



Safeguarding Policy

POL004-Safeguarding_Policy-2025-03-19

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HQAI is constantly developing and improving its tools and procedures. Depending on feedback and learning from experience, these may change. Please make sure you're using the latest version.

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Introduction

I. The Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative

HQAI's objective is to improve the Quality and Accountability of organisations working with vulnerable and at-risk populations through the provision and promotion of meaningful and adapted independent quality assurance. Its services are intended to build capacity in the sector and provide consistent, measurable data in the delivery of quality action, thus improving principled, accountable, efficient and equitable provision of aid to vulnerable and at-risk populations.

To all its stakeholders, HQAI is an accountable, open and trustworthy partner which applies the internationally recognised ground rules of auditing. These include competence and due care, confidentiality, evidence-based and risk-based approach, fair presentation, impartiality, independence, integrity, openness, and responsiveness to complaints and appeals. Our policies, procedures and tools for independent quality assurance follow relevant ISO standards requirements. HQAI's CHS certification scheme is accredited against ISO/IEC 17065:2012.

HQAI has developed robust tools to measure efficiently where an organisation stands in relation to the [Core Humanitarian Standard \(CHS\) on Quality and Accountability](#). Tools related to other standards may be developed in the future.

HQAI is committed to the nine fundamental principles of the CHS and implements them as far as they are applicable to its own activities.

These are:

- transparency and participation in decision-making
- delivery of timely services that respond to the needs of users
- delivery of services that are accessible to local and national actors
- avoidance of negative impacts of our work on people and the environment
- provision of safe and accessible complaint mechanisms
- delivery of services that are coordinated with, and complementary to, the work of partners and stakeholders
- continual adaptation and improvement of services based on feedback and learning
- effective management of staff, including non-discrimination
- responsible and ethical use of resources

II. Scope

HQAI is committed to improving standards, practice and culture to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. This Safeguarding Policy covers prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH) as well as child safeguarding and is an opportunity for HQAI to establish a strong framework that can drive change and support good practice across the organisation.

Governing body members, staff, auditors, volunteers, representatives, contractors and partners are expected to comply with the principles specified in this policy.

III. References

The following referenced documents can usefully complement this document. For dated references, only the edition cited applies. For undated references, the latest edition of the referenced document (including any amendments) applies.

HQAI POL001 - Code of Conduct

HQAI POL048 and PRO048 - Complaint Mechanism

HQAI POL014 and PRO014 - HR Policy and Procedure

HQAI GUI106 - Inclusive Auditing Guidelines

ADM072 - Complaint Fact-Finding and Investigation Form

ADM074 - Internal Grievance Fact-Finding and Investigation Form

IV. Definitions

Unless specified below and in the text, for the purposes of this document, the terms and definitions provided in the CHS and POL114-Quality Assurance policy apply.

Child: Anyone under the age of 18, regardless of local definitions of adulthood.

Safeguarding: Actions, policies and procedures that create and maintain protective environments to protect people from exploitation, harm and abuse of all kinds. Child safeguarding is a commitment to be a safe organisation for children, using preventative actions to ensure that all children are protected from deliberate or unintentional acts that lead to the risk of or actual harm.

Sexual exploitation: Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from the sexual exploitation of another¹.

Sexual abuse: The actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions¹.

Sexual harassment: Any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another².

Victim/survivor-centered: An approach that places the rights, wishes, needs, safety, dignity and well-being of the victim/survivor at the centre of all prevention and response measures concerning sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment¹.

Victim/survivor: A person who is or has been sexually exploited, abused or harassed¹.

¹ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), Definition & Principles of a Victim/Survivor Centered Approach

² UNHCR: Defining SEAH

Key principles

The nature of development and humanitarian initiatives can exacerbate inequitable power dynamics and therefore requires vigilant attention to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards. HQAI, by its culture and its work as a professional quality assurance body, is committed to non-discriminatory and respectful behaviours, does not accept misconduct, the abuse of power, or the exploitation of vulnerabilities arising from power inequalities. HQAI recognises that when young people's trust is exploited and standards for safeguarding children fail, significant damage is caused with long-term effects on the lives of children, their families and communities. HQAI as an organisation, and all individuals have a duty of care to children.

HQAI promotes an environment free of SEAH in which all people are treated with respect, where perpetrators are held accountable, where all personnel feel comfortable to speak out, and have confidence that SEAH allegations will be addressed in line with the principles mentioned in this Policy.

1. Zero tolerance for sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment
 - 1.1 HQAI has a zero-tolerance policy for any form of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.
 - 1.2 HQAI's Code of Conduct sets out a broader set of expected staff behaviours that promote and allow children and adults at risk to be free from harm and abuse, bullying and harassment, and discrimination. These behaviours include and may be linked to safeguarding.
 - 1.3 Failure to comply with the principles set out in this Policy and the Code of Conduct is grounds for disciplinary action, may be considered as gross misconduct and may result in termination. SEAH may constitute grounds for legal prosecution.
2. Risk assessment and safe programming
 - 2.1 Through implementation of procedures and good practice, HQAI representatives, including Governing body members, staff, auditors, volunteers, demonstrate an understanding of SEAH risks across their work and operations, and engage effective strategies to mitigate harm, abuse and exploitation.
 - 2.2 HQAI is committed to safe programming and SEAH risk management.
 - 2.2.1 Safeguarding is considered in all risk assessments, including but not limited to the work of auditors and the secretariat.
 - 2.2.2 Due diligence and assessments of partners include an assessment of partners' implementation of safeguarding and risk policies including PSEAH.
 - 2.3 Recruitment and screening processes when engaging new personnel (staff, governance members, volunteers, and auditors) verify the integrity of the applicant.

