basis.	This helps those with safeguarding leadership responsibilities keep an oversight of practice and share information with councils, committees and groups of the Church.	<p>Protocols established, used and reviewed.</p> <p>Number of reports produced and shared.</p>	June 2022	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>SSOs</p> <p>CSCs</p> <p>Members of relevant committees and groups</p>	<p>People not aware of lines of accountability.</p> <p>Roles and job descriptions with clear reference to responsibilities and duties to report and share information.</p> <p>Standardising GP5 as the main safeguarding policy and practice guidance across the URC.</p> <p>New policies (whistleblowing, bullying/harassment, lone working) are developed and applied across the URC (by SAG, HRAG or CHMG).</p>	<p>The CMS is now in place and all Synods have made use of it.</p> <p>GP6 make clearer where responsibility lay in safeguarding responsibilities, listing the different areas of the church.</p> <p>The constitutional changes from GA 2021/2022 clearly set out different areas of the churches responsibilities.</p> <p>CH have Bully and Harassment, Lone Worker and Whistleblowing Policies.</p>

					Crossover with HR and comms/reputation management.	
3.3 Each URC Synod provides safeguarding data and information annually in a consistent format.	Consistency of what information is required as well as regular reports and reviews of internal safeguarding policy and practice will help monitor and review changes.	<p>Evidence of review and changes on policy and practice.</p> <p>Use of standardised forms across Synods and churches.</p>	Each May in all years.	<p>Church Secretaries</p> <p>CSCs</p> <p>SSOs</p>	<p>Heavy workloads.</p> <p>Risk of not meeting deadlines.</p> <p>Provide adequate planning time for those who collate information and produce the annual S/G report for SAG and the whole church.</p> <p>Access to appropriate systems.</p>	<p>All Synods completed their annual safeguarding return in 2024 and 87.7% of local churches completed their returns for 2024 which is an increase on previous years.</p>
3.4 Co-produce with Synods minimum standards of compliance with legislation and internal procedures and obtain benchmark progress for each Synod.	This will embed a culture of co-design on the journey of improving URC's safeguarding practices in open and transparent ways.	<p>Synod positive feedback of co-production.</p> <p>Number of consultation meetings with Synods.</p>	Each May in all years.	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>SSOs</p> <p>Chairs of relevant committees and groups</p>	<p>Avoid a hierarchical model.</p> <p>Provide clear guidance on what is compulsory in the review of GP4 and production of GP5.</p> <p>Working closely with Synods.</p>	<p>GP6 was reviewed with personnel from all areas of the Church. This document sets minimum standard and compliance.</p> <p>All Synods completed annual returns in 2024 for compliance monitoring.</p> <p>A working group has been commissioned by the Safeguarding Committee to look at the URCs internal and external quality assurance framework, the aim is for a paper to be presented at GA 2026.</p>

3.5. Establish tools to measure change and review adequacy and robustness of procedures and policies.	Support a culture of continuous learning and improvement in the local church and identify systemic barriers across the denomination.	Standardise and consistent use of audit tools. Periodic independent reviews and audits.	April 2024	S/G Adviser SSOs CSCs Elders	Fear of an independent oversight at the denomination, Synods and local churches. Building trust and collaboration. Co-produce audits with survivors of abuse in the design and delivery. Avoid long-lasting reviews and excessive paperwork.	A working group has been commissioned by the Safeguarding Committee to look at the URCs internal and external auditing processes, the aim is for a paper to be presented at GA 2026.
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4. Ensure the safeguarding policies and procedures are updated, reviewed, and implemented in practice throughout the URC

Key Tasks	Rationale	Success indicators	Deadlines	Key people	Possible issues and wider implications	Final comments
4.1 Update URC's safeguarding policy every two years following the publication of 'Good Practice 5' (annually for each local church).	This ensures good practice guidance is regularly reviewed and updated in line with new legislation and policy changes.	Up-to-date publications and e-resources intake.	January 2020 January 2022 January 2024	S/G Adviser SSOs	Meeting the needs for the whole denomination. Consultation with all parts of the church to identify policy areas that require improvements. Resources (writing group, publications, etc). Update and brief people to use GP5-GP6.	Churches are asked if they review their policy annually through their annual return, this is a prompt for them to review. SSOs and central teams monitor this through the annual returns. GP6 is now in place and all resources have been reviewed. As we now have a Policy Development coordinator in role this review process will happen in a timely manner.

