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Safeguarding people in faith communities

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Churches and faith-based groups play a vital role in the lives of many children, young people and adults. People who contribute to the life of faith-based communities and places of worship have a role to play in keeping people safe. They also play a vital role in responding effectively and compassionately when someone comes forward to share concerns or disclose abuse.

SCIE is working with a number of faith groups to enable them to improve their safeguarding practice. This is a summary of the SCIE Inter-faith breakfast that brought together senior UK faith leaders to talk about safeguarding adults and children.

Whilst abuse in faith-based communities remains relatively rare, we have seen from recent high-profile inquiries the immense and long-lasting damage caused when abuse is perpetrated by someone in a faith-related role. We have also seen how ineffective, unprofessional or defensive responses are experienced by victims as re-abusive, sometimes worse than the original abuse itself.

The SCIE breakfast brought together senior faith leaders from across the country to identify what is helping and what is hindering safeguarding work, lessons learnt on individual journeys of improvement, and what more is needed to be done to remove the barriers to delivering the highest quality safeguarding to keep all children and adults safe.

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

The SCIE Inter-faith breakfast was the first of a series of reflective learning events to create a platform for dialogue and share best practice in safeguarding. There were representatives from the Methodist Church, the Church in Wales, the United Reformed Church, the Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Service, Soka Gakkai International UK – Buddhism in Action for Peace, the Church of England, Quakers in Britain, Baptists Together, and the Jewish community (Reshet).

Participants on the day agreed:

- How much they shared in terms of the challenges they all faced in progressing safeguarding practice, despite the differences between faith groups

- How useful it was to discuss these challenges with people of faith, regardless of which faith

Setting the scene – key note speakers

Graham Tilby, National Safeguarding Adviser for the Church of England, opened the morning by giving an overview of the Church's journey which began with first recognising that there is a problem and shared his view that safeguarding must be infused with theology to be effective. He then described how SCIE had helped the Church of England through its independent audits of dioceses and its research on the experiences of survivors of abuse of Church responses.

Shelley Marsh, Director of Reshet, a network of Jewish youth organisations, said that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and local forums for learning should be created to enable members across the community to come together to share their learning and concerns.

An evident theme across all the speakers and in consequent table discussions was that safeguarding is an issue that affects all faith groups. There was agreement and an acknowledgment regarding the level of resources and support internally and externally needed to successfully meet safeguarding statutory requirements, both with new legislative requirements and evolving risks, for example technology.

Faith communities and safeguarding



It's important to remember that safeguarding applies to both adults and children, and that while the focus in the media has largely been on sexual abuse, there are many different types of abuse which faith communities have a huge potential to identify and prevent. These include:

- physical abuse
- domestic violence or abuse
- sexual abuse
- psychological or emotional abuse

- financial or material abuse
- modern slavery
- discriminatory abuse
- organisational or institutional abuse
- neglect or acts of omission
- self-neglect
- exploitive use of technology
- spiritual abuse

Children's safeguarding is shaped by the Children Act 1989, but the key statutory guidance for faith groups is '**Working together to safeguard children**', which states:

'Every VCSE (voluntary, community and social enterprise), faith-based organisation and private sector organisation or agency should have policies in place to safeguard and protect children from harm. These should be followed and systems should be in place to ensure compliance in this.'



The Care Act 2014 provides the legal basis for adult safeguarding. Under it, adults with care and support needs at risk of or experiencing abuse and unable to prevent it themselves must be supported.

But faith groups tend to draw a much wider definition of what constitutes a vulnerable adult. For instance, the Church of England uses this definition in its disciplinary code:

'Vulnerable adult' means 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.'

The breadth of people that faith groups serve, and who they may see as in need of safeguarding support, presents an enormous opportunity to help vulnerable people, but is also a challenge in terms of managing workloads and defining the role of safeguarding professionals.

