

17 September 2024

Safeguarding Annual Report 2023 2024

Executive Summary

This report covers Forestry England, Forest Services, Commissioners Office and Forest Research for the period 1st April 2023 to 30th June 2024.

The Technical Safeguarding Advisor has been appointed as of the end of November 2023. We can see through the presence of this new role, and initial engagement the advisor has been able to complete across specifically Forestry England, there is an increase in safeguarding enquires and reports from across all departments.

The Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) completed an audit of safeguarding for the Forestry Commission with the final report being made available March 2024. The organisation was provided overall with a moderate rating. The report was a fair reflection of the significant work that has been undertaken in recent years but also the areas where this can be strengthened. Actions have been agreed with GIAA to support continued improvement and these are ongoing as set out in this paper.

There have been seventeen safeguarding incidents logged and identified within this reporting period, with learning actions completed or in progress. None of the incidents were highly significant or revealing of fundamental failings within FC. Building on reports and other learning, we have further strengthened procedures with specific teams to ensure we can meet our moral and statutory duties and better support colleagues dealing with challenging situations. There have also been several small updates completed to the Safeguarding PPG and supporting guidance. We are also addressing constructive feedback from Ofsted arising from their recent inspection of our Employer Training Provider activities.

Further progress has been made in embedding safeguarding principles across the Forestry Commission over the last 18 months, although it is recognised there is more to do in embedding policies, practices and specifically heightening awareness of safeguarding reporting. Reviewing reports shows that there are occasions when staff record safeguarding incidents under other headings, more commonly, personal safety and security. Further guidance has been released via targeted comms through the Health and Safety Technical Training Team and added to the Roots safeguarding page. By using the recent internal audit, we have been able to develop a clear delivery plan spanning the next 18 months with a supported communications plan. Heightening awareness of safeguarding reporting, and specifically the nature of what needs to be reported, will lead to a more accurate reporting and a fuller picture being available for management review.

The mandatory and level 2 child and adult safeguarding training courses have had increasing uptake across the organisation, by both staff and volunteers, and we continue to build towards having a full picture of required levels of completion. Over this reporting period a total of 502 training engagements have been completed for these courses. It has been challenging identifying a provider who can offer suitable senior manager training to cover the subject of both children and adults. A

possible supplier has now been identified with initial development work taking place this Autumn. The provision of existing training continues to be reviewed to maintain its relevance and effectiveness to a variety of staff groups, such as volunteers and teams outreaching with community groups.

There have been several challenges with the implementation of enhanced DBS checks and renewals for staff, over this reporting period, despite an umbrella organisation being brought into complete these alongside volunteer checks. This is currently being looked at as part of the new recruitment system for staff.

Introduction / Context

The Safeguarding Policy sets out how safeguarding of children, young people and adults at risk of harm or abuse will be achieved across the Forestry Commission and is supported by operational guidance.

Safeguarding means protecting a person's right to live in safety, free from abuse and neglect. All staff within the Forestry Commission have a duty of care to safeguard people within their teams, volunteers, contractors, agency staff and visitors to the nation's forests, with extra care taken to protect those who are least able to protect themselves.

Forestry Commission continues to fulfil our legal and moral duties to protect children and adults, through applying PPG 16 - Safeguarding in conjunction with legal requirements, this is further supported with guidance and toolkits for managers.

- The Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) is responsible for providing the overarching direction in safeguarding for the Forestry Commission;
- The Senior Responsible Owner for safeguarding is responsible for ensuring that the Forestry Commission complies with its statutory duties;
- The safeguarding SRO will have oversight across Forestry England, Forest Services, Forest Research and will produce an annual review of the system and whether we have met our statutory requirements;
- All employees must follow the processes identified in the escalation flow diagrams for reporting;
- Training at the appropriate level must be renewed every three years as a minimum;
- For staff, volunteers, contractors & agency workers, ensure that the appropriate pre-engagement DBS checks are completed for the role they are to undertake;
- Staff and volunteers to notify their supervisor of any convictions which they may receive which may impact on their role;
- All staff, agency staff, contractors and volunteers in roles must have an appropriate level DBS check for their role. All roles identified to need a standard or enhanced check must be renewed every three years as a minimum;

- Require that third party/permissions individuals and organisations have the appropriate safeguarding procedures in place to enable them to deliver a safe and effective programme;
- Forestry Commission supports ex-offenders to take up employment and volunteer roles across the Forestry Commission. Convictions will be reviewed against the specific role with the support of HR.
- Ensure personal details are held securely in line with GDPR.

Taking forward the Safeguarding Policy during the year

Forestry England, Forest Services, Forest Research and Commissioners Office

The Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) completed an audit of safeguarding for the Forestry Commission with the final report being made available March 2024. The organisation was provided overall with a moderate rating *“Some improvements are required to enhance the adequacy and effectiveness of the framework of governance, risk management and control.”* The report was a fair reflection of the significant work that has been undertaken in recent years but also the areas where this can be strengthened. Actions have been agreed with the GIAA to support continued improvement, and an implementation plan set out.

