

Paper 12

Synod Safeguarding Reviews 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	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 39 General Assembly instructs the denominational Safeguarding Team and Synods to implement a programme of regular reviews of Synods' safeguarding practice. Resolution 40 Assembly adopts an addition to the Rules of Procedure which will read under Synod responsibilities: 10.3.4 — To participate in a triennial safeguarding review conducted by the General Assembly Safeguarding Team.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	<p>The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) found that good quality auditing only happened in a small number of faith organisations and recommended further consideration be given to the need for internal auditing, inspection and oversight. The URC were core participants of the IICSA.</p> <p>The Makin Review (2024) also stated that “Safeguarding best practice is achieved by there being a ‘golden thread’ of safeguarding throughout the organisation with ‘safeguarding [made] everybody’s business’ from the bottom to the top of an organisation. A robust and systematic quality assurance process, that includes independent scrutiny, audits and learning reviews, would also be in place, to provide challenge and support to those responsible for safeguarding practice. A culture of transparency complementing a cycle of continuous learning to inform improvements to reduce gaps and improve practice are integral to these systems, as demonstrated in national statutory guidance that is applicable to other institutions and organisations” (emphasis added).</p> <p>Consequently, the URC Safeguarding Committee has been</p>
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	<p>considering ways to strengthen quality assurance in relation to safeguarding. A ‘Safeguarding Practice Development Framework’ has been developed (see 7 below) which sets out some key principles for our approach and different activities that can all contribute to the goal of improving safeguarding culture and practice.</p> <p>One important element of the Practice Development Framework is the introduction of Synod Safeguarding Reviews. This paper explains what this would involve and seeks approval by General Assembly for a regular programme of Synod Safeguarding Reviews to be undertaken.</p>
Main points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rationale for Synod Safeguarding Reviews • An outline of what a Safeguarding Review involves • A summary of experiences from two ‘pilot’ reviews • Proposals for the future roll-out of the reviews across all Synods
Previous relevant documents	Paper T1 Safeguarding Committee Annual Report 2025
Consultation has taken place with...	<p>Safeguarding Committee Members Synod Safeguarding Officers Synod Moderators East Midlands Synod South-Western Synod Audit working group</p> <p>The proposal to undertake Synod Safeguarding Reviews is also part of the draft Safeguarding Strategic Plan for 2026-2029 which was circulated to Synod Moderators, Synod Clerks, and Synod Safeguarding Officers for consultation.</p>

Summary of impact

Financial	There will be costs for travel incurred by staff visiting Synods to undertake Safeguarding Reviews and some additional ad hoc hours for the Policy Development Officer (Safeguarding) around the time of each Review. These costs will be covered within the General Assembly safeguarding budget.
External (eg ecumenical)	

URC Synod Safeguarding Reviews

1. Introduction

The United Reformed Church recognises that it is everyone’s responsibility to safeguard others and needs to have appropriate measures in place for quality assurance, to identify areas for improvement and to share examples of good safeguarding practice across the denomination.

2. Safeguarding Practice Development Framework

The diagram in Annex 1 below shows the planned practice development framework for

safeguarding. It summarises the aims of our quality assurance process and the principles underpinning how this will work out in practice. The activities listed are not exhaustive, and may change over time as the process develops, but are intended to illustrate different elements of practice improvement. It is not envisaged that all of these activities would be taking place at the same time and some of them (eg external review) are proposals for future development.

3. The need for Synod Safeguarding Reviews

Synods have a critical role in providing advice, support and training for local churches but the URC does not currently have any systematic way of evaluating the work being undertaken.

The introduction of the Casework Supervisor role has provided greater consistency (for those Synods which make use of the role) in terms of how active cases are managed. It is not within the remit of that role, however, to look at wider aspects of practice such as policies, communication between synods and churches, safeguarding culture, or the resources provided by synods for safeguarding personnel and activities.

There are regular quarterly meetings of Synod Safeguarding Officers (SSOs) which focus on providing mutual support and learning from each other. These meetings can cover a wide range of topics but are not intended to provide a systematic overview of practice across different synods.

In light of the recommendations from IICSA on strengthening quality assurance within organisations, the URC needs a way to evaluate how synods are fulfilling their vital contribution to creating a safer URC.

4. The approach to synod safeguarding reviews

A small working group was formed — comprising a local Church Safeguarding Coordinator, SSOs and members of the Offices of the General Assembly (OoGA) safeguarding team — to look at ways of taking this work forward. The group felt that any assessment of synods' safeguarding work needed to fit with the following criteria:

- not be overly burdensome for either synods or the OoGA safeguarding team
- provide an opportunity for synods to reflect on their own practice
- identify constructive learning for each synod and also for the wider denomination

The approach that has been developed and tested in two synods so far is based on the structure of the *Good Practice 6* safeguarding guidance and sets out key goals in each of the six key areas of the guidance (see Annex 2 below).

