

1. Context

10 minutes read

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This section provides an overview of what safeguarding is and why it is important. It is a good place to start for all those concerned with safeguarding in a Church context.

1.1 What is this Guidance about?

This Guidance helps Church Officers to recognise the signs that a child, young person or vulnerable adult might be being abused. It explores certain specific types of abuse in more detail which are most relevant to a Church context.

This Guidance does not detail the processes which must be followed if abuse is detected. These are contained in “ [Responding to, assessing and managing concerns or allegations against church officers practice guidance](#)” (2017) and “Responding to safeguarding concerns or allegations that relate to children, young people and vulnerable adults” (2018).

1.2 What is safeguarding?

The concept of safeguarding, and the promotion of a safeguarding culture, is wider and more pro-active than just responding to the actual abuse of one person by another.

1.2.1

It is important that safeguarding is seen in broad terms that extend beyond abuse-related concerns. As such, safeguarding can be understood as ‘acting in ways that mitigate any risk of harm’. There may be concerns about the safety and wellbeing of an individual which are not linked to abuse by another but are still on the safeguarding continuum. This might be to do with personal conditions or contextual circumstances; for example, poor mental health, homelessness and rough sleeping, suicidal thoughts, dementia and poverty. It is important to remember that safeguarding is as much about prevention as reaction, and so also covers risk assessment of environments and activities, anything that will help contribute to keeping people safe. This means that the types of safeguarding incidents which are most prevalent may be different according to the Church setting, be that a cathedral, parish or religious community.

1.2.2

According to Working Together^[1], safeguarding children means:

- protecting children from maltreatment
- preventing impairment of children’s mental and physical health or development
- ensuring that children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care
- taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes.

“Child protection” refers to the acute end of the safeguarding continuum. It focuses on protecting individual children identified as suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. This includes child protection procedures operated by local authority children’s services and other statutory agencies which detail how to respond to concerns about a child.

For the purposes of this Guidance, a child is anyone under the age of 18.

1.2.3

Under the Care Act 2014, “adult safeguarding” is working with adults with care and support needs to keep them safe from abuse or neglect. All statutory organisations^[2] have a duty to ensure that the welfare of all adults is ensured. As part of this, they need to understand when to implement their safeguarding adults reporting procedures. Safeguarding duties apply to an “adult at risk”, defined as one who:

- “has needs for care and support (whether or not the local authority is meeting any of those needs) and;
- is experiencing, or is at risk of, abuse or neglect; and;
- as a result of those needs is unable to protect himself or herself against the abuse or neglect or the risk of it”.

1.2.4

The Safeguarding and Clergy Discipline Measure 2016, Section 6^[3] outlines the Church’s requirements for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults in Church settings. The Measure uses the term “vulnerable adult” and defines it as:

- “a person aged 18 or over whose ability to protect himself or herself from violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation is significantly impaired through physical or mental disability or illness, old age, emotional fragility or distress, or otherwise; and for that purpose, the reference to being impaired is to being temporarily or indefinitely impaired”.

This definition, which has been Church law since 2016, encompasses the possibility that the ability of people to keep themselves safe can depend on the context they find themselves in, as well as on their own personal characteristics or abilities. For example, in some settings or relationships, people may find themselves in less powerful positions than others, and this could, depending on all the circumstances, significantly impair their ability to protect themselves from physical abuse or exploitation by the person who is in the more powerful position. Other people may have physical or mental disabilities which may significantly impair their ability to protect themselves from abuse. The definition of ‘vulnerable adult’ recognises that people may move in and out of being vulnerable at various points in their life or when the context changes.

Deciding whether a person should be considered a ‘vulnerable adult’ with regard to a particular safeguarding concern or allegation involves

making an assessment of the facts of the particular case and forming a view on whether the ability of the individual concerned to protect himself or herself from the abuse in question was significantly impaired through physical or mental disability or illness, old age, emotional fragility or distress, or otherwise.

It is recognised that all definitions have their limitations. The definition of “adult at risk” taken from the Care Act 2014 has limitations which could adversely impact on the realities of safeguarding in the Church context.

Therefore, the most important starting point when dealing with any scenario is to ask the question: “Is this a safeguarding situation – is there evidence of abuse as set out in this guidance?”; and to then exercise informed judgment and record the rationale for the decision.

1.2.5

In the Church context, safeguarding is the action Church Officers take to positively promote a safer culture and encourage safer behaviours.