4.2 Review current safer recruitment practice of the URC and develop a Good Practice Guidance for all parts of the Church.	Provide specific and clear advice that ensures appropriate recruitment, induction, and retention of trustees, and of paid and voluntary workers (ii) arranges lawful criminal record checks (DBS/PVG) for all who need this.	<p>New guidance's intake.</p> <p>Updated lists of eligible roles for DBS/PVG checks.</p> <p>Reduced number of inquiries to CH, Synods and DDC.</p> <p>Positive feedback in undertaking checks through DDC Satisfaction survey.</p>	October 2021 and ongoing	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>SSOs</p> <p>Ministries Office</p> <p>DBS Verifiers</p> <p>DDC staff</p>	<p>Over-checking criminal records of people affiliated with the URC.</p> <p>Create guidance that helps people clarify when it is not appropriate to check, and which roles are eligible for criminal record checks.</p> <p>Understanding checks as part of a wider recruitment process.</p> <p>Scotland's different policy requires separate guidance.</p>	<p>This is in place from GP6, Safer selection of Elders and minister, training course Safer Recruitment and training delivered by DDC about DBS/PVG checks.</p> <p>DBS check matrix was updated and a Scotland version has been created for PVGs going to AE in 2025.</p> <p>CSC are now DDC verifiers which was requested by local churches.</p>
4.3 Develop the capacity of safeguarding designated persons to conduct thorough safeguarding risk assessments and support offenders, alleged offenders and perpetrators of abuse across the URC.	Protect against abuse and better support those who are accountable to manage risk and monitor anyone who may pose a risk.	<p>Tools and resources produced and used.</p> <p>Number of safeguarding contracts/agreements.</p> <p>Number of DBS/PVG referrals.</p> <p>Publications and resources intake.</p>	March 2021	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>SSOs</p> <p>CSCs</p> <p>Elders</p>	<p>Interpersonal relationships can minimise the importance of risk assessment in the life of the church.</p> <p>Equip people with the right skills and specific guidance.</p> <p>Regular reviews of existing risk assessment tools and relevant sections of GP4/GP5. (Risk assessment and covenants of care forms and templates.)</p> <p>Information sharing protocols with other denominations.</p>	<p>All the documentation for those who pose a risk have recently been published on the URC website.</p> <p>CH team are looking to develop training on this subject.</p>

4.4 Connect safeguarding policy and procedures with URC's disciplinary processes, especially those related to ministers/CRCWs.	This helps establish good practice and expertise among all members of mandated groups and those involved in safeguarding cases that lead to instigation of disciplinary procedures.	<p>Evidence of joint thinking and consultation in the review process of Section O.</p> <p>Setting up disciplinary processes for other relevant roles within the Church.</p> <p>Number of safeguarding cases recorded in the disciplinary processes.</p>	June 2020	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>MIND</p> <p>Ministries Office</p> <p>SSOs</p>	<p>Disconnection between safeguarding and disciplinary processes.</p> <p>A clear and transparent process is jointly agreed and reviewed.</p> <p>Mandatory safeguarding training for members of mandated group involved in the Section O process.</p> <p>Defined role for safeguarding officers and advisers in the new disciplinary process.</p> <p>Adherence to GP5/GP6 requirements and legislation (eg Employment Law).</p>	<p>The Section O process has been reviewed and continues to be reviewed to be clearer how safeguarding fits into this process.</p> <p>Disciplinary for office holders now in place.</p> <p>Lessons learnt group now in place for Section Os that have been concluded.</p> <p>Section Os are logged on the case management system.</p>
4.5 Ensure people in positions of leadership and accountability are aware of any changes to safeguarding policy and practice.	New policy changes are discussed within supervision and training development of employed staff and shared within teams or working groups.	<p>Communication material shared.</p> <p>Policy updates added on agendas.</p> <p>S/G advanced training uptake is increased.</p>	January 2020 and ongoing	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>SSOs</p> <p>Synod Moderators</p>	<p>Challenges in information sharing (language, terminologies, technical issues).</p> <p>Use of newsletters, briefs and reports to MC/GA to inform the right people.</p> <p>The central role of elders, ministers, Synod Moderators and General Secretaries in understanding safeguarding and being aware of URC's policy and practice.</p>	<p>The national team produce quarterly newsletter that keep people updated including those in leadership.</p> <p>Safeguarding training is mandatory for those in leadership roles and updates form part of training.</p> <p>GP6 was widely shared at all levels of the church and is accessible on the URC website.</p>

5. Provide appropriate and accessible safeguarding training for all those who are accountable for and working with children, young people, and adults

