

CHILDREN FIRST

Safeguarders
Panel Team

Safeguarders Panel Team

Annual Report 2023-2024



Contents

Introduction	3
Policy Updates	3
Safeguarder Appointments & Trends	4
Age of Children with a Safeguarder	5
Safeguarder Allocations and Availability	6
Work of the Safeguarders Panel Team	7
Policies and Guidance	7
Practice Support, Learning and Development	8
Partnership Working	9
Partnership Opportunities	9
Multi-agency Partnership Meetings	9
Open Information Forums	10
Recruitment and Safeguarder profile	11
Service Review	13
Feedback and Complaints	15
Future Plans	17

Introduction

Children First has been operating the national Safeguarders Panel since 2013. The role and functions of the **Children First Safeguarders Panel Team (SPT)** include recruitment, selection, training, managing appointments and complaints, and supporting and monitoring the performance of Safeguarders across Scotland. We work with the Scottish Government, Safeguarders, and all those involved in the children's hearings system, to ensure that a child's best interests are at the heart of any Children's Hearing or related court proceeding.

Policy Updates

During this past year, the **children's hearings system** continued to be a focus for national policy and practice development. The primary developments have been the **Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 ("the Act")**, and the policy and practice responses to the "Hearings for Children" report and recommendations.

The Act makes many changes to the children's hearings system, the most significant of which are that children will no longer be able to be placed in Young Offender Institutions and that the children's hearings system will be available to children up to the age of 18. These changes reflect the incorporation of the **United Nations Convention of Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** which became law in July 2024.

There are many other aspects to the Act which will impact on the children's hearings system, on the role of Safeguarders and the work of the SPT. Implementation of this Act will be phased over the coming years, and the SPT will be working with the Government, partner agencies and Safeguarders to ensure that Safeguarders and the SPT are fully equipped to deal with these changes.

The Scottish Government responded to the Hearings for Children report in December 2023, accepting the vast majority of the recommendations, some with conditions. They agreed to explore and consult on 42 of the recommendations which included those with direct reference to Safeguarders. Seven recommendations were declined.

Work has begun on many of the recommendations which do not require legislative change and other recommendations are being considered in the Promise Bill which is being consulted upon in 2024. The SPT will be engaging positively in these processes and keep Safeguarders connected and informed, so that they can be active participants.



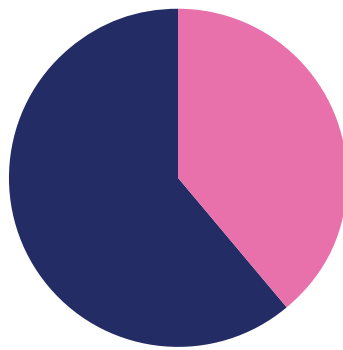
Safeguarder Appointments and Trends

Once a children's hearing or sheriff have made the decision to appoint a Safeguarder, the SPT have two working days to match a Safeguarder with the child. This timeframe has been deliberately kept short to minimise delay for the children and young people at the centre of this process.

884 Safeguarder appointments were made in the year 2023-2024

61%
(539)

Safeguarder appointments were made by a children's hearing



and 39%
(345)

Safeguarder appointments were made by a Sheriff Court

Fife, North Lanarkshire & Glasgow:

the local authorities where Safeguarders were appointed *most frequently* by a children's hearing

Glasgow, Fife, Perth & Kinross:

the local authorities where Safeguarders were appointed *most frequently* by a Sheriff Court

Western Isles, Orkney Islands & Shetland Islands:

the local authorities with the *least* Safeguarder appointments from a children's hearing

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, East Dunbartonshire, East Lothian, East Renfrewshire, Midlothian, North Ayrshire, Orkney Islands, Shetland Islands & South Ayrshire:

