



Child Safeguarding & Protection Service

SEPTEMBER
2023

NEWSLETTER



Diocesan Safeguarding Committee members Patricia Carroll, Archbishop Dermot Farrell, Frances Stephenson, Ronan Ormsby, Christine Halloran, Fr Michael Casey, Michael Lynch, Fr Fergal MacDonagh and Deacon Frank Browne at a meeting in Archbishop's House on September 4. Photograph taken by Katherine Ward

Decade of safeguarding work

IT IS TEN YEARS since the establishment of the diocesan Safeguarding Committee. Pictured above are current members of the Committee. Frances Stephenson is the outgoing Chair and Christine Halloran is taking over her role in December. Another member, Jennifer Tony, was unable to attend the meeting of 4 September. The members bring a range of expertise and experience. All have an involvement in safeguarding. Their experience comes from working in parishes, and diocesan and civil agencies.

The Safeguarding Committee provides focus and di-

rection to the work of safeguarding in the Archdiocese. This is achieved through devising three-year strategic plans which set the agenda for the Child Safeguarding & Protection Service in areas such as training, auditing and the development of good safeguarding practice. In addition, particular challenges have been identified and addressed. This has included issues such as the use of social media and sacramental preparation in parishes. Currently, the Committee is looking at the role of lay associations of the faithful and at helping parishes to respond to their obligations under the Children First Act 2015. ■

20 years of Child Safeguarding & Protection Service: Keeping our focus on protecting children

THIS YEAR marks the 20th anniversary of the Child Safeguarding & Protection Service. It is an opportunity to look back on where we have come from, on what has been achieved and by whom. It is also an opportunity to look to the future, to what remains to be done and to the challenges that persist.

In a recent article, the *Irish Times* columnist Breda O'Brien paid tribute to Sinead O'Connor as "a prophetic voice in the Old Testament sense, of calling out injustice and demanding change" at a time when the Church was failing to acknowledge the reality of the sexual abuse of children by priests and religious. O'Brien wrote: "There has been real progress in the Church, mostly due to an army of faithful lay volunteers and dogged and often frustrated campaigners." Despite this undoubted progress and the continued sterling work of our lay volunteers – parish safeguarding representatives, volunteer trainers, members of our various committees and others - the sexual abuse of children in the Church continues to be a blight and a counter witness to the message of Jesus.

We owe it to the prophets, campaigners and the army of lay volunteers to consolidate the progress they have achieved and to build on these achievements. We have a greater understanding now how, in the past, we allowed other considerations get in the way of the protection of children. The Murphy Report found that: "The Dublin Archdiocese's pre-occupations in dealing with cases of child sexual abuse, at least until the mid-1990s, were the maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal, the protection of the reputation of the Church, and the preservation of its assets. All other considerations, in-

cluding the welfare of children and justice for victims, were subordinated to these priorities." Countless other reports and enquiries, here in Ireland and also in other countries, relating to both church and non-church organisations, have come to similar conclusions. However, knowing this to be the case is not a bulwark against repeating the mistakes of the past.

Every so often a new scandal relating to the failure to protect children arises and we find the same institutional inertia and reluctance to take the necessary actions to protect children. The recent conviction of the nurse, Lucy Letby, for the murder of seven newborn children and the attempted killing of another six is a case in point. Senior doctors raised concerns about her in July 2015 after three babies died. There was no formal investigation for another year, at which point she was removed from the neo natal unit where she worked. However, it was a further ten months before the police were contacted. Lawyers representing the families concerned have suggested that hospital managers prioritised the hospital's reputation above child safety. It has also been suggested that complaints against Letby were not taken seriously because they were made by doctors seen as antipathetic to nurses. Some blamed the deaths on failings within the wider health system. All of this served to take attention away from where it ought to have been focused – on the safety of the children.

There is something more at work here than simple incompetence. There is a reluctance to face up to the awful truth of our own capacity to do terrible

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things. One of the most notorious clerical abusers was once referred as the holiest man in Dublin. Part of the difficulty of dealing with the Lucy Letby case was resistance to the very idea that a nurse could do such an appalling thing as inflict suffering and death on defenceless new born children. One of the doctors who eventually came to raise concerns about her recalled thinking initially: “It can’t be Lucy. Not nice Lucy”.

It is clear that some Church leaders, on first hearing of abusive behaviour by priests, understood that they were hearing about priests who were troubled, rather than children who were harmed. There are many instances cited in the Murphy report of church leaders sending offenders for therapeutic interventions that did not address the risk they posed to children.

It is not wrong to rehabilitate offenders. Indeed, one way of preventing further abuse is by doing so. The Archdiocese of Dublin provides support and supervision to those who have offended against children. Such support is conditional on the men in question accepting limitations on their activities, along with monitoring and supervision. This provides for a greater level of protection for children than having no supervision or monitoring in place. To provide such support without these conditions, however, would be irresponsible.

Many challenges remain. One is how we manage power in a hierarchical organisation. We have yet to work out how those with little or no authority within an organisation can call to account those in senior positions who abuse the vulnerable or simply fail to protect them. The doctors who raised concerns about Lucy Letby were threatened with referral to their own professional governing body. Indeed, they were put under such pressure that seven of them signed a letter of apology to her. Yet doctors are not without authority and influence. If their concerns can be discounted,



The service is located at the Dublin Diocesan Offices, 20-23 Arran Quay, Dublin 7, D07 XK85

how much more difficult is it going to be for those who are at the very bottom of the ladder?

Protections for whistleblowers are important but are not the complete answer. More fundamentally, we need to face the reality that threats to the safety of children can come from the most unlikely of sources. The temptation is to look away and not see what is before our eyes. The reality that someone we know and trust may have harmed a child is terrible to contemplate. To turn away from the suffering of a child is, however, infinitely worse.

To say that the safety of children and their protection from harm ought to be the paramount consideration in our dealings with and about children is not to say that other things are unimportant. The reputation of the Church is important if it is to carry out its mission of spreading the gospel. We ought to rehabilitate those who harm children because they too are precious in the eyes of God and by doing so we can protect children. These worthy considerations cannot, however, take precedence over the protection of children. The protection of children must always be our first priority in any matter that touches on their safety and welfare. ■



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Vetting: information and proof of identity

THE VETTING PROCESS can disclose personal sensitive information about the vetting subject, that is, the person about whom vetting is sought by a parish or diocesan organisation. In order to comply with data protection norms, the National Vetting Bureau insists that the identity of the vetting subject has been established before they process the vetting application. This is done to prevent information being disclosed about the wrong person.

Generally, this has to be done by producing photographic identification such as a passport or driving licence (but not a public service card) and a document that confirms the current address of the vetting subject. This could be a recent utility bill or bank statement but it must be under six months old.

The onus is on the organisation (parish, diocesan agency etc) to establish proof of the vetting subject's identity before submitting their vetting application and to be able to demonstrate that they did so.

If you have any queries in relation to this matter please send them to garda.vetting@dublindiocese.ie. ■

How to get in touch with the CSPS team

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Vetting applications should be submitted to garda.vetting@dublindiocese.ie