



Chapter one

Our URC commitments, values and responsibilities

1.1 URC Safeguarding Policy Statement (General Assembly 2021)

The United Reformed Church (URC) is committed to safeguarding in every area of its life and ministry. Safeguarding is the action taken to promote and protect the wellbeing and human rights of individuals. This means we will:

- Do all we can to create and maintain a safe and caring environment for all people
- Respond promptly and effectively to any form of abuse and neglect, including reporting abuse to statutory agencies as necessary
- Seek to prevent abuse in any form from occurring.

We will seek to identify individuals who may pose a risk to others and take necessary actions to minimise risk while supporting these individuals in our communities when safe to do so. The URC confirms that safeguarding is the responsibility of everyone: to prevent abuse and neglect of children, young people and adults; to act upon concerns of abuse; and to support the wellbeing of each person within all communities in which the Church is placed. Safeguarding is a requirement and a duty in all Councils of the Church. Safeguarding in the URC is supported with relevant policies, practice, guidance and training. The Church acknowledges that the wellbeing of the child or adult who is experiencing or is at risk of experiencing abuse, harm and neglect is paramount, and it will always act in their best interests, in line with national legislation, relevant statutory guidelines and good practice guidance. The United Reformed Church believes that all people have the right to be and feel part of this community, regardless of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership status, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation. We will operate in line with the Human Rights Act 1988, the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Equality Act 2010.

The United Reformed Church (URC) is committed to safeguarding in every area of its life ...

Commitments

The URC will adhere to the policy statement above by committing to:

- Promote safe and healthy cultures in which good practice standards in safeguarding are updated and disseminated
- Ensure everyone in a position of trust is carefully recruited / selected / appointed / elected and trained in safeguarding children and adults at risk
- Respond promptly and appropriately to any safeguarding allegation or concern (including reporting any allegations to statutory agencies), including those who may pose a risk to children, young people or adults at risk
- Care pastorally for all children and adults at risk, and all those who have experienced abuse in the past
- Ensure that all those who pose a risk to children, young people or adults at risk, and those who are the subject of allegations, receive appropriate pastoral care and supervision
- Exercise informed vigilance about risks in all forms of abuse and neglect
- Work together with other denominations, statutory agencies and voluntary organisations.

The full statement (paper T4) and further details can be found at: www.bit.ly/urcbor2021

1.2 Why safeguarding matters

Safeguarding is part of the URC's mission. Churches and places of worship reflect society, with children and adults sharing together in the activities taking place in and around them. We journey alongside those who have been abused and those who have abused, and we all go forward together as one body. The challenge for the URC is to foster a community of care where everyone – children, adults and, especially, those in greater need – finds in the Church a place where they feel safe and respected and can seek pastoral care and support when needed.

URC theology of safeguarding

Safeguarding involves all of us. Safeguarding is integral to the mission of the United Reformed Church and a part of its response and witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Safeguarding is underpinned by Jesus' command to his followers to "love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34-35). Because Jesus' ministry is continued in and through the Church, the whole people of God called and committed to his service and equipped by him for it, it is our call to "to live out, in joyful and sacrificial service to all ... that ministry of caring, forgiving and healing love which Jesus Christ brought to all whom he met" (*The Manual A 11*). As such, we, the Church, aspire to be a loving community, offering a welcoming environment in which people can flourish, safe from harm.

Safeguarding is a theme which runs throughout the whole Bible, where God commends to his people those who are of special concern: widows, orphans and strangers. With over 2,000 references concerning matters of justice and injustice in the Bible, God shows Godself as one who cares for the vulnerable: in Psalm 46 God provides safety and security and stands against domination, exploitation and abusive power; in Psalm 121, God is the keeper, the 'safeguarder' of Israel. God wants the very best for all his people. The theological imperative of God, then, is the safety of all his children.

Jesus, too, had a very clear message about the most vulnerable people. The Good News is about human flourishing in its deepest sense. It matters so much to God that human beings should flourish that God sent Jesus to die for us. Safeguarding is affirmed in the theological idea of the word 'Salvation', where the root of the word is safekeeping. We believe that God wants human beings to flourish and grow in loving relationship with one another and with God. John's Gospel uses the image of abundant life for this: "I am come that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Jesus says that abuse in all its forms at its heart denies people that opportunity to flourish.

