

Audit of Safeguarding Practice across the Church

Contact Name and Details	Nicola Sylvester, Safeguarding Policy Manager SylvesterN@methodistchurch.org.uk
Action Required	The Council is asked to receive this report and approve the implementation of the audit framework.
Resolutions	21/1. The Council receives the report. 21/2. The Council approves the audit framework for safeguarding practice.

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults
Main Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The need to assess the effectiveness of safeguarding practice across districts. ▪ To identify best practice to be shared within the Connexion.
Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Requirement to provide information on the effectiveness of the implementation of Safeguarding Policy, Procedures in districts. 2. To independently assess how effective safeguarding structures and processes are working across the Connexion.
Consultations	The Safeguarding Committee, District Safeguarding Officers and District Chairs

Summary of Impact

Financial	Additional financial resources may be required for the external audit process, however this is yet to be identified.
Personnel	Director of Safeguarding, Safeguarding Policy Manager and the Safeguarding Committee
Wider Connexional	Framework to be implemented across the Connexion.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Framework may be adopted by Local Ecumenical Partnerships where applicable

1. Introduction

In July 2021, the Safeguarding Committee (SGC) received a paper authored by Jane Stacey outlining the proposals for an independent audit process of safeguarding practice across the Connexion. The work in compiling the audit framework is intended to strengthen current quality assurance mechanisms and work alongside the new standards and criteria for District Safeguarding Groups (DSGs).

At the July meeting, the SGC discussed the proposals, which includes an additional function for its senior and professional members, as they would be carrying out the core audit activities. In order to ensure a robust process, there is a further suggestion that a final level of quality assurance is undertaken by an external organisation in respect of the audit process as completed by the SGC.

2. Context

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) published its report into child protection in religious organisations and settings and its subsequent recommendations on 2 September 2021. The Inquiry obtained evidence from thirty-eight religious organisations with a presence in England and Wales

requesting their responses within six months to the relevant recommendations being published. The thematic investigation examined a number of key areas including barriers to reporting; child protection policies and procedures; responding to allegations of abuse; out-of-school settings; and, inspection and oversight. Evidence was obtained from nine local authorities across England and Wales, home to large and diverse religious communities. The report's authors state that their findings indicate that each of those authorities wish 'to have greater powers to help religious organisations to better protect children'.

While the Inquiry did uncover 'a few rare examples of internal quality assurance by religious organisations themselves', it reports that the current system is 'one of patchwork influence rather than mandatory standards and enforcement'. Examples include inspections and reviews arranged by the organisation themselves and the voluntary commissioning of audits from organisations such as Thirtyone:Eight. The report's authors also highlight that while there is no accord among the varied organisations about what future oversight should look like, there 'was clear evidence' that standard and oversight arrangements are necessary to safeguard children effectively.

3. The Proposed Audit Framework

The Safeguarding Policy of the Methodist Church makes the following commitments:

- To promote a safer environment and culture.
- To safely recruit and support all those with any responsibility for children and adults within the Church.
- To respond promptly and appropriately to every safeguarding concern or allegation.
- To care pastorally for victims and survivors of abuse and other people who have been affected.
- To care pastorally for those who are the subject of concerns of allegations of abuse and others who have been affected.

The proposed audit is structured around these commitments. Therefore, the objectives of the audit process are to:

- assess the effectiveness of safeguarding leadership in churches, circuits and districts;
- provide information on how well the Safeguarding Policy, Procedures and Guidance are being implemented in each district; and,
- extract learning from each audit so that best practice can be shared across the Connexion.

It is important that the audits do not duplicate the quality assurance processes that are in place but add an independent element to assess how effectively these structures/processes are working.

