



CHILDREN FIRST

Safeguarders
Panel Team

Safeguarders Panel Team

Annual Report 2024-2025

Contents

—	Introduction	4
	Policy Updates	4
—	Safeguarder appointments & trends	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
	Information events	10
	Partnership opportunities	11
—	Safeguarder profile	12
—	Feedback and complaints	14
—	Future plans	16

Introduction

Children First has managed the national Safeguarders Panel since 2013. The responsibilities of the Children First Safeguarders Panel Team (SPT) include recruitment, training, appointment management, handling of complaints and the ongoing support and performance monitoring of Safeguarders across Scotland.

We work in partnership with the Scottish Government, Safeguarders and all stakeholders involved in the Children's Hearings System to ensure that the best interests of the child remain central to every children's hearing and related court proceeding.

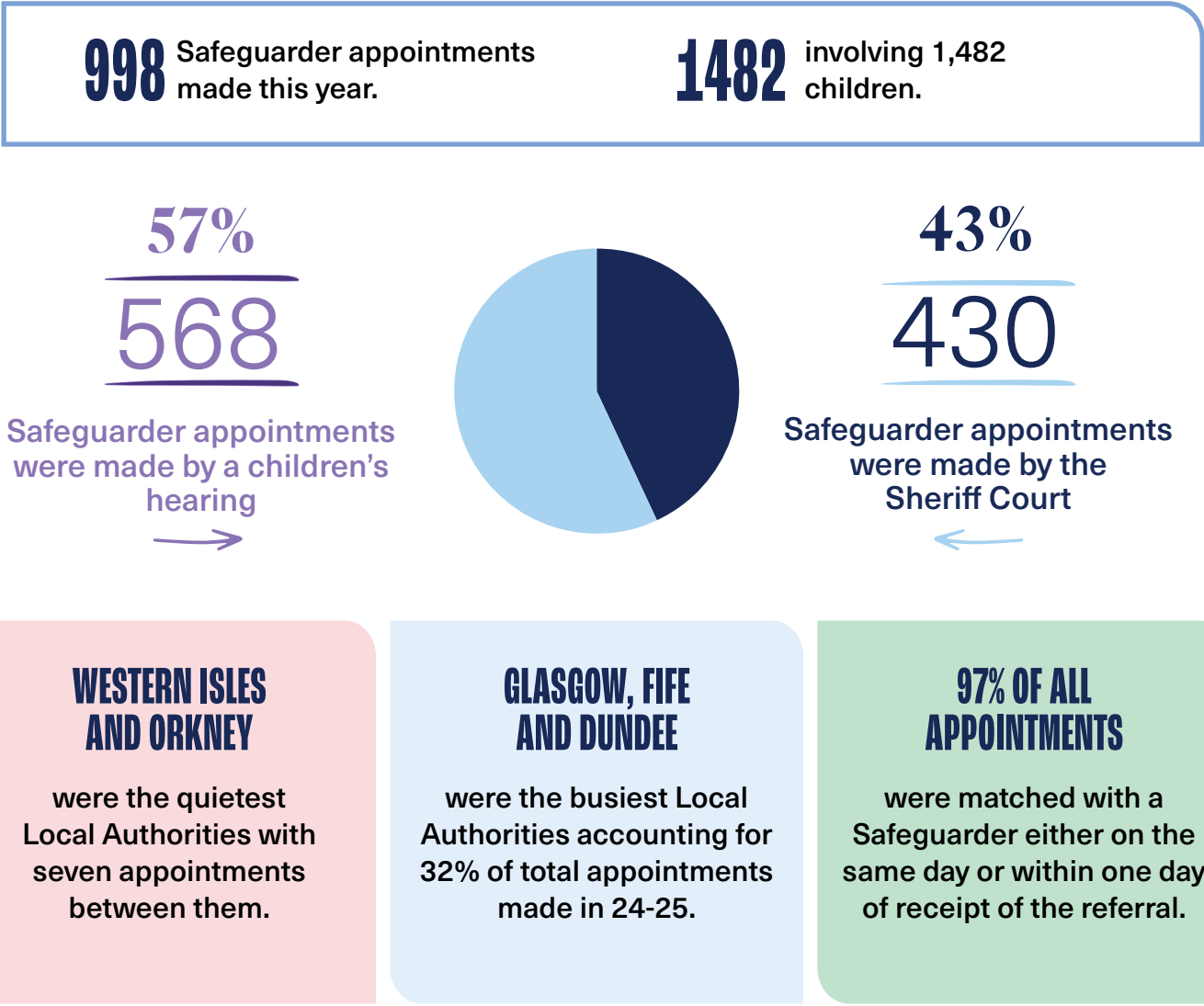
Policy updates

The Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 received Royal Assent in June 2024. The provisions of this Act have started to be implemented and will continue to be phased in over the coming years. One significant provision, enacted in August 2024, prohibits the detention of children under the age of 18 in Young Offender Institutions or prisons. SPT are preparing for the broader implementation of the Act's measures, including expanded access to the Children's Hearings System for 16 and 17-year-olds.

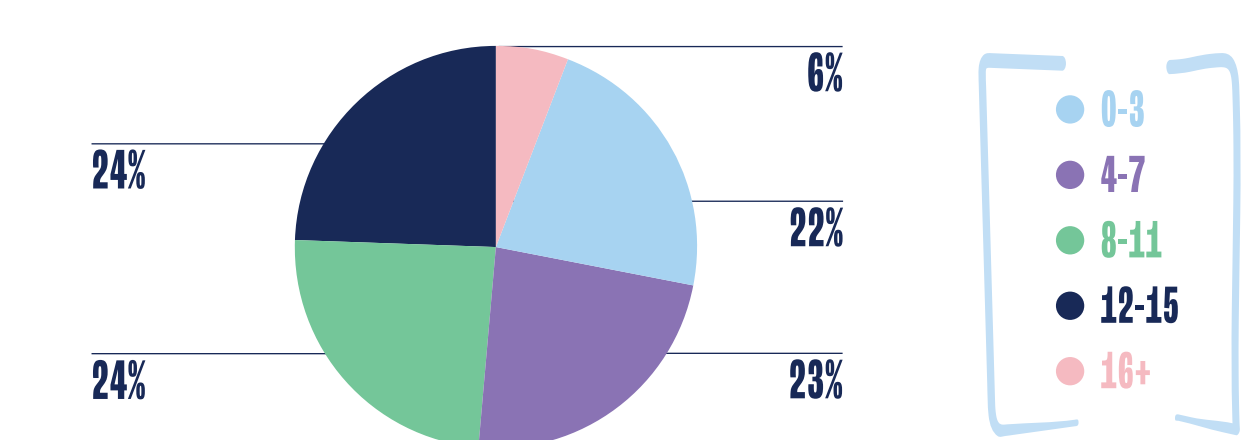
Work on the redesign of the Children's Hearings System has continued throughout the year. This has included multiple opportunities to engage with and provide consultation responses to the Scottish Government. The consultation process addressed a wide range of topics, from overarching principles of the Children's Hearings System to specific aspects of each phase - before, during, and after a hearing. Key areas of focus included children's attendance at hearings, the language used within the system, changes to referral criteria, and considerations specific to Safeguarders, such as the potential for earlier appointment within a redesigned system.