Note: These processes include, amongst others, criminal background checks and vetting against the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme (MDS), and are covered in the Human Resources policy and procedure.
3. Reporting and responsibilities to report
 - 3.1 HQAI has a zero-tolerance policy for inaction to prevent, report or respond to SEAH, and zero tolerance for retaliation against victims/survivors or whistleblowers.
 - 3.2 Any suspected or alleged case of SEAH perpetrated by anyone within the scope of this policy in connection with official duties or business must be reported.

- 3.3 Reporting is guided by the Code of Conduct and handled via HQAI's complaint mechanism³.
- 3.4 Allegations of SEAH are handled as serious complaints under HQAI's complaint mechanism. The Executive Director (or President if the Executive Director is the subject of the complaint) appoints an investigator and involves HQAI's Safeguarding Focal Point (also see 4.2).
- Note: All complaints, including reported SEAH, are recorded, and the anonymised records reviewed by HQAI's Advisory and Complaint Board as well as the Board of Directors. This is to ensure that Safeguarding measures and processes are reviewed and effective.
- Note: HQAI's Safeguarding Focal Point is a trained and skilled individual who may sit on one of the governance bodies or within the Secretariat.
- 3.5 HQAI is committed to protecting the privacy of victims/survivors, whistleblowers and alleged perpetrators in a way that no retaliation can happen.
- 3.6 Individuals found guilty of SEAH or who retaliate against those who report concerns or participate in investigations are held to account through timely disciplinary action.
- 3.7 Conduct that is criminal will be reported to the relevant authorities (in the country of residence and countries where the alleged perpetrator works), where it is safe to do so and is in accordance with the wishes of the victims/survivors.
- Note: When and where mandatory reporting procedures are in place, the victims/survivors must be informed (see 4.2.2)
- 3.8 False or malicious allegations of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse are extremely rare. However, if any HQAI personnel covered by this policy is found to have made an allegation that they knew to be false they will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment.
4. Survivor-centred approach
- 4.1 HQAI prioritises the rights, needs, wishes and empowerment of survivors of SEAH in both the prevention and response to SEAH.
- 4.2 SEAH complaints are investigated sensitively and confidentially with primary concern for the victim/survivor.
- 4.2.1 HQAI's response is both robust and sensitive to the wishes and protection of survivors.
- 4.2.2 Victims/survivors must be informed of the limits of confidentiality, including informing them when mandatory reporting procedures are in place and what these imply⁴.
- 4.2.3 Victims/survivors should receive equal and fair treatment. HQAI will not discriminate on the basis of race, colour, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, language, religion, belief, political or other opinion, national or social origin, disability, property, birth or other status.
- 4.2.4 HQAI's Safeguarding focal point shall be consulted for any complaint, reporting and/or investigation related to SEAH.
- 4.2.5 For investigations HQAI may use available quality guidance in the sector and involve its Safeguarding Focal Point or other qualified safeguarding consultants.
- Note: Examples are the CHS Alliance SEAH Investigation Guide and the Safeguarding Consultants Directory of the Resource & Support Hub.
- 4.3 Victims/survivors benefit from transparency and information.

³ Complaints policy (POL048) and procedure (PRO048) on HQAI website : <https://www.hqai.org/en/complaints/>

⁴ From Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Definition & Principles of a Victim/Survivor Centered Approach

- 4.3.1 HQAI provides the victim/survivor with regular, timely information in a language and format that is accessible, including for children.
- 4.3.2 HQAI may support victims/survivors by referral to accessible and quality services, including but not limited to medical, psychosocial support, and legal services, for as long as these are known by HQAI, are appropriate, and the referral is in line with the victims'/survivors' wishes.

Note: e.g. referrals to health facilities available in the locality for treatment or basic medication; referral to community structures/services that can provide emotional, mental health or psychosocial support; liaison with agencies like OHCHR to identify organisations that provide legal support.

4.4 Provisions on Child victims/survivors

- 4.4.1 Assistance and support to child victims/survivors must be provided in a manner consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), in particular the principle of the “best interests of the child”, as per article 3 of the CRC.
- 4.4.2 For children who are too young to understand information about their rights and service options, this information should also be shared with their trusted adult who can support the child to participate in making a decision.

5. Awareness, communication, training and learning

- 5.1 The safeguarding policy and safeguarding measures are clearly embedded in HQAI's practice and communicated to staff and auditors, volunteers, members of governance bodies, contractors and partners.
 - 5.1.1 HQAI provides an induction and regular refresher training on PSEAH to all staff and auditors, volunteers, members of governance bodies, contractors and partners, including the expected standards of conduct and the consequences of failure to fulfil those standards of conduct.
 - 5.1.2 HQAI provides information on the mechanisms to report alleged incidents of SEAH, and where to seek further information.
 - 5.1.3 The Safeguarding Policy is published on HQAI's Website.
- 5.2 HQAI's safeguarding commitments and complaints mechanism are communicated to all members of affected communities interacting with HQAI personnel during audits or other work.
- 5.3 HQAI publishes aggregated de-identified data on Safeguarding cases as part of its annual reporting of complaints received by HQAI and a summary of how they were dealt with. The de-identified information is reported to stakeholders and made publicly available on an annual basis.
- 5.4 HQAI learns and improves from experience, including where things have gone wrong.
- 5.5 HQAI aims at participating in joint efforts to strengthen and align PSEAH approaches, including the publication and sharing of data in a way that protects confidentiality, to help build the evidence base on PSEAH and track global progress.