Therefore, the ways in which Christians relate to one another and others are vital for both human flourishing and the witness of the Church. In Matthew 18, when the disciples ask who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and Jesus places a child in the middle of them, his reply about change and becoming like little children shows us the strength of his teaching about the most vulnerable in our midst. Jesus teaches that, in the Kingdom, we are judged by what is in our hearts and how we put our faith into action, rather than knowing what we should do, like the Pharisees who knew the Law but failed to put it into practice. Power over others does not play a part in the Kingdom. As Christians, we are called to imitate that radical hospitality which Jesus showed through his incarnation by affirming the dignity and worth of all people in our Church structures, policies, processes and patterns of relating. Safeguarding is one aspect of this. Matthew 18 also reminds us that we will need to challenge bad behaviours and abuse which prevent flourishing and have the confidence to report those we have concerns about, knowing that we do so in a safe environment.

**"love one another
as I have loved you"
John 13:34-35**

We have a wealth of skills and experience in our Designated Safeguarding Lead, our Synod Safeguarding Officers and the URC Safeguarding Committee, whose professional advice we do well to heed as they guide us. We are called as witnesses to the God who offers healing, hope and life in all its fullness through the Good Shepherd who seeks to protect us and helps us to protect others.

Another aspect of our witness is advocacy. Throughout the Bible, God is attentive to the cries and needs of those who are vulnerable and commands that his people are similarly attentive. This must always lead to action. Advocacy is about giving voice to others and their concerns. One way we do this is by making good use of our opportunities and using our own voice to speak up on behalf of others. Proverbs 31: 8 gives us the imperative to do this: “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the powerless.”

Another way is to give a platform to others to enable and empower their voice to be heard because it deserves to be heard. Victims and survivors have their own unique and personal experience, which can be effective in advocacy for others as well as pursuers of justice in their own right, if they are empowered to communicate this. With this intergenerational understanding from Proverbs, safeguarding becomes a partnership: not something done to people who are vulnerable, or about them, but with them. Therefore, speaking up for them and alongside them is a deeply Biblical principle as well as God’s wish for the Church; not only that we are safe, but we all work together for safety for all people.

Legal and regulatory requirements

In addition to legislation relating specifically to protection of children and adults at risk, other legal requirements in areas such as data protection, human rights and equality must also be considered. Relevant legislation and statutory guidance will be highlighted in each of the following chapters.

The Charity Commission

Within England and Wales, every local church falls under the regulatory direction of the Charity Commission regardless of whether or not they are registered with the Charity Commission. Synod Trust companies and the URC Trust are also subject to regulation by the Charity Commission.

All charities must undertake these five actions¹:

1. Identify and manage risks
2. Have suitable policies and practices in place
3. Carry out necessary checks
4. Protect volunteers and staff
5. Handle and report incidents appropriately.

The Charity Commission makes clear that having safeguards in place not only protects and promotes the welfare of children and adults at risk, but also enhances the confidence of trustees, staff, volunteers, parents / carers and the general public in the Church, protecting its reputation and helping it to fulfil its mission of encouraging all in their journey of faith.

1 www.bit.ly/safeguardingforcharities

The Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR)

For churches in Scotland, OSCR places a similar emphasis on safeguarding. Guidance states that ‘charities should have the appropriate mechanisms in place to make sure that a safe environment is created for staff, beneficiaries and volunteers’.²

Charity regulation for the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man (Crown Dependencies)

While the legal and regulatory framework is defined slightly differently in these jurisdictions, the same general principles as in Scotland and in England and Wales apply.³

Insurance

Failure to follow relevant legislation, policies and guidance may invalidate a church or synod insurance policy if a significant incident occurs.