Further consultation and engagement processes were set up to prepare for the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill which looks to make changes in several key areas related to the children's care system. The content of the Bill will be informed by these consultations including the Future of Foster Care, Developing a Universal Definition of Care Experience, Children's Hearings Redesign and 'Moving On' from care into adulthood.

Safeguarder appointment and trends



Age of children with a safeguarder



Safeguarder Allocations & Availability Across Scotland, 2024-2025

Local authority	Number of Safeguarders	Children's hearing introductions	Sheriff court introductions
Aberdeen City Council	12	13	15
Aberdeenshire Council	10	10	5
Angus Council	14	19	17
Argyll and Bute Council	9	6	6
Clackmannanshire Council	15	12	25
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	2	2	1
Dumfries and Galloway Council	11	24	0
Dundee City Council	21	29	42
East Ayrshire Council	15	28	2
East Dunbartonshire Council	10	5	0
East Lothian Council	6	11	0
East Renfrewshire Council	12	10	0
Edinburgh Council	19	34	8
Falkirk Council	20	25	30
Fife Council	28	35	66
Glasgow City Council	43	58	88
Highland Council	11	10	10
Inverclyde Council	12	15	5
Midlothian Council	7	16	0
Moray Council	6	7	2
North Ayrshire Council	13	19	0
North Lanarkshire Council	20	46	10
Orkney Islands Council	4	2	2
Perth and Kinross Council	15	14	23
Renfrewshire Council	16	19	8
Scottish Borders Council	7	7	1
Shetland Islands Council	3	6	0
South Ayrshire Council	10	6	1
South Lanarkshire Council	15	18	12
Stirling Council	14	12	14
West Dunbartonshire Council	24	37	31
West Lothian Council	10	13	6
Total		568	430