3.1 The Audit Team

The Standing Orders stipulate that the Safeguarding Committee (SGC) be composed of a mix of people, most with professional safeguarding experience but some who are members because of the respect they carry within the Church. In terms of gaining the trust of those who are to be audited, the mix of skills and personnel seems very relevant. As a consequence of the Past Cases Review (PCR), the Safeguarding Committee was charged with promoting effective safeguarding practice across the Connexion, a role which would be strengthened by the knowledge acquired through taking part in the audit process. It is proposed that each audit team has one of the senior members of the SGC in the role of chair, one/two professional member(s) of the SGC and input from a member of a survivors' group. The members of the audit team would not hold or have held any formal role or be resident within the district being audited to maximise independent scrutiny.

3.2 The Audit Process

The audit will be conducted in two parts: a document review; and, interviews with individuals/groups.

3.2.1 The document review

District level documents to be reviewed as part of the audit:

- Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) statistics for district broken down by circuit

- Training stats for district broken down by circuit
- List of safeguarding contracts broken down by circuit
- Any action plans made at district level to improve safeguarding practice plus plan reviews
- District Safeguarding Group (DSG) minutes of meetings for previous three years

3.2.2 Interviews

All interviewees will have advance notice of the questions that they will be asked. All interviews will be conducted by zoom or other IT platform and involve two members of the audit panel, one of whom will take the notes.

These will be in two categories of interviewees:

- a) District safeguarding leaders - the District Chair, the District Safeguarding Officer and members of the DSG in a group interview
- b) Randomly selected and anonymised interviewees holding leadership roles in circuits and churches, including:
 - Three superintendents (consider mix of circuit size, rural, urban)
 - Three ministers
 - Three circuit safeguarding officers
 - Three church safeguarding officers

The last two groups on the list will be asked to provide case records on:

Circuit Safeguarding Officer (SO) – notes of cases for previous four years and recruitment files for last four years

Church SO – notes of cases for previous four years

4. Proposed Timetable for audit programme

It is proposed that districts would be asked to volunteer to be part of the first year of the roll out of the audit process so that the audit is seen as less daunting and connexional learning from best practice can be maximised. Starting the audit process in the autumn of 2022 is a timescale that would enable reflection on the District Safeguarding Group standards that would have had a year of implementation. It would also work well with the timescales of the final IICSA report. In addition, starting the audits in 2022 provides the Methodist Council opportunity to consider the content of this document.

The programme is designed to audit all districts over a four-year period and the cycle is repeated on a rolling four-year basis. The proposed timetable is to undertake two/three audits in the autumn (October/November), two/three in January/early February and two/three in late April/May. Each audit would have interviews scheduled over a two-day period. The audit team would need preparatory reading time, an end of audit discussion session and time to complete records of interviews plus the panel chair writing the final report. This report would be shared as a draft with the District Chair, DSO and DSG for their comments before a final version is produced.

5. External audit

It would strengthen the independence of the process if there was an external input. It is proposed that an external organisation is commissioned to audit the audit and risk assessment panel functions of the Safeguarding Committee. A helpful timescale for this could be an external audit two years into the audit roll out so that lessons could be learnt to inform the programme going forward. IICSA recommendations could have a bearing on this.

6. Resources required

Senior members of the Safeguarding Committee would be asked to commit to doing two audits per year (the Committee Chair may not be able to make this commitment). This will involve a commitment of six days per year.

Professional members of the Committee who volunteer would also be asked to commit to doing two audits a year. Three members have already come forward but three more would be needed to fill the required

slots. It would be possible to recruit other volunteers to be involved if the workload is not possible for committee members.

Discussions need to take place with the Survivors' Reference group or an alternative group to assess how they could input into the panels.

In districts, those identified to be interviewed would require the interview time plus some preparation (approximately two hours each person/group once every four years).

There would need to be administrative support from the Connexional Team to arrange the audits.

There would be a resource requirement to commission an external organisation to conduct an audit of the Safeguarding Committee.

Conclusion

The Methodist Council is asked to receive this report and approve the implementation of the audit framework.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

21/1. The Council receives the report.

21/2. The Council approves the audit framework for safeguarding practice.