

Diocese of Chester

Response to SCIE safeguarding audit (May 2016)

We are pleased with the many positive comments made in the report and for the acknowledgement of the progress made so far. We are committed to achieving the best possible practice in respect of safeguarding and will use the considerations of this report in support of that.

We have set out our response to each section in the report

The considerations raised in the report are highlighted and a diocesan response made. We have also raised any other comments we have on that section.

2.1 Structure

Consider the need to delegate operational safeguarding decisions, so as to avoid potential conflicts of interest and/or delay.

How safeguarding management in the Diocese could benefit further from the professional experience of the DVSO, so that her role is not just an adviser e.g. the DVSO could report on safeguarding directly at Bishop's Staff meetings.

The Diocese appreciates the professionalism of the DVSO and her extensive experience. We will continue to keep under review how best to make use of this in advice and management of safeguarding matters. Similarly we will follow National Church Policy in this area. The Bishop's Staff meeting is not a safeguarding discussion group. Occasionally a matter may arise which might impinge on safeguarding issues or considerations. Should this happen, the DVSO will either be invited to attend to discuss or the DVSO's views will be sought asap, however Core groups are the expected method of dealing with management of safeguarding matters.

Procedures are in place for the DVSO to keep members of the Bishop's Staff Team appropriately updated on safeguarding matters.

2.2 Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser

Consider drawing up an annual work plan that addresses the safeguarding priorities for the Diocese and undertake regular reviews of progress and impact.

We agree this is appropriate and worth working towards, however at present numerous policy and practice guidance demands, consultations and requests for information, together with unpredictable casework (some historic) makes this very difficult to achieve. There are also the other areas of the DVSOs work. Greater stability will be required before such plans could be agreed annually. We will keep this under review and implement when appropriate. In some areas, such as training, plans are already in place.

2.3 Diocesan Safeguarding Commission

No considerations raised by auditors

For clarity, the DVSO did not model the Commission on the equivalent Roman Catholic diocese in which she operated. The model is the one identified in the national safeguarding policies Protecting All God's Children and Responding Well to those who have been Sexually Abused. The term 'Commission' is one used within the Catholic Church and that is what the group have adopted.

The auditors comment 'despite their best efforts' they were unable to engage with the Commission Chair. Unfortunately there was insufficient notice to arrange such a meeting for the dates arranged for the audit to accommodate such a meeting.

2.4 Policies, practice guidance and procedures

Implement urgently the use of core groups to be compliant to the House of Bishops' Practice Guidance: Responding to Serious Safeguarding Situations in Relation to Church Officers (June 2015).

Formal Core Groups are now being used effectively in full accordance with the policy.

The diocesan safeguarding policy was only ever intended as an interim document until such times as national policies were revised and approved by the House of Bishops. The national policies will be adopted.

2.5 Resources of safeguarding service

No considerations by auditors

2.6 Recording systems and IT

No considerations by auditors

2.7 Risk assessments and safeguarding agreements

Consider how best to involve the parish in the risk assessment process, so that they have a full understanding of the identified risks and how these are to be managed.

Currently we do not think it is appropriate to involve the parish in the risk assessment process. We believe that they are not equipped to contribute to professional safeguarding risk assessment. There are also potential data protection requirements to be upheld. What is appropriate, and which happens, is that the vicar is included in a preliminary meeting with an offender, and following this the parish safeguarding officer is given a copy of the Covenant requirements which stipulate the boundaries and advise who to inform if these are breached. Certain people from the parish may also be recruited to become part of a small designated support group for an offender, and if so then an appropriate limited briefing is provided relevant to a person's participation and needs. We believe this approach is working well and to our knowledge there have been no failures in the safe management of offenders under these arrangements.

2.8 Training

The use of a formal training plan, agreed by the Bishop's staff, to meet the backlog of those that require training, including those requiring a three-year cycle of refresher training.

A formal training plan has already been in operation since 2014 and remains on track despite the volume of other work. Resources are limited, and a scoping exercise is currently underway to ascertain the practicality of delivering the mandatory training modules within existing resources. This will be reported back to the Safeguarding Commission in October 2017.

2.9 Safe Recruitment of Church Officers

Consider developing and agreeing a consistent approach to organising relevant evidence and secure method for attaching it on the Blue File, when any member of the clergy has been the subject of a safeguarding concern or allegation.

We will give consideration to how this might be best achieved.

For clarity Human Resources files relating to lay appointments were not requested.

2.10 Response to allegations

The Diocese to consider how decision-making about safeguarding, with particular reference to the making of referrals to statutory agencies, can maximise the safety of children and vulnerable adults and make best use of professional safeguarding experience and judgement: such consideration to include use of consultation facilities with agencies for adults, as well as children and obtaining advice from the National Safeguarding Team (NST). Consider the need for senior clergy and diocesan senior managers to be provided together with training on the grooming process in the Church.