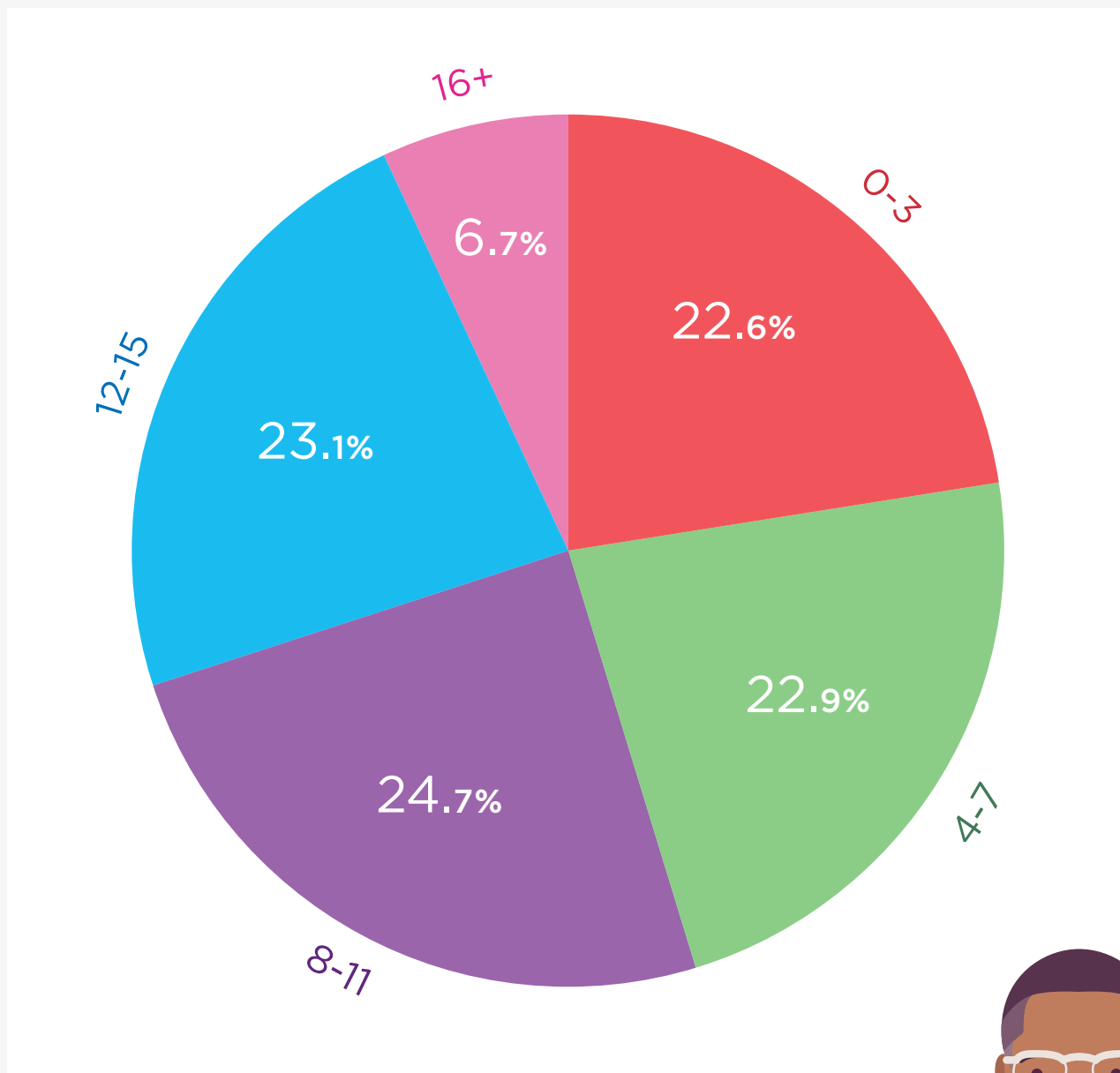
the local authorities with *no* Safeguarder appointments from a Sheriff Court

for 97%
of all appointments, the SPT matched a Safeguarder to a child on the same day or within one day of the referral being received.

In the year 2023-24,

136 Safeguarders were appointed to a total of 1,285 children

Age of Children with a Safeguarder



The next page gives a full breakdown of appointments by local authority.



