

How to choose a safeguarding consultant

Compare relevant experience, approach, capacity, organisational fit, assurance and value.



Introduction

Choosing a safeguarding consultant is not simply about finding someone with a strong CV. The right consultant should have relevant experience, a clear and proportionate approach, enough capacity to deliver the work properly, and a good fit with your organisation and its requirements.

This guide provides a practical framework for comparing safeguarding consultants and making a consistent commissioning decision.



The commissioning principle

Define the requirement first. Compare providers second.

A**Start with the organisational requirement**

Before approaching consultants, be clear about what you need the consultancy to achieve.

A safeguarding consultant might be commissioned for very different purposes, including:

- reviewing safeguarding policies, procedures or governance;
- providing an independent safeguarding review or audit;
- supporting organisational safeguarding improvement;
- advising trustees, boards, senior leaders or safeguarding leads;
- providing specialist safeguarding advice;
- supporting an organisation through a particular safeguarding challenge;
- developing or reviewing safeguarding systems;
- providing external safeguarding leadership or DSL support;
- delivering training or workforce development.

The consultant you need will depend on the problem you are trying to solve.

A useful commissioning requirement should explain:

- The context - What is happening in the organisation and why is external support needed?
- The outcome - What should be different as a result of the consultancy?
- The scope - What should the consultant examine or provide, and what is outside the scope?
- The stakeholders - Who will need to contribute to, receive or act on the work?
- The constraints - Are there particular timescales, confidentiality requirements, geographical considerations or budget limits?
- The deliverables - What will the organisation receive at the end of the work?

Being clear about the requirement makes it easier to compare consultants on the same basis.

Good commissioning starts with a clear understanding of need and the outcomes sought, rather than selecting a provider first.

1**Compare relevant experience**

Look beyond the consultant's job titles and consider whether their experience is genuinely relevant to your organisation and the work required.

Ask:

- Have they worked with organisations similar to yours?
- Do they understand your safeguarding context and regulatory environment?
- Have they undertaken the specific type of work you are commissioning?
- Do they have relevant experience with the people affected by your work?
- Have they worked at the organisational level required - for example with boards and trustees as well as operational teams?

- Can they provide examples of comparable assignments?
- Do they have appropriate professional qualifications, training or specialist expertise for the work?

Relevant experience is more useful than a long list of generic safeguarding credentials. Someone experienced in delivering training may not have the expertise required for an independent organisational review; expertise in one sector may not transfer automatically to another.

**Commissioning question**

Why is this consultant's previous experience relevant to our particular requirement?

2**Understand their approach**

Two consultants with similar experience may take very different approaches. Ask prospective consultants to explain:

- how they would approach your assignment;
- what information or evidence they would want to review;
- who they would need to speak to;
- how they would involve people who use your services, where appropriate;
- how they distinguish evidence, professional judgement and recommendation;
- how they would identify priorities and risks;
- how they would communicate difficult findings;
- what they would expect the organisation to do with their recommendations.

A strong proposal should be sufficiently specific to demonstrate that the consultant has understood your requirement, while allowing appropriate professional judgement about how the work should be undertaken.

Be cautious of proposals that rely heavily on generic templates or promise a predetermined outcome before the evidence has been examined. For independent work, clarify how objectivity will be maintained and conflicts of interest identified or managed.

3**Check capacity and availability**

A consultant may be highly experienced but still not be the right choice if they cannot give your work sufficient time and attention. Establish:

- when they can start and how much time they expect to spend;
- who will undertake the work and whether the named consultant will personally deliver it;
- how much work they are managing concurrently;
- their availability for meetings, interviews and follow-up discussions;
- what happens if they become unavailable;
- whether they have suitable supervision, quality assurance or additional support where relevant.

Capacity is particularly important where the work involves sensitive safeguarding information, multiple stakeholders or a tight timetable. Do not assess capacity solely by asking, 'Can you do it?' Ask how the work will be resourced and the timetable met.

4 Consider organisational fit

'Fit' should not mean choosing someone who is likely to tell you what you want to hear. Instead, consider whether the consultant's way of working is appropriate for your organisation.

Think about:

- the size and complexity of your organisation;
- your organisational culture and values;
- the level of challenge and challenge-readiness within your leadership team;
- whether you need a highly structured or more collaborative approach;
- whether the consultant can communicate effectively with trustees, leaders and frontline staff;
- whether their communication style is appropriate for the people involved;
- whether they understand the practical realities and resources of your organisation.



What good fit means

Independent professional challenge delivered in a constructive way that enables the organisation to act.

