

# Safeguarding in the Christian faith context before, during and post COVID-19

A research study commissioned by thirtyone: eight and undertaken by the University of Chester



# About us

## About Thirtyone:eight

Trusted for over 40 years, Thirtyone:eight is the UK's only award-winning independent Christian safeguarding charity which helps individuals, organisations, charities, faith and community groups to protect vulnerable people from abuse. Our vision is a world where every child and adult can feel, and be, safe, and to achieve this vision we work together with a network of thousands of organisations across the UK and overseas helping them to create safer places. We provide training, consultancy, DBS checks, a safeguarding helpline, and international safeguarding support to make sure everyone is equipped and empowered with the tools they need. We are leading experts in safeguarding, working with government to inform legislation and promoting high standards in safeguarding practice.

## School of Psychology at the University of Chester

We have a history of working in partnership with organisations to design research which enhances understanding and knowledge that can underpin evidence-based developments. Leading this research study is commensurate with our commitment to the community and to the safeguarding of children, young people and adults. We hope the findings from this study will enable the further development of safeguarding policy and procedure, as well as providing a foundation for organisations to work together to develop best practice. Additionally, we hope this will enhance understanding about the important but complex role of safeguarding leads. It is pleasing to see positive examples of good practice in the responses, and it is important that we continue to work together to address areas that the research identified as needing further consideration.



**Dr Lisa Oakley**



**Professor Moira Lafferty**

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# Foreword

COVID-19 has changed the world, possibly forever. On the one hand, it has brought incredible challenges, hardship and loss to life and livelihoods, whilst at the same time forcing people to adapt and find new and creative ways of working together and of staying connected. This is true in all areas of society. However, for Safeguarding, where the primary concern is with the care and protection of the most vulnerable people; children, young people, and adults at risk of harm, the effects of the pandemic have been especially apparent.

At thirtyone:eight, we know the crucial role that Safeguarding Leads play in creating safer places for all by making safeguarding happen. Often, these committed individuals are the unsung heroes within the life of churches and charities, and for over 40 years we've worked alongside them to equip, empower, and encourage them in their role.

A key objective for this research has been to give Safeguarding Leads an opportunity to share their experiences of working both before and during the pandemic. To continue to support them effectively in their role, we wanted to better understand the specific challenges they faced, and the impact the pandemic was having on the ground, and what this may mean for the future.

We have been so encouraged to discover so many examples of good safeguarding practice and a general sense that attitudes towards safeguarding within churches and charities are changing for the better. Alongside this, we're also pleased to see greater levels of collaboration with statutory agencies being reported, as well as an increased understanding by external agencies of the complexities of safeguarding in faith settings.

The specific challenges posed by COVID-19 are varied and complex, and likely to have an impact well beyond the lifting of restrictions. Most notable perhaps, is the pressing need to ensure the availability of appropriate support and care specifically for those who have safeguarding responsibilities. It is our hope that the learning from this research gives voice to the realities of those who have worked so hard during this difficult time to continue to safeguard vulnerable people from harm and abuse.

We are grateful to all who participated in the research and want to thank them for their time, honesty, and insightful contributions. Based on the findings, we hope that together with safeguarding leads and those who have a safeguarding responsibility at any level, that we can continue to effectively support them in their important role in creating safer places for everyone.

**Claudia Bell**

Head of Learning & Influence



# Executive Summary

To better understand the needs of Safeguarding Leads before, during and post the global COVID-19 pandemic, Thirtyone:eight commissioned Dr Lisa Oakley and Professor Moira Lafferty from the School of Psychology at the University of Chester to undertake a piece of research into the experiences of safeguarding leads in Christian faith contexts.

199 people in total participated in the research from across the UK. They held a range of safeguarding roles in a variety of different Christian denominational contexts.

A wide range of examples of good practice were reported throughout the research, the most common being collaboration and networking and the existing support in place for safeguarding leads. Participants also highlighted some of the challenges experienced including non-compliance or barriers to adhering to procedures and creating a safeguarding culture within their contexts.

In relation to the challenges posed by COVID-19 and the associated restrictions **69%** of participants stated that COVID-19 had impacted safeguarding in their organisation in some way, with **70%** reporting that it had impacted or changed the way that they conduct their safeguarding duties.

