

CATHOLIC SAFEGUARDING STANDARDS AGENCY

Diocese of Northampton Baseline Audit Report Executive Summary

November 2023

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1. Introduction

1.1 This is an executive summary of the baseline safeguarding audit report for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton. The audit was undertaken by the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency (CSSA) as part of its programme of baseline audits throughout the 22 Roman Catholic Dioceses of England and Wales. The audit was undertaken in accordance with the contractual agreement between the Diocese of Northampton and the CSSA. The full version of this report has been provided to the Trustees of the Diocesan charity¹.

1.2 The audit is based on information drawn from various sources, including:

- A self-assessment and supporting evidence provided by the Diocese of Northampton;
- Case audits of individual safeguarding cases and lower-level concerns;
- Individual and small-group interviews with key Diocesan personnel;
- Online surveys of Clergy and Parish Safeguarding Representatives (PSRs); and
- Focus groups with Clergy and PSRs.

1.3 The Diocese of Northampton is situated in the East of England and East Midlands regions, and covers the counties of Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire, and Berkshire (north of the Thames). The Diocese consists of 69 parishes, which are served by 53 Priests and 31 Permanent Deacons, together with a number of priests from Religious Orders, who are led by Bishop David Oakley. Safeguarding governance is provided by the Diocesan Safeguarding Advisory Board and Safeguarding Subcommittee, which report to the full Board of Trustees. The Safeguarding Team consists of a full-time Safeguarding Coordinator and a part-time Safeguarding Support Officer, who primarily work at Bishop's House in Northampton.

¹ Northampton Roman Catholic Diocesan Trust; charity number 234091. The charity has one trustee, (The) Northampton Roman Catholic Diocese Trustee (company number 00442173); Directors of this company comprise an even balance of lay and clergy, who comprise the full Board of Trustees.

2. Audit Grading

2.1 Practice was assessed against the eight safeguarding standards² adopted by the Catholic Church in England and Wales. The CSSA Diocesan Maturity Matrix was used to grade audit evidence, with scores from the individual sub-standards being used to calculate the overall standard gradings. Each standard was graded on an ascending seven-point scale of *Below Basic*, *Basic*, *Early Progress*, *Firm Progress*, *Results Being Achieved*, *Comprehensive Assurance*, and *Exemplary*. Grades for individual standards were combined to produce an overall grading, as displayed in the below table.

OVERALL GRADING FOR THE DIOCESE OF NORTHAMPTON	Comprehensive Assurance
Standard 1: Safeguarding is embedded in the Church body's leadership, governance, ministry, and culture	Comprehensive Assurance
Standard 2: Communicating the Church's Safeguarding Message	Comprehensive Assurance
Standard 3: Engaging with and Caring for those who report having been harmed	Exemplary
Standard 4: Effective Management of Allegations and Concerns	Comprehensive Assurance
Standard 5: Management and Support of Subjects of Allegations and Concerns (respondents)	Comprehensive Assurance
Standard 6: Robust Human Resource Management	Comprehensive Assurance
Standard 7: Training and Support for Safeguarding	Comprehensive Assurance
Standard 8: Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement	Firm Progress

² Full details of the eight standards and underpinning sub-standards are available at:
<https://catholicsafeguarding.org.uk/resources/the-eight-national-safeguarding-standards/>

3. Summary of Overall Findings

3.1 The current audit was a wholly positive experience that found good practice across all eight national safeguarding standards. Safeguarding practice in relation to Standard 3 is an area of particular strength for the Diocese, and often constituted best practice in terms of engaging with and supporting victim-survivors. The Diocese was fully compliant with statutory and regulatory requirements.

3.2 The Diocese has a real culture of safeguarding, which is driven and modelled by the Diocesan leadership and reinforced by a strong safeguarding policy statement. Safeguarding governance processes are robust and effective, with proper scrutiny provided by the Trustees, the Safeguarding Subcommittee, and Safeguarding Advisory Board; information flow and working relationships between these bodies and the Safeguarding Team is conducive to good, collaborative safeguarding practice. The Diocese should continue to review its resources in this area to ensure that the Safeguarding Team can continue to work to the same high standard and that the Safeguarding Advisory Board can maintain good statutory agency representation.