Key actions agreed with GIAA, and progress to date:

No.	Actions from GIAA report	Work implemented to date by Forestry Commission
1	Membership of the Forestry Commission Safeguarding Working Group is reviewed to ensure adequate representation from across the Forestry Commission and its agencies.	Completed with the first meeting held on 9 th July 2024.
2	To increase staff awareness that safeguarding is relevant to all, there should be more promotion across the Forestry Commission and its agencies of safeguarding responsibilities through posters, articles etc. including case studies/real life examples showing what would be a safeguarding concern and what would not.	A communications plan has been initiated with representatives across the FC being consulted. Advisor has written a blog, published on roots 22 nd July 2024, and attended various meetings to present information about safeguarding. This presentation is also being utilised by Forest Services.
3	All Districts, Areas and teams should identify a Safeguarding Champion at an appropriate level to provide daily safeguarding guidance and support for staff and support the Safeguarding Leads’ oversight role. Ideally, details of these	Most regions and departments have been able to identify a champion, all have a Safeguarding Lead, with the list linked on PPG 16 page being updated. The function to add the role to staff profiles has also

	should be publicised and easily accessible, as well as being included in the Roots staff profile.	been updated with most participants selecting this. An additional page has been created and linked on PPG 16 page which offers people a fast way to identify their Safeguarding Lead or Champion.
4	A discussion forum, MS Teams group, or similar should be established in line with the PPG requirements, to enable sharing of non-confidential information and approaches to increasing awareness.	The National Safeguarding Network channel has been established to support Safeguarding Leads and Champions in their roles.
5	Staff and volunteer roles that need level 2 training and enhanced security checks should be established for each District/Area and used to monitor compliance with training requirements	A working solution to enable this is in progress with support from HR and Technical Training. There is a list of identified job roles which are available and iTrent does record completed training.
6	Information on the organisations, local councils etc. to whom safeguarding issues should be reported should be made easily available to staff who may have a safeguarding concern raised with them.	This has been shared via recent communications releases and added to the PPG 16 roots page. PPG 16 and escalation charts to be updated with the links.

There has been a significant process to implement required Disclosure Barring Service (DBS) Checks for existing staff and volunteers, as required based on individual's role within Forestry Commission. An established contract continues to enable staff enhanced DBS checks to be completed more efficiently. There have been some challenges, however, in managers processing these checks for their staff but anticipate further improvements as Forestry England moves to the new HR recruitment system, which will enable checks to be completed for both basic and enhanced before new employees start and at point of renewal (every three years). Volunteer checks continue to run smoothly via Secure by Integrity.

Recruitment of a Technical Safeguarding Advisor for Forestry England has been completed, in post from the end of November 2023. This new permanent post was secured as part of the Forestry England 2023/24 business plan. The role supports the National Safeguarding Leads, to further embed safeguarding across Forestry England and support Forest Services and Forest Research as appropriate.

A review of the training by the Safeguarding Technical Advisor is ongoing in relation to all levels of the training. This has highlighted that some areas of the mandatory e-learning could be improved upon along with making it more specific to the Forestry Commission's own procedures. Monitoring uptake of the all-staff mandatory training is now produced internally having moved the mandatory

training from the Civil Service-Learning site to the Forestry eLearning platform, in line with the volunteer training. Moving away from Civil Service Learning enables us to capture training data and target actions to ensure compliance with PPG16. The basic safeguarding training that is mandatory for all staff requires refreshing once every 3 years, so taking April 2023 as baseline, we should see most staff being 'in date' with this mandatory requirement by March 2026. The data available from Forestry eLearning shows increasing completion of all staff mandatory safeguarding training and continued focus across all parts of FC to lift completion rates.

The level two training provided by KNW continues to have a good uptake. There has been 68 public facing staff and volunteers participating in the training over this reporting period. Predominantly this is now undertaken virtually for relevant staff and volunteers, although there is one locality that engages face to face training for its volunteers and staff given the volume of participants. This training meets several needs and KNW has been supportive of further tailoring this to Forestry Commission, such as using PPG 16 and case studies. There is feedback that suggests there could be areas to strengthen, however, this may be influenced by the changes to mandatory training, so it is intended that this continues to operate in its current design.

Another training provider, Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), has been identified and engaged to offer designated safeguarding lead (DSL) training planned 28th - 30th October 2024 for National Safeguarding Leads and the Technical Advisor. This is training that Ofsted has also stated is necessary during their inspection of the apprentice programme. This will also aid in developing the senior management training, which will be a bespoke piece of work undertaken with SCIE and aiming for roll out early 2025.

A review of the PPG and accompanying Guidance is ongoing with updates planned by December 2024.

Forest Research - There has been progress made towards the priority areas identified in the Safeguarding policy at Forest Research (FR). Actions include communication to all staff and supporting general awareness around safeguarding. FR deliver training on policy at staff centre meetings on an annual basis.

