
Safer Recruitment for Small NGOs

What you can realistically do — and why it matters more than you might think

Safer recruitment is one of the most important protective layers any organisation working with children can put in place. It is also one of the areas where small NGOs most often feel overwhelmed. With limited HR capacity, stretched budgets, and high staff turnover, robust recruitment can feel like a luxury reserved for larger organisations with dedicated HR teams.

It is not. What safer recruitment needs — more than resources — is consistency. And consistency is achievable for organisations of any size.

ClearPath Safeguarding reviews safer recruitment practice as one of eight safeguarding domains — drawing on Keeping Children Safe (KCS), ITFCP, and CIS standards. This article distils the most important elements for small organisations that want to do this well without being overwhelmed.

What safer recruitment actually means

Safer recruitment is the practice of making it harder for people who wish to harm children to gain access to them through your organisation. It is not about assuming that every applicant is a risk. It is about creating a process that deters unsuitable candidates, identifies concerns before harm occurs, and creates a documented record demonstrating that your organisation took its duty of care seriously.

The core elements are more achievable than many organisations realise — and each one adds a meaningful layer of protection.

1. Be clear about what the role involves — before you advertise

Every role with direct or unsupervised contact with children should have a written description that honestly describes the nature and extent of that contact. This matters in two directions: it allows well-suited candidates to recognise themselves in the role, and it makes it harder for unsuitable candidates to claim later that they did not understand what the role entailed.

Your job description should include an explicit statement that the role is subject to safeguarding requirements, background checks, and references — and that your organisation is committed to

child protection. Organisations that embed this language consistently find it shapes the candidate pool before the interview stage.

2. Ask the right questions at interview

A safer recruitment interview integrates safeguarding awareness into the whole conversation — not just a single question at the end.

Every interview for a child-facing role should explore: how the candidate thinks about professional boundaries, how they would handle a situation where a child was distressed, what they would do if they observed a colleague behaving in a way that concerned them, and whether they have ever been the subject of a safeguarding concern or allegation.

That last question is often avoided because it feels confrontational. It should not be. It is not an accusation — it is an opportunity to understand the candidate's history and how they have responded to difficulty. Candidates with nothing to hide will answer it directly. The response itself is as informative as the content.

Staff who conduct interviews for child-facing roles should be trained to ask and explore safeguarding questions confidently. A one-hour briefing on safer recruitment interviewing is a small investment with a significant protective return.

3. Take references seriously

Reference-taking is one of the most consistently neglected elements of safer recruitment — and one of the most valuable when done properly.

A written reference from someone a candidate has chosen is unlikely to raise concerns. The value of a reference call — particularly with the most recent direct supervisor — lies in what you ask and how you listen. Key questions: Did this person work with children? Were any concerns ever raised about their behaviour? Would you recommend them for a role involving direct, unsupervised access to children — without hesitation?

Pay attention to the pause before the answer. Pay attention to what is said carefully. Reference-givers are often constrained in what they can say directly, but their language frequently signals more than the words themselves. Always document the call — including the questions you asked and the substance of the responses.

4. Know what background checks are available and use them consistently

Many Southeast Asian contexts do not have background check systems equivalent to those in the UK or Australia. This is a real constraint — not an excuse for doing nothing.

Know what is available in your country context and apply it consistently for all roles involving direct, unsupervised access to children. For international staff, request documentation from their home country or previous countries of employment. Ask directly, in writing, about any past safeguarding concerns or disciplinary proceedings. Document your process.

For organisations with limited HR capacity, the principle is simple: apply the most rigorous checks you can access consistently to all roles involving direct, unsupervised contact with children. Partial implementation on the highest-risk roles is better than a complex system that collapses under operational pressure.

5. Apply the same standards to volunteers and short-term workers

Many safeguarding incidents in NGO and faith-based settings involve not paid staff but volunteers — including short-term mission volunteers, visiting teams, and programme helpers. These individuals often receive less scrutiny than paid staff, despite having equivalent or greater access to children in informal settings.

Your safer recruitment standards should apply to everyone with direct, unsupervised access to children, regardless of employment status, remuneration, or the duration of their role. The minimum — reference, safeguarding declaration, induction briefing, code of conduct — should apply universally.

6. Induction and supervision are part of safer recruitment

Safer recruitment does not end on the first day. Induction should include safeguarding training and clear communication of expected conduct: what is and is not acceptable in terms of physical contact, one-to-one time, online communication, gifts, and out-of-hours contact with children.

Ongoing supervision is itself a safeguarding tool. Regular contact between staff and their managers creates opportunities to identify concerns early — about a child, about a colleague, about an emerging dynamic — before they escalate.

A realistic starting point

If your organisation currently has no consistent safer recruitment process for child-facing roles, begin here:

- Create a one-page safer recruitment checklist that all hiring managers use for every relevant role — no exceptions.
- Add a safeguarding statement to all job descriptions for child-facing roles.
- Require at least one reference call for all roles involving direct contact with children.

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- Add two safeguarding-specific questions to every interview for a child-facing role.
 - Require all staff and volunteers in child-facing roles to sign a code of conduct at induction.
 - Document what you did — and file it with the recruitment record.

This is not a perfect system. It is a significantly safer one than having no system at all — and it is achievable for any small NGO, regardless of HR capacity.

Children are not safer because your organisation has good values. They are safer because your organisation has good practices, applied consistently, to everyone who works with them.

ClearPath Safeguarding reviews safer recruitment as one of eight interconnected domains. We assess what checks are in place, how consistently they are applied, and how recruitment standards translate into culture and practice once staff are onboard.

→ [Contact us to discuss a review for your organisation](https://clearpathsafeguarding.com/contact) → clearpathsafeguarding.com/contact