

OXFORD DIOCESAN SYNOD

Safeguarding in the Diocese of Oxford

This paper for Diocesan Synod will draw together learning from our recent audit, consider the impact of the current events within the Church of England on safeguarding and reflect on how we move forward in our aim to continue to make our churches safe places for all. This paper provides background information to the opportunity when Diocesan Synod meets for questions and discussion, including in groups, on safeguarding and the wider issues which it has raised over recent months.

In June 2024 an external safeguarding audit was undertaken of Safeguarding within the Diocese. The audit report which also focused on the areas within the national standards can be accessed [here](#). This paper will draw out both the audits and our own assessments of our strengths and weaknesses and where we will be focusing our energies over the next year.

The audit was comprehensive and rigorous. The team reviewed 250 documents and 335 survey responses. Six focus groups were held and there were 30 engagement sessions involving 82 people.

Overall, the audit considered safeguarding in the diocese to be robust. The team found areas of strength within our safeguarding work and areas we need to build upon and invest in. The audit recognised the significant work that has gone into improving our safeguarding provision over the last few years and was clear that the diocese is taking safeguarding seriously, not just around compliance but also in relation to prevention and culture change.

The report aligns well with our safeguarding strategy. It didn't highlight areas of good practice or improvements needed of which we were not already aware, but it crystalised our direction of travel and reinforced where we need to be focusing our energies over the next year.

An action plan to address recommendations from the audit report has been agreed by the Diocesan Safeguarding Panel and approved by Bishop's Council.

Where are we now?

The publication of the Makin Review in early November and subsequent events has had a profound impact on the workload of the safeguarding team. The team have seen referrals and requests for advice double and have been involved in high profile national cases. The average number of referrals from January to October 2024 were 18. The number for November, December, January were 35, 33 and 42 respectively, a monthly average of 36. There has also been a monthly average of 120 enquiries since November compared to a pre-Makin Report average of 84. This has understandably had an impact on the capacity of the team to undertake preventative work as the team have needed to manage the increase in reactive work. This is not a resourcing concern if this increase levels out over the next few months, however the longer-term impacts are unknown. The diocese has put temporary additional resource in place for the team, for which we are grateful, and the situation is being closely monitored.

The team have also needed to be involved in more diocesan and area meetings to give people the time and space needed to reflect on recent events and hear reassurances about safeguarding at a diocesan and parish level.

There has been further pressure on the team from the need to manage additional cases with the National Safeguarding Team (NST) where people had been criticised within the Makin Review, following the four-stage methodology devised by NST which can be accessed [here](#).

This collective pressure on the safeguarding team has resulted in the momentum that has been in place, to increase preventative work through giving further support to parishes and engage in culture change at all levels, being hindered by the sheer volume of work which the team is managing.

That said, it is important that we do not lose sight of our strategic plan which is underpinned by the National Safeguarding Standards and the remainder of the paper will explore progress and challenges in these areas.

Objective 1: Prevention

Progress/what is going well:

- Safeguarding happens in parishes and therefore it was encouraging that the preventative work that is carried out in the diocese was commended within the audit report. The auditors were particularly impressed with the establishment of the Parish Safeguarding Officer (PSO) working group which works collaboratively with PSOs to understand the challenges they face and how the Diocesan Safeguarding Team (DST) can support them. The group asked that there be a specific page for safeguarding within parishes on our website where all resources for PSOs can be [found](#). This has been actioned alongside a complete overhaul of the safeguarding website earlier in 2024.
- The safeguarding team continue to do all we can to make the role of PSO less burdensome and to try to ensure that PSOs feel recognised and supported. The area safeguarding system we have in place means that each Area Safeguarding Advisor can build relationships and offer support to PSOs in their area. There will be a further service in November 2025 to thank PSOs at Christ Church Cathedral and the team continue to run drop-in sessions for PSOs.
- An area plan has been developed with area teams to address PSO vacancies and training as well as working with area teams to encourage culture change. Coffee and meet sessions have been held in some deaneries to encourage PSOs to meet each other and to allow for networking opportunities. Area Advisors, capacity allowing, have been attending chapter and deanery meetings to engage incumbents, LLMs and Area Deans to support the development of positive safeguarding cultures in parishes. Area drop-in sessions continue to be run with sessions on topics like how to manage the risk of those who have sexually offended within churches.
- Currently over 80% of parishes are 'live' on the Parish Dashboard and parishes now have access to the Safeguarding Hub.