Key tasks	Rationale	Success indicators	Deadlines	Key people	Possible issues and wider implications	Final comments
5.1. Benchmark and co-produce with Synods URC's standardised safeguarding training programme for all roles and positions within the URC expected to undertake regular and mandatory safeguarding training.	Align with current Synod practices and public policy requirements to enable all those working with children and adults at risk as well as those responsible for their care undertake regular safeguarding training.	<p>Training used consistently in each Synod.</p> <p>A system to monitor attendance and renewals is established and standardised.</p>	June 2021	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>S/G Training/ Development Coordinator</p> <p>Education and Learning staff</p> <p>SSOs</p> <p>Synod Training officers</p> <p>CSCs</p>	<p>Lack of consistency across Synods.</p> <p>Recording attendance and renewal of URC or other denominations' training.</p> <p>Resistance to travel to attend training. Online access can help but limits interaction and collaboration. Accessibility needs.</p> <p>Accrediting URC safeguarding training.</p> <p>Defining training packages tailored to specific roles and positions (eg Elders<>SSO).</p> <p>Adaptation to national contexts of Scotland and Wales.</p>	<p>The Training Framework was agreed at GA 2021.</p> <p>The central team have produced and review foundation, intermediate and advanced training. Along with the bespoke courses these courses are being delivered both by the central team and in Synods.</p> <p>Training numbers are monitored through the annual church and safeguarding returns in 2023 showed 3000 people attended training across the denomination.</p> <p>The training reference group are looking at issuing guidance on monitoring attendance at training and systems vary from Synod to Synod and use of the database.</p>

5.2 Ensure robust guidance on delivering mandatory training in both areas of safeguarding (children and adults at risk) for all identified groups involved in regulated activities.	Mandatory training will ensure monitoring the delivery of standardised and refreshing safeguarding training for identified roles of accountability and leadership.	<p>Numerical evidence of training attendance.</p> <p>Evidence of positive action taken as a result of training</p> <p>Number of certificates per role.</p>	December 2021	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>S/G Training/ Development Coordinator</p> <p>SAG</p> <p>SSOs</p> <p>Ministries</p>	<p>Non-attendance for those who are involved in direct work with children and adults at risk.</p> <p>A framework of sanctions for non-attendance.</p> <p>Mandatory safeguarding training for active ministers.</p> <p>GA certificates.</p>	<p>The Training Framework was agreed at GA 2021.</p> <p>The central team have produced and review foundation, intermediate and advanced training along with the bespoke courses these courses are being delivered both by the central team and in Synods.</p> <p>There needs to be a system in place to monitor and manage those that are not attending the training they are mandate to do.</p>
5.3 Develop and maintain quality standards of regular safeguarding training and professional development across the URC.	Consistency and quality at different levels of development and delivery of safeguarding training are reviewed regularly.	<p>Positive evaluations and reviews of training provision.</p>	June 2021	<p>SAG</p> <p>S/G Training/ Development Coordinator</p> <p>SSOs</p> <p>Ministries</p>	<p>Connection with accreditation.</p> <p>Working with Learning Resource Centres.</p>	<p>The central team have produced and review foundation, intermediate and advanced training along with the bespoke courses. These courses are being delivered both by the central team and in Synods.</p>
5.4 Develop and update a comprehensive guidance and package of support resources to make serving elders and trustees (URC and	The aim is that elders/trustees feel confident in preventing abuse for all people in the church as well as protecting the assets and	<p>Number of interactions/meetings of designated safeguarding persons with elders.</p> <p>Feedback from elders meeting.</p>	June 2023 and ongoing	<p>S/G Adviser</p> <p>S/G Training/ Development Coordinator</p> <p>SSOs</p>	<p>Data of elders are not recorded at CH or Synods.</p> <p>High number of elders – cost and GDPR implications.</p> <p>Enabling regular interactions and briefings in Elders or Trustees Meetings to</p>	<p>Elders as Trustee training has been produced and is run across the URC, Elders are currently mandated to complete foundation training.</p>