Safeguarder Allocations and Availability Across Scotland: 2023-2024:

Local Authority	Safeguarders	Appt by Hearing	Appt by Court
Aberdeen	15	19	18
Aberdeenshire	11	12	11
Angus	11	25	18
Argyll & Bute	10	5	9
City of Edinburgh	15	25	12
Clackmannanshire	3	12	15
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	7	1	0
Dumfries & Galloway	26	21	2
Dundee City	15	26	19
East Ayrshire	13	17	4
East Dunbartonshire	13	10	0
East Lothian	17	11	0
East Renfrewshire	22	14	0
Falkirk	19	13	24
Fife	27	33	61
Glasgow City	38	45	72
Highland	10	15	3
Inverclyde	11	13	4
Midlothian	9	10	0
Moray	4	4	2
North Ayrshire	13	16	0
North Lanarkshire	19	41	3
Orkney Islands	3	2	0
Perth & Kinross	16	13	25
Renfrewshire	21	18	2
Scottish Borders	8	11	5
Shetland Islands	3	2	0
South Ayrshire	13	17	0
South Lanarkshire	15	22	3
Stirling	13	23	6
West Dunbartonshire	21	32	24
West Lothian	12	11	3

N.B. Safeguarders may choose to cover more than one local authority within reasonable travelling distance

Work of the Safeguarders Panel Team

Policies and Guidance

Following the launch of the new [Practice Standards for Safeguarders](#) and Practice Standards Guidance in May 2023, the [Safeguarder Practice Standards Guidance](#) was further updated in October 2023, to ensure this reflected the expectations of the service. This Guidance document now sits alongside the Practice Standards to provide support to Safeguarders and help identify how they can best evidence the Practice Standards.

The Support Session Record which is used to collate evidence of Safeguarder practice to support reappointment has also been restructured to allow for more evidence-based recording against the Practice Standards. This includes an 'action plan' to allow for more focused discussions about practice and a clearer process for review when gaps in practice are identified and/or more evidence is required for reappointment.

With the agreement of the Scottish Government, the SPT also produced [guidance](#) for making recommendations for reappointment and removal from the national Safeguarders panel. The purpose of developing this guidance was to ensure full transparency about the process of recommendations being made by the SPT during Safeguarders' appointment terms. It outlines the requirements and factors influencing a full three-year appointment recommendation, a one-year appointment recommendation and what factors may indicate that a recommendation for non-reappointment or removal from the national panel is more appropriate.



Practice Support, Learning and Development

To date, the SPT have ensured that all Safeguarders are trained in children's human rights and that newly recruited Safeguarders complete children's rights training as mandatory in the first year of their appointment term. Following on from this, the SPT produced a 'best interests' training module which is designed to support Safeguarders to further employ children's human right's considerations in practice, focusing specifically on the UNCRC best interests assessment in formulating conclusions and recommendations. Prior to incorporation of the UNCRC, the newly revised Practice Standards incorporated relevant UNCRC Articles to ensure Safeguarders were well prepared for this change.

In response to requests from Safeguarders, and in an effort to support the consistency and quality of Safeguarder's reports for children, the SPT recently produced a [report writing template](#), summarising the expectations of the contents of Safeguarder reports in a clear and concise way. This outlines all basic reference information to be included in a Safeguarder report to support the independent nature of the role. It should help to focus on children's views, needs, rights and best interests to ensure that every recommendation made by Safeguarders is clear, reasoned and justifiable.

The SPT continues to offer biannual individual support sessions, regional group support and peer mentoring to Safeguarders as part of the Performance Support and Monitoring Framework, with a bigger focus this year on partnership working to increase visibility of the service and general understanding of the Safeguarder role.



"My support manager listens and encourages open discussion and conversation. She challenges my thinking and helps me reflect as a practitioner."