- The audit recommended that the safeguarding team undertake quality assurance dip sampling of the dashboard within parishes. Capacity allowing, the safeguarding team are undertaking five audits within each area every year which will include this element of quality assurance.
- We continue to ensure that our training is delivered to a high standard and are receiving consistently good feedback for the delivery of our leadership course that not only raises awareness of abuse and how to respond well to disclosures but also helps people to understand the importance of positive safeguarding cultures. From January 2024 until October 2024, 4,910 participants had attended Church of England safeguarding courses.

Areas for development/challenges:

- One of the perennial issues with preventative work is that it will always be addressed after risk has been managed within any reactive work. It has helped that area teams have become more involved in this work but there is still much the safeguarding team need to do, and progress can appear slow due to the demands of managing risk. However, the team do have some time to undertake this work and the recent increase in team capacity has helped to address this imbalance. There are still some parishes (approx. 66) that do not have a PSO in place, however this figure includes group ministries which are covered by one PSO and this is being further explored by the DST. The team is aware that there is a high turnover of PSOs. The team will, in collaboration with clergy, arrange for exit interviews to be undertaken with departing PSOs.
- It was evident in the audit that some good work (i.e. workshops, newsletters) has taken place to raise awareness of different types of abuse which could occur within parishes, but more can be done. The team ran webinars in February 2025 on domestic abuse and on managing those who have sexually abused, and there are plans to hold further webinars on elder/financial abuse and trauma-informed practice. The webinars will be aimed at incumbents, church wardens and PSOs.
- The team are very keen to spend time in parishes and give direct support to clergy and PSOs, but the demands of risk management and reactive work means that preventative work remained at approximately 20% of Area Safeguarding Advisors' (ASA) time before the Makin Report. Reactive work is currently 100% of ASAs' time – as noted above, we hope (and expect) that this will be a relatively short term issue following the Makin Review.

Objective 2: Culture, Leadership and Capacity

Progress/What is going well:

- The diocese took an undefended approach to the audit, and it was recognised that senior leaders across the diocese are committed to making sure that safeguarding is part of their roles and responsibilities as well as ensuring that it has the reach and influence needed to affect culture change. This has been demonstrated by inviting the Head of Safeguarding to attend Bishop's Staff Meetings.
- The Head of Safeguarding has undergone certification to allow her to move from the role of Diocesan Safeguarding Advisor (DSA) to Diocesan Safeguarding Officer (DSO) under Amending Canon 42 which is the legal mechanism for implementing the IICSA Recommendation. The DSO is no longer primarily there to 'advise' the Bishop, but to have responsibility, independently of the Bishop, for safeguarding matters. This is an expansion of the responsibilities of the role: the DSO is to have 'professional leadership on and management of safeguarding', rather than just to advise on 'matters relating to safeguarding'.
- The Lead Safeguarding Bishop meets monthly with the Head of Safeguarding and there are regular meetings between the Head of Safeguarding and the Bishop of Oxford. With all senior clergy within the diocese there is an open-door policy that is evident in active engagement with the safeguarding team.
- The Diocesan Safeguarding Panel (DSP) currently has excellent participation from our statutory partners including TVP, Probation, and Children's Social Care. During her time in post, the Head of Safeguarding has witnessed a higher level of challenge and scrutiny from DSP with the addition of statutory representation.

Areas for development/challenges:

- The safeguarding team have been working closely with Theological Educational Institutions (TEIs) and religious communities and there needs to be further work undertaken whereby TEIs are encouraged to undertake safeguarding audits and for religious communities to better understand necessary roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding. There will be a further meeting with all safeguarding leads from religious communities in 2025. The responsibility for safeguarding in TEIs and religious communities (especially around ensuring healthy and safe cultures) lies ultimately with those institutions.

