

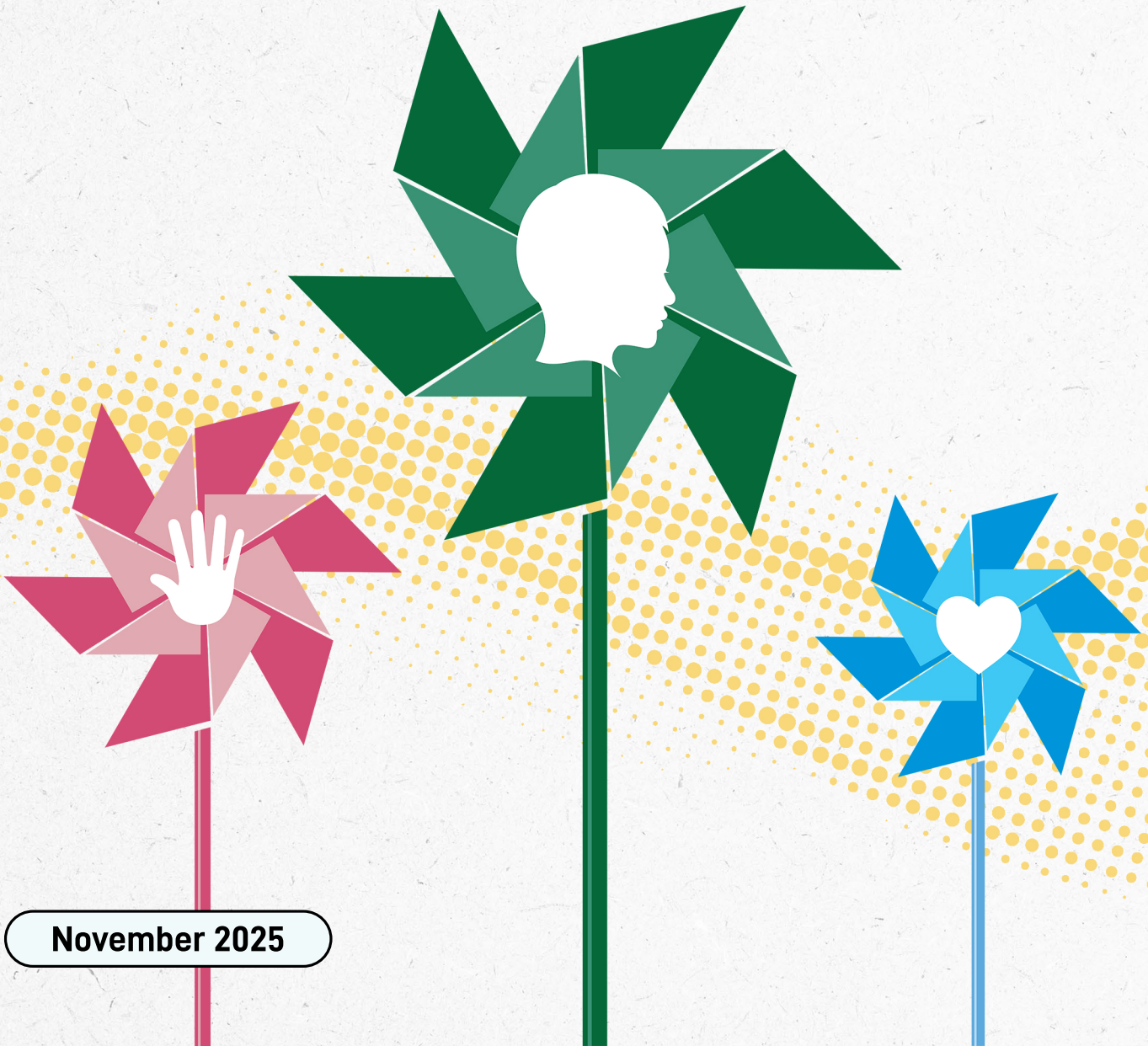


**IGNITE  
PHILANTHROPY**  
inspiring the end to violence  
against girls and boys



# Survivor-Led Safeguarding

**Lessons for Funders and the Field  
from Thrive Together**



**November 2025**

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# Introduction

**Ignite Philanthropy: Inspiring the End to Violence Against Girls and Boys** is pleased to offer these tailored learnings for funders on survivor-informed safeguarding. These include learning from Ignite’s pilot phase of the **Thrive Together** participatory grant-making programme (August 2023 to May 2025), which supports survivor-led organisations addressing childhood sexual violence (the second phase went live from August 2025). **Children Unite** accompanied Ignite’s Thrive Together team as a learning partner to explore the impact of using an authentically survivor-informed approach to safeguarding.

