



## REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT CHAIR OF THE SAFEGUARDING REFERENCE GROUP TO THE DEAN & CHAPTER

**1<sup>st</sup> January 2024 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2024**

### Introduction and Outline of Report

This report has been prepared for the Dean and Chapter by Peter Spindler, the Independent Chair of the Safeguarding Reference Group (SRG). It provides detail of the safeguarding framework and activity at Westminster Abbey in 2024 as well as assurance on how colleagues are performing against an agreed set of measurements. The data has been provided by David Pate, the Abbey Safeguarding Officer (ASO) and the Human Resources Department. The following six sections detail how the Abbey is working to ensure the wellbeing of vulnerable groups and the safety of those who may be at risk of harm.

This is my eighth safeguarding annual report and, whilst much of the content will not be new to the Dean and Chapter and the data is an amalgam of that contained in the ASO's quarterly reports, it is a report written for publication as part of the ongoing commitment to openness and transparency by the Abbey in its approach to safeguarding.

This year's report is presented in a new format and uses the headings from the Church of England National Safeguarding Standards to provide a narrative from my perspective on how well the Abbey is working to ensure the wellbeing of any vulnerable individuals or at-risk groups who attend in whatever capacity. 2024 has been a particularly challenging year for the Church with regard to scrutiny of its safeguarding arrangements and it is vital that the Abbey continues to invest in this important discipline.

**STANDARD ONE: Culture, Leadership and Capacity** – *safe and healthy cultures, effective leadership, resourcing and scrutiny arrangements to deliver high quality safeguarding practices and outcomes.*

As Dean, The Very Reverend Dr David Hoyle KCVO MBE continues to lead on the oversight of all safeguarding policy and practice and its implementation across Westminster Abbey, St Margaret's Church, Westminster Abbey Choir School and the ancillary buildings and grounds. The ASO has continued to work with the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft in the Palace of Westminster to assist the Dean in exercising his ecclesiastical jurisdiction there.

Additional internal support is routinely provided by the Receiver General (RG) and the Chaplain, both key members of the SRG. External support is provided by the Head of Safeguarding at the Diocese of London, a local authority representative at SRG and from me, as the Independent Chair of the Abbey's SRG. A Service Level Agreement with the diocese remains effective although would benefit from a refresh. The SRG met on four occasions in 2024, January, April, July and November, benefitting from input from both school's safeguarding leads. Additionally, the Dean and ASO met with the National Director

for Safeguarding in the summer to discuss a more joined up approach including collaborative work on the national register of clergy.

With regard to culture, it is interesting to note that the 2024 Staff Survey addressed how seriously the Abbey was seen to take safeguarding with 89% selecting “strongly agree”, up by 2% since the 2020 survey. A healthy culture of recognising and reporting concerns is evident and addressed below.

The ASO continues to work a four-day week and now benefits from some welcome additional administrative support as well as formal, external clinical supervision. He remains extremely well supported at the most senior levels. I am concerned though that, at times, there is insufficient operational support and capacity. The ASO role is an isolated one and I feel the Abbey would benefit from creating a Safeguarding Working Group, similar to that at other comparable institutions, chaired by a senior figure at the Abbey with operational staff being brought in to assist in delivering some of the initiatives being discussed at the SRG and in other forums. This would ensure momentum is maintained and responsibility shared.

**STANDARD TWO: Prevention – *planned range of measures which together are effective in preventing abuse in their context.***

The Abbey safeguarding processes are set out in the *Policy for Safeguarding in Westminster Abbey & St Margaret’s Church*. I am pleased to say the Abbey has embraced the new National Safeguarding Standards and the ASO is working hard to bring these to life as part of his day to day activities. The following sub-sections detail some of the ongoing prevention activity in 2024:

*Safer Recruitment* – These practices form part of the framework of checks and balances to minimise the possibility of appointing inappropriate individuals to work with those at risk of harm. I am assured that all interviews for roles involving a position of trust had a properly trained member of staff on the selection panel. No additional staff received safer recruitment training in the last year.