Safeguarding Incidents

Incident's, concerns or near misses.

Forestry England, Forest Services, and Commissioners Office

The monitoring of Safeguarding incidents, concerns or near misses continues to be completed via EcoOnline (Airsweb). Work has been completed to ensure that the appropriate permissions are in place to enable confidential reporting of the incidents and appropriate investigation. These are now in place for each of Forestry England, Forest Services / Commissioners Office, and Forest Research.

The National Safeguarding Leads and Safeguarding Technical Advisor continue to work closely with district leads to raise awareness for reporting process, as well as dedicating part of the level 2 Safeguarding training to it, but we suspect some missed reporting, which we are working to rectify, via communications and training.

Forestry England

Over this reporting period there have been sixteen safeguarding concerns or near misses reported. One of those should have been logged as personal safety and security rather than safeguarding. Some incidents have been identified as safeguarding, which were incorrectly logged. Each case has been supported by the national safeguarding leads and/or the Safeguarding Technical Advisor, to review and where appropriate report to the relevant authorities and/or record and cascade lessons learned. A summary of these incidents can be found in Appendix 1.

Forest Research, Forest Services and Commissioners Office

One safeguarding incident was reported during this period.

Performance Measures

Training

The following section outlines the number of employees of the Forestry Commission and volunteers within Forestry England who have completed relevant training in Safeguarding.

Mandatory Safeguarding Training completions

Department	Completions 1/4/23 to 30/6/24	Staff headcount recorded as 'in date'	Total Headcount
Forestry England	259	775	1271
Forest Services (including Commissioners Office)	119	360	644
Forest Research	21	35*	382
Volunteers	35	58*	Not mandatory for all - role related.

*Estimate from live accounts, as there are no user imports for these groups, we cannot guarantee all live accounts relate to active staff at this time.

Level 2 Safeguarding Training Employees and Volunteers

Department	Total training completions 1/4/23 to 30/6/24
Forestry England	61
Forest Services (including Commissioners Office)	7
Forest Research	0

As per Action 5 of GIAA report, we are working on a solution to be able to track compliance with the requirement for Level 2 training.

Senior Managers Training

In development - scheduled for launch early 2025.

Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) Training

Scheduled for Autumn 2024

Disclosures completed (Apr23 to Jun24)

This section outlines the number of Disclosure Barring Service (DBS) checks which have been completed across Forestry Commission over this reporting period. This includes, new employees, changes in role and renewals.

Enhanced DBS checks are now identified for individuals using a comprehensive list of job roles and through the PPG 16 requirements. Having defined job roles that require enhanced DBS, future reporting will be able to track rates of compliance both for new starters and renewals for existing staff.

Business Area				
	Basic	None	Standard	Enhanced (with or without barred list)
Forestry England	176	1	5	138
Forestry England - Volunteer's	22	-	0	35
Forest Services	169	0	0	0
Forest Research	121	0	0	0
Commissioners Office	8	0	0	0
TOTAL	496	1	5	173

Priorities for the Year Ahead

Forestry England, Forest Services & Commissioners Office

- Build on the momentum of the reestablishment of the Forestry Commission Safeguarding Working Group , to show strong leadership for this important subject area.
- Implementation of the communication plan increase staff awareness that safeguarding is relevant to all.

- Promote further uptake of mandatory training, especially within existing staff, across all parts of FC.
- Complete establishment of data capture and report generation to enable compliance tracking for required training and DBS.
- Build a strong team of Safeguarding leads and champions across all business units, ensuring that all members have the support required to complete their role effectively and with confidence.
- Information on the organisations, local councils etc. to whom safeguarding issues should be reported should be made easily available to staff who may have a safeguarding concern raised with them.
- Review of current training, mandatory e-learning and level two as well as developing and establishing designated safeguarding lead training and senior leadership training.

Forest Research

FR will continue to communicate the safeguarding policy via newsletters on the Internet and at staff centre meetings. Monitoring of the Airsweb reporting system for any safeguarding incidences will be carried out and ensuring all safeguarding incidences are investigated as per policy. The delivery of safeguarding awareness remains a key priority at FR, with the requirement that all staff are provided with the appropriate level of awareness, according to their role and responsibilities. The delivery of Safeguarding awareness will ensure that every member of staff is aware of their safeguarding responsibilities, recognises abuse and knows what to do about it, as the minimum requirement.

Conclusion

Good progress continues to be made to strengthen and embed safeguarding policy and practice in Forestry Commission. Growing awareness of safeguarding across staff and volunteers is leading to increased reporting, with further communications required to ensure everyone is aware of how safeguarding is relevant to their role.

While we have only relatively recently been able to track completion rates of mandatory training, and completions are growing, completion rates need to increase. Executive Board members are asked to remind leadership teams of the requirement for new and existing staff to complete mandatory safeguarding training.

Mike Seddon

Chief Executive, Forestry England & FC SRO Safeguarding