

Yourchurch Safeguarding Policy

Aim and purpose of this policy

The aim of this policy is to ensure that protecting people from abuse, harm or neglect is central to our culture. It provides procedures for promoting safeguarding, preventing abuse and protecting children, adults at risk and staff. This includes clear procedures for taking appropriate action when safeguarding concerns are raised involving children and adults who attend yourchurch.

Who this policy applies to

This policy is approved and endorsed by the yourchurch Eldership and applies to:

- all members of yourchurch
- all those who attend and serve yourchurch and its services
- the yourchurch Eldership
- paid staff (both internal and external, such as consultants)
- volunteers

The values and safeguarding principles within the United Reformed Church are described in **Appendix A1**. The policy and procedures should be interpreted in accordance with these principles and the most recent URC good practice guidance. Children, parents/carers, adults at risk and those responsible for safeguarding them will be informed of this policy and our procedures.

All Appendices in this report can be found at <https://urc.org.uk/safeguarding/safeguarding-good-practice/>

Definitions

The term 'children' refers to those under the age of 18 years.

The term 'adult at risk' refers to any adult aged 18 or over who, because of mental or other disability, age, illness or other situation, is permanently, or for the time being, unable to take care of themselves or to protect themselves against significant harm, abuse or exploitation.

Duty of care and confidentiality

We have a duty of care to all beneficiaries of the church, whether adults, children or young people. We will always maintain confidentiality, except when doing so would place the individual or another individual at risk of harm or abuse.

As an online congregation, there is a duty of care to provide safety for everyone attending yourchurch. As the supporting Synod, issues will be reported to the North Western Safeguarding

Officer initially, but where an incident has occurred or action needs to be taken, the appropriate Designated Officer for the area where that person lives will be contacted for the matter to be taken further. Where this is overseas, the appropriate body will be contacted with consultation with the North Western Safeguarding Officer.

Preventing abuse

The church will appoint Safeguarding and Deputy Safeguarding Coordinator(s) for safeguarding children and adults. A job/role description is included in **Appendix A2**.

Activities will be organised following the URC's safeguarding policy and guidance to promote a safe environment and healthy relationships, whilst minimising opportunities for harm, misunderstanding or false accusation. For each event, risk assessments will be carried out, appropriate and accessible consent forms will be used (for children's activities or activities for people with special needs), the required records will be kept, and adequate insurance will be in place.

We are committed to safer recruitment and selection of all paid staff and volunteers with an emphasis on those in regulated activities. We will treat applicants who have a criminal record fairly and do not discriminate because of a conviction or other information revealed (see **Appendix D** for the general church policy statement on the recruitment of ex-offenders) and ensure that all safer recruitment-related procedures are followed. These include:

- requiring applicants to complete an application form
- providing workers with job or role descriptions and person specifications
- completion of self-declaration forms
- obtaining Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) / Protecting Vulnerable Groups scheme (PVG) checks for eligible roles and positions
- taking up two references (not from family members)
- interviewing candidates
- providing workers/volunteers with written contracts/agreements.

All trustees, paid staff and volunteers will work within a code of conduct (code for workers attached as **Appendices A3** and **A4** depending on the vulnerable group) and understand that there may be action taken if this code is not followed, possibly involving suspension or the termination of people's service.

If we become aware of anyone within our congregation who is known to have harmed or is currently harming children or adults, we will inform the Church Safeguarding Coordinator or Synod Safeguarding Officer within 24 hours. We will cooperate with them and the relevant statutory authorities to implement a plan that minimises the risk of harm to children, young people, and adults.

All people are welcome at yourchurch, but we also recognise that the nature of a digital space for worship means that online safety must be considered as part of the everyday life of yourchurch. Given the risks associated with use of the internet, it is recommended that under 18s attend yourchurch in the company of a responsible adult who is present in the same room and using the same webcam.

These provisions apply to children under the age of 18 and vulnerable adults. To support both children and vulnerable adults, the following measures will be put in place—many of which are already operating.

If the Eldership becomes aware of an individual under the age of 18 or a vulnerable adult who wishes to attend services alone, they should promptly implement safety measures. These measures may include, but are not limited to:

- Ensuring that a member of the Eldership is present in all breakout rooms where the child or vulnerable adult is present
- Restricting private chat for all participants when a child or vulnerable adult is present – this is currently general practice.
- Restricting the ability for all participants (apart from the worship leader) to share their screen. This also is currently general practice.