Objective 3: Recognising, Assessing and Managing Risk

Progress/What is going well:

- Practice standards have been developed for the operational work that is undertaken by the safeguarding team. The standards work alongside the House of Bishops' guidance and aims to ensure consistency in each archdeaconry as well as contribute to the development of best practice.
- The team now have four Area Safeguarding Advisors (ASA) which means that each archdeaconry has its own ASA. This has addressed concerns around the capacity of one ASA to deal with the high workload in the Dorchester/Oxford area.
- The team support parishes to manage the risk of those who have sexually offended. We currently have 54 people worshipping in our churches who have sexually offended. The team work with parishes to put in place monitoring groups. The people in these groups are aware of the risk and the triggers which may increase risk. They also meet with the person regularly as part of the monitoring plan.
- To ensure that understanding and management of risk does not just remain within the safeguarding team, meetings are held four times per year with senior clergy in each archdeaconry to discuss current cases and make sure that the Archdeacon and Associate Archdeacon are aware of all cases and safeguarding agreements in their areas. This approach ensures that ASAs are aware of churches with large numbers of children, vacancies and churches.
- The Head of Safeguarding is working closely with the Deliverance Ministry Team and has oversight of referrals into this team.

Areas for development/challenges:

- A further challenge will be any impact for the safeguarding team of the Children and Young People's strategy (including the national bid). The team will work with the children and youth ministry team to reinforce the need for robust safeguarding cultures in all churches, including where new volunteers and youth ministers are based, taking into consideration the limited capacity of the safeguarding team.

Objective 4: Victims and Survivors

Progress/what is going well:

- The Oxford Survivor Group continues to work with the diocese to advise on survivor support and engagement. It meets six times per year and has been instrumental in the setting up of a chaplaincy for survivors of abuse in a church context. Based in the Safeguarding Team, the 'Chaplaincy for Survivors' will offer support to those affected by abuse by providing pastoral and spiritual care. We have recruited two chaplains, and the Survivor Group is running training in early 2025 for the chaplains. This initiative is based on concern expressed in the Survivor Group that there is limited and unsupervised spiritual support for survivors outside of informal structures.
- The diocese continues to support a number of survivors through counselling provision and signposting to other services.

Challenges/areas for development:

- The audit was clear that the services offered needed to be tested by victims and survivors. The Survivor Group is engaging with the recommendations and supporting the safeguarding team to test the accessibility and applicability of the support we offer.
- The survivor group would like there to be further collaboration between DSP and the group, which the DSP (which already has survivor representation) welcomed at its meeting earlier this week. A report will be produced by the group for DSP to ensure more time is spent considering support for, and engagement with, survivors.

Objective 5: Learning, Supervision and Support

Progress/what is going well:

- The safeguarding team all receive reflective supervision from the Head of Safeguarding. The diocese is part of the Regional Model Pilot to address IICSA 1 and 8 that was launched in September 2022. As part of this pilot project the Head of Safeguarding receives professional supervision from a Practice Safeguarding Lead overseen by the National Safeguarding Team. The diocese is in the process of exploring group supervision for clergy which is being led by the Director of People and the Bishop of Oxford.

Challenges/areas for development:

- The team, alongside senior clergy will engage with the learning from recent reviews such as the [Scolding Review](#) and the [Makin Review](#) and consider how the recommendations and learning from these reviews will shape and focus our safeguarding practice. It is critical that we learn from these reviews and explore environments and structures which may make abuse more likely to occur.

Conclusion

We have taken recognised steps forward in safeguarding as a diocese over the last few years and we need to maintain the momentum and drive to keep moving forward.

The events of the past few months have been distressing and demoralising for our PSOs, our safeguarding team, our clergy, laity and the wider public. That opens us up to the risk

that safeguarding practice becomes defensive, anxiety ridden and overly driven by compliance, so we are aware of this and will guard against it.

Rather we will aim for a culture that understands safeguarding to be our Christian imperative where we are called to take care of the young, the vulnerable and most in need. We will continue to listen to and learn from those who have experienced abuse, ensuring that their voices shape our practices and continue to share the message that this is a shared mission and we will strive to do all we can to bring about positive safeguarding cultures across the diocese.

Dr Louise Whitehead

Head of Safeguarding

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