

SAFEGUARDING – WHY SAFER RECRUITMENT IS SO IMPORTANT

Safer recruitment in the church is a challenge. The church is hugely vulnerable and safer recruitment is one way of keeping our most vulnerable safe.

What makes church so vulnerable? Church is open to all, everyone is welcome. Think about that for a second.....everyone.....who does that mean? Everyone means everyone, good and bad, safe and unsafe, kind and unkind, innocent and devious, vulnerable and not vulnerable.

A loving church is one that wants to keep those who are most vulnerable within it safe. What does vulnerable mean? Yes, we can all be vulnerable, but that does not mean we are vulnerable to being abused and that is what safeguarding is about. Most of us can be vulnerable but still very capable of realising when someone is doing something to us that we do not want or like. We remain capable of saying no or reporting that person to the authorities. Being vulnerable for a safeguarding purpose is a person who does not realise or understand that they are being abused or they are a person who does not have the ability or power to stop the abuse.

Examples of vulnerability:

A child (anyone under 18 years). Children are all considered vulnerable. They are reliant on others to care and provide for them. It is easy for those people in a position of power to abuse or neglect those in their care. So, parents, guardians, carers. There are repeated examples of this in the media all the time, cases where parents have abused their children and others have had concerns and have done nothing because they thought it was someone else's responsibility. Recent examples include – the death of baby Star Thompson <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-59599884>, Arthur Labinjo-Hughes <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/02/arthur-labinjo-hughes-lockdown-played-part-in-childs-violent-death> and 10 month old Finley Boden <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-65697782>

A child with communication needs is 3 times more likely to be abused. Why? A perpetrator will pick a child who cannot talk or communicate as this reduces the risk of them being caught. A child with communication

needs is much less likely to be able to articulate that they are a victim of some of the worst types of abuse.

Children cannot easily protect themselves. They need those around them to keep them safe. If those who are closest to them are the abusers, they need everyone else to keep them safe. That is why safeguarding is everyone's responsibility.

All children are vulnerable. Teenagers especially so. They are in a period of their life when growth is rapid. They want to be independent, they want to experience life, but their brains are not yet fully mature. They are very vulnerable to exploitation and risk. Teenagers are vulnerable because they think they know everything; they can be difficult to manage for parents/carers/guardians and that combination can lead them to be in a position where abuse can occur. This is just one example, there are so many more - <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/19025408.oxfordshire-teenager-exploited-drug-gangs-failed-authorities/>

One of the most widely misunderstood terms is '**vulnerable adult**'. Some examples would be:

A victim of domestic abuse. 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime. 2 women a week will die at the hands of a partner or ex-partner in England and Wales. <https://www.cps.gov.uk/crime-type/domestic-abuse>

A victim of domestic abuse lives in fear. Victims can be very controlled they may not be able to do anything without permission from their abuser. Eating, drinking and going to the toilet can be ways in which victims can be controlled. All of which goes on behind closed doors. Domestic abuse is often a 'hidden crime'. That is why these victims are considered to be vulnerable for safeguarding purposes.

Vulnerable adults are adults who have care or support needs and as a result of those needs are unable to protect themselves from abuse.

Examples of real cases can be found here -

<https://www.hampshiresab.org.uk/learning-from-experience-database/serious-case-reviews/>

What does a perpetrator look like? A person who wants to abuse a child or a vulnerable adult must first gain the trust of those who surround that

child or adult, parents, carers, church family. A perpetrator can look like anyone! They may be charming, charismatic, trustworthy. These are the characteristics that helps them to gain trust. Once trust is gained, they have access to the child or vulnerable adult. When it comes it protecting children and vulnerable adults, we must always be very careful. We need to ensure those who have access have been checked as thoroughly as possible and then carefully supervised in roles.

Surely not in the Diocese of Guildford

Sometimes the best way to understand is by hearing about real examples. The following cases are all from within the Diocese of Guildford and have happened in the last three years. They demonstrate why **Safer Recruitment** is so important.

A male member of the PCC (in his 60's) sent a 14-year-old female parishioner a number of Facebook messages. The messages were very bland and general but encouraging her to engage in a conversation with him. He did not know the girl other than she attended the same church. Her mother discovered the messages and reported them to the incumbent. The incumbent described the male as a very friendly person, someone who would talk to anyone, he felt confident the messages were sent innocently. Safer recruitment recommends that all PCC members should have a DBS check if their parish has children's or vulnerable adult activities. The male had not been DBS checked. If he had been checked it would have been discovered that he was a registered sex offender, his target victims being teenage girls.

A male pastoral visitor began to make unannounced visits with a vulnerable adult lady. Whilst at the address he began to touch her inappropriately. She was suffering from extreme mental health and was unable to leave her home.

A parish suddenly found themselves without a youth leader. They decided to engage a young man from their church on a temporary basis. He was from a church family and had been attending the church since birth. He was trusted. Safer recruitment was not carried out. Best practice was not followed, in that he was often in the company of children on his own. A warrant was executed at his home address by police, and he was arrested

for uploading indecent images of children. He admitted to being addicted to adult pornography.

A child protection vigilante group attended the home address of a PCC member and challenged him about his on-line interactions with the profiles of young girls. As a result, he was arrested by Surrey Police and convicted of a number of child sex offences.

A child protection vigilante group attended the home address of a church officer and challenged him about his on-line interactions with a 13-year-old girl. He was later arrested by Surrey Police.

A member of clergy who offered to mentor young adult men who were vulnerable adults. Whilst in their company he touched them inappropriately.

A church officer was arrested at his home address following the execution of a police warrant. In interview he admitted to an adult pornography addiction. His search history showed that his search preference was for 'teens'. He had a previous police caution for sending sexual messages to a 14-year-old girl in his previous Diocese.

In 2017 concerns were raised by church members about an elderly parishioner who lived at home but required a care agency to make daily visits. She was reliant on the care providers. The lady made discreet complaints to the visiting church members and they in turn raised the matter to the incumbent. The matter was not referred to the Diocesan Safeguarding Team as the lady was not thought to be a vulnerable adult. She very much was, she did not have the capability to care for herself, she relied on others and because of that, she did not feel she could make a complaint. She remained living for a further 5 years without review. Had the concern been shared with the DSA a professional referral could have been made to Adult Social Care and a strong case presented seeking an assessment of her care needs.

In 2019 a report from received from a person alleging historic abuse by a church organist and choir master against them when they were a child. The offending dated back to the 1970's. The offender remained active in the church community. He was convicted of sexual offences against a child in 2024.

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and safer recruitment is part of that. We have to be so careful about who we put our trust in. By ensuring safer recruitment checks are in place and ensuring best practice, we are doing everything possible to keep our vulnerable safe.

The Charity Commission strongly recommends that trustees of a charity that host activities for children or vulnerable adults be DBS checked to enhanced level.

<https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/safeguarding-e-manual/safer-recruitment-and-people-management-guidance>

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