## Key Learning:

By embedding survivor-informed safeguarding, funders can strengthen both protection and engagement with survivor-led groups and/or grassroots organisations. This approach not only upholds high standards of accountability but also supports more effective, equitable, and sustainable outcomes for survivors.

## Key Recommendations for Funders

- ✓ **Validate and resource survivor-led approaches:** Funders should recognise the expertise of survivor-led organisations and invest in their expertise and knowledge of trauma-informed, community-rooted practices as vital contributions to safeguarding.
- ✓ **Balance compliance with local realities:** Funders should adapt safeguarding due diligence requirements to reflect the capacities and contexts of grassroots organisations, ensuring that compliance does not exclude those best placed to support survivors – survivor groups.
- ✓ **Prioritise wellbeing in reporting:** Funders should ensure that due diligence processes and grant agreements protect confidentiality, respect survivor choice, and resource immediate support needs, rather than impose rigid reporting obligations or other onerous requirements.
- ✓ **Invest in capacity and ecosystems:** Funders should provide specific resources for survivor-led organisations to strengthen learning partnerships, build referral pathways, and develop digital safeguarding skills to respond to emerging risks.

- ✓ **Foster reflective grant-making cultures:** Funders should extend safeguarding to their own staff teams, create non-judgmental spaces for honest dialogue on safeguarding and risk management, and embed survivor input into the continuous improvement of grant-making practices.

**Survivor Informed Safeguarding:** the concept of ‘survivor-informed safeguarding’ was created in 2022 by Children Unite from a review of safeguarding policy and practice commissioned by Oak Foundation’s Prevent Child Sexual Abuse programme<sup>i</sup>. This new approach to safeguarding was tested and refined throughout the pilot phase, it complements existing approaches to safeguarding, but focuses on three elements:

<b>Trauma-informed practice:</b>	centring survivor wellbeing and connecting individuals to support services.
<b>Risk-informed decision-making:</b>	co-developing assessments and mitigation strategies with survivors and their networks.
<b>Continuous informed consent:</b>	ensuring survivors fully understand risks and can disengage when needed to protect their wellbeing.

Learning on a survivor informed approach to safeguarding was undertaken in four areas of activity:

- 1. Participatory grant-making with a Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP)<sup>ii</sup>:** building understanding and supporting management of safeguarding for participatory grant making.
- 2. Due diligence on safeguarding practice:** developing and co-delivering online ‘safeguarding conversations’ with shortlisted applicants.
- 3. Mapping contextual risks of survivor-led groups** (Thrive Together grantee partners) through review of due diligence data, workshops and a survey.
- 4. Capacity-building workshops with survivor-led groups** (Thrive Together grantee partners and [Sprout](#) Fellows)<sup>iii</sup> on global standards, risk management, reporting abuse and digital safeguarding.

# Executive Summary

This report highlights learning from the pilot phase of the [Thrive Together](#) participatory grant-making programme (2023-2025) which supports survivor-led organisations addressing childhood sexual violence and is delivered by [Ignite Philanthropy: Inspiring the End to Violence Against Girls and Boys](#).

[Children Unite](#) accompanied the Thrive Together team as a learning partner to explore the impact of using an authentically survivor-informed approach to safeguarding through four areas of activity:

- ✓ **Participatory grant-making with a Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP)<sup>iv</sup>:** building understanding and supporting management of safeguarding for participatory grant making.
- ✓ **Due diligence on safeguarding practice:** developing and co-delivering online ‘safeguarding conversations’ with shortlisted applicants.
- ✓ **Mapping contextual risks of survivor-led groups** (Thrive Together grantee partners) through review of due diligence data, workshops and a survey.
- ✓ **Capacity-building workshops with survivor-led groups** (Thrive Together grantee partners and [Sprout](#) Fellows)<sup>v</sup> on global standards, risk management, reporting abuse and digital safeguarding.

## Key Learning on Safeguarding for Survivor-Led Organisations:

### On Participatory Grant Making

- ✓ Survivor-informed safeguarding requires broadening the focus from compliance alone to include survivor wellbeing and meaningful participation.
- ✓ Funders should also invest in their own staff wellbeing and foster trauma-informed, reflective organisational cultures.
- ✓ Safe, non-judgemental spaces enable open dialogue and honest learning around safeguarding, strengthening trust and engagement with survivor-led partners.