Safeguarder

Partnership Working



The SPT collaborate strategically and operationally with agencies so that together we improve the experience of children and families in the children's hearings system. In 2023-2024 we have identified new partnership opportunities, attended multi-agency meetings, and delivered open forum events for the children's hearings workforce

Partnership Opportunities

The **SPT** collaborate with **Children's Hearings Scotland (CHS)** regularly, most notably on our learning & development programme. Our partnership with CHS has enabled us to share the CHS Learning Academy platform for a number of years. We share online learning resources and host our own specific resources for Safeguarders. This strategic partnership arrangement enables access to a wide range of quality training resources for Safeguarders and partners, whilst saving resources for both partners.

In 2023-2024 we met with individual members of the newly appointed CHS regional partnership co-ordinators team to discuss how we can work together in each region. Early discussions focused on the sharing of practice feedback between Panel Members and Safeguarders, and preparations for the implementation of the Children (Care & Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024.

Multi-Agency Partnership Meetings

We are involved nationally in strategic partnership working, primarily through the Children's Hearing Improvement Partnership (CHIP), chaired by Scottish Government and involving a whole range of partners, such as Scottish Children's Reporters Administration (SCRA), Children's Hearings Scotland, (CHS), and Social Work Scotland (SWS).

At a local level our involvement in multi-agency partnership meetings vary in their make-up but typically involve representatives from Social Work, SCRA, CHS, advocacy services and education.

SPT staff attend quarterly Keeping the Promise in Children's Hearings (KTP) meetings in East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, and Renfrewshire. The group focus on embedding The Promise in the children's hearings system and reviewing any barriers to implementation.

We are involved in regular Better Hearings meetings in Dundee, Angus, Perth & Kinross. The primary aim of this group is to improve the journey of children and families through the children's hearings system, including pre and post hearing.

We attend the Glasgow Children's Hearings Improvement Partnership (CHIP) which brings together partners from across the children's hearings system to deliver change and improvement. In 2024-2025, the SPT will be joining CHIP meetings in Dundee and Fife.

Finally, we are involved in the Glasgow Referral Liaison Group, attended by SCRA, Scottish Court staff and the Glasgow Bar Association. The group discuss court developments and anything that might affect court practice. At this group we share positive feedback or difficulties that Safeguarders are experiencing specific to this court.

open Information Forums

We regularly promote and deliver Open Information Forums to raise awareness of the Safeguarder role and the role of SPT in support and monitoring. These online events are open to volunteers and professionals from across the children's hearings workforce and have been attended by panel members, professionals from SCRA, CHS, education, legal, mental health, and advocacy services. In the year ending April 2024, 118 individuals attended seven open information events which included two in-person events on the Western Isles.

We see our involvement in local and national partnership work as crucial to the development of our service and the work of Safeguarders. We need to balance our capacity for ongoing involvement in partnership meetings with our other work, and keep this as a key focus, particularly in the changing policy and practice landscape.



"As a relatively new Safeguarder I am impressed with the learning portal. It's been useful in areas where I lack knowledge and confidence in. It's part of my toolkit"

Safeguarder

Recruitment and Safeguarder profile



Since February 2023, we have completed one round of Safeguarder recruitment to make sure we meet the operational needs in each local authority area.

From April 2023 to April 2024, we welcomed 22 new Safeguarders to the national panel. We are pleased that, once again, children and young people helped the SPT during the interview and selection process for new Safeguarders.

Over this year, eight Safeguarders resigned. This was mainly due to people having less availability, or for health reasons. All Safeguarders sought reappointment in 2024, although one did not accept reappointment. There were no Safeguarders removed from the national panel.

