



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

1st January 2023 – 31st December 2023

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 safeguarding activity at Westminster Abbey in 2023 and offers assurance as to how well colleagues are performing against an agreed set of measurements. The data has been provided by Dave Pate, the recently appointed Abbey Safeguarding Officer (ASO) and the Human Resources Department. The following seven 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 seventh and penultimate safeguarding annual report and, whilst much of the information below 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. For consistency, I have followed the same format as previous reports although some of the context is new.

1. Safeguarding Governance Structures and Resources

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.

The Dean has been supported throughout 2023 by Dave Pate, the ASO, who was, until recently, employed on a part-time basis covering a period of maternity leave for Juliette Curtin who has now left the organisation. There was a seamless handover of responsibility between the two. Juliette was supportive throughout this period and I want to thank her for all the hard work over the years in building the safeguarding capacity and capability at the Abbey.

Additional internal support is routinely provided by the Receiver General (RG) who is a key member of the SRG. External support is provided by the Abbey Safeguarding Adviser (ASA) from the Diocese of London as well as a local authority representative at SRG and from me as the Independent Chair of the Abbey's SRG. The SRG met on four occasions, in January, April, July and October, although external member attendance was not as consistent as I would have liked. I am working with the ASO to widen membership of the group to ensure more external input to our discussions.

2. Policy and Procedures

The Abbey safeguarding processes are set out in the *Policy for Safeguarding in Westminster Abbey & St Margaret's Church*. There are a number of significant developments underway nationally with the Church of England National Safeguarding Team (NST) introducing new National Safeguarding Standards and a revised Safeguarding Code of Practice. These documents will be reviewed and the Abbey policies and procedures updated as necessary in 2024. Dean and Chapter will be advised of any amendments prior to approval. It remains important that the Abbey continues to ensure that safeguarding is considered in the planning for all significant events, and the ASO will be working with colleagues to enable that to happen.

3. Summary of Safeguarding Preventative Activity in 2023

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. Safer recruitment training was not offered in 2023 although I am assured that all interviews for roles involving a position of trust had a properly trained member of staff on the selection panel.

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:

- 218 DBS checks were requested.
- 2 DBS checks were returned marked.
- 1 DBS check is outstanding and being processed by HR and U-check.

The marked returns show the importance of this preventative process, and one applicant had an offer of employment withdrawn as a result; the second issue was not judged to be a safeguarding concern.

Training – The following table provides a breakdown of training delivered in 2023:

Training	Departments identified to be trained	Total completed in 2023	Number of people outstanding
Basic Safeguarding Awareness	All staff and volunteers	203	0
Foundation	Selected Staff and volunteers	145	0
Leadership	Selected leadership staff	58	1
Senior leadership	Dean and Chapter HoDs	9	0
Mental Health First Aid	Selected job roles across departments	0	0
Child Protection Safeguarding	Choir School and Music Department	60	0
Safer Recruitment	Managers with recruitment responsibilities	0	0
Suicide Prevention	Selected job roles across departments.	0	0

Data on the Choir School has been included here for the first time as the ASO is now more actively involved in supporting their Designated Safeguarding Lead. Training attendance is overseen by the HR department and whilst it has been a challenge to ensure all departments keep their staff at the required level of training compliance in the past, the above statistics demonstrate how hard Abbey staff have worked in the last year 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.

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. There has been another increase in reporting this year, with the number of incidents recorded rising to 71 from 51 in 2022. The following table highlights the emerging pattern of reporting for the last seven years:

Year	Safeguarding concerns/incidents reported	Of which were concerns over mental health matters
2017	10	N/K
2018	40	20
2019	35	N/K
2020	23	10
2021	23 (Lockdown period)	11
2022	51	35
2023	71	25

In total, 13 cases involved children, many were low level incidents whilst on visits to the Abbey. Issues with adult visitors' perceived mental health and wellbeing contributed to just over a third of the reports received and actioned by the ASO. An emerging category of persons of concern presenting at or contacting the Abbey involves those fixated on the Royal Family and has resulted in collaborative working with statutory bodies to assess the risk associated with these individuals. An obvious link can be made to the recent state events that took place immediately prior to and during this reporting period.

The ASO is working with the Diocese of London to explore what options are available for the Abbey to link in with the new national case management system which is now fully in use at the Diocese. Hopefully this will improve the recording and managing of case files as well as potentially facilitating external scrutiny and resilience. Progress on this will be reported to Dean and Chapter later in the year.