3.3 Safeguarding communications are diffuse, high-quality, and driven by the Diocesan leadership. The Director of Communications has an excellent working relationship with the Safeguarding Team and Diocesan leadership, and provides good support to safeguarding governance processes and complex or critical incident casework. Significant work has been completed to root safeguarding communications in the daily business and ministry of the Diocese, and safeguarding messaging is meaningful and positive. The recent safeguarding communication plan would benefit from further dissemination and embedding, and the Diocese ought to consider how it can further engage with its stakeholders to evaluate and develop safeguarding communications.

3.4 The Diocese is completing inspirational and innovative work to engage with, listen to, and support victim-survivors. The Bishop sets aside time on a bi-monthly basis so that victim-survivors can request a personal meeting with him; he makes a strong commitment to victim-survivors via the Diocesan website and takes a

lead role in initiatives such as the Isaiah Journey³ and LOUDfence⁴. The Healing and Reconciliation Group is an innovative way to involve and prioritise victim-survivors in safeguarding responses, and further signals the Diocesan desire to work collaboratively with victim-survivors. The Diocese provides a compassionate and bespoke response to each victim-survivor, making best use of its modest resources to fund individual counselling and initiatives that can provide comfort to many, such as the Diocesan Healing Garden. Practice in this area could be developed even further by formalising the Diocesan offer in a bespoke Victim Care Charter and by publicising the excellent work being done to support victim-survivors.

3.5 The Diocese provides robust and appropriate responses to both substantive safeguarding cases and lower-level concerns⁵; responses are underpinned by formal policy, processes, and guidance and reinforced by good quality training and ongoing support. Case recording practices are excellent, with transparent, evidenced-based, and analytical decision-making throughout case materials. The Safeguarding Team are supported by a range of effective supervisory processes, with excellent case oversight and support from the Diocesan leadership. Whilst there has been some valuable ad hoc learning derived from casework, the Diocese ought to formalise regular opportunities to reflect on cases and extract further learning. Six of the seven individual cases reviewed during the audit were graded as *Outstanding*, with the remaining case being graded as *Good*.

3.6 Clergy and lay respondents receive a consistent response from the Diocese, with an excellent balance between risk management and support. Safeguarding Plans are bespoke documents which are underpinned by high-quality risk assessments and which encourage safe engagement with the Church by means of appropriate restrictions and supports. All respondents receive a pastoral response, tailored to their individual needs, and statutory, safeguarding, and canonical investigations are appropriately coordinated. Casework demonstrated that lay employees and clergy work closely and effectively to ensure the wellbeing of respondents. An area for development is the creation of a policy that

³ The Isaiah Journey is a working group of the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales, dedicated to supporting individual and communities affected by sexual abuse within the Church. The group is responsible for developing liturgical, spiritual, and theological resources in the area of safeguarding for the Church in England & Wales.

⁴ 'LOUDfence' is an initiative promoted by the 'Survivors' Voices' organization, which involves people tying coloured ribbons and messages to a fence in a public show of support and solidarity with those affected by abuse.

⁵ Lower-level concerns are situations in which concern is expressed about a person's welfare or behaviour, but in which there is no substantive allegation of harmful or abusive behaviour.

formally sets out the Diocesan offer of support to clergy respondents, as well as providing guidance to support clergy respondents' understanding and engaging with any investigatory processes.

3.7 Human resources management is excellent. The Diocese adheres to robust Safer Recruitment processes, which are unpinned by readily available policies and applied with equal diligence to leaders, clergy, lay employees, and volunteers. DBS⁶ processes are managed very well: clergy DBS compliance is excellent and is a prerequisite for obtaining a celebret⁷; the volunteers DBS system has been overhauled and a commendable effort has been made to cleanse volunteer lists and reduce a post-pandemic backlog. The Diocese should make a final push to clear any remaining DBS checks, and explore further promotion of its whistleblowing and safeguarding complaints policy.

3.8 Training is also well managed by the Diocese. Clergy compliance is almost 100%⁸, with a strong message from the Diocesan leadership that safeguarding training is mandatory, and good oversight from Diocesan safeguarding governing bodies. The Safeguarding Team dedicates considerable effort to their own training and continuous professional development, as well as delivering a range of useful bespoke training and providing excellent signposting to a host of useful training and resources for clergy and lay. PSRs are provided with comprehensive safeguarding inductions, support materials, and ongoing guidance and support. The Diocese could further develop its training offer by completing a formal Training Needs Analysis and diversifying its provision of in-person training and networking opportunities.

