



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

**1<sup>st</sup> January 2025 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2025**

### **Introduction and Outline of Report**

This report has been prepared for the Dean and Chapter by Michael Orchard, the new Independent Chair of the Safeguarding Reference Group (SRG). It provides detail of the safeguarding framework and activity at Westminster Abbey in 2025, 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. This report provides detail as to 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 first safeguarding annual report, having taken over the role of Independent Chair in June 2025. I would like to thank the previous Chair, Peter Spindler, for his work and support to me moving into this role. As I took over the role halfway through this reporting year, I have also consulted the former Chair in writing this report, to ensure it is an accurate reflection of the whole year.

For consistency, I have followed the format of the previous reports and outline the findings under the headings used 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. This format, against the five standards, is also used by the ASO in his reporting on a quarterly basis to the SRG and the data used will be seen on an ongoing basis by the Dean and Chapter as part of their ongoing awareness and scrutiny.

This report will be provided to the Dean and Chapter in early 2026 and as part of the Abbey's ongoing commitment to openness and transparency I recommend it is published through the Abbey's website.

There has been ongoing scrutiny of the Church during 2025 and its wider safeguarding arrangements. It has also been a year when we have seen an ongoing audit of the Church of England's safeguarding both nationally and locally, which will inevitably bring areas of learning and development to consider. It is therefore important that the Abbey continues to improve and invest in this area to ensure safeguarding remains a focus in its work.

I would like to thank the Abbey and its staff for their candour and support as I have transitioned to this new role. As I will outline below the Abbey remains committed to its safeguarding responsibilities and continues to strive to improve.

**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 leads 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 members of the Speaker's House staff to assist the Dean of Westminster exercising his ecclesiastical duties in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft. In 2026, the strategic lead for safeguarding will move to the Canon Steward and Archdeacon when a new member of Chapter starts, whilst remaining under the overall oversight of the Dean. I have discussed this with the Dean and see this as a positive change that will continue to allow effective oversight and direction for the Abbey. It will be important that they have the support of the safeguarding team, myself and Chapter, as they come into this role and continue to progress the Abbey's work.

Additional support, both internally and externally, is provided through the SRG and its representatives, including the Receiver General (RG) and the Interim Chaplain. There is now a Regional Safeguarding Lead structure in place within the Church of England National Safeguarding Team (NST). I have consulted the Southeast representative and the wider NST for support and understanding of wider practice in other cathedrals and dioceses nationally. The NST regional lead also supports the ASO on a voluntary basis and the ASO has a strong partnership relationship with his counterpart at St Paul's Cathedral.

It is important that the ASO and the dedicated safeguarding leads have the wider support of all staff at the Abbey, as well as senior leaders and relevant partners. This does occur at the Abbey. To support this, I have now extended the attendees for the SRG meeting to senior representatives from the security and music departments, as well as representatives externally from the safeguarding team covering the Westminster Local Authority and a local mental health charity. I will continue to keep attendance under review and add further roles if I feel it will add value. In addition, as highlighted in the 2024 Independent Chair's report and through the recent INEQE audits of other diocese, there remains value in having a working group formed that is cross-departmental to support the safeguarding work at a tactical level. This not only provides support to the ASO regarding capacity, but also ensures greater buy-in across departments as to safeguarding responsibilities.

The SRG met on four occasions in 2025; January, April, July and October with me as chair for the latter two. As well as the SRG meetings, the ASO has met regularly with the Dean as Chapter lead and the RG in his supportive role.

As highlighted in the 2024 report, the staff survey showed 89% of staff "strongly agree" that safeguarding is taken seriously at the Abbey. There has not been a staff survey during 2025 and therefore there are no updated figures for this area. The Abbey is repeating this process in early 2026 and are now considering a specific short survey for all staff regarding its safeguarding culture. They are also working to understand what works well for staff to further develop their understanding of safeguarding and their responsibilities for it. These are important areas to seek to de-mystify any misunderstanding, as well as ensuring there is a robust and healthy culture of putting policy into practice. I commend the Abbey for undertaking this further proactive approach.

The ASO continues to work a four-day week and has administrative support for the SRG. He also has additional support to review and refresh the Abbey's overarching safeguarding policy

and can access ongoing clinical supervision, which they report to me as being invaluable. In addition to the creation of the safeguarding working group I feel that additional resource is required to support the ASO and to progress the proactive work that the Abbey seeks to achieve. This additional resource has been provisionally agreed by the Abbey, subject to formal approval. I fully support that decision and look forward to that being in place as soon as it can be.

**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*. This policy is also now being updated and will be re-published in early 2026.

The Abbey utilises the National Safeguarding Standards to measure its work. The following sub-sections detail some of the ongoing prevention activity in 2025:

*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 informed that all interviews for roles involving a position of trust had a properly trained member of staff on the selection panel and there are sufficient staff trained for this to continue throughout 2026.

*Vetting and Barring Checks* – The Abbey continues to undertake DBS checks appropriately and these are renewed every three years. This year, 552 DBS checks were requested which is a significant rise from the 81 checks in 2024. This rise is due to the 3-year anniversary of the Church of England policy introduced in 2022 that DBS checks are renewed every 3 instead of 5 years, as well as the Abbey extending checks further to those that support the Abbey on a temporary basis. The Abbey has a strong policy not to allow staff and volunteers to work without this check being undertaken and in date.

*Dean's Yard Security* – This is an area where safeguarding responsibilities overlap with visitor experience and security matters. The ASO continues to work in partnership with these departments to appropriately mitigate risk in this area.