### On Due Diligence

- ✓ Informal 'safeguarding conversations' with shortlisted applicants build trust and provide valuable insights into real safeguarding practices and contextual challenges.
- ✓ Grassroots organisations without formal policies can still be supported when no harmful practices are identified and there is clear commitment to capacity-building.
- ✓ A staged due diligence approach clarifies expectations, streamlines the process, and reduces administrative burden on applicants.

### On Contextual Risks for Survivor-Led Groups

- ✓ The taboo surrounding sexual abuse combined with a focus on reputation risks often limit open dialogue on safeguarding, making Ignite Philanthropy's transparent, survivor-informed approach a valuable model for wider sector engagement and learning.

### On Global Safeguarding Standards

- ✓ Existing global standards are often narrow in scope, focusing on sexual abuse in humanitarian contexts and risks from foreign staff, making compliance resource-intensive.
- ✓ Keeping Children Safe standards were identified as the most adaptable and relevant framework for survivor-led organisations.

### On Reporting & Responding to Abuse

- ✓ Emotional distress and breaches of confidentiality are significant risks for survivors, underscoring the need to prioritise safety and trust throughout reporting processes.
- ✓ Survivor preferences should guide decisions on reporting, with openness to restorative justice approaches where appropriate.
- ✓ Survivor-led organisations are well placed to meet survivors' immediate needs, including shelter, healthcare, counselling, and other critical support.

### On Digital Safeguarding

- ✓ Digital safeguarding for survivor-led groups must extend beyond child protection to include survivors, their families, staff, and the organisation itself.
- ✓ Weak online enforcement exposes organisations to harassment, making safe, survivor-centred digital spaces essential.
- ✓ Strong security measures—such as restricted access, regular software updates, and secure communication—are critical to preventing harm and supporting safer advocacy.

### Key Recommendations for Funders

- ✓ **Validate and resource survivor-led approaches:** Funders should recognise the expertise of survivor-led organisations and invest in their expertise and knowledge of trauma-informed, community-rooted practices as vital contributions to safeguarding.
- ✓ **Balance compliance with local realities:** Funders should adapt safeguarding due diligence requirements to reflect the capacities and contexts of grassroots organisations, ensuring that compliance does not exclude those best placed to support survivors – survivor groups.
- ✓ **Prioritise wellbeing in reporting:** Funders should ensure that due diligence processes and grant agreements protect confidentiality, respect survivor choice, and resource immediate support needs, rather than impose rigid reporting obligations or other onerous requirements.
- ✓ **Invest in capacity and ecosystems:** Funders should provide specific resources for survivor-led organisations to strengthen learning partnerships, build referral pathways, and develop digital safeguarding skills to respond to emerging risks.
- ✓ **Foster reflective grant-making cultures:** Funders should extend safeguarding to their own staff teams, create non-judgmental spaces for honest dialogue on safeguarding and risk management, and embed survivor input into the continuous improvement of grant-making practices.

## Findings

### 1. Participatory Grant-Making With a Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP)

Ignite's Thrive Together team and Children Unite supported the safeguarding of LEAP - a panel of nine survivors<sup>vi</sup> who provided valuable insights, expertise and guidance in developing and selecting the Thrive Together call for applications, ensuring the fair assessment and selection of shortlisted organisations. Support to LEAP members on safeguarding included managing risks through a risk/mitigation register that was regularly reviewed and updated, undertaking onboarding of LEAP members and co-delivering online workshops to LEAP members on safeguarding, self-care and engagement. Thrive Together staff completed an administrative check on all applications to highlight potentially triggering content for LEAP members, who were undertaking short-listing in turn. In addition, Children Unite provided 1-2-1 ad hoc support to the Thrive Together team in the management of a safeguarding concern raised by one LEAP member.

#### Key Learning From This Process Includes:

- ✓ **Safeguarding practice and meaningful engagement:** Survivor-informed safeguarding merges protection practices with inclusivity and wellbeing practices, requiring a broader definition of safeguarding to ensure genuine survivor participation.
- ✓ **Investing in the staff team:** Safeguarding practice should extend to funders' staff teams and foster trauma-informed, reflective organisational cultures that prioritise wellbeing.
- ✓ **Creating safe spaces for grant-making:** Non-judgemental, trauma-aware spaces are essential for 'lived experience' panellists to speak openly as well as an honest and intentional approach to learning on safeguarding.
- ✓ **Incorporating and sustaining learning:** Survivor panellists should revise and co-create grant-making tools and practices and act as mentors for upcoming survivor panellists to ensure learning is incorporated into future cohorts.

