

Coronavirus (COVID-19) advice for social care

Safeguarding in faith-based organisations during the COVID-19 crisis

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Last reviewed: 7 January 2021

This quick guide for faith-based organisations describes some of the main issues around safeguarding during the COVID-19 crisis.

Faith-based organisations and communities play a core role in the spiritual and social care of individuals, and are a vital social network and source of guidance and support during the COVID-19 outbreak. Organisations and their leaders are often well recognised and trusted within communities and their networks, including those who are, or may be, vulnerable.

Faith-based organisations also play an important role in ensuring that those who seek spiritual support and worship are safeguarded from harm. During the current outbreak, there have been significant changes to the ways that faith groups engage with their communities, and this poses additional challenges to adapt safeguarding practices to meet their needs.

This quick guide outlines some of the implications of this new climate on safeguarding, and looks at what can be done to continue to serve the needs of communities and protect them from harm. This briefing is part of the Safeguarding Training Fund; funded by the National Lottery and DCMS.

Protecting others from harm

Restrictions on our lives can bring additional and heightened risk to many aspects of life for some children and adults, and can pose a challenge to those safeguarding them from abuse and neglect.

Where you are concerned that an individual may be at risk of harm from abuse or neglect, you should contact your organisation's safeguarding officer for support. A referral should still be made to the local social care service in the area that the individual lives. The website for the local social services department will provide information on any changes to reporting procedures in place during this time. If there is an immediate risk of harm, contact the police on 999.

Poverty

We have long recognised that poverty and the safeguarding of children and adults are related. Where families are unable to meet their own basic needs, or those of their children, this can lead to both an immediate increase in the risk of harm, and other long-term effects on health and wellbeing. This is particularly true where individuals lose their employment or are forced to isolate due to symptoms of illness.

Faith-based organisations often witness the impact of this in their communities and may have ongoing or additional concerns about individuals during the current outbreak. Efforts to mitigate against the experience of poverty continue and, in many cases, have escalated during the COVID-19 outbreak, including the operating of food banks and collation of food parcels.

What can you do?

- 📄 Map out the support available in your local area, including food banks or points of contact, and share this with those who may be experiencing poverty.
- 🏠 **Covid-19 Mutual Aid** [link 1](#) has established groups around the country to provide a network of neighbours who can support those who are vulnerable or self-isolating to access essential supplies.
- 🍽️ If families have children of school age, and would usually be in receipt of free school meals, schools should be continuing to provide this support so encourage individuals to continue to seek advice and support from them.
- 📄 For those who have limited access to technology or information, share basic hygiene and infection prevention advice from sources such as the **NHS** [link 2](#) and **World Health Organization** [link 3](#) to help protect individuals and ensure that they can access healthcare where needed.
- 🔒 Where individuals might face insecure accommodation due to poverty during the current crisis, share information on protections under emergency coronavirus legislation to help them to understand their rights.
- 👤 When providing support directly to individuals within your community, consider the advice on volunteers below to ensure safe practices.

Exploitation



Exploitation and grooming of children and vulnerable adults comes in many forms. In times of crisis, those who might seek to exploit others can be quick to act and prey on vulnerabilities – particularly in online forums, where they may face fewer barriers to do so with a reduction in human online moderators that work to keep people safe.

Online social media and gaming sites become a lifeline for parents and children adapting to being at home and for addressing social isolation. However, they often use them without access to personal, social and health education on how to stay safe.

What can you do?

- 👂 Be vigilant to the indicators of financial abuse, including reports of missing personal possessions, unexplained shortages of money for essential items and reports of others showing unusual interest in, or controlling a person's financial assets. Discuss any concerns with your organisation's safeguarding officer.
- 🎯 Sharing basic advice on financial abuse, including the signs of a SCAM (**S**eems too good to be true; **C**ontacted out of the blue; **A**sks for personal details; **M**oney is requested) can help people within your community to remain vigilant.
- 📁 If providing support to those in your community involving payment, for example buying essential goods, follow [government advice](#) [link 4](#) on keeping records and receipts for any money handled.

Domestic abuse

We know that abuse, conflict and violence can escalate when families face greater pressure and stress, and the need to limit social contact and stay at home (including due to self-isolation requirements) can cause anxiety for those who feel at risk. The current situation disrupts routines and behaviours, both positively and negatively and it is important to be aware of how the tension can escalate to violence and abusive behaviours between families, parents and children. During this time, the [National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#) [link 5](#) has seen a 25 per cent increase in calls and faith groups may be one of the first supports that people turn to in times of need.