Synod) aware of their legal responsibilities.	reputation of churches.	<p>Numbers of elders attending basic safeguarding training.</p> <p>Evaluation of training provision.</p> <p>Referrals to CC.</p>		Education and Learning Committee	<p>minimise concerns and build trust.</p> <p>Working closely with other departments/teams within the URC.</p> <p>Keep elders up to date regarding changes to regulations and policies using traditional and visual methodologies (induction material, <i>Reform</i>, video, etc.</p>	<p>The changes to the URC Constitution and the Safeguarding Policy Statement adopted by GA 2021 gives weight to the importance of safeguarding in all areas of the church and describes the responsibility of different groups within the church, this continues to be shared with local churches by SSOs and the central team.</p> <p>National team to look at the 'So They Have Asked Me to Be an Elder' booklet to see if it covered safeguarding responsibilities and share this with the Ministries team who own this document.</p> <p>GP6 is to make it clearer who plays what role in safeguarding situation including local church/elders.</p>
5.5 Value the expertise of and contribute to continuous development of	Ensure Synod designated persons are equipped and remain resourceful to	<p>Numbers of co-working groups and surveys with SSOs.</p> <p>Records of attending relevant training and</p>	Ongoing	SSOs S/G Adviser	<p>Heavy workloads and increased commitments.</p> <p>Common understanding of safeguarding between SSOs to be fostered.</p>	<p>All Synods now have an SSO solely in that role.</p> <p>SSO attend an annual residential together.</p>

Synod Safeguarding Officers.	lead all aspects of safeguarding practice in their local churches with continuous support and supervision.	<p>professional development opportunities.</p> <p>Positive appraisals and feedback from SSOs.</p>		<p>Line managers of SSOs</p> <p>Synod Moderators</p> <p>Relevant Synod committees and groups</p>	<p>Joint posts with CYDO roles to be reviewed</p> <p>Adaptations to national contexts (Wales/Scotland).</p>	<p>Peer-led training sessions for SSOs continue.</p> <p>Standalone training sessions have been delivered for SSOs.</p> <p>Case work supervisor now in role to support SSOs on cases.</p> <p>SSO training is not currently recorded.</p> <p>Synods are responsible for appraisals and these are not shared with the central team or the Safeguarding Committee.</p>
5.6 Ensure safeguarding is part of the induction of any newly appointed persons to URC roles (particularly trustees, children's and youth workers and those in regulated activities with adults) alongside the specific role induction.	This enables each new role holder to understand the personal and corporate liability should a safeguarding incident happen, while building a culture of prevention at every church setting,	Number of job and role descriptions where safeguarding is listed as duty.	June 2022	<p>HR</p> <p>CSCs</p> <p>Active Ministers</p> <p>Pastoral Committees</p> <p>Training Officers</p>	<p>Oversee essential requirements set up by Government guidance or CC.</p> <p>HR teams to update existing recruitment and induction policies.</p> <p>Update safer recruitment guidance for those who recruit, induct and line-manage workers and volunteers.</p>	<p>Safeguarding training is mandatory in these roles but there is no timescale on how long someone has to undertake this training, an amendment to this is coming to GA 2025.</p> <p>CH employees all complete safeguarding training during induction period.</p>

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6. Encourage and build constructive partnerships with statutory, non-statutory bodies, other denomination and faith-based communities

Key tasks	Rationale	Success indicators	Deadlines	Key people	Possible issues and wider implications	Final comments
6.2 Improve public awareness of URC's good practice in safeguarding across denominational, cross-denominational and ecumenical settings.	Encourage personal drive and actions of URC people (particularly volunteers) to improve the safeguarding ethos at the local church and public acknowledgement of personal and collective efforts.	Increased number of local initiatives and campaigns. Opportunities to share expertise externally.	March 2023	Synods S/G Adviser SSOs CSCs SAG	Initiatives and events. Links with other developments 'Walking the way safely'. Links with Methodists, Baptists and Anglicans.	DSL on ecumenical working groups and member of Christian Forum of Safeguarding. Some SSOs attend local interdenominational meetings. The URC was core participants of the IICSA. Safeguarding symposium to be run bi-annually. Central team linking in with the Communications team at CH and more social media posts being made around safeguarding.
6.3 Develop and share guidance on safeguarding when churches hire out their premises or	Promote good practice in allowing our premises to be used by	Increased use of the guidance.	June 2023	S/G Adviser SSOs	Serious incidents not reported to CC. Clear safeguarding arrangements and agreements.	New safeguarding clauses have been issues to Synods following a lengthy development and consultation period.

providing space to groups/ organisations whose work involves children.	external organisations working with children and adults at risk.					
6.4 Endorse close partnership and knowledge exchange of best practice with other denominations to support LEP's and church communities.	Promote ecumenical dialogue and co-produce partnerships for the benefit of public worship, protection of the vulnerable and pastoral care of communities.	Publication of material and resources. Number of joint events and seminars.	Ongoing	S/G Adviser SSOs CSCs CFS Local ecumenical groups	Shared resources and common events. Ecumenical and international settings.	DSL on ecumenical working groups and member of Christian Forum of Safeguarding. Some SSOs attend local interdenominational meetings.