### 2. Due Diligence on Safeguarding Practice

Formal safeguarding due diligence processes consisted of application form questions for all short-listed applicants, a request for applicants to submit their safeguarding policies or procedures as well as a dedicated New Venture Fund<sup>vii</sup> children safeguarding information form. To complement the formal processes, online 'safeguarding conversations' with short-listed applicants were developed and co-delivered to explore the safeguarding practice and local contexts of applicants<sup>viii</sup>.

A review of the formal due diligence procedures and 'safeguarding conversations' identified the following key learning:

- ✓ **Safeguarding conversations:** Informal 'live' discussion on safeguarding with short-listed applicants helped to build trust and provided richer insight than questionnaires, giving a clearer view of applicants' real practices, the contextual factors affecting safeguarding and helped verify authenticity (as some written applications showed signs of AI use).
- ✓ **Building a picture of safeguarding practice:** A staged approach to due diligence helped gradually build a picture of applicants' understanding and practice on safeguarding and avoided repetition and confusion. This could be achieved by explaining the due diligence requirements on safeguarding to applicants for each stage of the application process (i.e., only explaining the 'safeguarding conversation' process to short-listed applicants rather than to all applicants).

**Example:** Develop guidance for short-listed applicants that explains terminology used in any official due diligence forms to help them complete the forms correctly.

- ✓ **Grassroots organisations:** Since grassroots organisations often lack formal safeguarding policies, the lack of a policy document should not prevent them from receiving support. In these cases, holding a ‘safeguarding conversation’ with potential grantees is crucial – they are a non-threatening way to identify and collaboratively explore any weaknesses, gaps or ‘red flags’ (harmful or abusive practice) regarding applicants’ safeguarding or child protection activities. And, providing there are no ‘red flags’ regarding harmful or abuse practice, applicants that are transparent, committed, and willing to build their capacity on safeguarding should still be considered for support.

- ✓ **Transparency in decisions:** Decision making on due diligence should be transparent, formalised, well documented, and supported with clear feedback to applicants.

## 3. Mapping Contextual Risks With Survivor-Led Groups

A mapping of key risks and a consultation process with Thrive Together grantee partners on the key contexts for safeguarding with survivor-led groups identified the following insights.

Grantee partners recognised that taboos, shame, and blame surrounding child sexual abuse strongly influence how the issue is addressed in the child protection sector. Based on Children Unite’s experience, funders and INGOs are often reluctant to engage in open discussions about safeguarding and sexual violence. This hesitation is closely tied to the origins of safeguarding and the focus on reputational risks for organisations operating in the child protection sector.

Consequently, grantee partners found Ignite Philanthropy’s open approach to risk management and safeguarding unexpected, as it stood in contrast to a more closed stance typically taken by other organisations, making it particularly important for Ignite to continue exploring survivor-informed safeguarding in practice and to share learning across the sector.

## 4. Capacity Building Workshops With Survivor-Led Groups

The mapping highlighted the need for capacity building of survivor-led organisations (grantee partners) in three key areas:

1. Understanding and adapting global safeguarding standards to grantee partners’ contexts
2. A deeper exploration of the risks involved in reporting abuse (to authorities) and responding to disclosures of abuse
3. Digital safeguarding

### 1. Understanding and Adapting Global Safeguarding Standards

In review and discussion of global safeguarding standards<sup>ix</sup> by survivor-led organisations, two key gaps or weaknesses of global standards were identified in relation to survivor groups:

- ✓ Many standards focus exclusively on sexual abuse and exploitation or in humanitarian aid settings, and
- ✓ Many standards have been written for large INGOs or UN agencies and tend to focus on addressing the risks posed by ‘foreign’ (Western/North American) staff.

It was acknowledged that this has created a bias in the standards towards building internal safeguarding mechanisms that frame staff as the main risk to local communities, with compliance demanding significant organisational resources - especially staff time. The Keeping [Children Safe Standards](#) were identified as the most suitable and relevant global standards for survivor-led organisations.