3.9 There is also good work underway to quality assure and develop Diocesan safeguarding practice. Parish audits have been completed to assess compliance with national and Diocesan communication standards, and to cleanse volunteer lists to drive more effective DBS practice. The leadership is also able to reassure itself regarding casework quality via the effective oversight provided by the Safeguarding Advisory Board and Safeguarding Subcommittee; this has also been reaffirmed via the Diocesan involvement in a recent Domestic Homicide

⁶ DBS – the Disclosure and Barring Service; a government organisation which facilitates the completion of criminal records checks, as well as consulting other material and databases which might suggest that someone is unsuitable to work with children or adults at risk.

⁷ A celebret is a letter, or more commonly now an identification card, from a Bishop testifying that the bearer is a priest in good standing, thereby allowing him to seek permission to celebrate mass in another diocese.

⁸ A single Deacon was booked to complete an outstanding course a short while after the audit period.

Review. The Diocese should seek to develop further in this area by ratifying and embedding its draft Safeguarding Implementation Plan, and exploring how this might be supplemented by an annual safeguarding report and a more formal case/practice audit system.

3.10 The good practice summarised above is reflected in the overall audit grading of *Comprehensive Assurance*.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Areas for development primarily comprise building on existing work or taking forward matters that the Diocese has already identified as part of the audit self-assessment process. The following are broad areas for development:

- Further review and development of safeguarding resources.
- Further development and embedding of quality assurance, continuous improvement, and learning processes.
- Dissemination and promotion of key safeguarding policies.
- Further review and development of the Diocesan training and support offer.
- Formalisation and publicisation of the support available to victim-survivors.
- Review of clergy respondent support processes.
- Further work on volunteer DBS figures and systems.

4.2 To support improvement in these areas, the following recommendations are made:

- Continued development of the succession planning process for Safeguarding Advisory Board membership.
- Review of Safeguarding Advisory Board membership to identify any gaps in representation and encourage quarterly attendance by statutory agencies.
- Develop a formal mechanism for regular review of Safeguarding Team workload and available resources; to include horizon scanning for increased business demand and consideration of critical incident responses.
- Ratification of the draft Safeguarding Implementation Plan, ensuring that actions are owned by individuals with the right skills, knowledge, and resources.
- Development of an annual safeguarding report for trustees, to maximise learning opportunities and to inform the review and development of the Safeguarding Implementation Plan.
- Consideration of formal internal or external processes to quality assure safeguarding practice, such as a peer review system for casework.
- Dissemination and embedding of the safeguarding communication plan; stakeholder engagement to be used further to evaluate safeguarding communications and inform ongoing plan development.
- Development of a Training Needs Analysis to identify any gaps in provision and further develop the Diocesan training offer.
- Development of Diocesan training and support offer to provide increased opportunities for in-person and evening/weekend networking and training.

- Formalisation of the Diocesan support offer for victim-survivors in a bespoke Victim Care Charter or Commitment that can be made readily available via the Diocesan website.
- Maximise victim-survivor engagement by further publicisation of the excellent work of the Healing & Reconciliation Group, Healing Garden, and other Diocesan/joint initiatives; seek further opportunities to share best practice in this area with counterparts across England & Wales.
- Formalisation of the Diocesan support offer for clergy respondents in a bespoke policy covering housing, financial, legal, pastoral, and physical/mental support; to be informed by learning from recent complex case and to include clear guidance for those subject to an allegation.
- Develop formal processes for identifying learning from allegations, concerns, and victim-survivors.
- Final drive to cleanse volunteer lists and deal with any remaining rechecks; ongoing promotion of digital recheck system, and regular list provision, to help sustain good practice in this area.
- Further development of the safeguarding complaints policy to include the CSSA escalation process; further promotion of both complaints and whistleblowing policies via internal distribution and prominent website placement.

5. Arrangements for Follow-up

5.1 In accordance with the CSSA follow-up pathway for Dioceses achieving a grading of *Comprehensive Assurance*, the Diocese of Northampton will be invited to attend a six-month check-in with the lead auditor to review progress against the recommendations. A full re-audit should take place during the second half of 2026, with annual “top-up” self-assessments to be completed in the intervening period.