

Safeguarding Action Plan 2021-2024



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Executive Summary

SOS Children's Villages is the primary caregiver for more than 65,000 children and young people, and we reach a further 347,000 children, young people and adults through our support to families. The safety and wellbeing of children is the reason we exist. Children and young people need adults that can be trusted, but there have been cases of abuse in our programmes, cases where we did not live up to the standards we set for ourselves, where we did not fulfil our promise to keep children safe, which we have articulated in the [SOS Care Promise](#). We have apologized for our failures, for example through [a statement by the SOS Children's Villages International CEO](#).

We owe it to all the children and young people we support to continually strengthen safeguarding throughout our organization. This is documented in our Child Safeguarding Annual Reports, available on our [international website](#), as well as a special report on our [Child Safeguarding Journey](#). The introduction of our [Child Protection Policy](#) in 2008, the global [Code of Conduct](#) in 2011, and other policies and procedures in recent years were positive steps but not enough.

Therefore, we have developed a comprehensive **Safeguarding Action Plan**, which aims to address key learnings of recent years, including those gained through our commissioning of the [Independent Child Safeguarding Review](#).

The plan approaches the broader challenge of achieving strong safeguarding through:

1. Prioritizing, in everything we do, support for the people who experienced abuse towards healing, reconciliation, and becoming self-reliant
2. Improving overall programme quality, which is essential for prevention of abuse
3. Improving our policies and systems specifically related to child safeguarding
4. Addressing broader governance and organizational culture matters – creating a safe environment for all

Indeed, ensuring a safe environment for children and young people we support starts with establishing a safe environment for staff. This requires a broad approach, with a commitment to creating environments that are safe for everyone. It is clear now that safeguarding needs to be more prominent in the organization. If we are to keep our promise to ensure a safe environment for children, young people and our staff, it needs to be at the centre of who we are and how we behave.

It is important to emphasise that safeguarding is inextricably intertwined with programme quality – delivering a high standard of support to children and young people in our programmes. In our [SOS Care Promise](#), introduced in 2018, we address key components of programme quality, such as:

- Ensuring children are placed in the most suitable care option, fitting their individual needs
- Integrating our programmes and participants into the local community
- Providing mental health support to all children, young people, and staff
- Promoting gender equality
- Providing all appropriate training and development opportunities to care practitioners

Accordingly, our 24-point [Safeguarding Action Plan](#) aims to create a safe environment in multiple ways, from providing support to those affected by abuse, to strengthening programme quality, to extensive training for child and youth care practitioners. More specifically, we have prioritized eight key actions in the plan:

- Setting up a Special Commission to address cases of failings, including child abuse, corruption, and breaches of regulations
- Establishing an ombudsperson system to represent the rights of children, young people and others affected by abuse
- Funding individual support for those who have experienced abuse
- Providing extra support for our programmes in high-risk countries
- Expanding our Protective Behaviours empowerment programme for children and young people
- Strengthening the incident management system
- Updating and embedding our Code of Conduct into everything we do
- Fully implementing our existing policy on the Prevention of Sexual Harassment, Exploitation and Abuse.

Many of the actions had already been identified and initiated as part of our ongoing safeguarding work. This document provides more information on the action plan, the eight prioritized actions, and how they relate to the recommendations of the ICSR Global Report.

Independent Child Safeguarding Review

In 2017, SOS Children's Villages commissioned Keeping Children Safe, a recognized safeguarding organization, to conduct an Independent Child Safeguarding Review (ICSR). The **objectives** of the ICSR were:

1. To provide insight into past and current child safeguarding practices of SOS Children's Villages International and the federation of member associations by looking into four historical cases.
2. To identify and promote the lessons learned from historical and current safeguarding practices to implement child safeguarding efficiently throughout the federation of SOS Children's Villages.
3. To support member associations to strengthen their ability to respond to historical abuse allegations and effectively safeguard children in their care today.