## Implications for Funders Supporting Survivor-Led Organisations:

- ✓ **Validate survivor-led practices:** Recognise and support the collective, trauma-informed, community-rooted safeguarding approaches already used by survivor-led organisations.
- ✓ **Avoid reinforcing colonial dynamics:** Acknowledge the limitations of Global North-driven safeguarding standards and their mismatch with local contexts and realities of survivor-led organisations.
- ✓ **Develop survivor-informed models:** Co-create due diligence tools related to safeguarding (i.e., harmful practices rather than fraudulent practices), and safeguarding policies or standards that reflect the contexts and needs of grassroots and survivor-led groups.
- ✓ **Bridge compliance and reality:** Ensure safeguarding requirements balance donor accountability with the lived experiences and capacities of survivor-led organisations.

## 2. Reporting and Responding to Disclosures of Abuse: Exploring the Risks

Insights from two capacity-building workshops, one focused on risk management in reporting abuse to the authorities, and the other on appropriate responses to disclosures of abuse - together with subsequent discussions, highlight the following key considerations for survivor-led organisations:

- ✓ **Emotional distress as a primary risk:** Participants identified emotional distress, particularly the risk of re-traumatisation when reporting abuse to the authorities, as the most frequent harm faced by survivors. This risk is frequently exacerbated by stigma, victim-blaming, insensitive police questioning, and breaches of confidentiality.
- ✓ **The critical importance of confidentiality:** Breaches of confidentiality were emphasised as particularly damaging, often leading to stigma, social isolation, and further harm to survivors. Ensuring confidentiality is therefore central to any effective reporting and response process.

- ✓ **Pressures to utilise formal reporting mechanisms:** Survivor-led organisations frequently experience pressure - from donors, INGOs, or because of national requirements (such as mandatory report) - to pursue formal reporting through official justice channels. Such pressures can conflict with the organisations' assessment of what best supports the safety and recovery of survivors.
- ✓ **Diverse perspectives on justice:** Not all safeguarding concerns require formal reporting mechanisms, and not all survivors wish to pursue legal action - often due to concerns about breaches of confidentiality, previous negative experiences with authorities, or the perception of low conviction rates. These concerns highlight the importance of centring survivors' preferences in decisions about reporting and of exploring restorative justice models.

**Example of good practice:** Trusted NGOs already supporting survivors provide accompaniment for meetings with officials, court proceedings, etc., to help explain processes and advocate for survivors' best interests.

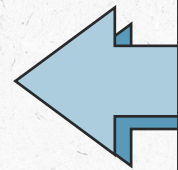
**Example:** Considerations when reporting abuse to the police might include a) therapy can be provided to the victim or b) the victim can be relocated to a safe house.

- ✓ **Prioritising wellbeing in decision-making:** For many survivor-led organisations, the primary focus remains on the wellbeing, recovery, and dignity of survivors rather than solely on legal outcomes. Reporting decisions should therefore be guided by considerations of whether they promote or compromise the survivor's welfare
- ✓ **Capacity to meet immediate needs:** Survivor-led organisations are particularly well-placed to address the immediate needs of survivors by providing safe accommodation, access to healthcare, counselling, and other critical forms of support that contribute to recovery and resilience.

## Implications for Funders

- ✓ **Embed survivor-centred reporting approaches:**

When conducting due diligence, look for evidence that organisations involve survivors in decisions about reporting abuse and provide support before formal reporting takes place.



**Example:** Indicators could include joint decision-making with victims, ensuring access to psychosocial support or safe accommodation.

- ✓ **Be clear about responsibilities in reporting**

**abuse:** In funding agreements, it is important to set out who is responsible for what when safeguarding concerns arise.

- ✓ **Tackle stigma to reduce harm:** Funders' support (but not pressure) for survivor-led organisations' efforts to challenge stigma and silence around sexual abuse is a critical element in prevention activities as well as in supporting survivor-centred response mechanisms.

- ✓ **Invest in strengthening local ecosystems:** Funders can help survivor-led organisations map out the services available in their contexts, identify where their own expertise is most valuable, and develop partnerships for effective referral pathways.

- ✓ **Prioritise timely, realistic risk management:** Encourage survivor-led groups to develop safeguarding action plans that are realistic and can be implemented promptly by local staff.