1.3 The challenge of safeguarding

We cannot avoid these issues just because they are difficult. In our current social context, failure to take care over safeguarding can cause real reputational damage not only to the church but also to the Gospel message of love and acceptance. This guidance sets out some of the ways churches large and small can ensure they are seen to proclaim the Gospel message and protect and promote human dignity and also protect the reputation of the whole church.

It is recognised that small churches in particular can find it difficult to manage expectations regarding safeguarding practice. Mutual support and partnerships between churches are one way to help overcome some of these challenges; further guidance in this area will be made available.

1.4 Division of responsibilities

Who is responsible for safeguarding in the URC? Safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility.

The different parts of the Church are interrelated and co-dependent: Assembly and its staff, Synods and local churches. The URC is a small denomination, where it is common to find people who are related to one another, who have other strong non-familial connections, and where individuals may hold more than one position of responsibility. Therefore, the risks and likelihood of conflicts of interest are potentially high, and the need for clarity of responsibilities is essential.

Additions to URC Structure and Rules of Procedure (sections B and C of the Manual) were approved by General Assembly 2021 to “make explicit where various responsibilities lie”.⁴ These are listed below and further guidance on how this applies in practice is provided in the ‘Safer Culture’ section.

Local churches

Primary responsibility for safeguarding in local churches is exercised through Church Meetings and Elders’ Meetings.

2 www.bit.ly/3QdfOjq

3 Isle of Man www.gov.im/charities; Guernsey: www.guernseyregistry.com/charities; Jersey www.charitycommissioner.je/for-charities/guidance-and-legislation/

4 Paper T2: www.urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/book-of-reports-2021.pdf

Additions to the Structure agreed in 2021	
Functions of Church Meeting:	Functions of Elders' Meeting:
a) To appoint a Church Safeguarding Coordinator. b) To adopt and promote implementation of safeguarding policy in line with General Assembly recommendations. c) To receive regular safeguarding reports from the church Safeguarding Coordinator.	a) To satisfy themselves that all necessary procedures are in place to achieve the aims of the church's safeguarding policy. b) To adopt best safeguarding practice for all church activities. c) To report to Church Meeting and to Synod. d) To report to the building trustees, charity regulators and insurers when advised to do so by the Synod Safeguarding Officer.

Synods

Synods support local churches with their safeguarding responsibilities. They do so by:

- Assisting with the development of safeguarding policy
- Assisting with the appointment of, and offering support to, Church Safeguarding Coordinators
- Arranging and delivering training in accordance with the Safeguarding Training Framework
- Monitoring safeguarding implementation through the annual safeguarding return.

Additions to the Structure agreed in 2021	
Functions of Synod:	
a) To appoint a Synod Safeguarding Officer or equivalent. b) To have oversight of, and to support, monitor and report safeguarding related activities and issues within local churches, and among ministers, officers and staff of the Synod.	c) To take all necessary powers and actions positively to promote implementation of good practice in accordance with the safeguarding policy statement adopted by the General Assembly. d) To adopt best safeguarding practice for all its own activities and events.

General Assembly

General Assembly supports synods and local churches by overseeing the development and implementation of policy and best practice in safeguarding.

Additions to the Structure agreed in 2021	
Functions of General Assembly:	
a) To appoint a Designated Safeguarding Lead. b) To have oversight of local churches and Synods, monitoring practice. c) To adopt a safeguarding policy statement and procedures for use throughout the whole United Reformed Church.	d) To advise on all matters of safeguarding throughout the Church. e) To adopt best safeguarding practice for all its own activities and events.

Safeguarding Committee

General Assembly has appointed a Safeguarding Committee to monitor the implementation of the URC Safeguarding Policy Statement and to oversee strategic matters of safeguarding throughout the Church.⁵ The Committee reports to the Assembly Executive and General Assembly.

Schools associated with the URC

The URC is associated with a number of schools, in both the state and private sectors. Schools will generally deal with safeguarding matters independently of the Church, based on the requirements of their policies and procedures. State schools are bound by the policies and procedures of the relevant Local Authority (or Trust if they are part of an academy group) and are inspected by Ofsted / Estyn / Education Scotland. Independent schools will have their own safeguarding policies which must adhere to statutory requirements and reflect national guidance. They are subject to routine inspection under arrangements administered by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI).