The Diocesan Bishop has responded to this section representing his views in the accompanying document.

Recent changes in the relevant regulations have clarified responsibility for referrals rests with the Safeguarding advisor.

The auditors raised in this section concern at the language used when writing to perpetrators and those accused. Their concern was that this could be interpreted as collusion or minimising of the offence, and could be hurtful to survivors should it become public. In the situation they were referring to, the language used was considered appropriate to the circumstances, respectful and supportive to someone accused with whom it was imperative that co-operative engagement was maintained. This person was ultimately acquitted at court, unanimously. The fact that good communication was maintained throughout meant that this extremely vulnerable young person was able to be well supported and safely managed throughout the process. The allegation did not relate to the Church and the complainant had no Church connection. The person was fully compliant with all requirements, boundaries were in place, and these were regularly reviewed. The national office was also consulted during the time of this matter and supported the handling of this case.

We are also advised to consider the need for clergy and diocesan senior managers to be provided training together on the grooming process in the Church. A day's training was provided in 2015 in Manchester Diocese which senior staff attended. The day was organised by the NST. The current C4 national module is being rolled out across dioceses and we will be delivered this training in June 2018.

2.11 Quality of Casework

No considerations raised by auditors

We are pleased by the auditors' findings in this important area of the DVSOs work.

2.12 Complaints

Consider whether to write and implement a formal complaints procedure that allows for complaints by service users on the safeguarding service and offers a three-stage process.

We will consider this with a view to an appropriate policy being put in place. Various other Diocesan policies already exist in this area.

2.13 Whistleblowing

Replace the contact details for Public Concern At Work in the whistleblowing policy.

This has now been done.

2.14 Monitoring of safeguarding in parishes as part of the Archdeacons' responsibilities

Consider how the archdeacons might use information from the annual self-audit at parish level, in conjunction with information kept by the DSA, to analyse the state of safeguarding in the parishes and to direct their efforts.

This is being carried out, and will be kept under review as addition information becomes available via the annual self-audits.

For clarity, the archdeacons happen not to have sent out Articles of Enquiry in the last three years, but could revert to doing so in the future.

2.15 Resources for children and vulnerable adults

No considerations raised by the auditors

2.16 Information sharing

The Diocese to consider how decision-making about safeguarding, with particular reference to information sharing with statutory agencies and other dioceses, can maximise the safety of children and vulnerable adults and make best use of professional safeguarding experience and judgement: such consideration to include use of consultation facilities with agencies for adults, as well as children and obtaining advice from the National Safeguarding Team (NST).

Consider approaching the relevant safeguarding boards to develop an information-sharing protocol between the Diocese and statutory agencies.

Formal information sharing protocols are being requested with all statutory agencies, subject to the necessary data protection obligations. The general data protection regulations due to be implemented in 2018 may provide a useful opportunity to ensure best practice in this area.

2.17 Quality assurance processes

Consider how the Safeguarding Commission will satisfy itself that processes and systems are robust and safe, and how (and to whom) this will be reported.

This is one of the primary roles of the Safeguarding commission; we expect this to be regularly reviewed as part of their work. Reporting will be to the Diocesan Bishop, Bishop's Council and Diocesan Synod if appropriate. Membership of the commission has been designed in such a way as to facilitate such reporting.

2.18 Links with National Safeguarding Strategy and Team

No considerations raised by auditors

2.19 National Systematic Safeguarding Issues

As these are matters for the National Safeguarding Team we do not feel it appropriate to comment and expect the National Safeguarding team will address in due course.

Final comments

We were one of the earlier audits and it was evident during the audit that the auditors' found the environment in which the Church operates difficult to understand. Despite much discussion, some of this lack of understanding is still discernible in the final report. This is to some extent understandable given the complexity of some of the legislation but created challenges for the Diocese both during and subsequent to the audit.

Despite amendments being made, we do not believe the final paragraph of the report is fair. The following are extracts from the guidance issued to the Diocese before the audit:-

"Should the audit have raised issues of concern regarding the functioning of the senior leadership team, this will be shared at the Learning Together session with the senior leadership team. For this reason, it is important that the Bishop (or his/her Chaplain) and the Diocesan Safeguarding Panel are represented at that session."

"It is for the diocese audit liaison person to arrange exactly who should attend this session along with the DSA. This might include: Diocesan Bishop or Bishop's Chaplain, Diocesan Secretary, Delegated safeguarding lead e.g. Archdeacon, Chair of Safeguarding Panel, representatives of the senior leadership team."

The audit dates were set without Diocesan involvement and the notice period was short. The Diocesan Bishop had an important commitment on National Church business at the time of the final meeting, but did nonetheless make himself available during the audit and shortly after in a telephone call. He was also represented by the Diocesan Secretary and the Director of HR who are members of his staff team and also attend the Safeguarding Commission meetings.

All this was in accordance with the guidance received in advance.