## 3. Digital Safeguarding

Through discussion with survivor-led organisations, it was acknowledged that digital safeguarding is often framed around preventing child sexual abuse and protecting children from online predators. This reflects the focus of many global safety standards. However, for survivor-led organisations, digital safety extends further - it includes safeguarding survivors and their families (external risks), as well as staff and the organisation itself (internal risks). Digital safeguarding is particularly pertinent to the advocacy and campaigning work of survivor-led organisations. In taking a public stance against child sexual abuse, many survivor-led groups reported facing online threats from abusers or their allies, aiming to intimidate survivors, disrupt support services, and interfere with justice processes. Key insights from discussions on digital safeguarding include:

- ✓ **Weak enforcement online:** Survivors and survivor-led organisations are raising the alarm about online child sexual abuse, but tech companies and law enforcement often fail to act quickly or effectively, leaving harmful content online.
- ✓ **Prioritise survivors, not abusers:** Trolls and bullies deliberately target survivor-led groups to destabilise them. Survivor groups should create safe, supportive online spaces that protect and empower survivors rather than spending their time and resources on confronting abusers.
- ✓ **Digital security as prevention:** Strong security measures such as restricted administrative access, software updates, secure messaging, and careful data handling are critical to reducing risks and preventing harm in online spaces.

## Key Implications for Funders

- ✓ **Support capacity building:** Funders should recognise digital safeguarding as an urgent and evolving need, resourcing survivor-led organisations to strengthen their knowledge and skills across both technical dimensions (such as data security and content moderation) and ethical practices (such as online storytelling, consent and the wellbeing of survivors).
- ✓ **Provide flexible resources:** This could include modular training or accessible resources on key areas such as digital security, online wellbeing, and ethical storytelling practices.
- ✓ **Encourage collaboration with experts:** Funders can broker or support partnerships between survivor-led organisations and specialist organisations with expertise in digital safety. And cultivate relevant networks of grantee partners and technical groups in the Global South to ensure survivor-led organisations can access IT support that is culturally and contextually relevant and aware.

# Conclusion

The learning partnership between Ignite Philanthropy and Children Unite has shown that survivor-informed safeguarding is not only possible but essential for funders seeking to support effective, equitable, and sustainable initiatives. Survivor-led organisations consistently demonstrate that safeguarding and meaningful participation are inseparable; practices rooted in trauma-awareness, confidentiality, and survivor choice often prove more relevant and effective than donor-driven standards. For funders, this creates both a responsibility and an opportunity: to move beyond compliance-driven frameworks and towards approaches that respect survivor expertise, address stigma, and adapt safeguarding expectations to diverse local realities.

Importantly, this learning reinforces that funders can play a catalytic role in strengthening safeguarding by resourcing survivor-led models, embedding wellbeing at the heart of due diligence, and investing in digital and contextual safeguarding capacities. By adopting reflective, survivor-centred practices within their own teams and grant-making processes, funders can help shift the culture of safeguarding from one of risk avoidance to one of agency, empowerment and inclusion. In doing so, funders uphold accountability while also advancing survivor leadership and creating safer, more resilient ecosystems of care and support.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The review found that current safeguarding policies and practices did not address the 'advocacy/campaigning environment', in particular, for children and young people (survivors) advocating for their rights. Consequently, 'survivor-informed safeguarding' was put forward to fill this gap.

<sup>ii</sup> LEAP is a panel of survivors who undertook shortlisting and final decisions on applicants for Thrive Together grants.

<sup>iii</sup> Sprout Fellows are participants in Ignite Philanthropy's Sprout Programme: Next Generation Systems Leaders for Child Safety and Well-Being.

<sup>iv</sup> LEAP is a panel of survivors who undertook shortlisting and final decisions on applicants for Thrive Together grants.

<sup>v</sup> Sprout Fellows are participants in Ignite Philanthropy's Sprout Programme: Next Generation Systems Leaders for Child Safety and Well-Being.

<sup>vi</sup> LEAP members are adults with lived experience of sexual abuse in childhood

<sup>vii</sup> New Venture Fund is Ignite Philanthropy's fiscal sponsor

<sup>viii</sup> For other grantee partners (not known to be survivor-led), Ignite Philanthropy administers a questionnaire in lieu of these 'safeguarding conversations.'

<sup>ix</sup> Standards discussed included: [Keeping Children Safe Standards, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office \(FCDO\) Enhanced Due Diligence Standards, CHS Alliance: Core Humanitarian Standards](#) and [United Nations Minimum Operating Standards \(MOS-PSEA\)](#)