What can you do?

- 👂 If you become concerned that someone in your community is experiencing domestic abuse, contact your organisation's safeguarding officer for support. If you think someone may be in immediate danger, call the police on 999.
- 👂 For those working within your organisation, or providing community volunteering during this time, make training or advice accessible that will help them to identify and support those who may be at risk.
- 📍 Signpost individuals within your community to resources of support, for example [SafeLives](#) [link 6](#). Consider ways to do this that will not alert the potential abuser and so put victims or survivors at further risk, for example through links on your organisation's website.
- 👤 Consider how, with a reduction in opportunities to seek one-to-one support in light of current restrictions, victims could contact your safeguarding officer directly and confidentially, for example sharing work contact details.
- 💡 Make victims aware that any order to stay at home does not apply to those escaping danger or harm, and this includes domestic abuse and violence.

For further information on this topic, see SCIE's [COVID-19 domestic violence and abuse](#) [link 7](#) quick guide.

Safe online activities

Faith-based organisations face restrictions in running face-to-face services (except for private worship), and need to engage with their communities in virtual and socially-distanced ways. The challenges of doing so in a safe way are significant and often a new challenge for people. However, protections should be put in place that continue to safeguard people from the risk of abuse and grooming. This includes considering the protection of data and sharing personal information.

There have also been recent reports of a rise in hacking activity which seeks to disrupt online activities and spread harmful or abusive material.

What can you do?

- 🎯 Follow and remind staff and volunteers of your organisation's safe working practices advice and safeguarding policy.
- 👤 Ensure that consent is sought from a parent for any child under the age of 13 years. For those over 13, there is no legal requirement to seek parental consent but continue to notify parents where possible.
- @ Avoid engaging with those in your community through social media platforms and always use an email address from within your organisation for any email contact.
- 🏠 Risk-assess any platforms for online meetings and communication and consider what can be done to reduce the risk of harm.
- 👂 Consider what low-tech means might be available to continue to support those who may have limited access to technology, including telephone calls.
- 👤 Review your organisation's lone-working policy to ensure that it gives specific guidance on avoiding one-to-one online contact or mitigates risk where this is unavoidable.

Using Zoom for video meetings

Whilst there are several platforms for online meetings, Zoom has proven to be a commonly used tool for connecting faith leaders and communities. Consider the following:



- Ensure that advice is given to only download Zoom directly from the company's own website to avoid potential scams.
- Don't advertise the meeting ID and password on publicly accessible forums – instead try to send direct email invites.
- Use the 'waiting room' feature to better control access to the meeting.
- Lock the meeting once all are joined.
- Disable participant screen sharing.
- Do not record meetings unless absolutely necessary and with consent from all involved.
- Know how to expel a participant quickly and place a call 'on-hold' in the event of an incident or concern.

For further advice on safety and security, see detailed safety tips on the [Zoom website](#) [link 8](#) .

Community volunteers

There has been a surge in community volunteering initiatives, both from individuals and organised through faith-based organisations, to support the needs of communities and those who may be vulnerable. However, continuing to do this in a safe way is essential and organisations should look to apply the same standard of safeguarding and protections in this work.

Many roles that volunteers carry out do not raise safeguarding issues and so do not need a DBS check. However, eligibility for a check in these roles should be reviewed and the standard of seeking checks and assurances should not be lowered where they are.

-  Revisit your organisation's risk assessment of roles and DBS eligibility, and map any new volunteering opportunities against the potential for harm (to both volunteers and recipients of support) and need for safeguarding.
-  Continue to apply for [DBS checks](#) [link 9](#) where needed, and ensure that volunteering in these roles does not start until a satisfactory clearance is received. Where a DBS is in place from another role, consider whether this applies to adults or children and whether any updated information can be obtained from the DBS Update Service, if the person is subscribed to it.
-  Review your organisation's lone working policy and ensure that they provide protections for those volunteering to ensure their safety and that of others.
-  Consider how to best provide virtual safeguarding training to anybody undertaking a new role, continuing to update the training of existing staff or volunteers as required.

Safeguarding agreements, contracts and risk-management plans

For ex-offenders or those who may pose a risk to others, being able to worship is an important support. Safeguarding agreements, contracts and risk-management plans can be used to mitigate against risk whilst still enabling individuals to be part of the community. However, these plans may not make effective provisions for the safeguarding of others in current ways of working and this can be a significant vulnerability to the individual and others.

