

Safeguarding Starts with Strong Systems

Mike Thomas · Founder & Director | 5 min read · May 2026

A clear background check is not the same as a safe hire.

Most organisations know this in theory. In practice, many rely on a system that was never designed to catch every risk — and assume that because nothing has gone wrong yet, the gaps don't exist.

They do. And in a sector that works with children and young people, closing them isn't optional.

This article is written in the context of Hong Kong's regulatory environment. Specific references to legislation, checking procedures, and institutional frameworks reflect the Hong Kong context and may differ from other jurisdictions.

Where the Gaps Lie

The baseline in most organisations involves two references and a clear Sexual Conviction Record Check (SCRC). It's a reasonable starting point — but it has significant weaknesses when examined closely.

Reference standards vary widely. Are referees required to be recent line managers? Are they actually contacted, or do references sit unread in an inbox? The value of a reference depends entirely on how seriously the receiving organisation treats the process.

Non-conviction issues slip through. A clear SCRC only reflects convictions, not arrests or ongoing proceedings. A recent case illustrated this starkly: a staff member committed offences that only came to light after a conviction for a first incident — which had occurred a year before a second arrest.

International background checks are inconsistent. Previous records from other countries are routinely missed — not through negligence, but because obtaining reliable checks across multiple jurisdictions is both time-consuming and expensive.

What Stronger Systems Look Like

Standardise reference checks. Define what a valid reference means: who can provide one, how recently they must have managed the candidate, and how references will be followed up. A reference that isn't verified is not a reference — it's a signature.

Build ongoing monitoring into the process. Vetting at the point of hire is a snapshot. Policies and systems that flag concerns during employment — rather than only at the start — provide a far more robust safeguard.

Explore shared industry solutions. No single organisation needs to solve the international background check problem alone. Collaboration across the sector to develop shared mechanisms would reduce individual burden significantly.

Use external oversight. Having an independent body perform or oversee the vetting process removes the risk of internal bias or inconsistency.

Why It Matters

Children are a vulnerable segment of society. They are also our future. Both of those facts demand that the systems designed to protect them are built to actually work — not just to satisfy a checklist.

The cost of getting this right is real. The cost of getting it wrong is incalculable.

Strong safeguarding practice is not about distrust. It is about creating environments where children are genuinely safe, staff are clearly accountable, and organisations can stand behind their processes with confidence.

Safeguarding is only as strong as the system behind it — and systems only work when someone is willing to look honestly at where they fall short.

What gaps exist in your current process? We'd welcome the conversation.

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