Work of the Safeguarders Panel Team

POLICIES AND GUIDANCE

Following the publication of the Report Writing Template in 2024, which outlined expectations for Safeguarder reports, a more comprehensive document, Guidance on Effective Report Writing was finalised and published in February 2025. This guidance is divided into two parts: Part 1 focuses on the structure and content of reports, while Part 2 addresses the legal framework underpinning report writing. The original Report Writing Template has been included as an appendix to ensure all relevant resources are consolidated in a single document.

In April 2025, Guidance on Legal Advice and Representation, and Expert Witnesses was issued to Safeguarders following consultation and approval by the Scottish Government. While Safeguarders are not required to hold legal qualifications to fulfil

their role in court, SPT recognises the challenges that may arise in particularly complex or unusual appointments. This guidance supports Safeguarders in identifying circumstances where legal assistance may be appropriate and outlines the criteria considered by the Scottish Government when reviewing such requests.

"All the Practice Standards and report writing templates available mean that I know exactly what is expected of me as a Safeguarder. This makes my role so much easier."

Safeguarder

PRACTICE SUPPORT AND LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

In November 2024, the SPT launched two new e-learning modules for Safeguarders. The first, a child development module, builds on previous training and supports Safeguarders in understanding the developmental stages of pre-school children. It also encourages consideration of how developmental delays may affect the needs of both the child and their family.

The second module, focused on child health inequalities, was developed in response to the persistent and significant levels of poverty affecting families across Scotland. Given the strong correlation between poverty and poorer health and developmental outcomes, it was felt important to highlight this concept of health inequalities and the implications for the children and families Safeguarders work with.

Both modules are highly relevant to Safeguarders' responsibilities in identifying a child's needs and best interests and in reflecting these considerations in their recommendations to children's hearings and Sheriffs.

Safeguarders also have ongoing access to training related to the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 through the Children's Hearings Scotland Virtual Learning Academy. The first course, Care and Justice Part 1 – Responding to the Needs of Older Children, was developed by Children's Hearings Scotland (CHS) in partnership with the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ). This course emphasises the importance of

considering age-appropriate views and needs to ensure children's rights are upheld. A second module, covering the more technical aspects of the legislation, is scheduled for release prior to the full implementation of the Act.

In early 2025, Safeguarders were invited to participate in small group discussions on the implementation of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024. These sessions were offered both in person and online across different regions, with attendance ranging from two to nine Safeguarders per session.

The SPT also continues to provide individual support sessions and peer mentoring opportunities as part of the Performance Support and Monitoring Framework. Safeguarders attend a minimum of two support sessions each year and further sessions are often arranged depending on the support and development needs of individual Safeguarders. Support Managers also continue to respond to informal practice enquiries throughout the year.

"I learn a lot from our support sessions and try to make sure that I work in the best way possible for children, young people, their families and the professionals involved in supporting the child's plan."

Partnership working

The Safeguarders Panel Team works both strategically and operationally with partner agencies to enhance the experiences of children and families within the Children's Hearings System. Over the past year, the SPT has identified new partnership opportunities, participated in multi-agency meetings and hosted information events for the children's hearings workforce.

MULTI-AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS

Multi-agency partnership meetings vary in composition but typically include representatives from social work, the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA), Children's Hearings Scotland (CHS), advocacy services and education.

A key aspect of this work is the SPT's participation in Children's Hearings Improvement Partnerships (CHIPs). The purpose of CHIPs is to improve the experiences and outcomes of children and young people involved in the Children's Hearings System by fostering collaboration and encouraging the exchange of information and ideas among partners.

The SPT is a member of the National CHIP and chaired the Glasgow CHIP in 2024. In 2024-2025, the SPT expanded its involvement and is now actively engaged in CHIPs across several areas of Scotland including Glasgow, Dundee, Angus, Fife, Perth and Kinross, Edinburgh, West Dunbartonshire, East Dunbartonshire, Ayrshire, East Renfrewshire, and Renfrewshire.

