

UPDATE FROM INDEPENDENT REVIEW GROUP

The work of the Independent Review Group, set up by the Bishops' Conference of Scotland to monitor the implementation of the McLellan Commission on safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults, continues. The Covid-19 crisis means we have had to adapt how we work, but for all of us, throughout the Church, safeguarding is even more important during the lockdown.

The IRG last met face to face on February 22nd, when we were joined by Fr Gerry Maguinness, new General Secretary of BCOS along with Michael McGrath. That was a very useful meeting following the publication of the first two independent audits, conducted by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), of the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh and the Diocese of Galloway, and we were able to announce that the 2020 Independent audits would be of the Dioceses of Motherwell and Aberdeen

Prior to the lockdown, we had anticipated that the start of the 2020 audit process would have been on April 21, and we were planning a "Lessons Learned" conference in June. Now we are working with SCIE to determine if some of the preparatory work with the next two Dioceses can be done by working remotely to allow a quick start to the face to face elements of the audits. We will keep you informed of how we progress that. Both initial audits have been a valuable learning experience for all of us.

On these first two completed audits, we are now arranging what may have to be on-line meetings to offer assistance to both dioceses on possible ways of implementing the action points for improvement that emerged in the audits, and we will have formal follow up meetings at the end of the 6 month period since publication to acknowledge the progress which has been made. We are very grateful for the ready cooperation we have received from both the Archdiocese and the Diocese.

Events have recently unfolded in ways which none of us could have anticipated. While we are deprived of personal contact, churches and our shared connections through our communities will be very important and a vital part of our survival strategies. It will also be important not to let our focus drift. Mindful of the responsibilities placed on us, the IRG met virtually on the 18 April 2020 when we were given sight of the online Audits of each diocese for 2019 conducted on behalf of BCOS.

The work of safeguarding is particularly important at a time when people are physically isolated, may have less support than usual and may be worried and frightened. We are grateful for the many ways in which diocesan safeguarding staff have continued to link with the IRG, to complete their annual office audits / action plans and to plan for future events. We know that behind the safeguarding staff there are people attending DRAMTS and DSAG meetings - virtual of course.

There are hundreds of volunteers who remain committed across parishes in Scotland. Neither do we forget the work of Religious Orders and their communities who have also helped us with information and ideas, particularly about support to victims and survivors, and we look forward to meeting with them and the new Chair of the Religious Order Commission Geraldine Bienkowski.

A Memorandum of Understanding has been agreed with Bishops' Conference, which will guide the process and shared oversight of future audits. This is the result of much collaboration, good will and a commitment to learning from the experiences of all involved.

We are happy to report that representatives of the IRG have been welcomed at the DSAG Safeguarding Advisory Group meetings in 6 Dioceses with the final 2 in planning. Themes from those meetings will form part of our 2020 annual report. We have an agreed Action Plan and will be tracking diocesan action plans against the recommendations of the McLellan report, which gives our mandate and framework.

Finally, we have had many conversations about the Outreach events. After a successful meeting in the Archdiocese of Glasgow in 2019 and agreement about dates, further such events are on hold partly because of some capacity issues in late 2019 and now the Public Health emergency. We have new provisional dates and are determined to proceed as soon as practical. Preparatory work is ongoing.

The Outreach events are hosted by IRG members and organised jointly with Diocesan Safeguarding offices. They are open to anyone, regardless of status, who wants to find out about the IRG's work and to contribute ideas about how safeguarding can improve. They are not training events, though there is some input. They are opportunities, in as safe a place as we can collectively make it, to talk about safeguarding, knowing that the impacts of abuse still resonate for many people. Sharing ideas about how safeguarding practice can improve further, particularly in relation to the support and care of those hurt, helps the IRG and may help others.

Although these are not survivor-specific events, a guiding principle for the IRG is a recognition that victims and survivors will be present in any gathering. We understand that many people affected by abuse feel that they have not been heard. As you will know, Helen Liddell, the Chair of the IRG, has made it her mission to ensure that survivors are at the heart of safeguarding. In facilitating these sessions we bear that in mind. We know too of other events organised by Dioceses, such the 'Grief to Grace' event scheduled to take place in Paisley Diocese when circumstances allow.

These are troubling times for all of us. We will do our best as an IRG to live up to the mission given us. We never lose sight of the importance of independence, and we recognise the driving commitment of many in the Church to ensure that the vulnerable among us are protected and shielded with love and compassion.

Notes

Further information about the Independent Review Group and its work can be found on www.bcos.org.uk

Information about outreach events will be made available through Diocesan Safeguarding teams.

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