The findings from the research around the impact of COVID-19 have been grouped together into six key themes or learning areas which are expanded on in more detail in the following sections of the report. These are:

- Hidden people, hidden harm  
**During the pandemic, many people lost contact with trusted friends and family and ongoing connections of support.**
- Impact on mental health  
**The pandemic has had a huge impact on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of many and the effects are likely to be on going.**
- The challenge of blended provision and hybrid models of working  
**There has been a significant shift to creating opportunities for people to gather online as well as in person which is likely to continue.**
- Implications for policy, practice and process  
**Despite the restrictions, safeguarding leads have continued their work, with safeguarding arrangements needing to be reviewed as guidance has changed.**
- Impact on international working  
**The global pandemic has impacted international work especially where it requires travel, but also communicating with those on the ground in other countries.**
- Pastoral support needs and support for Safeguarding leads  
**There is a clear need for pastoral support to be made available for everyone as restrictions ease including for Safeguarding Leads.**

Overall, the findings demonstrate a commitment to safeguarding, the desire to create and establish good practice as well as highlighting some of challenges experienced by safeguarding leads who play an integral role within their organisations.

The specific challenges related to the pandemic require careful reflection and planning in order to ensure organisations are equipped to respond to and manage the recommencement of activities and interaction post lockdown restrictions and beyond.

# What did we find?

## Many examples of good practice.

A significant area of focus for the research was in providing an opportunity for Safeguarding Leads to share their experiences of working before and during the pandemic. In order to provide better support and guidance we wanted to hear about what was working well in addition to the challenges and barriers to implementing policy and procedures. We've separated the findings into two main sections: The first looks at the experiences of Safeguarding Leads before the pandemic (which are summarised in this section), and the second focuses on the experiences and challenges in relation to COVID-19 and the associated restrictions, which have been grouped together under six key themes in the following section of the report.

## Before the pandemic

### Key findings

#### **Safeguarding leads are committed, experienced and feel supported**

The research revealed that the average length of time that safeguarding leads had served for was six years four months and included one participant who had been in role up to 30 years. This represents extensive service in safeguarding roles.

Many safeguarding leads bring with them a wealth of experience to their safeguarding roles from backgrounds such as education, including in early years provision to university, nursing and other health-related roles, and roles within the charity or voluntary sector.

The majority of participants reported that they generally felt supported in their role and thought there was an understanding of safeguarding in their context and of their safeguarding role. 82% had access to support in their safeguarding role outside of their church or organisation.

#### **There are many examples of good working practices**

Participants recorded a wide range of examples of good practice the most prevalent being collaboration and networking. One element of good practice that was reported was the active role of safeguarding leads in promoting safeguarding messages. These included regular reminders of safeguarding and related processes. Some commented on the introduction of Safeguarding Sunday to promote safeguarding to the whole Church annually.

Examples of good practice that were reported included:

- The promotion of safeguarding as everyone's responsibility
- Evidence of the promotion of safeguarding leading to positive attitudes towards it
- Individuals were aware of the role of safeguarding leads
- Training as an integral element of their safeguarding practice
- Reviewing and editing of safeguarding policy to ensure it was relevant and current
- Safer recruitment including DBS checks

Examples of collaboration and networking in promoting and maintaining good safeguarding practice included: collaboration within denominations and organisations, between Christian groups, with external agencies like Thirtyone:eight, and with statutory agencies.

“ Since taking on the role I have seen a culture-shift in attitudes towards safeguarding particularly amongst staff members.”

## Challenges to safeguarding

In addition to good practice examples, participants provided information about the challenges to safeguarding they had experienced or observed. The most common challenges were:

- Lack of a safeguarding culture
- Non-compliance or barriers to adherence to requirements
- Problems working with statutory agencies
- Time pressure, workload and capacity

Participants noted that although there were some positive changes in terms of attitudes and understanding of safeguarding, some negative attitudes persisted and in some accounts the lack of a safeguarding culture remained. Some participants commented that safeguarding is still perceived negatively, and even seen as preventing the Church 'doing its work', however some suggested that rather than a resistance there was a lack of understanding about the importance of safeguarding and the reasons for policy and procedures and need to ensure that individuals saw safeguarding as more than DBS checks.

Some participants felt that the role of the church in the lives of individuals was not understood by statutory agencies, and this can lead to safeguarding leads being absent from key meetings. Specific issues raised included feeling that the voluntary sector and levels of experience by those in safeguarding roles was not understood. There were also several comments about lack of feedback or response by statutory agencies to concerns raised.