5 Ask for evidence, not just assertions

When comparing consultants, ask for evidence that supports their claims. This might include:

- examples of relevant assignments and anonymised case examples;
- references from comparable organisations;
- sample outputs or reports, where confidentiality permits;
- details of relevant qualifications and professional development;
- evidence of quality-assurance arrangements;
- appropriate insurance;
- information about data protection and confidentiality arrangements.

Ask referees specifically about reliability, independence, quality of work, communication and delivery against the agreed scope. A website profile or marketplace listing is a starting point for due diligence, not independent evidence of suitability.

6 Compare proposals consistently

If you approach several consultants, give each the same requirement and ask for comparable information. A simple scoring framework can reduce the risk of making a decision based mainly on personal preference or price.

Criterion	Questions to consider	Weight
Relevant experience	How closely does their experience match the requirement?	30%
Approach and methodology	Is the proposed approach credible, proportionate and evidence-based?	25%
Capacity	Can they deliver the work to the required standard and timetable?	15%
Organisational fit	Are they likely to work effectively with your organisation and stakeholders?	15%
Quality and assurance	Are qualifications, references, insurance and quality arrangements appropriate?	10%
Cost and value	Does the overall cost represent appropriate value for the expected outcome?	5%

These percentages are illustrative. Adjust them to reflect the importance and risk of your assignment. Do not allow price to become a substitute for suitability. The cheapest consultant is not necessarily the best value, particularly if the work needs to be repeated or does not provide the assurance or improvement required.

7 Ask the right questions

Before appointing a consultant, consider asking:

- What experience do you have of organisations like ours?
- What comparable safeguarding assignments have you undertaken?
- What would your approach be to our particular requirement?
- What evidence would you want to see before reaching conclusions?
- Who would undertake the work and how much time would they have available?
- How would you handle disagreement or challenge from organisational leaders?
- How would you identify and manage conflicts of interest?
- How would you protect confidential and sensitive safeguarding information?
- What would you provide at the end of the assignment?
- What would you need from us to deliver the work effectively?
- How would you deal with a significant safeguarding concern identified during the work?
- Can you provide relevant references?
- What are the total costs, including expenses or follow-up work?
- What happens if the scope needs to change?

Consider the answers alongside the written proposal rather than in isolation.

8 Clarify the boundaries of the consultancy

Before appointment, make sure both parties understand what the consultant is - and is not - being commissioned to do. Your agreement should clarify:

- the purpose and scope of the work;
- responsibilities of the consultant and organisation;
- reporting arrangements, expected deliverables, timetable and milestones;
- fees and expenses;
- confidentiality, information-sharing and data-protection responsibilities;
- arrangements for handling new safeguarding concerns;
- conflicts of interest;
- cancellation or changes to scope;
- follow-up support, if required.

Where the consultancy involves safeguarding concerns or sensitive information, agree in advance how urgent issues will be escalated. External consultancy should complement, rather than obscure, the organisation's own safeguarding responsibilities.

T A simple decision test

Before making the appointment, ask:

- Experience - Does this consultant have the right experience for our requirement?
- Approach - Do we understand how they will undertake the work, and are we confident in their methodology?
- Capacity - Can they give the assignment enough time, attention and resource?
- Fit - Can they provide independent challenge while working effectively with our organisation?
- Assurance - Have we completed proportionate checks on qualifications, references, insurance, conflicts of interest and confidentiality?
- Value - Does the proposed cost make sense in relation to the quality, scope and outcomes expected?



Decision point

If the answer to any of these is unclear, seek further information before appointing.

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Commission for the outcome, not the CV

A strong safeguarding consultant is not simply someone who has accumulated the most qualifications or the longest list of organisations on their CV.

**The better question**

Who is best placed to help our organisation achieve the safeguarding outcome we have identified?

Start with the organisational requirement. Then compare consultants against the same criteria: relevant experience, approach, capacity, fit, assurance and value. This makes the commissioning process more transparent, defensible and focused on what the organisation actually needs.

**SafeguardingLink commissioning principle**

Define the requirement first. Compare providers second.

Important information

SafeguardingLink helps organisations identify and compare safeguarding professional services. This guide is intended to support commissioning decisions; it is not advice about an individual safeguarding concern or a substitute for your organisation's procurement, legal or safeguarding procedures.

SafeguardingLink helps organisations define professional service requirements and compare independent safeguarding providers. Independent providers supply their own information; a listing is not accreditation, approval, endorsement or a suitability guarantee.

More commissioning resources: www.safeguardinglink.co.uk/resources