Glossary

CC Charity Commission
CFS Churches Forum for Safeguarding
CH Church House
CRCW Church-related Community Workers
CSC Church Safeguarding Coordinator
CYDO Children's and Youth Development Officer
DBS Disclosure and Barring Service
DDC Due Diligence Checking Ltd

DSL Designated Safeguarding Lead
GP4/5/6 Good Practice 4/5/6
LEP Local Ecumenical Partnership
LADO Local Authority Designated Officer
MC Mission Council
MIND Ministerial Incapacity and Discipline Advisory Group
PVG Protecting Vulnerable Groups (Scotland Scheme)

SAG Safeguarding Advisory Group
S/G Safeguarding
SSO Synod Safeguarding Officer
GA General Assembly
GP Good Practice
URC The United Reformed Church

Annual safeguarding report 2025

This report is created from data captured from the Annual Church Safeguarding Returns for 2024, but does not include analysis from Synod Safeguarding Officers (SSOs) through their reporting, due to time frame for submission. Further in-depth analysis will be reported to the September 2025 Safeguarding Committee for reflection and action.

Introduction

87.7% of churches completed safeguarding annual returns.
4.5% of churches have no Safeguarding Coordinator.

Comments: Again this year, there has been an increase in churches completing their annual safeguarding return (+6%) which is positive. Also the number of churches without Safeguarding Coordinators had reduced, which is encouraging. SSOs continue to reach out to those churches not completing returns or without Safeguarding Coordinators to offer support and encouragement.

There is a sense that the culture of safeguarding in our church has shifted, with feedback that safeguarding is seen as who we are as a Christian denomination to want to keep people safe, and to love and support those who have been harmed, and not a governance and compliance issue.



Safeguarding concerns

Number of concerns related to children: 55, the main two categories of abuse are emotional abuse and neglect.

Number of concerns related to adults: 159, the main two categories of abuse are emotional abuse and domestic abuse.

(These figures are likely to be higher when final data is collected by SSOs and do not include high numbers of low-level concerns supported by SSOs).



Comments: The number of concerns being reported and supported by safeguarding personnel have slightly increased on last year's figures. This is to be expected as we become more aware through training and awareness-raising of what is a safeguarding concern and how to report this.

The safeguarding training offered is continually being reviewed, updated and developed to ensure that all safeguarding personnel across the denomination are trained in topical issues as well as core safeguarding topics.

The Church Life Review questionnaire responses were very positive in relation to how safeguarding is supported across the denomination in terms of training, personnel and shared resources. The central and Synod safeguarding teams continue to work hard to offer this high level of support to local churches and value the positive feedback.

Pastoral care and support

Comments: Local churches and Synods continue to source pastoral care and support for individual and groups in need of this support, with access to Place for Hope support as needed.

Managing risk

65 known people who pose a risk to children or adults are attending URC churches.

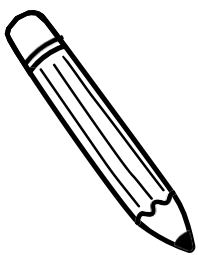
Comments: Those on safeguarding agreements in local churches continue to be supported by the Church Safeguarding Coordinators and Synod Safeguarding Officers. The guidance documents for supporting those that pose a risk has had a major overhaul over the last period and is now available on the URC website. We hope that these documents make it clearer to all how we can safely manage those that pose a risk in our churches.



Safer recruitment

Comments: With the culture shift within safeguarding, the understanding of the need for safer recruitment continues to be recognised and adhered to. In turn, this has led to an increase in the number of DBS/PVG checks being completed: 2,565 being completed in 2024 as a small part of the safer recruitment/safer Election of Elders process.

Of those 2,565 DBS/PVGs being completed in 2024, 1.1% were issued with a blemish which required a risk assessment on the suitability for the individual to carry out the role. These were carried out by the Synod Safeguarding Officer in liaison with the local church.



Additional comments

The Safeguarding Committee would like to thank all local churches and church Safeguarding Coordinators for taking the time to complete the Annual Return. It really does support the work of the Synod Safeguarding Officers and that of the Church House safeguarding team. IF you have any feedback on the annual safeguarding return, then please contact **safeguarding@urc.org.uk**.