The [ICSR Global Report](#) provides 46 recommendations in six categories:

1. Overall
2. Child Safeguarding measures within SOS Children's Villages International
3. Leadership and Organizational Culture
4. Oversight, Governance and Accountability
5. Care Quality and the role of primary caregivers
6. Justice and support for victims, survivors, and whistle-blowers

The full report with all 46 recommendations can be found on our international website. The report confirms [lessons we had already been learning](#) through our safeguarding work. These lessons are also reflected in our Child Safeguarding Annual Reports, which are also available [on our website](#).

SOS Children's Villages is committed to implementing all of the report's recommendations, as well as making other improvements in our organization to ensure safe environments everywhere we operate.

Our Child Safeguarding Approach

With everything we do, we promise to put the child at the centre, and so it is with our safeguarding work. We have rigorous policies and procedures that are aligned with international standards, and we report transparently on child safeguarding incidents.

These fundamental principles guide our child safeguarding efforts:

- We have no tolerance for any form of abuse
- We focus on supporting those affected by abuse
- We apply international safeguarding and child rights standards
- We continuously learn and improve

The [SOS Care Promise](#) is the overall policy which pertains to our programmatic work, and our [Child Protection Policy](#) guides our child safeguarding work specifically. Another important point of reference to which our policies align is the [Child Safeguarding Standards](#) produced by Keeping Children Safe. In addition, all employees within the federation are obliged to comply with our [Code of Conduct](#).

In our efforts to learn and improve, which have been complemented by the Independent Child Safeguarding Review, we seek to strengthen our safeguarding through:

1. Prioritizing, in everything we do, **support for the individuals** who experienced abuse towards healing, reconciliation, and becoming self-reliant. This includes medical, mental health, psychosocial and legal support as well as support to improve their individual living situations.
2. Improving our policies and systems **specifically related to child safeguarding**. This includes ensuring the participation of children and young people in shaping safeguarding measures and understanding their rights, improving child and youth care practitioner working conditions, wellbeing, learning and development.
3. Improving **overall programme quality**, which includes safeguarding risk management and prevention efforts. Elements of programme quality include: ensuring children are placed in the suitable care option, fitting their individual needs; integrating our programmes and participants into the local community; providing mental health support to all children, young people and staff; promoting gender equality; providing all appropriate training and development opportunities to care practitioners.
4. Addressing broader **governance and organizational culture** – creating a safe environment for all. This includes ensuring that everyone in the organization understands their responsibilities for creating a safe environment and how the organizational values translate into behaviours; and establishing the right governance and accountability structures.

Our 24-Point Safeguarding Action Plan

Learnings from our ongoing child safeguarding work, as well as specific recommendations from the ICSR Global Report, have informed our Safeguarding Action Plan. This will include actions to place safeguarding at the centre of everything we do – creating a safe environment for children, young people, and families we work with, as well as our staff and partners.

Eight of the actions are prioritized to address the most urgent points across the full range of the ICSR recommendations, and these are listed in bold.

We have categorized the 24 actions according to six different learning areas, which reflect our ongoing commitment to focus on the children and young people we support, as well as supporting caregivers and other staff; the plan is not just about policies and systems.

Learning areas and actions

Learning Area A

Holistic support, justice and incident management

1. **Immediate support for children and others that have experienced abuse** -- to ensure those affected are supported towards healing, reconciliation, and becoming self-reliant
2. **Ombudsperson system** – to represent the rights of children, young people and others affected by abuse
3. **Incident management for persons that have experienced abuse** – consistently implemented across the entire federation

Learning Area B

Participation of children and young people in shaping safeguarding measures and understanding their rights

4. **Child and youth empowerment** -- to ensure children and young people are involved in decisions regarding their care, prevent peer-to-peer violence and abuse, and give them a stronger voice in safeguarding
5. Youth development and participation – to ensure that young people are empowered to participate in decisions affecting their care and development, and are supported in the leaving care process

Learning Area C

Child and youth care practitioner working conditions, role, wellbeing, learning and development