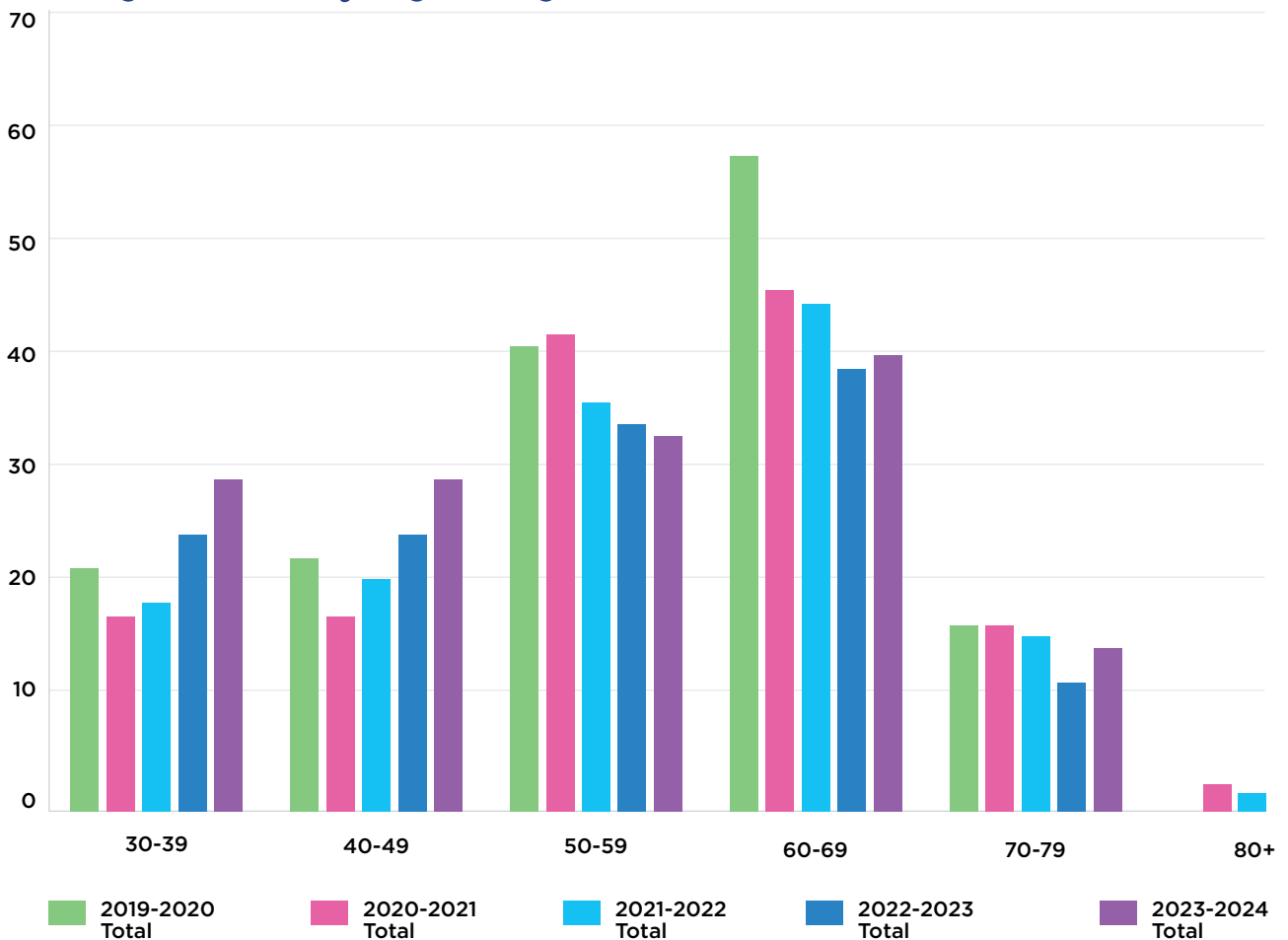
By April 2024, the total number of serving Safeguarders was 145, an increase from the previous year. We have enough Safeguarders to cover all the area lists, however over the last couple of years we have had challenges recruiting and appointing Safeguarders in the north of Scotland, particularly in Aberdeenshire and Moray. We have no recruitment plans for this year, but we will reassess this need again in 2025, with a specific focus on the north. We will also need to consider how the implementation of the Care and Justice Act, with more 16 and 17 years olds accessing the children's hearings system, impacts on our need for more Safeguarders.