In addition to CHIPs, the SPT continues to participate in the Glasgow Referral Liaison Group, which includes representatives from SCRA, the courts and the Glasgow Bar Association. This group discusses developments in court practice and provides a forum for the SPT to share feedback on issues, challenges and positive experiences Safeguarders encounter in court settings.

Nationally SPT is a member of the Advocacy Expert Reference Group which is chaired by the Scottish Government and includes the advocacy service providers across Scotland, as well as the main stakeholders involved in the children's hearings system.



Information events

The SPT regularly hosts events to raise awareness of the Safeguarder role. These events aim to promote understanding of the role, highlight the support and monitoring framework provided by the SPT and encourage professionals and volunteers to share feedback on their experiences with Safeguarders.

The overarching goal is to support the highest standards of Safeguarder practice for the benefit of children and families.

In 2024-2025, a total of 467 volunteers and professionals attended one of the following events:

OPEN FORUMS

The SPT hosted seven online open forums for volunteers and professionals across the children's hearings workforce. Attendees included panel members and professionals from SCRA, CHS, education, legal, mental health and advocacy sectors. A total of 303 individuals attended these events - representing a 64% increase in attendance compared to 2023-2024.

CHILDREN'S PANEL MEMBER LEARNING EVENTS

Increased collaboration with CHS Regional Partnership Co-ordinators enabled the SPT to engage directly with Panel Members. In 2024-2025, the SPT delivered information sessions at five learning events, reaching 100 Panel Members.

CUSTOM EVENTS

The SPT also delivered bespoke information sessions to professionals in the education and court sectors. In October 2024, 64 Headteachers and Virtual Headteachers from Aberdeenshire attended an online session to learn more about the Safeguarder role. Additionally, sessions were delivered to members of the judiciary in Forfar and Dundee, including Sheriffs, Sheriff Clerks and other senior staff.



SOCIAL WORK PARTNERS



A notable development in this year's partnership work has been the SPT's ability to offer tailored information sessions to social work teams. These sessions have been particularly well received by teams with high numbers of newly qualified children and families' social workers. This approach has helped foster stronger relationships with social work partners and has enhanced the flow of feedback and information for mutual benefit.

PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

The SPT continues to work closely with CHS, particularly through regular engagement with CHS Regional Partnership Co-ordinators. This collaboration is increasingly important as preparations continue for the implementation of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024.

Through sustained efforts, SPT colleagues have remained informed of both local and national developments. This has significantly raised the profile of the SPT, strengthened its role in supporting families and Safeguarders and extended its reach. As a result, collaboration with CHS and SCRA has deepened and communication with partners has improved. This has led to valuable developmental feedback and numerous accounts of the positive impact Safeguarders are having on children, their families and overall outcomes.

"I feel so supported by everyone at the Safeguarders Panel Team."

Safeguarder



Safeguarder profile

As of April 2025, there were 129 active Safeguarders appointed to the national Panel. This figure represents the lower end of historical panel numbers and reflects a relatively high number of resignations (17) during the 2024-2025 period. Additionally, one Safeguarder was not reappointed to the Panel.

Understanding the reasons why Safeguarders choose to leave the role is an important aspect of service development. The reasons provided for resignation during this period were varied, with some individuals citing more than one factor:

PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7

LACK OF TIME

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7

HEALTH REASONS

- 1
- 2

FEES

- 1

RETIREMENT

- 1

FOLLOWING THE OUTCOME OF A COMPLAINT

- 1

NOT SPECIFIED

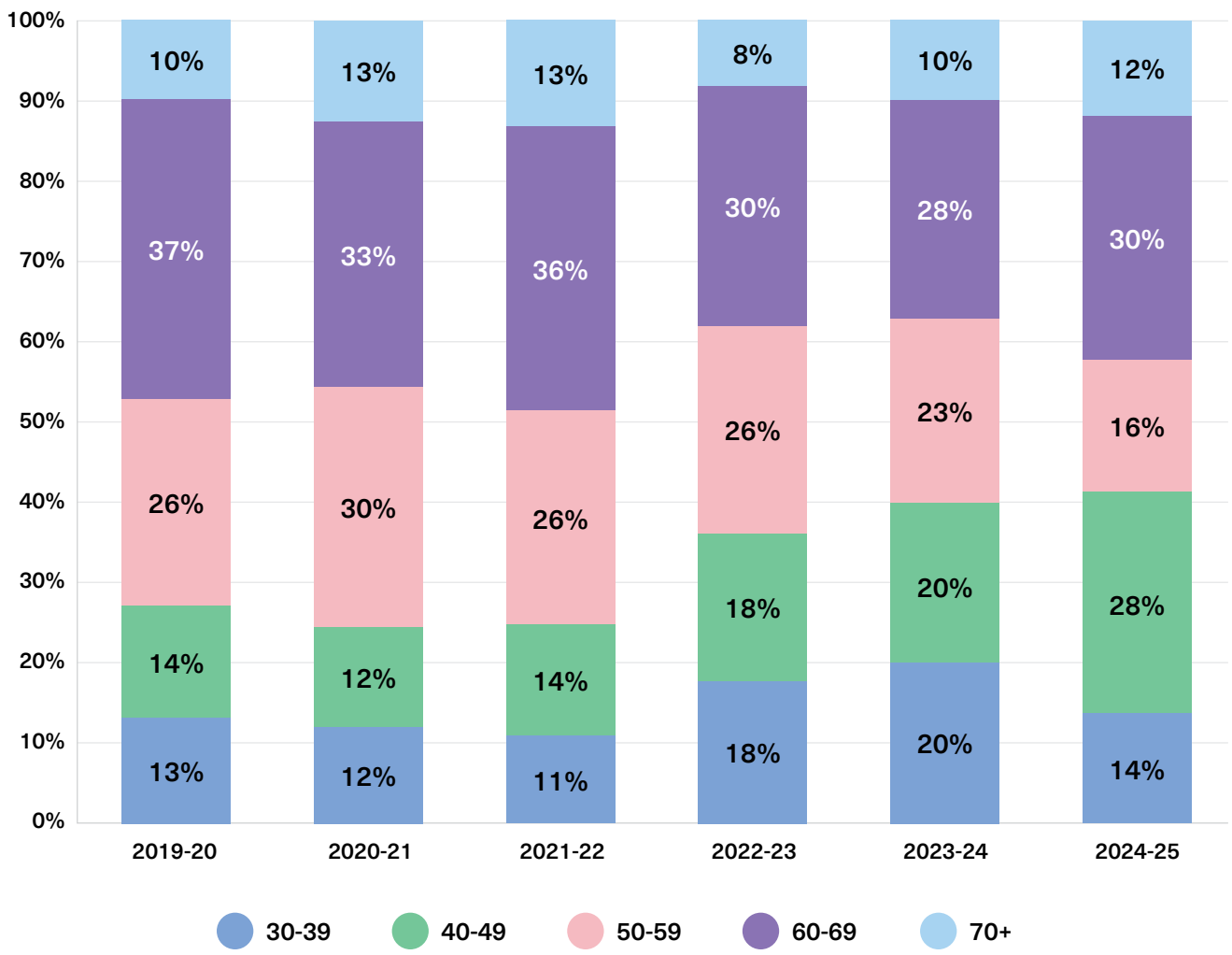
- 1

Each Safeguarder is offered the opportunity to participate in an exit interview with one of our Service Managers. These interviews provide valuable insights into their experiences of the role and of the support provided by the SPT. The feedback gathered informs future recruitment and retention strategies.

The most recent round of Safeguarder recruitment took place in 2023. In response to the overall reduction in panel numbers and changing demand - particularly in the east and north of Scotland - a further recruitment campaign is underway for 2025. This initiative also forms part of the SPT's preparations for the ongoing implementation of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024.

The upcoming recruitment drive will support the ongoing objective of developing a diverse panel in terms of age, employment background and life experience. The Safeguarder profile does continue to gradually evolve over time. This is most noticeable in an increase in the proportion of Safeguarders in the 40-49 age bracket and associated decreases in those in the 50-59 and 60-69 brackets.

AGE PROFILE OF SAFEGUARDERS OVER TIME





Feedback and complaints

Receiving feedback about Safeguarders from children, families and others involved in the Children's Hearings System is essential to ensuring continuous improvement in Safeguarder practice. Positive feedback reinforces and supports good practice, while concerns and complaints provide opportunities for learning and development.