How to recognise abuse

It is important to be aware of possible signs and symptoms of abuse. **Appendix A6: Signs and Symptoms of Abuse** provides definitions of different forms of abuse and further help and guidance. Some signs could be indicators of several different categories of abuse.

It is essential to note that these are only indicators of possible abuse. There may be other, innocent, reasons for these signs and/or behaviour. There might be domestic abuse that requires a different approach (please see **Appendix R: A Guide to Domestic Abuse**). The indicators will, however, be a guide to assist in assessing whether abuse of one form or another is a possible explanation for a child or adult's behaviour.

Church workers and members will also pay attention to online safety and their electronic communications with children and adults. Grooming and abuse of any form can occur offline (both physically and verbally) and online. **Appendix C: Model church online safety policy** includes an acceptable use policy about the use of church computers by both workers and children and provides sample forms which children and workers could be asked to sign.

What to do if there is a disclosure or allegation of abuse

If a child, young person or adult makes a disclosure that they are being abused and have been abused, it is important that the person being told:

- stays calm and listen carefully

- reassures them that they have done the right thing in telling
- does not investigate or ask leading questions
- explains that they will need to tell someone else if anyone is at risk of harm, in order to help them
- does not promise to keep secret what they have been told
- informs the church Safeguarding Coordinator within 24 hours (if they are implicated in the allegation, inform the Deputy or the Synod Safeguarding Officer)
- makes a written record of the allegation, disclosure or incident and signs and dates this record (using the template in **Appendix A5**). This should be given to the church Safeguarding Coordinator or the Synod Safeguarding Officer and stored securely in a locked filing cabinet.

Procedure in the event of a concern of abuse

If there is an immediate threat of harm, the Police should be contacted without delay.

General Internet abuse:

As an online congregation where the Zoom link is advertised on URC social media, the possibility of a person or group who wish to disrupt the meeting as a whole, rather than targeting individuals, is a real one. Should this be a concern, steps are in place for that person / people to be dismissed from the meeting via the Tech Team. Once dismissed, those people will not then be able to return to the meeting.

During the service of worship, a designated Duty Elder monitors the chat during the service. Should an inappropriate message be seen, the Elder will take the person who has sent the message into a breakout room to discuss further, to see if further action is needed. This will then minimize disruption to the preacher and others involved.

For individuals:

Where it is judged that there is no immediate threat of harm the following will occur:

- The concern should be discussed with the Church Safeguarding Coordinator or the Synod Safeguarding Officer **within 24 hours** and a decision needs to be made as to whether the concern warrants a referral to statutory authorities.
- A confidential record will be made of the conversation and the circumstances surrounding it using the template at **Appendix A5**. This record will be kept securely, and a copy passed to statutory authorities if a referral is made
- The person about whom the allegation is made must not be informed by anyone in the church if it is judged that to do so could place a child or adult at further risk. If the statutory authorities are involved, they should be consulted beforehand
- The Synod Safeguarding Officer should be kept informed of any serious concerns and referrals to police and statutory authorities.

Prior to any referral to children's services, the child's wishes and rights should be considered when determining what action to take. There should also be a verbal consultation with the local authority's children's services to ensure that making a referral is an appropriate action. The parent/carer will normally be contacted to obtain their consent before a referral is made. However, if the concern involves, for example alleged or suspected child sexual abuse, domestic abuse, Honour-Based Violence, fabricated or induced illness, or the Synod Safeguarding Officer has reason to believe that informing the parent at this stage might compromise the safety of the child or a staff member, nothing should be said to the parent/carer ahead of the referral, but a rationale for the decision to progress without consent should be provided with the referral.

In the case of referrals to adult social care or other services for adults at risk, information should be shared with consent if the adult has capacity within the meaning of the Mental Capacity Act and if this does not place the referrer, them or others at an increased risk. A person's right to confidentiality is not absolute and may be overridden where there is evidence that sharing information is necessary to support an investigation or where there is a risk to others. See section 14 of Good Practice 5 for further advice and guidance.

If the allegation is regarding a church staff member or church volunteer

If someone in the church is alleged or known to harm/have harmed children or adults, it is essential to inform the Synod Safeguarding Officer so that they can offer advice and support.