Multi Agency Working – 14 of the 71 cases above were referred to statutory services for their information and follow-up action. The Abbey convened one Safeguarding Case Management Group in 2023 which has subsequently been satisfactorily reviewed by the Diocese of London Safeguarding Team.

Safeguarding Agreements/Plans – Three 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.

4. Risk Register

The ASO maintains a detailed, ten-point safeguarding risk register following the Abbey's standard format for the management of risk. Two new risks were added in 2023, the first focussing on managing increased footfall and the second covering the potential for domestic

abuse in a faith context. This document is linked to the Safeguarding Action Plan and allows for cross referencing of issues between the two. All risks are currently assessed as medium risk with mitigation measures in place.

5. Safeguarding Action Plan

The Safeguarding Action Plan is designed to drive the business of improving safeguarding at the Abbey. It is a list of longer-term initiatives managed by the ASO and monitored by the SRG. There were 22 actions outstanding on the plan however these are under review by the ASO and will be incorporated into a new 10-point Safeguarding Strategy. This revised document will propose a workplan for safeguarding activity in the period 2024 to 2027 and was drafted by the ASO with my support, and has been subsequently reviewed by the RG.

6. Additional Safeguarding Activity and Forward Look

There have been a number of additional safeguarding developments during 2023 worthy of bringing to the Dean and Chapter's attention and some proposed events in 2024 as follows:

- a) There has been a strengthening in the collaborative working arrangements of the two schools within the Abbey estate which has enhanced their resilience in safeguarding matters.
- b) The ASO and the Liturgical Team have developed a process of due diligence to check visiting clergy who are robing, processing and/or officiating at services in the Abbey or St Margaret's. This will require further work in 2024; the often-challenging task of checking whether or not a cleric or other faith leader is safe to receive should be factored in to considerations when invitations are being considered.
- c) The compliance by staff and volunteers with the need for up to date DBS checks and safeguarding training has improved significantly in 2023. Work is still required to develop a 'business as usual' model with supporting HR software to drive the notifications for completion to individuals and their managers. It is vital that the Abbey stays on top of these requirements to ensure everyone is kept safe.
- d) Recording of pastoral encounters has improved utilising a diary system for the Duty Chaplain and other clergy to record, where appropriate, the encounter or concern and ensure an appropriate briefing or handover is in place.
- e) The new St Margaret's Chorister safeguarding arrangements have been implemented, the choir is now established and the ASO is working with the St Margaret's music team to ensure this remains robust with periodic reviews to capture learning and implement updates.
- f) Enhanced induction training inputs for newly appointed staff and volunteers has started. The ASO meets with new cohorts on the first Monday of each month to explain core elements of safeguarding and working practices at the Abbey.
- g) The ASO has developed a process with security staff for colleagues to refer low-level safeguarding concerns such as those relating to correspondence or packages arriving at the Abbey.
- h) The ASO has been working with the Canon Steward and Archdeacon and other colleagues to identify and develop a safe space in the Abbey where initial contact and conversations on pastoral or safeguarding matters can take place safely. This will develop through 2024.
- i) Improved safeguarding practices for visiting contractors will be developed in 2024, utilising accreditation processes implemented for managing access during the Coronation.
- j) A renewed focus on safeguarding for those involved in music at the Abbey is planned and arrangements for deputies are currently being reviewed.
- k) A review of the response to the identification and support to those potentially experiencing domestic abuse within the Abbey community is currently underway, led by

HR. This was identified as a risk by the director of safeguarding for the Diocese of London as this is their most prevalent issue. The Abbey had not previously considered it a concern. Progress in this area will be monitored through the SRG.

- l) The Abbey intends to host the national Cathedral Safeguarding Network in 2024 and work is underway to plan for this important two day event.
- m) A safeguarding critical incident, multi agency table top exercise has been developed for cathedrals to test the effectiveness of their response which could easily be adapted for use by the Abbey and its partners. It will be considered by the RG before Dean and Chapter is consulted.

7. Concluding Remarks

I am pleased to report that the Abbey continued to maintain a positive approach to safeguarding throughout 2023 despite the challenges posed by significant national events. There remains a clear commitment from those I engage with to enhance the Abbey's safeguarding responses and ensure those most at risk of harm are safe to visit and worship at this iconic British institution.

The ASO has been a particularly strong appointment, bringing a fresh perspective and experience to the Abbey. There is however still plenty to do and the proposed three year plan outlined in the draft Safeguarding Strategy will assist in providing focus and direction. Finally, the Abbey has not been subject to an external safeguarding audit since 2019 and I suggest that this is considered in more depth during the coming year.

Peter Spindler
Independent Safeguarding Advisor
February 2024