*The Company of St Edward* – The Abbey Safeguarding Officer has led on change to the way the volunteers who serve in The Company of St Edward are supported in their work, alongside children who also volunteer as servers in the Company. Working with the Honorary Secretary of the Company of St Edward and Human Resources, role descriptions have been agreed, clear lines of accountability detailed, and assessment of risk undertaken with this key group who give their time to support services in 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, safeguarding risk register following the Abbey's standard format for the management of risk and this is subject to regular review at the SRG. One new risk has been added in 2025, relating to the capacity of the ASO and the ability to manage the demand of the proactive work that the Abbey seeks to undertake, that I have already mentioned and that is being appropriately addressed.

*Casework management* – The ASO continues to manage specific case management through the National Case Management System in use by safeguarding teams across the Church of England. The ASO has extensive knowledge and experience in safeguarding policy and operational practice to undertake this work. Good practice and to support the ASO in this

operational area would be for independent review of the case management system to be put in place and therefore offer a degree of quality assurance.

*Safeguarding Agreements/Plans* - From time to time, it is necessary to restrict or exclude members of the public from entering the Abbey or its precincts for safeguarding reasons. The decision to do so is taken by the Dean after representation from the Abbey Safeguarding Officer. In this reporting period, six people have been excluded for varying reasons. In the same period another person had their exclusion lifted. These decisions are kept under review and there is a good process to manage this.

*The Safeguarding Action Plan* – Safeguarding actions are currently managed at different levels in the Abbey, including through the Safeguarding Reference Group. Discussions are ongoing to set up a cross-departmental working group to work on safeguarding issues at a tactical level. The arrival of the Canon Steward and Archdeacon who will take the safeguarding lead, and the implementation of this group will support their leadership of safeguarding at Westminster 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. This reporting period has seen a drop in reporting of concerns to 64 in 2025 from the previous 91 in 2024. There is no one clear reason for the decrease and a close eye should be kept on this, to ensure this is not a lack of understanding in the process. The survey work mentioned above will provide reassurance to the Abbey if any additional steps may be required to support staff in this area.

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

Year	Safeguarding concerns/incidents reported	Adults concerned	Children concerned	Of which were MH concerns
2019	35	Data not available		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
2025	64	51	13	18

*Multi Agency Working* – 18 of the 64 cases above necessitated a referral by the ASO to statutory services or to other diocese for their information and follow-up action, with the remainder managed locally. The ASO has engaged locally with statutory services supporting mental health in the tri-borough, with a local charity supporting people with poor mental health, as well as the continuing relationship with a specialist team of police and mental health professionals who have supported safeguarding work at the Abbey with positivity and professionalism.

*Safeguarding Case Management Groups (SCMG)* – The Abbey convened one SCMG (formerly known as core groups) in 2025 and referred two cases to the NST as they cross the jurisdiction of a number of dioceses.

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

*Survivors' Reference Group* – The ASO remains connected to national work in the Church of England in this area. The ASO continues to work with individual survivors of abuse as appropriate that are linked to Westminster Abbey.

**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 there has been a collaborative arrangement with St Paul's Cathedral to support training and to improve capability. The Abbey partners with St Paul's to deliver the annual Cathedral Safeguarding Network and 2025 focused on the statutory response to referrals to social care.

The following table provides a breakdown of training delivered in 2025

<b>Training</b>	<b>Departments identified to be trained</b>	<b>Total completed in 2025</b>	<b>Number of people outstanding</b>
Basic Safeguarding Awareness	All staff and volunteers	121	11
Foundation	Selected Staff and volunteers	115	4
Leadership	Selected leadership staff	3	1
Senior leadership	Dean and Chapter, HoDs	5	5
Mental Health First Aid	Selected job roles across departments	0	0
Child Protection Safeguarding	Choir School and Music Department	26	0
Safer Recruitment	Managers with recruitment responsibilities	3	0
Suicide Prevention	Selected job roles across departments.	1	0

Data on the Choir School has been included here as the ASO is actively involved in supporting their Designated Safeguarding Lead and Headteacher. Training attendance is overseen by the HR department, and I am pleased to say that the ASO and therefore the SRG, now has good visibility of compliance regarding training matters. Whilst there is a small percentage of outstanding training, these are all known and are being managed, including through alternative training provided if required. An assessment is always made if any gaps in training require further action to be undertaken. There has been a lot of positive work in the area of training and compliance throughout 2025.

## **Findings**

There are a number of areas I would encourage the Dean and Chapter, as well as the new safeguarding lead, to consider and monitor progress against during the coming year. These are:

- Inducting and supporting the new Canon Steward and Archdeacon as the Strategic Lead for Safeguarding at Westminster Abbey;
- Consideration of additional resource for the dedicated safeguarding team to support the ASO;
- Formation of, and support to, an ongoing Safeguarding Working Group to collaborate and drive cross-department safeguarding work across the Abbey;
- Commission and undertake an external review/audit similar to the 2024/25 national audit of dioceses and their cathedrals;
- Develop and maintain a workstream and priorities living document to drive safeguarding activity to capture and implement good practice where identified; and
- To consider an independent review level of the case management system, to support the ASO regarding quality assurance.

## **Concluding Remarks**

As outlined above, there continues to be a clear commitment to safeguarding the vulnerable at Westminster Abbey. The ASO continues his good work and is proactive in striving to improve the Abbey further. He continues to be well supported by the Dean, the wider senior leadership and colleagues. Good progress has continued to be made throughout 2025 and I recommend to the Dean and Chapter the areas above be considered to continue this into 2026.

**Michael Orchard**

**Independent Chair – Safeguarding Reference Group, Westminster Abbey**

**February 2026**