*Vetting and Barring Checks* – The Abbey continues to employ U-Check for its Disclosure and Barring Service access to expedite the safeguarding vetting process. Checks are renewed every three rather than five years, adding an additional layer of assurance. The following data points summarise the activity in the reporting year:

- 81 DBS checks were requested.
- 0 DBS checks were returned marked.
- 1 DBS check was outstanding but has now been processed by HR and U-check.

*Dean’s Yard Security* – The ASO will need to continue to work in partnership with the Head of Security to ensure the ongoing safety of pupils and choristers. This arises from two specific safeguarding incidents in this reporting period. In one case an adult male was arrested and charged as a result of diligent work by the ASO and colleagues from the Security and Visitor Experience Teams. This demonstrates the importance of recognising the interface of safety and security with safeguarding.

*The Company of St Edward* – the ASO has been attempting to identify what if any risks might be apparent when the choristers end their time at the choir school and continue to serve with The Company. I expect the safeguarding standards there to be brought in line with those at the Abbey.

**STANDARD THREE: Recognising, Assessing and Managing Risk** – *Risk assessments, safety plans and associated processes are of a high quality and result in positive outcomes. The assessment and management of risk is underpinned by effective partnership working.*

*Risk Register* - The ASO maintains a detailed, 11 point safeguarding risk register following the Abbey's standard format for the management of risk. Two new risks were added in 2024, the first focussing on choristers graduating and secondly, on the safer recruitment and vetting of choral deputies and St Margaret's singers. Both are assessed as high risk while mitigation is developed. This document is linked to the Safeguarding Action Plan and allows for cross referencing of issues between the two. All remaining risks are currently assessed as medium with mitigation measures in place.

*Safeguarding Agreements/Plans* - Five individuals are currently on the Abbey's 'adults to notice' record. Safeguarding and risk mitigation arrangements have been put in place to support them and each has either a permanent exclusion, suspension, arrangements for additional support or a safeguarding agreement in place to ensure the safety and support for all Abbey users. One new safeguarding agreement has been implemented in the last year.

*The Safeguarding Action Plan* - is designed to drive the business of improving safeguarding at the Abbey and is a list of longer-term initiatives managed by the ASO. This is currently evolving into a new format, similar to the national parish dashboard used by the Church of England. The ASO is working with the contractors employed by the National Safeguarding Team to develop a new approach to monitor compliance with national standards.

*National Review Benchmarking* – A number of significant reviews into past abuse within the Church were published in 2024 including the Scolding Review of Soul Survivor and the Makin Report. All of the recommendations and learning from these reviews have been transposed onto a benchmarking grid and checking against the current Abbey safeguarding arrangements is ongoing. The Dean and ASO have also reviewed the learning from the initial audits of cathedrals carried out by INEQE to identify what if any improvements are required at the Abbey.

**STANDARD FOUR: Victims and Survivors** – *Victims and survivors experience the timeliness and quality of responses to disclosures, and their subsequent support, as positively meeting their needs, including their search for justice and helping their healing process.*

*Incident/Concern Reporting* – The identification of potential safeguarding incidents, concerns or issues and bringing them formally to notice is a good indicator of the safeguarding culture of an organisation. The Abbey has purchased the National Case Management System, MyConcern and is now making good use of this new capability. This is the same system used by the Choir School and the ASO is working closely with the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) to ensure interoperability with the two systems. This is an important development and will improve the consistency of recording incidents or concerns. This is supported by a new interactive reporting platform MyVoice which will allow people to report concerns direct to the system both internally and externally. This synergy with the Church of England is important when there is so much scrutiny of past safeguarding failings nationally.

There has been another increase in reporting this year, with the number of incidents recorded rising to 91 from 71 in 2023. This is the highest number of concerns raised since this monitoring process commenced and the vigilance evident is welcome.

