

## THE BISHOP OF ROCHESTER

The Rt Rev Dr Jonathan Gibbs



### For the attention of the trustee members of the Archbishops' Council

Mr William Nye  
Secretary-General of the Archbishops' Council  
Church House  
London  
SW1P 3NZ

8 January 2025

Dear William,

Firstly, a Happy New Year to you. I hope you enjoyed a good break over the Christmas period.

I am responding further to your letter, sent to me on 11<sup>th</sup> December, in the light of the publication of that letter on the Church of England website, details of which were then reported in the Church Times. You will remember that I initially replied to you on 12<sup>th</sup> December, thanking the Archbishops' Council for the letter and its offer of conversation, and saying that I and my diocesan colleagues would respond further once we had had the opportunity to consult together.

Given that your letter has now been made public, I believe it is both appropriate and necessary for me to respond directly and personally rather than to await a conversation with the Council, though I and my colleagues would still welcome that opportunity. I am aware that you wrote separately to the Lay and Clergy Chairs of our Diocesan Synod and they will be responding on their own behalf in due course.

I note the information you provided about the actions being undertaken by the Council, all of which we acknowledge and for which we are grateful. I believe however your suggestion that our Synod members were perhaps acting in ignorance is both inaccurate and unfortunate.

Speakers in the debate highlighted a number of concerns about the Council's oversight of safeguarding matters, including its response to earlier reviews as well as to the Makin Report. The terms of the motion, as was made very clear by the proposer, did not call for resignations or recommend specific courses of action. Neither were any individuals, whether trustees or officers, criticised by name or function. Equally, it was acknowledged that responsibility for change rests with all of us, though the focus on this occasion was on the Council as the executive body responsible for the Church of England's work on safeguarding at the national level. The motion simply said that the Synod did not have confidence in the Archbishops' Council's *oversight of safeguarding* and called for a better response from the national church.

I cannot speak for what individual members were thinking when they chose to vote overwhelmingly for the motion but given all that has happened in the Church of England over the last few weeks and months, I would suggest that the outcome was hardly surprising. I believe the vote was indicative of the profound disconnect that people in the parishes feel with the Church of England's senior leadership over the handling of abuse cases and especially our conduct towards victims and survivors.

In terms of my own decision to support the motion, I would like to reiterate that this was not intended as a criticism of the work of the National Safeguarding Team or of the Lead Bishops for Safeguarding, and I have already apologised for any distress caused to colleagues in this regard. Equally, I believe it is essential that Bishops and others should be free to criticise the actions of the Council, when necessary, otherwise we simply confirm people's suspicions about the Church's national leadership being a closed shop dedicated to self-preservation. Transparent disagreement and open debate about the issues are essential to our common life.

My own decision on how to vote was made in response to the debate and was taken above all out of a wish to support our Synod's desire to stand alongside victims and survivors. The Makin Report (and others) revealed in stark terms how they have been failed both by individuals in the Church and systemically by the Church as an institution. The Archbishops' Council is not solely responsible for these systemic failures – we are all (and especially bishops) responsible in one way or another – but the Council is the executive body which has responsibility for and oversight of the Church's central safeguarding functions, including a major role in resource allocation.

As I have said elsewhere, I believe that the Council's response to the Makin Report (which it commissioned, after all) was significantly lacking. It failed to take account of the enormity of the crisis that the Report would precipitate and the conflict of interest that would arise as a result of the Archbishop of Canterbury being personally criticised in the report.

Notwithstanding the actions that were taken, including the setting up of the Response Group, the seismic impact of the Makin Report could have been foreseen and plans put in place for a much more comprehensive and pastoral response from the Council. This surely has to be a watershed moment for the Church of England, and the Archbishops' Council, as the commissioner of the Report, could for instance have led, together with the House of Bishops, a national response of repentance and prayer to demonstrate our commitment towards profound systemic and cultural change. Instead, given the absence of such a response, victims and survivors felt betrayed and the Church at the national level was perceived by many as lacking both transparency and sensitivity towards victims and survivors.

More generally, and arising directly from my experience as Lead Bishop, I have become convinced that the national governance arrangements for the oversight of safeguarding in the Church of England are unsustainable. The overlapping roles of the Archbishops' Council, the National Safeguarding Steering Group, the House of Bishops and the National Safeguarding Panel are confusing and not fit for the purpose of driving organisational and cultural change in a complex and dispersed institution like the Church of England. At the same time, all of these bodies, including the Council, are compromised by both their instinct and their remit to protect and serve the needs of the Church of England. That is inevitable given the nature of the role of trustees and our shared loyalty to the Church.

It was therefore also on this basis that I supported the motion: out of my belief that the Archbishops' Council's role in the oversight of safeguarding needs to be replaced by an independent oversight and scrutiny body which has the power and authority to question and hold to account the decisions and actions taken by the Church in respect of safeguarding. I am concerned that ironically the current crisis may make it more difficult for General Synod to make the best decisions about what shape this could take, but we shall have to see what happens in February.

My hope was that the passing of this motion would draw the attention of the Council to the deep concerns of those in the Diocese of Rochester and elsewhere to the need for a

fundamental change of culture not only around safeguarding but around transparency and accountability in leadership and governance. As I said above, we would be pleased to take up the Council's offer of such a dialogue in due course, so that we can explore together how to grow safe and healthy cultures and behaviour at every level of the Church's life. That surely has to be our top priority in the years to come.

My colleagues the Lay and Clergy Chairs of the Rochester Diocesan Synod will be sending you their own response. Given that your letter to us is now in the public domain, you will understand that Rochester Diocesan Synod members and others will want to know how I have responded, and therefore this letter will also be made public.

With my prayers and good wishes for the New Year.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan Loffen'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross-like mark at the beginning.

**Jonathan, Bishop of Rochester**

cc: Mr Matthew Girt, Diocesan Secretary  
The Rev Canon Jeremy Blunden, House of Clergy Chair  
Mrs Sarah Poole, House of Laity Chair