## Summary

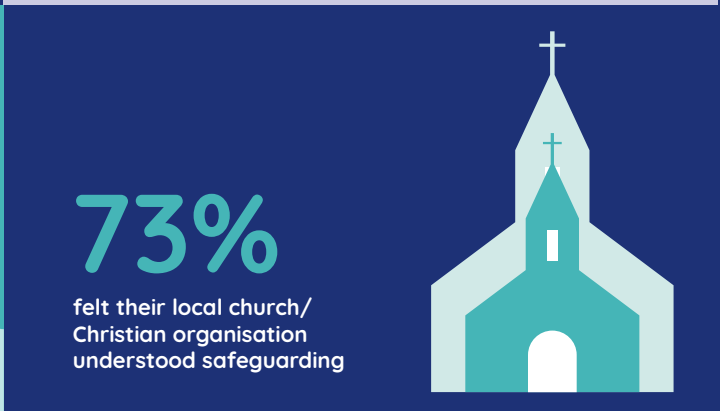
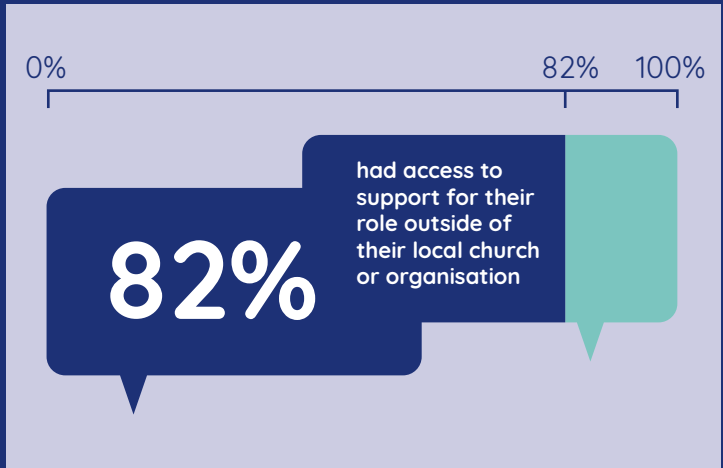
The research highlighted many examples of good practice in safeguarding and reflected the work of safeguarding leads to collaborate with others and to support safeguarding through policy, training, and processes, underpinned with effective systems. They also illustrated the promotion of safeguarding through communication, partnership working and messaging.

Participants also highlighted the challenges experienced including non-compliance or barriers to adhering to procedures and creating a safeguarding culture within their contexts. There were also a number of examples provided of complexities in working with external organisations.

**“ It’s only taken a decade but people finally accept that they need DBS checks and therefore respond to document etc requests in reasonable time.”**

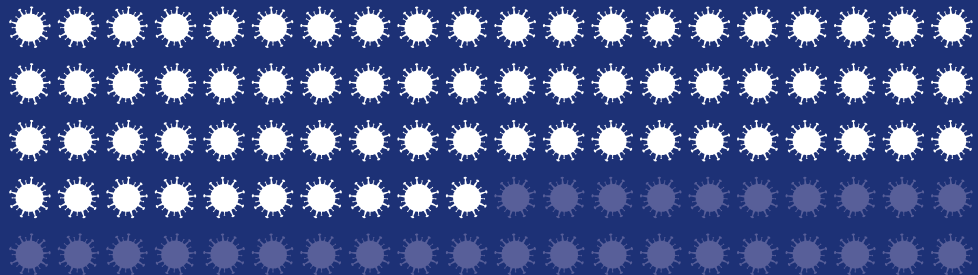
**“ Sometimes people don’t understand why safeguarding matters, I think it is less than it used to be but I think when it comes down to being on the ground it can be that people don’t stick to things.”**

# Key findings



**70%**

reported covid has impacted or changed the way they conduct their safeguarding duties





# The challenges of COVID-19

A significant focus for the research was in understanding the specific challenges posed to safeguarding by COVID-19 and the accompanying restrictions.