The following table highlights the emerging pattern of reporting for the last eight years:

Year	Safeguarding concerns/incidents reported	Adults concerned	Children concerned	Of which were MH concerns
2017	10	Data not available		N/K
2018	40			20
2019	35			N/K
2020	23			10
2021	23 (Lockdown period)			11
2022	51			35
2023	71	61	14	25
2024	91	86 <sup>1</sup>	21	55

Issues with adult visitors' perceived mental health and wellbeing contributed to over half of the reports received and actioned by the ASO.

*Multi Agency Working* – 18 of the 91 cases above necessitated a referral by the ASO to statutory services for their information and follow-up action, with the remainder managed locally. This is consistent with partnership activity in 2023.

*Safeguarding Case Management Groups (SCMG)* – The Abbey did not convene any new SCMGs (formerly known as core groups) in 2024; however the ASO remains a member of a nationally convened SCMG which the Abbey has an ongoing interest in.

*Survivors' Reference Group* – The ASO is working with the Diocese of London who have created a working group to examine how best to ensure survivors can be integrated into decision making and influence safeguarding policy and practice. This work will continue into 2025 and I expect the Abbey to be an active part of this initiative and ensure they maximise the opportunity this presents.

**STANDARD FIVE: Learning, Supervision and Support** – *All those engaged in safeguarding-related activity receive the type and level of learning, professional development, support and supervision necessary to respond to safeguarding situations, victims and survivors, and respondents effectively.*

*Safeguarding Training* – The Abbey follows the national Church of England training framework and provides additional local training to fit their context. In 2025, it is likely that a collaborative arrangement to improve capability will be developed with the Cathedral Safeguarding Officer at St Paul's who is an experienced trainer.

The following table provides a breakdown of training delivered in 2024:

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these individual cases/incidents involve both adults and children as the persons concerned.

Training	Departments identified to be trained	Total completed in 2024	Number of people outstanding
Basic Safeguarding Awareness	All staff and volunteers	102	0
Foundation	Selected Staff and volunteers	54	0
Leadership	Selected leadership staff	25	0
Senior leadership	Dean and Chapter, HoDs	0	0
Mental Health First Aid	Selected job roles across departments	0	0
Child Protection Safeguarding	Choir School and Music Department	27	1
Safer Recruitment	Managers with recruitment responsibilities	23	0
Suicide Prevention	Selected job roles across departments.	13	0

Data on the Choir School has been included here as the ASO is now more actively involved in supporting their DSL. Training attendance is overseen by the HR department and whilst it remains a challenge to ensure all departments keep their staff at the required level of compliance, the above statistics demonstrate the efforts made to significantly improve performance. HR are now working even more closely with the ASO to maintain standards in particular with regard to the training of volunteers. This is a greatly improved position.

*Cathedral Safeguarding Practitioner Network* – The Abbey continues to be an active member of the national Cathedral Safeguarding Network and in November hosted the national conference which focussed on suicide prevention and “safeguarding the safeguarders”. Speakers from this event will be invited to address Abbey staff later this year.

### Concluding Remarks

There are a number of issues I would encourage Dean and Chapter to monitor progress against during the coming year. Some have been alluded to above and some may have cost implications for the Abbey. In summary these are listed as follows:

- Development of a survivor engagement strategy in partnership with the choir school, diocese and external partners;
- Consideration of an external review/audit similar to the 2024/25 INEQE national audit of dioceses and their cathedrals;
- Building capacity and monitoring welfare of those with safeguarding responsibilities;
- Ensuring senior leadership training is completed;
- Identifying and inducting a new independent chair for the SRG with an updated role profile.

A great deal of progress has been made in the last 12 months to strengthen the safeguarding arrangements at the Abbey. I am able to assure the Dean and Chapter that there is a clear commitment to safeguarding the vulnerable and that high standards are maintained by the ASO and those who work with him.

**Peter Spindler**  
**Independent Safeguarding Advisor**  
**February 2025**