Safeguarding concerns should, in the first instance, be directed to the head teacher of the school. Where an issue identified by a school involves a member of the URC who is working there, the relevant Synod Safeguarding Officer should be notified and will liaise with the school as appropriate. If anyone becomes aware of a safeguarding issue relating to a URC member who is involved in any way in a school, they should consult their Synod Safeguarding Officer and contact the head teacher.

1.5 Good Practice 6 (GP6)

The URC aims to foster best practice in safeguarding as an expression of God's loving concern for all.

While formal processes are not enough on their own to protect children and adults at risk, having good procedures in place is an essential starting point.

Scope and purpose

Good Practice 6 constitutes the URC's only guidance document for safeguarding throughout the denomination. The guidance in this document and its associated resources applies across all levels of the URC. This includes Councils of the Church (at local, synod and Assembly level), Resource Centres for Learning, Church members, adherents, trustees, paid and volunteer staff, as well as lay and ordained ministers of Word and Sacraments and Church Related Community Workers (CRCWs).

Good Practice 6 is not itself a policy. Its purpose is to provide information about the URC's arrangements and procedures for safeguarding, and to offer model policies, resources and templates to help apply the guidance in practice. It is the responsibility of churches, synods and General Assembly to create and implement safeguarding policies for their own context which fit with *Good Practice 6* guidance.

Nations within the UK and the Crown Dependencies

While the core principles of good safeguarding practice apply across different settings, there are some differences in legislation and regulatory frameworks between England, Wales, Scotland, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. *Good Practice 6* focuses primarily on England and Wales

5 www.bit.ly/46EXXaZ

and the same principles are generally applicable to the Crown Dependencies. The National Synod of Scotland follows Church of Scotland procedures (except for issues of safeguarding concerns about ministers where the Ministerial Disciplinary Process [Section O of The Manual] would apply).

1.6 Key definitions

The following definitions are used throughout the guidance and additional resources:

Child

A child is defined as anyone who is under 18.⁶

Please note: even though we often refer to teenagers who are under 18 years of age as young people, legally they are defined as children (regardless of whether or not they are living independently).

Adult

An adult is defined as anyone who has reached their 18th birthday.

Adult at risk

There are slight variations in the definitions used across the UK and Crown Dependencies, but the common principle is that: Adults at Risk are aged 18 or over and, by reason of mental or other disability, age, illness or other situation are permanently, or for the time being, unable to take care of themselves, or to protect themselves against actual or potential abuse or neglect.

See Resource G2: A Guide to Adult Safeguarding for further details.

Minister

The term 'minister' is used to refer to both ministers of the Word and Sacraments and Church Related Community Workers (CRCWs).

Worker

A person who is appointed by the church to work with children or adults at risk on behalf of the church, on a paid or voluntary basis. This term is used to describe ministers, youth workers, adult workers, Elders, pastoral assistants and others, including volunteers, who may be involved in regulated work and activities with children and adults at risk.⁷

Charity trustees

Those responsible for the general management and administration of a charity. In the URC, this includes local church Elders⁸ (or equivalents in Local Church Partnerships), the board of trustees for each Synod Trust Company, and trustees of the URC Trust.

6 This is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and UK legislation. In Scotland, guidance states that where a young person between the age of 16 and 18 requires support and protection, services will need to consider which legal framework best fits that person's needs. In some circumstances, the Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007 can be applied to over 16s when the criteria are met. www.bit.ly/3rRZHhA

7 Use of the term 'worker' does not imply or confer any employment rights for those undertaking voluntary roles

8 In most cases the charity trustees will be the serving members of the Elders' Meeting although there are some cases where the Church Meeting has set up a separate body to act as Charity Trustee. www.bit.ly/3ZOobVK

Position of Trust

A legal term that refers to certain roles and settings where an adult has regular and direct contact with children. Changes to the law in England and Wales in 2022 extended the definition to include faith group leaders. It is illegal for someone in a position of trust to engage in sexual activity with a child in their care, even if that child is over the age of consent (16 or over).