This means the Church will^[4]:

- Promote a safer environment and culture.
- Safely recruit and support all those with any responsibility related to children, young people and vulnerable adults within the Church.
- Respond promptly to every safeguarding concern or allegation.
- Care pastorally for victims/survivors of abuse and other affected persons.
- Care pastorally for those who are the Respondent of concerns or allegations of abuse and other affected persons.
- Respond to those that may pose a present risk to others.

1.3 Why is safeguarding at the heart of all we do in the Church?

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!^[5]”

“Safeguarding is at the heart of our Christian faith. We are all made unique and in the image of God^[6]”

Whilst this is a safeguarding document, it is necessary to highlight key points on theology here. For a fuller discussion on the theology of safeguarding, please see 'Theology and Safeguarding: trauma, justice, forgiveness, wholeness, experience and calling', a document developed jointly by Church Officers and survivors. Safeguarding is rooted in the gospel. It is a Christian imperative to take care of the young, the vulnerable and most in need. As every person is made in the image of God, this begins with value of all God's people.

"The Church is called to share the good news of God's salvation through Jesus Christ. The life of our communities and institutions is integral to how we address this task. The good news speaks of welcome for all, with a particular regard for those who are most vulnerable, into a community where the value and dignity of every human being is affirmed and those in positions of responsibility and authority are truly trustworthy. Being faithful to our call to share the gospel therefore compels us to take with the utmost seriousness the challenge of preventing abuse from happening and responding well where it has.
[7]"

Promoting a Safer Church, 2017

"Safeguarding is everyone's business. For faith-based organisations and communities, getting this right can be challenging but it must be at the heart of everything they do. Recognising the risks and understanding that abusers can hide in plain sight is more than a tick-box exercise, it's about culture and behaviour."

Paul Burstow, Chair, SCIE

1.4 Why is safeguarding needed?

It is important that every individual knows how to respond well if they observe, hear or suspect that a child, young person or vulnerable adult is at risk of, or is being, abused or suffering in some other way. Significant numbers of children and adults experience abuse or vulnerability in some form. Sexual abuse and physical abuse are perhaps the most obvious forms which spring to mind, but abuse and vulnerability also cover homelessness, poor mental health, online abuse and exploitation.

1.5 Who does abuse affect?

Safeguarding concerns can affect everyone, irrespective of social class, race, education or gender. It is inevitable that at some point everyone will encounter someone who has experienced abuse or is currently experiencing abuse, whether as victim, as someone who poses a risk or as a vulnerable person. This includes clergy and their families, where there might be the same kind of abuse issues as non-clerical families.

In the context of a Church setting, where people (including perpetrators, victims / survivors of abuse and those otherwise at risk) come in times of need and to seek help, it is even more important that everyone is aware of the different forms of abuse and safeguarding concerns, and is able to respond in an appropriate manner.

1.6 A safeguarding continuum

1.6.1

As outlined in section 1.2 above, there is a safeguarding continuum which ranges from those cases requiring immediate emergency response, to those where a pastoral response will be most helpful. Consider some examples below:

- An individual is expressing suicidal thoughts and is reporting they have made active plans to carry this out.
- An individual reports having been feeling down for several weeks, is not eating and has not been to work.
- An individual looks upset after a service and reports they have lost their job.
- Someone has been sleeping rough in the church yard, they have dried blood around their head, they are shivering and are confused and incoherent.
- Someone has been sleeping rough in the church yard. They are coherent, in touch with social services, understand the situation they are in and expect it to be temporary.

When thinking about what needs to be reported to a Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser (DSA) or Cathedral Safeguarding Adviser (CSA), it is easy enough to separate out the emergency situations which will require immediate police intervention, and the non-emergency issues requiring a pastoral response, but we remain left with a considerable grey area. For example, workplace bullying and harassment (unless there is an obvious safeguarding dimension) should be dealt with under an organisation's HR policies and procedures. In our homeless example above, it is likely that the DSA/CSA would be informed in the first scenario but not the second, and not at all if there was no connection to a Church Body or Church Officer.

While there are patterns we can learn about types of abuse, all safeguarding situations are slightly different from each other and that is why this document contains good practice advice as well as requirements.

[2] For the avoidance of doubt, the Church of England is not classed as a statutory agency under this Act.

[3] [Safeguarding and Clergy Discipline Measure 2016 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

[4] [safer \(churchofengland.org\)](#)

[5] Matthew 18: 1-7

[6] Archbishop Justin Welby, Parish Safeguarding Handbook

[7] [Promoting a safer church](#)

This document is version 1 and was printed on 19 April 2024. The most up to date version of this policy can be found on the Church of England website: <https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding>

Source URL: <https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/safeguarding-e-manual/safeguarding-children-young-people-and-vulnerable-adults/1>