The research highlighted a number of areas that Safeguarding leads identified. These have been grouped together into six key themes or learning areas which are expanded on in more details in the following sections of the report. These are:

- Hidden people, hidden harm  
**During the pandemic, many people lost contact with trusted friends and family and ongoing connections of support.**
- Impact on mental health  
**The pandemic has had a huge impact on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of many and the effects are likely to be on going.**
- The challenge of blended provision and hybrid models of working  
**There has been a significant shift to creating opportunities for people to gather online as well as in person which is likely to continue.**
- Implications for policy, practice and process  
**Despite the restrictions, safeguarding leads have continued their work, with safeguarding arrangements needing to be reviewed as guidance has changed.**
- Impact on international working  
**The global pandemic has impacted international work especially where it requires travel, but also communicating with those on the ground in other countries.**
- Pastoral support needs and support for Safeguarding leads  
**There is a clear need for pastoral support to be made available for everyone as restrictions ease including for Safeguarding Leads.**

“ Covid social isolation has driven emotional and physical harm undercover – people may fall through the cracks.”

“ Work with survivors of abuse cannot have the face-to-face and human approach required in this sensitive safeguarding practice.”

## Hidden people, hidden harm

During the pandemic, many people lost contact with trusted friends and family and ongoing connections of support.

Safeguarding leads, as the main participants of the research reported on a range of issues that surfaced as a result of government-imposed restrictions including lockdown. There were concerns about the rise in domestic abuse cases, child abuse and neglect and the ability for children and adults to report issues and concerns.

### Key findings:

- Participants expressed concern about cases of abuse being hidden or that they would not be picked up by those who usually look out for the signs and indicators of abuse.
- There were fears about the impact of isolation upon older people and the worry that some people had become voiceless because of an inability to use or have access to social media and online platforms
- The lack of in person meetings was also shown to present challenges in terms of seeing individuals for whom a safeguarding agreement was in place
- Safeguarding leads were anticipating an increase in disclosures of abuse once groups began to meet in person again, giving rise to a need for training to prepare for this which would include an increased awareness of the range of issues or harm that may have been experienced by vulnerable groups during the pandemic.
- Participants also noted that some disclosures could take longer to emerge.

“Some vulnerable people have ‘lost their voice’, because they do not engage with social media.”

### Summary:

The implications of hidden people leading to hidden harm suggests that an intentional and proactive approach is required to identify individuals and families who continue to be out of contact, along with careful thought being given to any preparation needed to enable safeguarding leads to effectively respond to concerns or harm experienced.



## Impact on mental health

The pandemic has had a huge impact on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of many and the effects are likely to be ongoing.

Participants in this research reported this as a real cause for concern. The importance of recognising and being able to respond to mental health issues across all age ranges from young children to adults was seen as crucial for safeguarding leads

### Key findings:

- Bereavement and the long-term effects of the virus has left many people traumatised, including safeguarding leads.
- Preparation was seen as key in anticipating the rise in mental health issues.
- Safeguarding leads were keen to learn how to incorporate mental health considerations into their day-to-day practice linking this with training and knowledge on the subject.
- There was an awareness that it was not yet possible to predict how the pandemic had fully impacted mental health
- Some noted the challenges for members of faith communities who may struggle to process the pandemic alongside their theological perspective

### Summary:

There were some examples of strategies and good practice already being implemented, however, understanding mental health issues and identifying relevant support is a key issue for faith-based organisations seeking to work effectively post pandemic. Knowing where to go to for help and balancing the need to maintain a healthy workforce to support, listen and care for those in need will be an ongoing challenge.

**“ I think there will be a mental health legacy from this time.”**

**“ Reconciling what has happened with God’s plan.”**

**“ We do not yet know the fears, mental health challenges of people in our community – so we need flexibility.”**

## The challenge of blended provision and hybrid models of working

There has been a significant shift to creating opportunities for people to gather online as well as in person which is likely to continue.

While online provision has resulted in much more inclusion for those not able to gather in person during the pandemic, there was an acknowledgement by the participants that some form of blended provision would likely continue for some time, possibly beyond the pandemic and into the future, as a more inclusive and safe option. Therefore, the need to ensure that organisations can operate safely online was viewed to be crucial.

### Key findings:

- There was recognition of education, technical support and advice needed to operate safely online
- Practical issues, such as obtaining consent for children and young people to join meetings were noted.
- Some individuals who join churches or Christian organisations for online meetings may not have been part of physical communities prior to the pandemic and may have no intention of joining face to face in the future.
- Safeguarding everyone when operating a truly hybrid model creates challenges for identifying signs and indicators of abuse in a virtual space where the usual visuals and social interactions are missing

### Summary:

It was clear that blended provision and a hybrid model of church and ways of working within organisations was a significant change for all. For some, it felt overwhelming and perhaps double the work and therefore the need to equip those with such responsibilities with the tools to do this effectively is key.

