

A briefing for General Synod members from the HOUSE OF SURVIVORS

February 2023

This briefing has been prepared and edited for members of the General Synod by victims and survivors of abuse in the Church of England.

Our group includes women and men, ordained and lay, some who still believe, and others whose experience of the Church makes belief impossible. We have experienced physical, sexual and spiritual abuse. Our abusers include bishops, deans, clergy and other Church employees. You will understand our scepticism when we are told that bishops, deans, clergy and other Church employees are the right people to sort this out.

We are offering you this account, because we have learnt to have no confidence in the briefings that Synod members receive from the bishops or the Archbishops' Council. You need the truth about how your safeguarding apparatus is working.

Of course there is a great deal more that we could say. What we can't fully describe for you here is the deep and endless suffering felt by so many of us – not only from the abuse we received at the hands of clergy and others, but the continuing re-abuse we experience through the machinery of the Church's 'safeguarding' provision.

We asked for bread, but you gave us stones.

The National Safeguarding Team

The National Safeguarding Team (NST) is a bloated, costly, chaotic, impenetrable mess. Communication with victims and survivors is terrible. Individual victims are pushed from pillar to post. Our confidentiality is routinely breached. The current Director of Safeguarding is the fifth to hold the post in as many years. This latest one has been in post for six months, but only one of us has met him. The previous Lead Bishop, Peter Hancock, asked us to set up a Survivors Reference Group. We did this with great care and sensitivity, giving thousands of voluntary hours. But the last Director of Safeguarding but two refused to ratify the SRG Terms of Reference, so it has never been resourced or consulted. Perhaps if there were a properly constituted Survivor Reference Group, relationships between survivors and the NST would be less toxic. In the meantime, if anyone in the hierarchy tells you that 'survivors have been consulted' you should treat what they say with scepticism.

As I have learned more in recent months about what has gone on, I have been appalled by the way in which survivors have been treated.

Bishop Jonathan Gibbs, June 2020

The Interim Support Scheme

The Interim Support Scheme (ISS) was established in late 2020 to bridge the gap before the arrival of the full Redress Scheme. We were told that the Redress Scheme would be operational in the Summer of 2022. The ToR of the ISS were narrowed in 2021 to exclude any restorative actions other than money. Other things that survivors often need - meetings, apologies, information – are now out of scope. Even financial support is limited to six months, or twelve in exceptional circumstances. Grants are discretionary, meaning that we are treated as supplicants. We are told that the scheme is only there to keep us from absolute destitution – though we know this is applied inconsistently. Some survivors of Church abuse face imminent homelessness. Others have been told to call The Samaritans or go to foodbanks. The current administrator is the third in 18 months.

The Redress Scheme

What Redress Scheme? Despite all the promises, the Church of England still has no Redress Scheme for victims and survivors of abuse. None of us has any idea when redress will begin, if at all. Yes, a commitment to find money for redress was announced to General Synod in February 2020, and a delivery date of Summer 2022 was promised. But we are now told that this date will be missed by at least two to three years. We are left in the dark. We hear rumours that a scheme is being devised that will offer very minimal support - but we have no way of knowing whether that is true. Meanwhile we see huge sums of money being found for other projects.

“Over the last five years, millions of pounds have been spent on safeguarding panels, projects and surveys; piles of policy documents have been produced. Is anything better for victims? I would say it is worse.”

Survivor of clergy abuse

The Independent Safeguarding Board

In response to recommendations from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) the Archbishops’ Council agreed to set up an Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB). The board was set up at the end of 2021 to last for just two years, meaning that it is already more than halfway through its life. The board is not “Independent”, since it has no separate legal standing, and its members are appointed and paid by the Archbishop’s Council. Its remit is *not* to provide independent management input to the Church’s safeguarding, or even independent scrutiny and assurance, but only “coordinating discussions on future models of independent regulation, accountability and governance.” Not a single Church body has so far been inspected by the ISB. The board consists of just three part-time members. One of those three, the chair, has been “stood aside” for the past six months, whilst multiple data breaches are investigated by the Office of the Information Commissioner. At the beginning of November 2022 the ISB delivered its first report, including recommendations for the treatment of survivors. It all looked very familiar to us – almost identical to the independent report produced by SCIE in 2019. Three months on, the Church has had to be pushed into making any response at all to the ISB report. Have the recommendations been adopted? Are they being implemented? Has Synod discussed or even read the ISB report? Or is the whole ISB project just a fig leaf?

