

Next steps for Church of England safeguarding: thoughts on “The Future of Safeguarding” report by Prof Alexis Jay

In February 2024, shortly before the meeting of the General Synod, Prof Alexis Jay published her Report “The Future of Safeguarding”.¹

She had been commissioned by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York:

- To provide options and recommendations for forming an independent safeguarding and scrutiny body for the Church of England
- To make any recommendations for how further independence of safeguarding might be achieved
- To make any other recommendations that are necessary or appropriate” (Page 6).

This follows the debacle of the closing down of the Independent Safeguarding Board, which I wrote about in a previous article.²

Prof Jay correctly identifies the problems with the current system of safeguarding operated by 42 dioceses (Diocesan Safeguarding Officers and Diocesan Safeguarding Advisory Panels) and three national bodies (National Safeguarding Team; National Safeguarding Steering Group; and National Safeguarding Panel). She found:

- safeguarding policies, practices and record keeping of 42 dioceses are not consistent;
- safeguarding staff resources vary between dioceses, unrelated to the amount of work;
- safeguarding staff are overworked by being given non-safeguarding cases to deal with.

Regarding that last point, if a member of the clergy is a bully, this can be dealt with through the Clergy Discipline Measure. But if a lay member of the Parochial Church Council is a bully, there is no church process, so a safeguarding ‘angle’ is sought as a way of getting it dealt with.

This problem should get better because the February General Synod passed a motion:

- “That this Synod request that the Archbishops’ Council carry out a review to consider:
- a) the possibility of drawing up a Code of Conduct for PCC members and lay volunteers,
 - b) the issues required to put in place a disciplinary process for their removal from the PCC in cases where this is not followed,
 - c) the resources required at national, diocesan and parish level to bring this about.”³

Prof Jay recommends making the Church of England’s safeguarding fully independent by replacing the current structures with two new national bodies:

¹ <https://futureofchurchsafeguarding.org.uk/>

² <https://adrianvincent.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/202402-Review-of-the-Independent-Safeguarding-Board.pdf>

³ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/bussiness-done-feb-2024.pdf>

“the creation of two fully independent bodies for the operational delivery and scrutiny of safeguarding in the Church of England. There must be a complete transfer of responsibility from the Church to these bodies, whose advice and decisions should be final and not merely advisory. For ease of reference, we have called these A (operational safeguarding) and B (scrutiny).

These organisations will need to be funded from Church resources which are all charitable in nature. We consulted with the Charity Commission and have concluded that the new organisations need to be established as charities. This will mean that the Charity Commission will continue to have regulatory oversight of the new organisations.

Organisation A

This organisation will be responsible for:

1. Receiving referrals, concerns and inquiries in relation to safeguarding matters.
2. Conducting safeguarding investigations into the conduct of people within the Church of England and making directions and recommendations.
3. Providing victims and survivors with appropriate care and support.
4. Providing care and support to those against whom allegations are made.
5. Issuing guidance in relation to safeguarding operations.
6. Providing initial and ongoing training in relation to safeguarding matters for all safeguarding staff including parish safeguarding officers.
7. Publishing reports and making directions and recommendations.

Organisation B

This organisation will be responsible for:

1. Providing oversight and scrutiny of organisation A.
2. Issue a safeguarding code of practice/safeguarding standards.
3. Issuing an inspection framework document and related advice and guidance.
4. Publish safeguarding inspection reports and an annual report.” (Pages 34-35).

This is probably the right way forward, but the risk is that if the Church hands over all safeguarding responsibilities to an independent body, churches and dioceses might breathe a sigh of relief that safeguarding is now someone else’s problem and forget that safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility.

Prof Jay rejects this possibility:

“Some people believed that independent safeguarding would mean that the Church and its institutions would see no need to take any further responsibility for children and vulnerable adults with whom they come into contact. We find that surprising, given the express moral purpose and duty of the Church for the protection of these groups. The Church will not be absolved of its responsibilities to identify and report any concerns about safeguarding to an independent body. Indeed, it could use the opportunity to voluntarily introduce its own form of Mandatory Reporting, ahead of legislation.” (Page 37).

The Report is also vague as to what will happen to the current safeguarding staff in the dioceses. Annex E lists that there are currently about 140 full time equivalent Diocesan Safeguarding Advisors. Will they all be made redundant, to be replaced by the staff of the

two new national bodies? The Report gives mixed messages. Page 36 says, “The physical location of safeguarding staff in dioceses should be retained.” But page 39 says that if a church has a safeguarding issue they should report it direct to the new national organisation, “Any complaint, concern or enquiry regarding safeguarding shall be referred to organisation A at the first available opportunity.”

Prof Jay has given us a good proposal but there are a lot of details that will need to be worked out.

March 2024
Adrian Vincent