One of the main challenges in maintaining the optimum number of Safeguarders in each area is the uncertainty around how many appointments there will be. Recently, we have seen that in some areas, especially in the west of Scotland, there are more Safeguarders than appointments. This means Safeguarders have to wait longer between being offered appointments.

The SPT always aim to attract a diverse panel in terms of age, employment background and life experience. Our female: male ratio currently sits at approximately 3:1 and the number of younger individuals (30-39 years) successfully applying for the role has been increasing year on year. The number of Safeguarders over 59 years of age is generally decreasing due to resignations.

As we have recruited an increasing number of younger Safeguarders we we have noticed that these Safeguarders often chose to remain in a Safeguarder role for a shorter period of time. We have also observed that the male: female ratio is reflected in the applications received during each recruitment, rather than female applicants being more successful in the recruitment process.

Safeguarders by age range



Service Review

In October 2023 a service review was undertaken by the SPT. This consisted of an online survey, two focus groups and feedback from Safeguarders including exit interviews from 2020 onwards. This gave us a breadth of qualitative and quantitative data to highlight successes, identify areas for development and to make positive changes in the future. Thirty percent of Safeguarders took part in the online survey and the information below represents their views. Positive responses were noted as either 'strongly agree' or 'somewhat agree' and negative responses noted as 'somewhat disagree' or 'strongly disagree' with an alternative option of 'neither agree nor disagree'.

100%

of Safeguarders who participated agreed that they are treated with respect and courtesy when they contact the SPT.

82% strongly agreed that all enquiries are managed in a timely manner and the SPT are helpful and solution focused.

37%

of Safeguarders agreed that they would like to be involved in service development.

53% responded 'neither agree nor disagree'. Safeguarder input is actively encouraged when opportunities arise.

A small number of Safeguarders actively contributed to the recent review and the development of the Practice Standards, Guidance and Policies.

83%

of Safeguarders agreed they use the Safeguarder booklet as a matter of practice.

90% agreed it is a helpful resource and helps explain the role.

46% of Safeguarders agreed they direct children and families to the animation on the SPT website while 32% neither agreed nor disagreed.

According to the online survey, 92% of Safeguarders find the SPT website useful, 88% find the practice notes on the website helpful and 88% find them easy to access.



The general consensus from survey results was that communications from the SPT to Safeguarders have improved and Safeguarders feel kept 'in the loop'.

Fee Structure Review

It is clear from Safeguarder responses that there are differences in views regarding the administration of fees and expenses by SPT and the fees and expenses structure itself.

63% of Safeguarders agreed the Fees and Expenses Policy is easy to understand whilst 30% disagreed.

76% agreed they feel confident in submitting fees and expenses claims.

96% agreed any enquiries regarding fees were answered fairly and in a timely manner.

Allocation Process

From the Safeguarder responses the allocation process is easy to understand but we are thoughtful about the views shared regarding the transparency of the allocation process.

90% of Safeguarders 'strongly agreed' or 'somewhat agreed' that the allocations process is easy to understand.

02% of Safeguarders 'strongly disagreed' that the allocations process is easy to understand.

41% of Safeguarders 'strongly agree' that the process is transparent while 16% 'somewhat disagree' and 16% neither agree nor disagree.

Appointments Allocations

Several comments suggested that it would be helpful to explain in more detail how we administer this area of the service, and some views were shared about the lack of appointments being a result of over recruitment.

71% of Safeguarders agreed they are satisfied with the number of appointments they receive.

20% of Safeguarders disagreed they are satisfied with the number of appointments they receive.

Individual Support

The feedback from Safeguarders about individual support has been positive.

94% agreed they have a good relationship with their support manager and their support manager is available and easy to approach.

92% of Safeguarders agreed their support manager adds value to their practice.

Online Learning

Safeguarders were broadly positive about online learning and shared that they would like more opportunities for in person learning.

69% of Safeguarders agreed they were happy with online learning.