“ Online meetings will continue when restrictions end so being more educated and equipped to ensure online safety will be necessary.”

“ Resourcing safe practice for digital and online delivery and support is important including advice about settings and which digital platforms to use.”

“ Not having face to face contact when you can assess body language, observe behaviour, facial expressions... or sense tension/nervousness in a person is a difficulty.”



## Implications for policy, practice and process

Despite the restrictions, safeguarding leads have continued their work, with safeguarding arrangements needing to be reviewed as guidance has changed.

Participants noted that many aspects of safeguarding would need to be re-established, updated, or developed post the lifting of restrictions. Some participants referred to past case reviews and the Independent Inquiry into child sexual abuse (IICSA) and stated the importance of learning messages from these and incorporating them into policy and practice going forward.

### Key findings:

- Some participants noted that case reviews and national reviews now necessitated changes which they would need to implement alongside changes in response to the pandemic.
- A number of participants commented on the need to update training which for many had been paused during the pandemic.
- There was recognition that safeguarding training, policy and practice may need to be developed to underpin effective practice in the current blended/hybrid context
- Developing policies and practice for blended/hybrid provision might require re-education
- The release of restrictions may create time pressures to reviewing and implementing arrangements that could be challenging to manage
- There was recognition that the future of safeguarding roles may be different and partnership working, and collaboration was needed for effective safeguarding moving forward.
- Fears were expressed about the staffing of activities due to how the pandemic has impacted upon the volunteer workforce

### Summary:

Many volunteers have been personally impacted by the pandemic; some are exhausted. This will have implications for individuals and their capacity or ability to volunteer on top of a potential staffing crisis and a lack of experienced and trained volunteers. It will be important to ensure that when activities can and do recommence, the wellbeing of volunteers and staff is fully taken into account as well as ensuring all policies, and procedures have been sufficiently updated.

**“ After all this, we’re going to need to re-new everything.”**

**“ Everyone is starting to focus on safeguarding again, so reminding people of policies and procedures to reduce risk and stay safe is important.”**

**“ I think there will be fewer volunteers willing to run or assist in running activities, which will put a strain on those running the activities who then may miss safeguarding issues.”**

## Impact on international working

The global pandemic has impacted international work especially where it requires travel, but also communicating with those on the ground in other countries.

In the context of organisations that work internationally, there were concerns raised about safeguarding issues and harm that may be occurring overseas but that was not able to be identified. Others commented on the impact that the pandemic was having on poverty and vulnerable individuals overseas and an inability to offer support or minimise risk. There was uncertainty about when international work would recommence but there was agreement that this was dependent on restrictions easing and government directives.

### Key findings:

- Not being able to travel has led to a void of not knowing what is happening on the ground overseas.
- Communication with overseas partners has been impacted.
- Whilst online communication was being used, there were some challenges with this.
- Limited communication has created situations where risks could not be effectively identified.
- Financial giving and fund raising to support international work or indigenous organisations has been impacted by the pandemic.

### Summary:

Participants agreed that recommencing work overseas was dependent upon when it will be deemed safe to travel along with any government directives in the UK and overseas. When international work recommences, there will be a need for safeguarding to be reviewed with enhanced awareness of context specific challenges. Training for those working in the international context was high on the agenda alongside the need for resources to support safeguarding in international work.

**“Travel beyond boundaries has been forbidden, the only way around is by computer link, and this is not the same.”**

**“It has created more issues with poverty and accessing support and vulnerable groups may be more at risk.”**

**“Our teams working in Malawi and Romania have not been able to travel, so cannot get accurate information about how the children we support in those countries are managing.”**



## Pastoral support needs and support for Safeguarding Leads

There is a clear need for pastoral support to be made available for everyone as restrictions ease including for Safeguarding Leads.

The need to provide pastoral and safeguarding support to individuals including for those who hold safeguarding responsibilities, was seen as a key priority for organisations as restrictions ease and the full impact of the pandemic becomes more visible.

### Key findings:

- The level of care needed may necessitate working together as many pastoral workers and safeguarding leads may also have been impacted by the pandemic personally or by increased workloads.
- The workload of those in safeguarding roles is likely to be significant given the rise in disclosures as well as the need to evaluate and develop policy and practice as activities re-open.
- It is essential that the wellbeing of safeguarding leads is considered by all organisations.