6. Working conditions for care practitioners – to improve the working conditions and strengthen learning and development of child and youth care practitioners
7. Research on gender equality – to improve understanding of attitudes and beliefs around gender and women's rights, experiences of discrimination, differentials in pay and conditions, and gender balance in leadership.
8. Learning and development for care practitioners – to provide opportunities for individual, face-to-face, and digital training

Learning Area D

People, culture and human resources practices for safeguarding

9. Federation culture development – to build a safeguarding environment through practical, targeted initiatives
10. **Code of Conduct/ values-based conduct** -- to ensure the mandatory, global code is fully embedded across the federation; it will address bullying, power imbalances, and gender disparities.
11. Human resources competency framework – to demonstrate how staff can live our organizational values in our day-to-day work and integrate them into recruitment, performance management, and development
12. Review of all human resources policies – to ensure safeguarding is reflected and mandatory
13. Safe recruitment regulation – to ensure consistent and mandatory steps are taken in the recruitment process
14. Strategy for safeguarding capacity building – to ensure we have the right learning and development systems to support all our people, including child and youth care practitioners, support staff, managers and leaders
15. New global human resources policy with binding standards – an umbrella policy to ensure clarity and consistency across the entire federation
16. **Prevention of Sexual Harassment, Exploitation and Abuse (PSHEA) regulation implementation** – to fully implement the regulation already adopted by the International Senate, to promoting awareness and prevention and implementing reporting and responding processes

Learning Area E

Oversight, leadership, governance and accountability for safeguarding

17. Independent Special Commission – to take up past and contemporary cases of failings, including child abuse, corruption, and breaches of regulations
18. Alignment of integrity, compliance and safeguarding– to ensure our processes and procedures are working together effectively, including improved and integrated reporting and responding procedures
19. Child safeguarding policy update – to ensure ICSR recommendations and current best practice is reflected
20. High-risk country support -- to provide extra financial and management support to 25 member associations with a high-risk profile
21. Early warning system – to ensure safeguarding risks are monitored and escalated appropriately
22. Safeguarding resources in institutional donor projects – ensuring appropriate resources are in budgets


Learning Area F

Investment for high quality programmes across the Federation

23. Increased investment in 70+ programmes to fix quality gaps – including monitoring, ensuring the necessary financial investment is made to improve quality in 70-100 programme locations
24. Increased support for member associations to implement the SOS Care Promise – including regular self-assessment and continuous improvement in areas such as programme admission standards and mental health support to programme participants

Mapping prioritized actions against ICSR recommendations

Key elements of our Safeguarding Action Plan, labelled as 'prioritized actions', will ensure that we make progress towards implementing the recommendations as rapidly as possible.

 Prioritized actions	1. Immediate support of those affected by abuse	2. Ombudsperson system	3. Incident management system	4. Child and youth empowerment	10. Code of Conduct and other human resources initiatives	16. PSHEA regulation implementation	17. Independent Special Commission	20. High-risk country support
Categories of ICSR recommendations								
Overall Recommendations								
Child Safeguarding Measures								
Leadership and Organisational Culture								
Oversight, Governance and Accountability								
Care Quality and the Role of Primary Caregivers								
Justice and Support for Victims, Survivors and Whistleblowers								