For any concerns relating to children, the Designated Officer (previously known as LADO) or the equivalent in Scotland and Wales will be contacted. As the congregation are online and therefore could be anywhere in the country (or abroad), this will be the Designated Officer of the area in which the child(ren) live. The timing and method of any action to be taken will be discussed and agreed with the LADO. This will cover communication with the worker, suspension, investigation and possible strategy meetings. A decision will be taken by the DO about when to inform the worker and the church will follow this advice.

For concerns relating to adults, Adult Social Care will be contacted, again, in the area in which the adult(s) live.

For instances where the person/ people are abroad, the necessary equivalent will be contacted in consultation with the Synod Safeguarding Officer.

In accordance with the law, a referral needs to be made to the DBS / PVG for consideration of barring to share information about any individual in regulated activity where for safeguarding reasons the organisation has either terminated the employment, failed to appoint, or would have terminated the employment had the individual not moved on through resignation, retirement or re-deployment. In such cases, the Synod Safeguarding Officer needs to be advised/informed.

Depending on the seriousness of incidents or allegations, a report to the Charity Commission will also need to be considered at the Elders' meeting, as they deem such a referral to be a 'serious incident' and require notification.

Managing those who may pose a risk to the welfare of people

The use of rigorous and careful supervision is paramount to protect people from the risks associated with known offenders within the congregation, including implementing safeguarding contracts with known or alleged offenders and those who have been assessed as posing a risk. Where it is known that someone has a caution or conviction for committing a sexual offence, the church can play an important role in the prevention of further abuse by helping the offender to live an offence-free life.

If anyone is made aware that a person attending their church has been convicted of an offence against a child or has had an allegation of this nature made against them at any time, we will immediately inform a Synod Safeguarding Officer. Note that in Scotland, the Church of Scotland Safeguarding Service should be contacted.

It is important to provide known or alleged offenders with a group of people who will offer support, friendship and supervision. Following advice from the Synod Safeguarding Officer, when appropriate, a formal safeguarding contract will be drawn up between the church, the person who is considered to pose a risk to the welfare of people in the church, and any statutory agencies when involved.

Training

Safeguarding training will be provided and volunteers and paid staff will be given support and supervision in their role. All relevant staff members and volunteers will receive appropriate safeguarding training delivered by the synod. The Safeguarding Coordinator(s) should ensure that people involved in regulated activities with children or adults (including Ministers, staff and volunteers) have undergone safeguarding training, as recommended by the URC.

Concerns, Complaints and Compliments

Should anyone have any concerns, complaints or compliments please contact:

Name Ruth Watson

Telephone No 07811 859706

Email safeguarding.yourchurch@gmail.com

If would be helpful to have complaints in writing, as this avoids any possible misunderstanding about what the issue is. However, whether verbal or in writing, complaints will be acted upon.

Any written complaint will be responded to within 10 days.

Key Contacts: Sources of advice and support

- The church **Safeguarding Coordinator** is the person to whom all concerns or allegations relating to children, young people or adults should be addressed:

Name Ruth Watson

Telephone No 07811 859706

Email safeguarding.yourchurch@gmail.com

- In the absence of the Safeguarding Coordinator, the **Deputy Safeguarding Coordinator** can be contacted:

Name Lawrence Heath-Moore

Telephone No 07813 842202

Email safeguarding.yourchurch@gmail.com

- **Synod Safeguarding Officer**

As yourchurch is currently grounded in the North Western Synod, as its supporting Synod, any safeguarding issues can be directed to the Synod Safeguarding Officer of North Western Synod

Name Yvette Hansbury-Robinson

Telephone No 07827390299

Email safeguarding@nwsynod.org.uk;

- **URC Safeguarding Office** (This should only be used if you are unable to contact your Synod Safeguarding Officer)

Telephone No 020 7520 2729

Email safeguarding@urc.org.uk

- **ThirtyOne: Eight** (This should only be used for urgent advice if you are unable to contact URC) (This is an independent Christian Safeguarding Charity)

24 hour helpline: 0845 120 4550

Review

The Elders will review this policy annually, amending and updating it as required, and informing Church Meeting that this has been done.

Date of the most recent review: 20 March 2026

Date of the next review: 20 March 2027

Signed: R. Watson

(on behalf of the yourchurch Elders)