What can you do?

-  Risk assess any new activities (including virtual and online meeting forums) to consider new risks and how they might be mitigated against.
-  Urgently revisit any agreements, contracts or plans with the individual involved to discuss amendments that make clear any new restrictions or requirements.
-  Where restrictions are needed to ensure safety, remain vigilant when using online group meetings to ensure that individuals who should not be participating are not present.
-  Consider the support that can be offered to anybody subject to such a plan, to ensure that they are still able to access spiritual support.

Checklist

This checklist will help you focus on the important issues you should address around safeguarding during the COVID-19 crisis.

To save your checklist, please [login](#) [link 10](#) to your MySCIE account or [register](#) [link 11](#) if you do not yet have an account.

- Have you considered how to engage with any stigmatised groups in your community and continue to speak out against negative behaviours to help counter stigma and discrimination?
- Have you considered how to continue to spread, through spiritual leadership, the message of inclusion, support and safeguarding through your interaction with others?
- Have you developed a way of distributing any important, timely and accurate information to workers, volunteers and those within your community, including health promotion and ways of preventing the spread of infection?
- Have you acted to identify whether you need to temporarily postpone or cancel events, programmes, and services, especially for groups at greater risk such as older adults or people with chronic health conditions?



- Have you revisited any safeguarding policies within your organisation and considered an addendum to it that outlines new ways of working or expectations?
- Have you considered and undertaken any risk assessments needed to help ensure that your activities continue to protect those involved with your organisation from harm?
- Have you mapped the local and national support networks available and their contact details, to be able to share with your community?

[Save checklist >](#)

To save your checklist, please [login](#) [link 12](#) to your MySCIE account or [register](#) [link 13](#) if you do not yet have an account.

Find out more about safeguarding in faith-based organisations

- [World Health Organization](#) [link 14](#) – practical considerations for religious leaders and faith-based communities
- [Disclosure and Barring Service](#) [link 15](#) – advice on DBS checks and volunteering during COVID-19
- [NSPCC](#) [link 16](#) – safeguarding and child protection information
- [Faith Action](#) [link 17](#) – advice and resources
- [SafeLives](#) [link 18](#) – domestic abuse resources and support
- [Inter Faith Network](#) [link 19](#) – advice and guidance from faith groups
- [SCIE](#) [link 20](#) – Support and training to help churches and faith groups

For more information, see our [safeguarding resource hub](#) [link 21](#).

Support from SCIE

[SCIE's COVID-19 hub](#) [link 22](#) contains more relevant information including safeguarding, supporting people who are isolated and vulnerable, and infection control. It can be used when supporting and safeguarding adults and children during COVID-19, and can also be shared with community groups.

link 1 | <https://covidmutualaid.org/>

link 2 | <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

link 3 | <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

link 4 | <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-factsheet-community-volunteers-during-covid-19-outbreak/safeguarding-and-dbs-factsheet-faqs>

link 5 | <https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/>

link 6 | <http://www.safelives.org.uk/>

link 7 | <https://www.scie.org.uk/care-providers/coronavirus-covid-19/safeguarding/domestic-violence-abuse>

link 8 | <https://zoom.us/docs/en-us/covid19.html>

link 9 | <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-factsheet-community-volunteers-during-covid-19-outbreak/safeguarding-and-dbs-factsheet-faqs>

link 10 | <https://www.scie.org.uk/myscie/login>

link 11 | <https://www.scie.org.uk/myscie/register>

link 12 | <https://www.scie.org.uk/myscie/login>

link 13 | <https://www.scie.org.uk/myscie/register>

link 14 | https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WHO-2019-nCoV-Religious_Leaders-2020.1-eng.pdf

link 15 | <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-factsheet-community-volunteers-during-covid-19-outbreak/safeguarding-and-dbs-factsheet-faqs>

link 16 | <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection/coronavirus>

link 17 | <https://www.faithaction.net/campaigns/coronavirus/>

link 18 | <https://safelives.org.uk/>

link 19 | <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/news/faith-communities-and-coronavirus>

link 20 | <https://www.scie.org.uk/safeguarding/faith-groups>

link 21 | <https://www.scie.org.uk/safeguarding>

link 22 | <https://www.scie.org.uk/care-providers/coronavirus-covid-19>

link 23 | <https://www.scie.org.uk/myscie/register>

link 24 | <https://www.scie.org.uk/myscie/login>