The answers to the questions about the challenges for safeguarding moving forward demonstrated a great deal of reflective thinking by the participants. Some of the issues raised directly related to safeguarding but others spoke to a variety of issues resulting from the pandemic. It was recognised that many in Christian communities may need support and that this should not exclude the wellbeing of staff, pastoral workers and safeguarding leads themselves.

**“Who is safeguarding the safeguarding leads as they come back to what may well be an ever-increasing workload?”**

**“Coping with needs especially related to welfare...identifying levels of support. Supporting families who have experienced safeguarding issues during lockdown.”**

**“We are looking at increasing pastoral support for a wide range of people when in person work is feasible again.”**

## Summary and conclusions

The findings of the research highlighted some important challenges being experienced by safeguarding leads who play an integral role within their organisations.

Participants reported on a range of issues that surfaced as a result of government-imposed restrictions, and while online provision has resulted in much more inclusion for those not able to gather in person during the pandemic, hybrid/blended provision is likely to continue for some time and carries with it its own set of safeguarding risks and challenges. Alongside this is the fact that many people have become 'unseen' or 'voiceless' because of an inability to use or access social media and online platforms.

Although there are some examples of strategies and good practice already being implemented, there is a need for many aspects of safeguarding to be re-established, updated, or developed post the lifting of restrictions. A key part of this will be knowing where to go to for help and balancing the need to maintain a healthy workforce to support, listen and care for those in need.

Some of the key conclusions from the research include:

- The need for organisations to adopt an intentional and proactive approach to identify individuals and families who continue to be out of contact post pandemic
- The need to give careful thought to how to effectively respond to concerns or harm experienced as it is disclosed.
- The need to understand mental health issues across all age ranges and to identify relevant support as a core component in working effectively post pandemic
- The need to ensure that organisations can operate safely online is crucial, and that those with such responsibilities are equipped with the tools to do this effectively.
- When activities can and do recommence, there is a need for the wellbeing of volunteers and staff to be fully taken into account as well as ensuring all policies, and procedures have been sufficiently updated.
- The need to provide pastoral and safeguarding support to individuals including for those who hold safeguarding responsibilities, as restrictions ease.

The specific challenges related to the pandemic require continued careful reflection and planning in order to ensure organisations are equipped to respond to and manage the recommencement of activities and interaction post lockdown restrictions and beyond.



# Appendix 1.

## Methodology

### Method

Due to the absence of empirical research in this area to date, the study employed a questionnaire built on **Online surveys** to explore the experiences of those holding safeguarding roles in Christian faith organisations in the UK. The inclusion criteria set out that participants had to hold a current safeguarding role in a Christian organisation in the UK.

The questionnaire was constructed to allow an exploration of roles held, geographical location, prior experience relevant to the role and how supported individuals felt in their roles. The survey questions also asked participants to comment on examples of good practice, challenges to safeguarding and to reflect on any training undertaken during the pandemic. A further section of the survey asked participants to comment specifically about the impact of the pandemic on safeguarding and their role and challenges regarding safeguarding in the Christian context post COVID-19.

Participants were recruited through an invitation sent out to all members of thirtyone:eight and through adverts on social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter. The survey was open from 9 January to 1 March 2021.

### Ethics

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the School of Psychology ethics committee at the University of Chester in August 2020. Ethical issues were carefully considered, and informed consent was obtained through providing an information sheet at the start of the survey. Participants were asked to indicate that they had read and understood the information sheet and that they consented to take part in the research. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to confirm if they were happy for their data and any anonymous quotes to be included. All data, where consent has been provided, has been anonymised prior to analysis to protect participants identity. Contact details for sources of support, including the thirtyone:eight safeguarding helpline were provided to participants at the end of the survey.

### Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to report findings on the closed questions. Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis was employed on the open text data to identify key messages and themes in respondents' answers. The data was coded on **NVivo 12**, which is a qualitative data management system.

### Interpreting the findings and data

It is important to note that not all participants answered every question. Therefore, any percentages reported in a descriptions, tables or visuals are out of the total number of participants who answered each question, not the overall sample.

Call us **0303 003 1111**  
email us **info@thirtyoneeight.org**  
or visit **thirtyoneeight.org**  
follow us **@thirtyoneeight**

PO Box 133, Swanley, Kent, BR8 7UQ

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