Before starting the review, the synod and Head of Safeguarding for the URC will sign an information sharing agreement in recognition of the sensitive nature of some of the data being shared.

The key elements of the process are:

- The completion of a self-assessment tool by the synod prior to the review. This is based on the key goals linked to each of the sections of Good Practice 6.
- Review of a range of documents including policies, minutes of Trustee and safeguarding committee/reference group meetings
- Review of safeguarding information provided on the synod website
- Online questionnaires (anonymous) to obtain feedback from Church Safeguarding

- Coordinators (CSCs) and Ministers
- Visit by two members of the OoGA safeguarding team to the synod and discussion based on all of the above
- Dip sampling of a small random selection of cases

A full report is then provided to the synod highlighting both positive aspects of practice and suggestions for improvement. A summary report can also be provided for sharing more widely within the synod.

The OoGA team members will also keep a record of any examples of good practice to share with other synods and also areas where further guidance or training may need to be developed.

5. Piloting the Synod Safeguarding Reviews

Two 'test-runs' have taken place so far: East Midlands Synod kindly volunteered to be the first synod to take part in the process, and their trial review took place in November 2025. A second pilot review took place in South-Western Synod in March 2026.

Some key learning points from these two pilot reviews include:

- The self-assessment tool takes time to complete but both synods found it useful
- The completion rate of the online questionnaires for CSCs and Ministers has been good and has provided some useful feedback for the synods
- There will be differences between synods in terms of which staff are involved in the reviews given their different structures and staffing levels
- Synods need several months' notice of a review to have adequate time to complete the self-assessment and collate the relevant documentation
- The purpose of the review needs to be clearly explained (that it is a review of wider synod practice and not an external appraisal of the SSO).

The approach combines structured self-reflection by the synod with the benefit of external review by the OoGA safeguarding team. The aim has been to engage in constructive discussion, taking account of the specific context, resources, challenges and opportunities in each Synod. This also seems to fit well with the conciliar structure of the URC, rather than pursuing a rigid 'inspection' type approach.

6. Proposed roll-out of Synod Safeguarding Reviews

It is important that all Synods take part in this process in order to achieve adequate accountability and to maximise the opportunities for learning and practice development across the denomination.

We propose to that each synod would complete a review once every three years. This timescale would avoid placing too much burden on synods whilst ensuring that there is a regular opportunity for reflection and review.

We would continue with the approach that has worked well in the pilot Reviews so far.

