



## FINAL REPORT

How can the Newcastle Diocese Safeguarding Team better support Incumbents, Parish Safeguarding Officers and Churchwardens in the effective implementation of Church of England safeguarding policy in practice?

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This final report sets out a summary of the three parts of this research study which took place between 2022–2024. These include: a mixed methods self-completion electronic survey; Community of Enquiry; and solution-focused action planning.

### **The survey**

A mixed methods self-completion electronic survey was distributed across the Diocese of Newcastle, containing a range of open and closed questions so that both quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (narratives) data could be generated. The survey was completed by Incumbents (n=18), Parish Safeguarding Officers (n=39) and Churchwardens (n=43).

Data from the surveys highlighted that while Incumbents, Parish Safeguarding Officers and Churchwardens felt generally confident in their understanding of safeguarding (67.9%), there were differences based on position within the Church roles and within geography. The qualitative data highlighted an increased burden of bureaucracy and responsibility perceived to be placed on Parish Safeguarding Officers (who are volunteers) which is potentially unsustainable. Participants observed the safeguarding system as one of compliance that is burdensome and not appropriate for all Parishes; and that people, especially Incumbents, do not have enough time to complete their responsibilities. It was highlighted that rural communities require the same level of administration (including training) as more populated parishes, but for fewer members, which it was felt placed additional burdens on them. This was potentially reflected in how they perceived safeguarding and presented a less positive perception in their knowledge and confidence.

Whilst training was perceived positively, there was disparity in how this was received and experienced by Churchwardens. Further to this, there was statistically significant data to indicate that Parish Safeguarding Officers engaged with the Diocesan Safeguarding Team for advice and support, but Churchwardens did not – although the reasons for this were not clear. Data also indicated that trust had not yet been established to the degree that survivors felt able to report their experiences of abuse and be believed, because a perceived protection of those in power remained.

The following areas for consideration were presented at Newcastle Cathedral on 30 November 2023.

- Can a cultural shift be supported in terms of embedding safeguarding more into sermons and day-to-day life of the Church?
- How can trust be built – where survivors feel they will be believed, and that people will be held accountable for their actions?
- How can a conceptual understanding of safeguarding be further developed in terms of a preventative focus, e.g. a recognition of those who may pose a risk?
- The role of the Parish Safeguarding Officer – can the administration be reduced/shared and are there alternatives for smaller/rural Parishes rather than adding to Churchwarden responsibilities?

- Is there scope for paid roles to be created, e.g. in between Diocesan Safeguarding Team and Parish Safeguarding Officers, to take on more of the administrative and oversight responsibility?
- How can more face-to-face contact in Parishes be facilitated, e.g. through training, mentors etc., especially with Churchwardens?

Volunteers for a Working Group were sought, to explore these areas in the form of a Community of Enquiry.

### **Community of Enquiry**

In the second part of this research study, team members from the University of Sunderland facilitated two Community of Enquiries. These are ‘workshop-style sessions’ in which space is provided for participants to collaboratively ‘explore ideas and ask rich and meaningful questions of each other’ (Muirhead, 2018, p.2). Participants in the first Enquiry explored the areas for discussion set out in the previous section. This led to an exploration of the question: **Why do people feel so overwhelmed by safeguarding?** In this discussion, issues such as fear, moral injury and frustration were highlighted. It was agreed that for the next Community of Enquiry the existing survey data would be re-interrogated focusing on the following issues: examples of what participants felt overwhelmed them about safeguarding; and what examples participants gave that helped them in implementing safeguarding practice.

The format for the second Community of Enquiry was adapted to take a Solution-focused approach. Solution Focused Brief Therapy is an evidence-based practice that is widely utilised within Social Work. It is strengths-based and designed to help individuals identify and utilise their existing resources, strengths and skills to create positive change. SFBT was devised by Shazer et al. (1989) and although underpinned by psychological counselling approaches, focuses on a pragmatic implementation in practice. Its underlying principles are Humanistic and Buddhist thought focusing on the future rather than the past and on goal setting. During this Enquiry, data from the safeguarding survey was shared with a specific focus on what helped and what worked. As participants explored the miracle question, this led to identification of areas such as: the desire for people to be pro-active in engaging with training; for everyone to have access to a computer and support with IT; for clarity on how the safeguarding portal is accessed; and ensuring everyone knows what they need to do for their role. The key aspiration was to reframe the discourse around how safeguarding is discussed, to encourage more openness.

### **Solution-focused Action Plan**

The final part of this report contains the action plan identified by the working group members to collaboratively develop solutions to improve the implementation of safeguarding practice across the Diocese. This will be presented, and handed over, to the Bishop’s Council on 7 November 2024 and denotes the completion of the research project.

### **References**

Deacon, L. and Durey, M. (2023) *INTERIM REPORT: for distribution and discussion. How can the Newcastle Diocesan Safeguarding Team better support Incumbents, Parish Safeguarding*

*Officers and Churchwardens in the effective implementation of Church of England Safeguarding Policy into Practice*. Project Report. University of Sunderland.

Muirhead, S. (2018) *Community of Enquiry Guide*. Glasgow: Iriss.

Shazer, S., Berg, I.K., Nunnally, E., Molnar, A., Gingerich, W.M. and Weiner-Davis, M. (1986) 'Brief Therapy: Focused Solution Development' *Family Process*, 25(2), pp. 207–221.