How to commission a safeguarding audit

Define the audit scope and evidence base, reporting expectations and organisational outcomes before comparing providers.

Introduction

A safeguarding audit should provide more than an assessment of whether policies are in place. A well-scoped audit gives leaders an evidence-based view of safeguarding practice, identifies strengths and risks, and creates practical priorities for improvement.

The strongest commissioning process starts with the organisational requirement - not the provider. Define what you need the audit to examine, what evidence should be tested, what the final report must enable you to do and how findings will be governed.

> i **The commissioning principle**
> *Define the audit before you compare the auditor.*

A clear brief makes proposals easier to compare, reduces ambiguity about price and deliverables, and increases the likelihood that the final audit answers the questions that matter to your organisation.

1 Define the purpose of the audit

Start with the decision the audit needs to support.

An audit may be commissioned to:

- provide independent assurance to a board or governing body;
- assess the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements;
- identify gaps between policy and practice;
- prepare for inspection or regulatory scrutiny;
- review safeguarding after organisational change or a concern;
- benchmark current practice; or
- test whether previous recommendations have been implemented.

> ? **Commissioning question**
> *What do we need to know at the end of the audit that we do not know confidently today?*

2 Define the audit scope

Set the organisational boundaries

Specify whether the audit covers the whole organisation, particular services, sites, departments, programmes, subsidiaries or commissioned services. State any areas deliberately outside scope.

Consider the safeguarding domains

Depending on your context, consider:

- governance and leadership; policies and procedures; roles and accountability;
- safer recruitment; training; reporting and recording; referral and escalation;
- concerns and allegations; supervision; safeguarding culture; partnership working;
- case management; board or trustee oversight; quality assurance; safeguarding data; and
- learning from previous incidents, reviews and audits.

3 Agree the evidence base

Use multiple sources

A robust audit should not rely on policy review alone. Specify the documents, records, cases, data and people that should inform the assessment.

Documentary evidence may include

- safeguarding policies and procedures; governance papers and minutes;
- safeguarding reports and dashboards; training and recruitment records;

- referral and incident data; case audits; complaints and concerns;
- supervision evidence where appropriate; previous reports; and improvement plans.

People and practice may include

- interviews with senior leaders, safeguarding leads, trustees or board members;
- staff and volunteer interviews or focus groups;
- observation of relevant meetings or processes; case sampling; and
- proportionate engagement with people who use services, children, young people, families or carers.

?

Key question

What evidence will allow the auditor to distinguish between what our organisation says it does and what it actually does?

4 Set expectations for methodology

Ask providers to explain how they will conduct the audit

A proposal should describe:

- the methodology or framework used and how evidence will be triangulated;
- how samples will be selected, who will be interviewed and how case records will be reviewed;
- how strengths and risks will be assessed;
- how immediate safeguarding concerns will be escalated; and
- how recommendations will be prioritised.

Look beyond checklist compliance

A useful audit combines structured assessment with professional judgement and evidence from practice. Ask how the provider will test whether arrangements operate effectively, not simply whether documents exist.

5 Specify the reporting requirements

Agree outputs before comparing providers

Consider requesting:

- an executive summary and a clear statement of overall findings;
- evidence supporting significant findings;
- strengths and effective practice;
- identified gaps, risks and vulnerabilities;
- prioritised recommendations and suggested sequencing for improvement; and
- a presentation or discussion of findings with relevant leaders or governance bodies.

Make recommendations usable

Where helpful, require a management action plan setting out each recommendation, its priority, responsible owner and target completion date. Ask how findings will be presented so they work for both operational safeguarding leads and governance.

6 Define the organisational outcomes

Decide what success looks like

Possible outcomes include:

- stronger safeguarding governance and clearer accountability;
- more consistent practice and better quality records;
- greater staff confidence and improved board or trustee oversight;
- clearer assurance about safeguarding risks;
- completion of outstanding actions; or
- a realistic, prioritised safeguarding improvement plan.

Keep the outcome in view

The audit should be the means of reaching a better organisational position, not the end product in itself.

7 Compare providers against the same criteria

Once the scope and requirements are fixed, use the same criteria to assess every proposal. Avoid making price the proxy for quality.

Criterion	What to look for
Relevant expertise	Experience of safeguarding audits in comparable organisations and sectors.
Methodology	A clear, proportionate and evidence-based approach.
Independence	Appropriate independence and ability to provide constructive challenge.
Evidence	A strong approach to triangulating documents, people and practice.
Safeguarding expertise	Current knowledge of relevant safeguarding expectations and practice.
Reporting	Clear, proportionate and actionable reporting.
Recommendations	Prioritised recommendations linked to evidence and risk.
Engagement	An appropriate approach to staff, leaders, trustees and people using services.
Capacity	Sufficient time, suitably experienced auditors and realistic delivery.
Cost	Transparent pricing linked to the agreed scope and outputs.

8 Questions to ask prospective providers

1	How would you approach our proposed scope?
2	What evidence would you need before reaching a conclusion?
3	How would you test whether safeguarding arrangements operate effectively in practice?
4	How would you identify and communicate an immediate safeguarding risk discovered during the audit?
5	How would you involve staff, leaders, trustees and people who use our services?
6	How do you distinguish compliance from effective safeguarding practice?
7	How do you prioritise recommendations?
8	What will the final report enable our board or leadership team to do differently?
9	What information or access would you need from us before starting?
10	What would you consider outside the scope of this audit?

9 Establish governance and responsibilities

Before the audit begins, agree who will commission, oversee and receive the work. The auditor should have sufficient access and independence to reach credible conclusions.

- Commissioning lead and senior organisational sponsor
- Safeguarding lead and operational contacts
- Governance body receiving the report
- Who will provide evidence and facilitate access
- Who will coordinate interviews and case sampling
- How emerging concerns will be escalated
- Who will own and monitor the resulting improvement plan

10 Agree what happens after the audit

Decide before commissioning how findings will be presented, communicated and converted into an improvement plan. Agree how actions will be assigned to accountable owners, monitored through governance and reviewed to establish whether improvements have been achieved.

B A simple commissioning brief

Brief element	Question to answer
Purpose	Why is the audit being commissioned?
Scope	Which services, sites, functions and safeguarding arrangements are included?
Evidence base	What documents, records, cases, data and people should inform the audit?
Methodology	What approach and level of sampling are expected?
Outputs	What report, presentation, action plan or other deliverables are required?
Governance	Who commissions the audit, who receives findings and how will risks be escalated?
Outcomes	What organisational decisions or improvements should result?
Timescale	When should fieldwork, draft findings and final reporting take place?
Provider requirements	What safeguarding expertise, independence and relevant experience are required?
Budget	What funding is available, and what assumptions should providers make when pricing?

i

Commission with clarity

Define the audit scope, evidence base, reporting expectations and organisational outcomes before comparing providers.

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