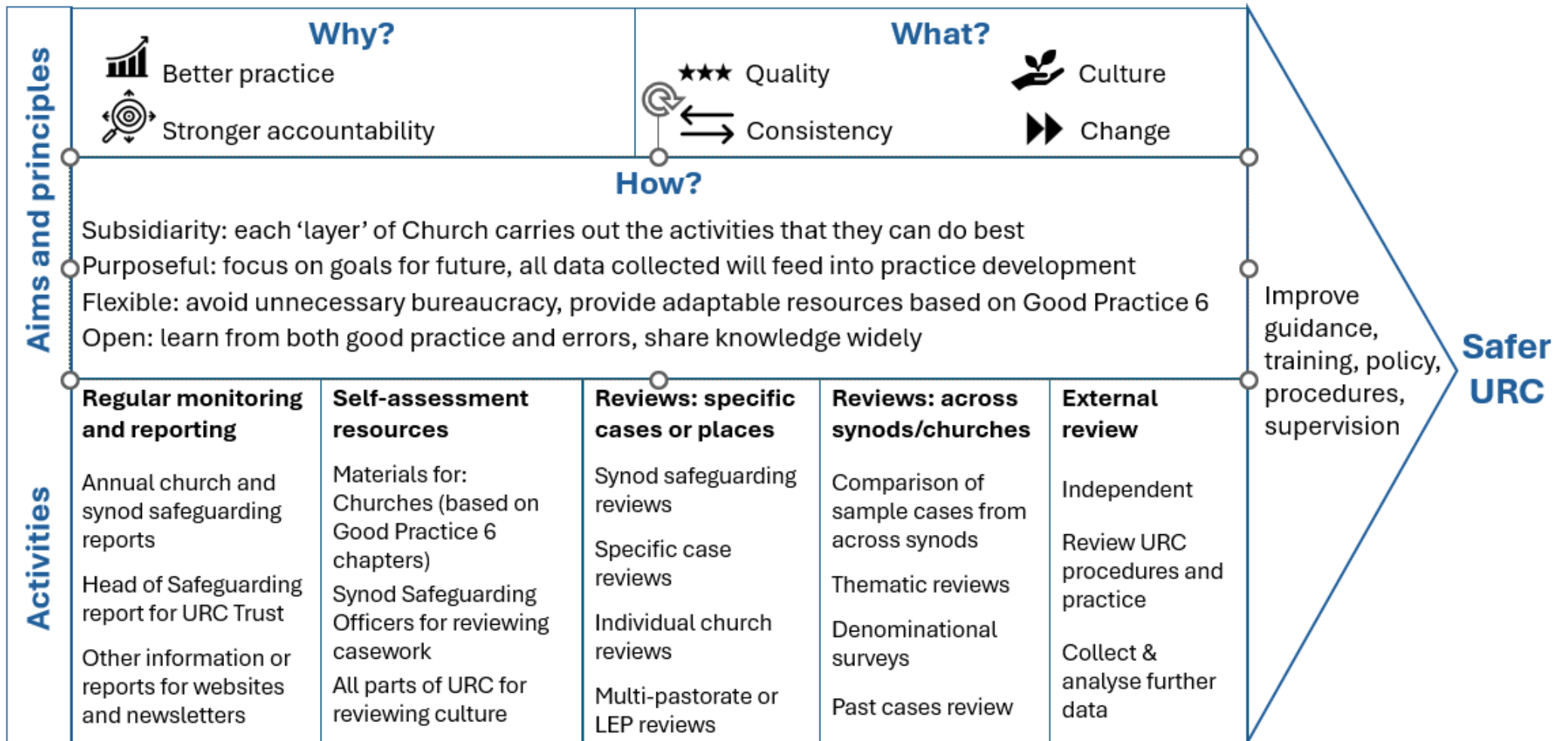
We would work with the National Synod of Scotland to agree an amended process for a review in Scotland. The Synod has a service agreement with the Church of Scotland Safeguarding Service who provide training for churches and are responsible for responding to concerns and allegations arising within URC congregations. The review process would be adapted to reflect this specific context.

As per the new safeguarding strategic plan, we would look at lessons learned after one year of the new roll-out and for the Safeguarding Committee to consider whether any changes to the process or resources required are needed.

7. Future plans

We plan to look at options for a review of the OOGA safeguarding team and/or an independent external review of safeguarding across the denomination, but this would likely take place once the first full cycle of synod reviews has been completed.

Annex 1: Safeguarding Practice Development Framework



Annex 2: Structure of Synod Safeguarding Reviews

The reviews are structured around the chapters of *Good Practice 6* guidance.

1. Our URC commitments, values and responsibilities

Goal: The Synod actively demonstrates its commitment to implementing the URC's safeguarding policy statement and provides clear leadership on safeguarding for local churches.

Key themes:

- Leadership
- Strategic oversight
- Operational responsibilities
- Communication

2. Safer culture

Goal: The synod is continually developing a safer culture in its own work/activities and helps local churches strengthen their safeguarding cultures.

Key themes:

- Safer recruitment and training
- Policies and procedures
- Data privacy, security and information sharing
- Reviewing and learning lessons

3. Safer activities

Goal: Safe working practices are evident across all areas of the Synod's work and the Synod helps equip local churches to embed safer working in their activities.

Key themes:

- Safe use and hiring of buildings
- Risk assessments for activities
- Best practice in safer working for events and activities

4. Recognising and responding to concerns

Goal: The Synod responds promptly and appropriately to concerns, working effectively in partnership with local churches, statutory services, and other relevant organisations. The Synod helps equip local churches to recognise and respond to concerns appropriately.

Key themes:

- Awareness of abuse and how to report it
- Appropriate and timely responses to concerns
- Contact with statutory services, other agencies and denominations
- Support and pastoral care

5. Managing allegations and risks

Goal: Allegations against church workers are managed effectively and fairly with appropriate support provided to all involved. The Synod supports local churches to balance being open to all with ensuring suitable boundaries are in place to protect people attending church activities from those who intend to cause harm.

Key themes:

- Referrals, investigative and disciplinary procedures
- Behavioural risk assessments
- Safeguarding agreements and multi-agency working
- Equipping local church leaders and support groups to manage risk

6. Supporting victims and survivors

Goal: The Synod prioritises the needs of victims and survivors; ensures they receive appropriate, personalised care; and helps equip local churches to provide support.

Key themes:

- Raising awareness
- Responding to disclosures
- Provision of support
- Listening to the voices of victim-survivors