77% of Safeguarders agreed they were happy with the choice and selection of learning modules available to them.

77% of Safeguarders agreed they were happy with the quality of courses available.

Overall, the service review has highlighted positive elements of service and some areas we intend to address in the coming years. This will include developing the understanding of the allocations process and policy for Safeguarders, identifying more in-person learning opportunities for Safeguarders and concluding the ongoing fees review to ensure this is more straight forward and accessible for Safeguarders.

In terms of fee structure, some Safeguarders commented that the current structure does not always fully take into account the complexity and challenges involved with an appointment and the length of time involved in an enquiry. The fee structure review process is ongoing with a number of Safeguarders involved in the working group.

The feedback on individual support was positive with Safeguarders telling us they value the time they spend with their support manager and the respectful way they explore practice, in particular discussing report samples.

Feedback and complaints



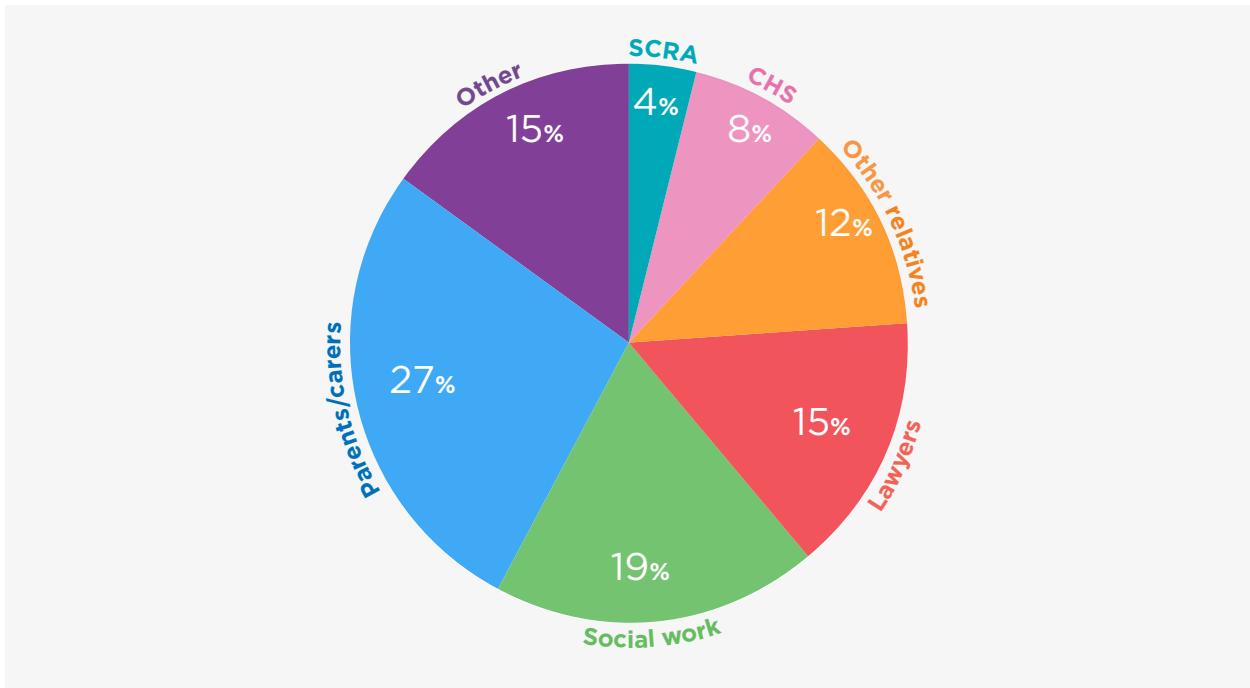
The SPT welcomes feedback about Safeguarder practice because it is one of the important ways in which we are able to support Safeguarders to improve their performance. Feedback also demonstrates Safeguarders accountability to children through the Practice Standards.