"I have myself begun to discover the capacity of the Church of England to drag its feet: this is simply not good enough, when people's lives are in tatters and when help is needed now, not somewhere down the road."

Bishop Jonathan Gibbs June 2020

Safe Spaces

Safe Spaces was intended to provide helpline support to victims and survivors of church abuse in the Church of England and the Roman Catholic church. A new organisation took over the helpline this month – the third agency running Safe Spaces in eighteen months. This one has no specific experience of the Church and how it works. If you phone Safe Spaces today and ask to be allocated an advocate, you will be told that no one is available.

Lessons Learned Reviews

The Church doesn't seem to know how to set up and conduct a review, or what to do if and when one is published. Unlike other organisations, the Church of England does not even have independent scrutiny of its reviews. Findings are not followed-up. What lessons have been learnt from the Gibb Review, the Carmi Review, the Elliott Review, or the Pearl Review? Why has there been no Church of England review into Revd Jonathan Fletcher, Revd Iain Broomfield or so many others?

The publication of the review into John Smyth, one of the Church of England's most prolific abusers, was due in May 2020. It has been delayed seven times already, and there is no date for its publication. We are aware of battles behind closed doors as to how much of any review we will be allowed to see. In the meantime, of the nine bishops and others

"The church keeps saying it will provide redress one day. That's no use to me. My life is broken now."

Survivor of church abuse

who were complicit in enabling Smyth's abuse, or failed to deal properly with victim disclosures, not one has been held to account. Those who were most responsible for allowing this to happen are gradually retiring or dying.

The inquiry into the abuse of rapist Revd Trevor Devamanikkam is even more overdue. Many of us contributed to an independent review of safeguarding processes at Lambeth Palace and Bishopthorpe. The reviews were completed in June 2022, but seven months later they had not been published. Are you not concerned about this?

Past Cases Review 2

Like the bad sequel to a terrible movie, the Church's second Past Cases Review (PCR2) was published in October 2022. The report spoke of "a culture of deference, protectionism and bias", "evidence of inconsistent practices", "a culture of tolerating bullying" which "allow[s] for blame to be diverted onto the victim." Survivors have numerous concerns about the way the review was conducted; the inconsistency between dioceses, the lack of

"How can the Church say it has a message of good news, and at the same time ignore and trample over people it has hurt."

Survivor of church abuse

independence of some reviewers, and as ever, the poor communication with survivors. Many of us don't know whether our 'case' was included in the review. Despite its limited scope and inconsistent application, the report uncovered 383 cases of abuse that had previously been recorded in diocesan and other files, but hadn't been properly addressed. 242 of the alleged abusers are living clergy. More than 200 of the allegations involve physical or sexual abuse. We are shocked by that – but even more shocked that no support or follow-up has been offered to the 383 or more newly-discovered victims. Once again, it appears that the motive behind the review was to count victims, not to care for them.

Conclusion

In December 2022 fifty-one people signed a letter to the chair of the Charity Commission asking him to investigate the Church of England's safeguarding practices. The letter refers to "a highly dysfunctional Church culture" that is "uniformly poor in responses to allegations of abuse". The letter asserts that the Church lacks any "functional leadership" in safeguarding and that "current safeguarding processes, bodies, panels, and their personnel are incompetent, ineffective and unfit for purpose." In reply, a Church of England spokesperson said: "The Church is committed to the highest standards of safeguarding." So which is it? "The highest standards of safeguarding"? Or "unfit for purpose"?

We encounter shock amongst secular safeguarding professionals when they see the way that the Church treats us. "Decisions seem to be made by people with no understanding of trauma", one said recently. "They are twenty years behind the times", said another.

Whatever you are told at Synod, we want you to hear our pain and frustration. The Church of England's treatment of victims and survivors of abuse is chaotic, cruel, and dangerous. For many of us, the way we are treated by the system today is worse than our original church-based abuse. Your safeguarding apparatus is broken beyond repair.

"The platform tactic (from those leading debates and carrying forward the business of Synod) has been to attempt to keep questions about the Church's safeguarding practice, past and present, off the floor of Synod. Attempts to inquire (sic) the shortcomings of the National Safeguarding Team, the past failures of Bishops and the various 'lessons learned reviews' (from which we never seem to learn very much) have been seen off and resisted, leaving victims, survivors and those campaigning on their behalf with the sense that justice will never be done or seen to be done. I suspect that this is one area of our national church life where we need to set up better ways of processing these concerns. They won't go away."

Bishop Pete Broadbent, Ecclesiastical Law Journal, January 2023

For more information and updates, visit www.houseofsurvivors.org

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