

## **Review of the Independent Safeguarding Board<sup>1</sup> - cock-up not conspiracy**

The Church of England, like most organisations, has a poor historic safeguarding record. Victims and survivors of abuse by those in positions of church power have been let down, and those in authority often ‘closed ranks’, defending the perpetrator rather than the victim. The Church has been working hard to improve and in recent years there have been a huge number of reviews, reports, new procedures and training. The Church still does not always get it right, but it is committed to getting it right.

In October 2020 the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (ILCSA) published its report into the Anglican Church. The Church of England was keen to implement all of the recommendations, and on the month of publication, the Church of England’s National Safeguarding Steering Group (NSSG):

“recommended going beyond the Recommendations to establish an independent structure of oversight for the NST [National Safeguarding Team]. While proposals for such a structure were drawn up, the NSSG recommended an interim arrangement whereby a small number of independent professionals were recruited which could in the short term provide additional independent oversight of safeguarding...” (Paragraph 105).

A few months later, the Archbishops’ Council set up this interim Independent Safeguarding Board, consisting of a Chair and two Board members. However, in June 2023, the Council terminated the contracts, announcing that they would move directly to the work of setting up the permanent replacement. This caused great upset, particularly given that the victims and survivors for whom the Board had been reviewing many of their cases, were neither consulted nor informed before the Council pulled the plug.

Barrister Sarah Wilkinson was therefore appointed to undertake a Review of what went wrong. Her terms of reference were:

“[a] to use best efforts to establish a clear account of the events from the conception, design and implementation of the ISB, until the announcement of the termination of contracts;  
[b] to use best efforts to establish and identify on the balance of probabilities the reasons for the action to terminate the contracts of the ISB members;  
[c] to identify lessons learnt based on the findings in (a) and (b).” (Paragraph 5).

Sarah Wilkinson carried out her investigation and her 185-page report was published on 30 November 2023. It makes sad reading of mistrust, breakdown of relationships, and tit-for-tat behaviour, all by well-meaning people thinking they were acting for the best.

Here are some of the things that went wrong:

- The Archbishop of Canterbury is fully committed to the importance of safeguarding and was determined that the new Board be set up as soon as possible. This meant that it was

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<sup>1</sup> *Review of the Independent Safeguarding Board: Report*. Sarah Wilkinson. Blackstone Chambers. 30 November 2023. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/isb-review-report-30-november-2023.pdf>

set up in a rush, before all the details were worked out and it was never completely clear which body was responsible for what, and who was allowed to share data with who.

- The name “Independent” in the Board’s title was misleading. The members of the Board thought it meant that they could do whatever they wanted, and they treated any involvement of the Archbishops’ Council with suspicion. But the Council was responsible for writing the contracts, paying the bills, and had oversight responsibility as charitable trustees. A more accurate name should have been chosen, such as “Interim Safeguarding Body” (see Paragraph 643).
- The first Chair of the Board made a mistake in sharing data in breach of the General Data Protection Regulations, and resigned. The Council were keen that the work of the Board should continue without interruption, so, rather than stop the work for a long recruitment process, they appointed as an interim, that the Chair of the National Safeguarding Panel to also Chair of the Board, on a temporary basis. The other two Board members objected to this. To have the same Chair chairing two bodies meant that the Chair would be marking her own homework. They refused to work with the new Chair. A large number of victims and survivors insisted that their personal data must not be shared with the Chair.
- The Archbishops and the staff of the Council made well-meaning attempts to help, but if they pleased one side in the dispute it upset the other side:

“510. [...] on 28 April 2023, the Archbishops wrote to the three ISB members to invite them to attend the Archbishops’ Council meeting on 9 or 10 May 2023 and that the Council would be open to hearing concerns from victims and survivors about the process so far, so that they could learn from that and to hear further thoughts on the steps that were planned in order to move to structural independence.

511. [...] the acting Chair felt unsupported by this letter. On 2 May 2023, a press release from the Archbishops was published restating their confidence in the acting Chair’s appointment. [...] the Survivor Advocate felt that this statement did not acknowledge the concerns of survivors about the appointment of the acting Chair.”

- Relationships broke down completely and the Council decided to close the Board down and go straight to Phase 2 of working to set up a permanent replacement. That decision was implemented in a rush. Victims and survivors felt betrayed that the Board had been closed down and that they had not been notified in advance or told how their case reviews were to be taken forward. But the Council couldn’t notify the victims and survivors in advance because data protection meant that the Council were not allowed to have the contact details. They could have asked one of the two Board members to make the contact, but those Board members had recently been writing articles in the media criticising the Council, so this was probably an unattractive option.

In short, feelings ran deep and tensions ran high. Everyone was in a rush to do the right thing, but this resulted in mistakes and every mistake was interpreted as an act of betrayal.

The “Lessons To Be Learnt” section on pages 150-153 is well worth reading.

February 2024  
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