Hearing from children, parents and carers about Safeguarders, as well as from professionals such as social workers, Children's Reporters and Panel Members, gives us an insight into how Safeguarders are perceived. Whether we receive positive feedback or complaints, this information is crucial in helping develop quality Safeguarder practice.

When we receive positive feedback, this is shared with the individual Safeguarder and their support manager and can be used as contributory evidence for good practice and reappointment. In 2023-24, we received positive feedback on 32 occasions from a range of people including children, parents and Panel Members. In the previous year we received 18 separate pieces of feedback regarding Safeguarder practice so we can see this is increasing.

Alongside this, we received 26 complaints regarding Safeguarder practice. Over the year, 24 of these complaints were concluded and two remained open at the end of the year. In only one of these 26 complaints, a formal investigation was required, and this is one of the complaints that remains open.

Source of complaints



As with previous years, parents and carers are the single source of the most complaints, while other partners are represented similarly to previous years.

In terms of the number of complaints received, this figure is just slightly higher than usual. Last year we received 21 complaints regarding Safeguarder practice, and in the previous two years the figure was 23 and 13 respectively. While this figure is slightly higher than previous years, we also recognise it is still only around 2% of total Safeguarder appointments. The increase in feedback overall may be a result of the increase in partnership working in recent years and more information being shared during these sessions about people's ability to provide feedback and how to do this.

Of the 24 complaints that were concluded, in 11 of these there was insufficient information to be able to progress the allegation to a final decision. In five cases the complaint was not upheld, on four occasions they were partially upheld and on four other occasions the complaint was upheld.

Action plans for improvement are developed with Safeguarders and their support managers in all situations when a complaint is upheld or partially upheld and even in situations where a complaint is not upheld, there are often issues which are discussed with Safeguarders and can be included in an action plan. These plans are reviewed regularly to demonstrate evidence that the practice improvement required has actually been met.

We sought feedback from people who have been through our complaints process from March 2023. This is the first full year of gathering feedback from Safeguarders and complainants in every complaint that has been concluded. We received feedback on the process from 24 different people - 13 of these were complainants and 11 were Safeguarders. We collate and share this feedback with the Scottish Government at quarterly contract meetings, to ensure transparency. We recognise that, although many people positively comment on the way in which a difficult process is handled impartially and in as supportive a manner as possible, not everyone is happy with the process or conclusion of a complaint. We listen to all feedback, discuss it with our Scottish Government contract manager and take action when required.



Future plans

2023-24 has been a busy and productive year for the Safeguarders Panel Team and for Safeguarders. We anticipate the same for this year, 2024-25. We know that through the Care and Justice Act and the actions flowing from the “Hearings for Children” report, there will be many positive changes in the children’s hearings system over the coming years and we will be actively taking our role in developing and enacting these improvements in systems and practice.

We will continue to build close relationships with partners in the system and with Safeguarders, in this year and coming years the development of these relationships will be crucial. We are particularly keen to listen to Safeguarders regarding the support they require to safeguard the interests of children during the changes within the children’s hearings system. We anticipate developing processes to listen more systematically to Safeguarders, such as the survey we completed in 2023-24.

As well as listening to Safeguarders further, we want to act on the information already shared with us by Safeguarders through our service review. This year we are offering online information sessions regarding allocations and individual consultations regarding fees so that Safeguarders can ask questions and further understand these processes. We are looking for opportunities, within our budget, to further develop in person learning and development opportunities.

We expect to conclude the “fees review” in the coming year and report to the Scottish Government with the views of Safeguarders regarding a structure that will be easier for Safeguarders to navigate. We also expect to publish Guidance on Legal Representation and Advice for Safeguarders.

Our main overarching priority is to support Safeguarders and work with partners to ensure that the incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots law, results in the children’s hearings system becoming ever more focused on respecting, protecting and fulfilling children’s rights.



www.childrenfirst.org.uk/safeguarders



**The Scottish
Government**

Children First is contracted by the Scottish Government to assist with the management and operation of the Safeguarders Panel in terms of Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 (Safeguarders Panel) Regulations 2012.

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