Prioritized actions in greater depth

ACTION	DESCRIPTION	KPIs	ICSR Report Recommendations Addressed
<p>Immediate support for those who have experienced abuse</p>	<p>Funding from existing reserves has been made available for direct individual support to all children, young people and other persons that have experienced abuse in SOS Children's Villages programmes, to ensure those affected are supported towards healing, reconciliation, and becoming self-reliant. This includes medical, mental health, psychosocial and legal support as well as support to improve their individual living situations. Support to be individualized, supportive, realistic, and empowering to the individual.</p> <p>To deliver this, we are setting up a system that can be monitored globally to ensure that every affected individual has a dedicated support person and plan, and every case is handled according to protocol. This is connected to the Incident Management action described below.</p>	<p>By 2024, 100% of MAs will have implemented strict minimum standards on delivering individualized support</p> <p>15% MAs by end of 2022</p>	<p>7.1; 7.5; 7.40; 7.41; 7.42; 7.46</p>
<p>Ombudsperson system</p>	<p>A safeguarding ombudsperson system throughout our global organization will represent the rights of children, young people and others who have experienced abuse. Building on the model already practiced in some member associations, it will support children and others that have experienced abuse and anybody seeking resolution of concerns. The means by which support will be made available will be clearly communicated on our international website and across the 137 countries and territories where we work.</p>	<p>Interim Ombudsperson in GSC by end Sept 2021</p> <p>100% of MAs covered by system by December 2023</p>	<p>7.40; 7.44</p>
<p>Incident Management system</p>	<p>We will ensure a robust incident management system is consistently implemented across the entire federation. This includes additional staffing in member associations and regional offices. This will provide better support and access to justice for children, young people and others who have experienced abuse and will be complemented by the Ombudsperson system.</p>	<p>Urgent gaps filled by end of 2021;</p> <p>100% of MAs implement the new system by December 2023</p>	<p>7.2; 7.3; 7.4; 7.6; 7.7; 7.9; 7.33; 7.43; 7.45; 7.46</p>
<p>Child and youth empowerment</p>	<p>We will roll out the Protective Behaviours programme across the entire federation and ensure children and young people understand their rights. This programme, which has already been running in many countries, helps to ensure children and young people are involved in decisions regarding their care, serves to prevent peer-to-peer violence and abuse, and gives them a stronger voice in safeguarding.</p>	<p>100% of programmes implement Protective Behaviours by end of 2023</p>	<p>7.10; 7.19; 7.20</p>

<p>Code of Conduct and other human resources initiatives</p>	<p>We will update our Code of Conduct, already mandatory across the federation, and ensure it is fully embedded across the General Secretariat and in all member associations. The revised Code will address stronger focus on bullying, power imbalances, and gender disparities. The rollout will include multilingual e-learning tools to ensure consistency across the federation.</p> <p>It will be backed by a broader values-based conduct programme, which includes training and awareness to ensure staff understand how our organizational values of Accountability, Commitment, Courage, and Trust should be put into action.</p> <p>The Code of Conduct project will also be complemented with a comprehensive revision of all human resources policies to ensure safeguarding is prioritized and foregrounded in our key HR processes such as recruitment procedures, job descriptions, and appraisal processes.</p> <p>Underpinning the entire performance management system, there will be a new competency framework which ensures all understand and are assessed on their responsibilities for safeguarding.</p>	<p>Competency framework finalized by end 2021;</p> <p>New Code of Conduct established by January 2023;</p> <p>100% GSC staff trained in new Code by Dec 2023</p> <p>Three senior staff added to drive Code of Conduct and other initiatives by September 2021</p>	<p>7.8; 7.11; 7.14; 7.15; 7.16</p>
<p>Prevention of Sexual Harassment, Exploitation and Abuse (PSHEA) regulation implementation</p>	<p>The International Senate has already adopted a PSHEA regulation, and this will be fully implemented across the General Secretariat and all member associations. This includes promoting awareness and prevention and implementing reporting and responding processes.</p>	<p>Implemented in 100% of federation by December 2024</p>	<p>7.22; 7.38</p>
<p>Independent Special Commission</p>	<p>The independent Special Commission will address past and contemporary cases of failings, including child abuse, corruption, misuse of funds, and breaches of UN guidelines and regulations that protect children's and employees' human rights. The commission will investigate why failures occurred, while in other instances the organization's policies and processes were appropriately followed through and important changes achieved.</p>	<p>Established by end May 2021;</p> <p>Further KPIs to be established as work proceeds</p>	<p>7.2; 7.3; 7.4; 7.30</p>
<p>High-risk country support</p>	<p>We will provide extra financial and management support to 25 member associations with a high-risk profile to strengthen their child safeguarding through actions such as: assessment of risks; embedding of reporting mechanisms; involvement of external partners; training for management, boards and practitioners; and more frequent safeguarding audits. Includes targeted prevention and holistic mental health support in each programme location.</p>	<p>All 25 MAs to complete process and be audited by end December 2024</p>	<p>7.29</p>



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