

Church of England Safeguarding - the case of Fr Alan Griffin

On 9 July 2021 the Courts and Tribunals website published the Coroners “Prevention of Future Deaths report”¹ into the death of Fr Alan Griffin, and the response by the Church of England to the criticisms of the Coroner.

The CofE recognised some failings they had made, but they disagreed with the Coroner who had argued that unsubstantiated rumours should be checked before being passed on. The CofE argue that the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) requires that everything must be passed on without checking.

The Coroner reported:

“Alan Griffin hanged himself at home on Sunday, 8 November 2020. He killed himself because he could not cope with an investigation into his conduct, the detail of and the source for which he had never been told. The investigation had been ongoing for over a year and was being conducted by his former Church of England diocese and subsequently also by his current Roman Catholic diocese (to whom the Church of England had passed a short, written summary of allegations that contained inaccuracies

[...] Father Griffin did not abuse children. He did not have sex with young people under the age of 18. He did not visit prostitutes. [...] And there was no evidence that he did any of these things.

[...] The investigation into Father Griffin began because the head of operations of the Anglican Diocese of London & Westminster was retiring in 2019, and suggested to his archdeacon that he undertake a “brain dump” of information he had acquired over the preceding 20 years. The archdeacon agreed.

The two met in early February 2019, and then subsequently with the director of human resources (HR) & safeguarding, and a note taker. The head of operations’ recollections were used to create a document called the Two Cities audit report 2019, describing 42 members of the clergy of the London & Westminster Diocese of the Church of England (CofE).

The head of operations told me that no safeguarding concern ever came to his attention regarding Father Griffin.

[...] What the head of operations did say in his meetings in 2019 was that Father Griffin had told him he had “used rent boys”, which the head of operations understood to mean he had visited adult male prostitutes. [...] Notwithstanding the view expressed to me by the head of operations that the phrase related to visiting adult male prostitutes, it formed the basis of the allegation of sex with minors.

[..] I recalled the head of operations on the last day of inquest to ask if it was possible that this had in fact been his own term rather than Father Griffin’s. He immediately said yes, the term was his term and Father Griffin had not used it. He said that Father

¹ <https://www.judiciary.uk/publications/alan-griffin/>

Griffin had never used the term rent boys. He thought that Father Griffin was generous with hospitality and paid for meals out and perhaps he had misinterpreted that. He said that Father Griffin had never actually said that he had paid for sex. Yet in an investigation lasting over a year, the head of operations did not volunteer these details and nobody obtained them from him.

I made a finding of fact at inquest that Father Griffin did not pay for sex.

[...] The archdeacon seemed to envisage that others might interview the head of operations at a later stage, but nobody thought that was needed. Thus nobody fully explored what the head of operations actually meant when he volunteered his recollections; what he was actually alleging; and the source for his disclosures and any allegations.

[...] The archdeacon told me that it was not his call to decide what was and what was not gossip, and so he had asked the director of HR & safeguarding to be present at subsequent meetings with the head of operations. The director of HR & safeguarding told me that it was not for her, but for the safeguarding professionals to make an independent assessment and to decide what allegations were investigated and how. The safeguarding manager said that she was invited to the meetings simply as a note taker [...]

Thus nobody took responsibility for steering the direction of the process from start to finish and for making coherent, reasoned, evidence based decisions that made sense in the context of the information that was available to the team as a whole. [Coroners report, pages 1-5].

So, in short, it was a case of ‘Chinese whispers’: Fr Griffin said he paid for meals out with men. The head of operations reported that Fr Griffin paid “rent boys” (meaning adults). The safeguarding manager assumed “boys” meant children, and recorded that Fr Griffin had paid to have sex with underage boys.

This allegation was then passed on by the CofE to the Roman Catholic Church to investigate, because Fr Griffin had left the CofE and become a Roman Catholic.

“Thus, the allegations against Father Griffin passed on to the Roman Catholic Church were supported by no complainant, no witness and no accuser. There was no concern raised by a victim of abuse, by a child, parent, teacher, youth worker or other witness. No person said they had been the subject of or had witnessed any concerning behaviour, save that Father Griffin had been seen to have dinner with men in an Italian restaurant, for which he might have paid the bill. The CofE safeguarding adviser finally tasked with dealing with the matter did not consider that there was any safeguarding concern. And yet on this basis, Alan Griffin found himself to be under investigation for over a year, without ever having the allegations and their source plainly set out for him.” [Coroners report, page 6].

The Coroner writes that during her investigation:

“I then received submissions on behalf of the Church of England regarding any prevention of future deaths report. These submissions impressed upon me that referrals to child protection and safeguarding professionals must not be reduced and urged me not to include any concerns that may be taken as a criticism of clerics or staff for not filtering or verifying allegations.

It seems to me that a duty of care and competence in a situation such as this one is not in any way incompatible with the moral duty we all have, and the legal duty that bodies such as the church have, to try to keep children and the vulnerable safe.”
[Coroners report, page 7].

The Church of England response² to the Coroner’s report accepts some failings, and say that they have commissioned a Lessons Learned Review. However, they insist that it would have been wrong for the Archdeacon to seek to check the accuracy of what the operations manager had said. They argue that the IICSA report and CofE Guidelines require that everything must be passed on unchecked. Only a safeguarding professional is allowed to check accuracy:

“The Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) was a wide-ranging inquiry into many British Institutions. [...] The Church of England accepted the recommendations made by the inquiry in full. [...] Both the IICSA recommendations and the existing House of Bishop’s Guidance to clergy are strong and clear in their instruction that all safeguarding concerns or allegations should be reported to the Diocesan Safeguarding Team in the first instance and in any event within 24 hours, and that it is those professionals who should decide, independently, whether investigation or action needs to follow.

This is to ensure untrained clergy are not investigating or using their own judgement, and to establish consistency of process. Although elements of our response to and handling of the concerns about Fr Griffin fell well short of good practice and need improvement, the principle of reporting, without investigation or filtering, of safeguarding concerns to qualified professionals, is one which is well established and one which we defend.”
[CofE response, page 5].

“The Guidance is clear that it is inappropriate for clergy and staff to filter or investigate any apparent or alleged safeguarding related concerns and instructs them to refer these directly to safeguarding professionals. The Church of England has worked hard to ensure that all clergy and staff are clear about their reporting obligations. We were and are keen that this good work is not undermined.”
[CofE response, page 11].

The Church of England has a history, in the past, of failing to pass on allegations in other cases, and as a consequence abusers have not been brought to justice, victims have been let down and more people have been abused. In our absolute determination that nothing like that must ever happen again, we appear to have gone to the opposite extreme.

² Response by the Diocese of London and Lambeth Palace to the Regulation 28 Report (9 July 2021) to the Church of England in relation to the death by suicide of Fr Alan Griffin on 8 November 2020.

I think that there is a middle way. When the operations manager used the term “rent boys” when speaking to the Archdeacon, the Archdeacon should have been allowed to ask what the operations manager meant by the term, and whether Fr Griffin had ever used that term himself. This would have then produced an accurate record of what was actually alleged. If that had been done, Fr Griffin would probably still be alive today.

I think that the Church of England needs to recognise that possibility and consider amending its Guidelines.

Adrian Vincent.
5 September 2021