A QR code is included on our Safeguarder information leaflets linking directly to our website where individuals can submit feedback on Safeguarder practice. In some cases we request feedback from children's hearing participants with the agreement of the Safeguarder involved. We continue to build strong relationships with partners to maximise opportunities for both positive and constructive feedback. All feedback received is recorded in the individual Safeguarder's file and is used to support practice

development and assess performance against the Practice Standards. Feedback is shared with the Safeguarder during individual support sessions.

Concerns and complaints are managed in accordance with our Complaints Policy. We aim to resolve concerns at the earliest possible stage that is appropriate. The policy ensures that both the complainant and the Safeguarder are engaged in the process and that escalation to a formal investigation only occurs when necessary.

In 2024-2025, positive or developmental feedback regarding Safeguarders was received on 19 separate occasions. Sixteen pieces of feedback were classified as positive and three as developmental. This volume of feedback is consistent with the previous two years, during which we received 32 and 18 pieces of feedback respectively.

There was a notable decrease in the number of complaints received this year. Twelve complaints were recorded, compared to higher figures in previous years.

YEAR	COMPLAINTS RECEIVED
2019-2020	27
2020-2021	13
2021-2022	23
2022-2023	21
2023-2024	20
2024-2025	12

It is unclear why the number of complaints decreased this year. However, recent months suggest a return to more typical levels. We continue to engage with partners and remain open to understanding the factors that may have contributed to this decline in complaints.

Of the 13 complaints managed during 2024-2025 (including one carried over from the previous year), 12 were concluded within the reporting period. In five cases we were unable to proceed due to insufficient information - often because the complainant did not maintain contact. Of the remaining seven complaints:

- **Five were resolved at the early resolution stage.**
- **One was concluded following an investigation.**
- **One was concluded following an investigation and review process.**

Outcomes for the seven concluded complaints were as follows:

- **Two were upheld.**
- **Three were partially upheld.**
- **Two were not upheld.**

Learning from each complaint is shared with the relevant Safeguarder and a plan is developed to monitor and support improvement.

The chart below illustrates the sources of the 13 complaints managed during the year, reflecting a typical distribution:

SOURCE	NO. OF COMPLAINTS
Parent	6
Legal	1
Social work	2
CHS	1
SCRA	1
Other	2

Following the conclusion of a complaint both the complainant and the Safeguarder are invited to provide feedback on the process. While we recognise that the complaints process can be challenging, we value all feedback received. This year, we received two responses - one from a complainant and one from a Safeguarder - both of which were positive about how the process was managed. This feedback is shared with the Scottish Government during quarterly contract meetings to ensure transparency and accountability.



Future plans

Children First Safeguarders Panel Team (SPT) will continue working with a group of Safeguarders to review the current fee structure. This has been a complex and lengthy process due to the intricacies of the relevant rules and guidance, as well as the significance of the outcome. Having completed the stage in which models were developed collaboratively by Safeguarders and the SPT, these proposals have now been submitted to the Scottish Government for consideration. Final decisions will be made by the Scottish Government taking into account factors such as cost implications and implementation feasibility.

Over the coming year the SPT will work with Safeguarders to develop guidance on how to claim fees and expenses. Once finalised this guidance will be submitted to the Scottish Government for approval. We look forward to the introduction of a revised fees structure upon the conclusion of this work.

In parallel, the SPT will undertake a recruitment campaign to ensure sufficient numbers of Safeguarders are available to meet anticipated demand across all geographical areas. Certain regions have experienced challenges in meeting demand and the implementation of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024, which will expand access to the Children's Hearings System for 16 and 17-year-olds, is expected to increase the need for Safeguarders. Newly appointed Safeguarders are expected to begin in post by April 2026 supporting our ability to meet these evolving requirements.

In the coming months the SPT also plans to consult with Safeguarders to gain a deeper understanding of the key issues currently shaping their perspectives. We are particularly interested in their views on learning and development priorities, including the value of in-person training and the topics that are most relevant and impactful for practice. Given the limited time available to Safeguarders and the need to manage resources effectively, this consultation will help ensure that our learning and development programme is both targeted and meaningful.

"I'm grateful to be a Safeguarder because it gives me the opportunity to make a real and lasting difference in a child's life during some of their most vulnerable moments. It's a privilege to be trusted with such a responsibility, to step into their world and focus entirely on what is truly best for the child."



www.childrenfirst.org.uk/safeguards



**The Scottish
Government**

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

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