



Responding to Concerns

C/2.1.3

Purpose

This document provides guidance to councils and committees of the church for responding to concerns relating to neglect or abuse of children or vulnerable adults and conducting subsequent performance improvement processes. When issues arise, either with performance or behaviour, appropriate process are to be undertaken, as outlined in this procedure.

Legislation

New laws start on **5 July 2021** which target behaviour that ignores or hides the sexual abuse of children pursuant to the *Criminal Code (Child Sexual Offences Reform) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2020*.

These new laws mean:

- all adults must report sexual offending against children to the police unless they have a reasonable excuse
- adults in an institutional setting (e.g. a school, church or sporting club) must protect children from the risk of a sexual offence being committed against them.

The Mandatory Reporting Process for Ministry Agents, and the Mandatory Reporting Process for Lay Workers and Volunteers, outlines the steps to take to ensure that you are fulfilling your duty of care, by reporting incidents of abuse, or suspected abuse or neglect. A copy of the Mandatory Reporting Process for Lay Workers and Volunteers, and the Mandatory Reporting Process for Ministry Agents, is available on the synod website.

Scope

This procedure applies to concerns relating to neglect or abuse of children or vulnerable adults within the bounds of the Synod of Queensland as part of Uniting Church congregations and faith communities. This includes matters involving the abilities and performance of volunteers, helpers and leaders of children's activities and programs. Synod and presbytery committees responsible for the oversight of ministry agents in accordance with the Regulations of the Uniting Church may refer to this procedure as appropriate.

Exclusions:

This procedure does not apply to agencies, regulated businesses, colleges and schools of the church. These entities are required to ensure they comply with their statutory obligations and to maintain policy, process and resources relating to child protection and safety which are specific to their context.

Principles

- The safety and well-being of each individual is important
- The safety and well-being of each child is always the priority
- All ministry agents, church members, volunteers and leaders are treated fairly and consistently
- Concerns and incidents are investigated thoroughly, in line with policies and processes
- Decision-making processes are transparent
- Mandatory reporting obligations are met in line with the requirements for ministry agents and lay workers



Responding to concerns and/or complaints

Concerns and complaints provide an opportunity to strengthen understanding and improve our services. When people's expectations are not met, they may complain to one another or directly to their ministry agent. Concerns and complaints may range from feedback about "how to do it better" to emotional demands for explanation and action. Consider the information contained in [Frequently Asked Questions: Reporting Concerns](#), and the Mandatory Reporting Guides for both [ministry agents](#) and [lay workers](#) for additional guidance.

A three-step process to responding well provides guidance to help you remain respectful, maintain rapport and ensure appropriate action has been provided in this document.

1. Acknowledge and apologise

- 1.1. **Thank** the person for taking the time to raise the issue that's concerning them.
- 1.2. Offer an **apology**, before moving on to ask further questions (e.g. "I'm sorry that xyz happened").
- 1.3. Use the R.E.S.P.O.N.D. technique (ministry agents) or the B.E.C.A.L.M. technique (lay workers and volunteers).

2. Ask and listen

- 2.1. Ask open **questions** to clarify that you understand what the person is telling you. To assist the communication, it may be helpful to acknowledge facts, thoughts, emotions and wants. This can be done by asking questions like "what happened?", "what thoughts do you have about it?", "how are you feeling about it" and "what would you like to see happen?"
- 2.2. Listen—don't interrupt, argue, justify or make promises. Pay attention to what the person is telling you and use **open** questions to clarify your understanding of what is being said.

3. Act

- 3.1. Explain **what** actions you will take next, being mindful of any mandatory reporting processes. Focus on what you can do, for example, "I will check on ..."; "I will speak to ..."; "I will take you to..."; "I will arrange ..." (see actions to take section below).
- 3.2. Plan a time to report back to them and whether this timing is acceptable for them. For example, "... and I'll get back to you about it on Wednesday, how does that sound?".
- 3.3. Follow up. Act quickly and keep the person informed about the actions that have taken place (see below for more **detail**).

Actions to take: Unsafe behaviour

4. Assess the immediate risk

- 4.1. Are the concerns about repeated boundary violations, knowledge or reasonable suspicion of grooming behaviour, harm and abuse to children?
- 4.2. Are there any immediate safety concerns? Use the R.E.S.P.O.N.D. technique (ministry agents) or the B.E.C.A.L.M. technique (lay workers and volunteers).
- 4.3. Does the person/s involved need to be stood aside from child related duties pending the outcome of due process?



5. Report the concerns and actions taken

- 5.1. Follow the Mandatory Reporting Guide for [ministry agents](#) or [lay workers](#). These guides also outline who else you should report to within the church.
 - 5.1.1. If you are not sure about what action to take or what information to include when reporting, contact the Safe Church Assurance and Support Officer at the Synod office at safeministrywithchildren@ucaqld.com.au or on 0491 491 227 for advice.
- 5.2. Record your concerns and actions taken using the [Template for Complaints and Allegations](#).
- 5.3. The [Reporting and Referral Guide](#) provide details if a report needs to be made to the appropriate statutory authorities, noting the new laws in place from 5 July 2021. Provide a copy of your report to the relevant authority.
- 5.4. Provide a copy of your report to the presbytery chair and/or church council chair.
- 5.5. Provide a copy of your report to the Synod office at safeministrywithchildren@ucaqld.com.au.
- 5.6. After reporting, care must be taken to cooperate with authorities in such matters.

Actions to take: Unsafe programs or activities

1. Assess the immediate risk

- 1.1. Are there any immediate safety concerns? Use the R.E.S.P.O.N.D. technique (ministry agents) or the B.E.C.A.L.M. technique (lay workers and volunteers).
- 1.2. If you are not sure about what action to take or what information to include when reporting, contact the Synod Office:
 - 1.2.1. For work health and safety, email Health.Safety@ucaqld.com.au or call 07 3377 9703 for advice.
 - 1.2.2. For child-related activities or programs, contact the Safe Church Assurance and Support Officer via email safeministrywithchildren@ucaqld.com.au or call 0491 491 227 for advice.

2. Report the concerns and actions taken

- 2.1. Record your concerns and actions taken, using the [hazard/incident template](#) available on the Workplace Health and Safety website.
- 2.2. Provide a copy of your report to the presbytery chair and/or church council chair.
- 2.3. Provide a copy of your report to the synod office at Health.Safety@ucaqld.com.au.
- 2.4. Review the activity or program and complete a new [Risk Assessment](#). Provide a copy of the new risk assessment to the church council chair, and provide copies to the presbytery chair and Health.Safety@ucaqld.com.au if required.

Storage of documents

3. Storage of documents

- 3.1. All records must be kept in the relevant personnel file for the period of the position.
- 3.2. All records and reports concerning suspected or known grooming behaviour, harm or abuse of children must be kept indefinitely

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Disagreement, grievance, resolution and appeal rights

4. Procedure

4.1. If the person disagrees with any aspect of the way the process was conducted:

- 4.1.1. The person may lodge a grievance in accordance with the [Complaints and Allegations Policy \(POL-0003\)](#) at complaints@ucaqld.com.au or on 1800 586 591.
- 4.1.2. Encourage the person to speak to their immediate supervisor, church council chair, minister, cultural advisor or presbytery chairperson for advice.

Definitions

Term	Meaning
All terms	See Glossary of Terms

Revisions

Document number	C/2.1.3				
Version	Approval date	Approved by	Effective date	Policy owner	Policy contact
4.0	30.06.2021	Risk and Compliance Manager	30.06.2021	ED Strategic Resources and Assurance	Safe Church Assurance and Support Officer
Next scheduled review	30.06.2026				