Challenges and opportunities facing faith-based communities



When discussing challenges and barriers to safeguarding in faith-based communities, common themes included:

- The trust people have in religious leaders, which both creates opportunities for abuse, and makes it less likely that victims will be believed if they accuse a religious community leader
- The difficulty people have in thinking that someone of their own faith would abuse another member of that same faith, tied with the desire not to damage the reputation of the faith group by exposing such individuals
- An attitude of welcome and inclusion, which makes religious communities susceptible to people who wish to enter them in order to abuse. This can be tied up with issues of forgiveness and second chances
- Blurred boundaries between adults and children, for example on pilgrimages and other trips
- Reliance, especially at the level of individual congregations, on volunteers to handle safeguarding issues; volunteers who will have varying degrees of knowledge and confidence, and who can easily walk away if not properly supported
- A concern for organisational reputation, stemming at least in part from the status of religious groups as morally good organisations. This status is threatened by abuse within the organisation, and appears to be a consideration in the repeated covering up of potential scandals in a number of faith groups.

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- Community organisations/charities, faith groups – especially smaller ones – may have limited resources to devote to safeguarding
- Many lack a culture of safe recruitment, supervision, human resources and other management structures which can lead to accountability and transparency
- Tension between religious laws and customs and statutory requirements
- How to best use limited resources

Key issues

Proportionality

Some faith-based groups are small and locally based. They may lack the necessary resources to develop robust and comprehensive policies and procedures, e.g. child protection, adult safeguarding, whistleblowing, and lone working.

Role of leaders

Change needs to begin with overt, proactive leadership about the priority given to keeping people safe and on a clear stance that abuse in any form will not be tolerated. Guidance should be given to the community with clear lines of accountability and information shared widely about actions being taken to improving safeguarding.

Capacity and skills

Concerns were raised by several participants about the skills and capacity of staff working in faith-based organisations to lead and delivery better safeguarding practice. There are often large numbers of volunteers who support faith organisations, who can struggle to find the time to take part in formal training.

Scale of change

Since faith-based communities are often made up of many smaller groups in different locations, implementing a clear national policy can be challenging. It is vital to invest in the frontline by providing effective safeguarding training, management and regular reviews of safeguarding practice.

Cultural change

Many people can find it difficult to accept that someone of their faith is capable of abusing someone, and they may want to protect the faith's reputation. Some communities also believe deeply in the importance of forgiveness and in giving people second chances, even if they are known abusers. This can help instil a culture within organisations that is less likely to shine a light on incidents of abuse or explore concerns about abuse, unsafe people or practices.

To effect cultural change and ensure that safeguarding leads do not operate in a silo, it is crucial to ensure that safeguarding is infused with theology. It was suggested that holy texts could be used to help translate safeguarding policies into real change.

Graham Tilby noted that as National Safeguarding Adviser, he 'was not changing the Church's mission, since safeguarding is already part of the religious mission'.

Legal frameworks

Many religious organisations have their own internal legal system, and perceptions of conflicts between canon law and civil law, where the law of the land differs from faith law were acknowledged as potential barriers to effective safeguarding. For instance, the Seal of the Confessional has been interpreted to mean that priest-penitent privilege prevents confessions of abuse being reported to the authorities. This interpretation has more recently been contested. The idea of being answerable only to a higher power and not also subject to civil law and statutory safeguarding requirements should be addressed and the requirement to report abuse of children to statutory agencies made clear.

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Developing a collaborative approach

The need to build structures and resilience for increased engagement with the existing safeguarding framework in both the statutory sector and with other faith groups was emphasised. This will help address the practical challenges around how to operate in a post Local Safeguarding Children Board world, and how to bring in an independent auditor with the appropriate status and credibility to publish their findings.

The importance of co-production

The voices of survivors should be heard in a meaningful and non-tokenistic way. This means seeing survivors as a valuable resource, and reaching out to engage with them in safeguarding improvement work, for example through co-designing and co-producing policies and procedures, training and safeguarding education. SCIE is working with Church of England survivors to support the possibility of better partnership of survivors and the Church. This began with the opportunity to organise a fringe event at the recent Church of England General Synod with MACSAS (The Ministry and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors). Survivors participated and Synod members were able to listen and begin crucial dialogue. The event included presentations by survivors and group discussions drawing on preliminary themes from SCIE's independent survey of survivors' views.

Independent reviews and audits

Independent reviews are an important mechanism to help organisations learn from cases where people have been abused by a person or people in faith-related roles,

especially if it is known or there are concerns that the response did not meet standards of good practice. Independence scrutiny by these means helps both rebuild trust that what happened is truly being brought to light and there is no cover up. They also allow the systemic barriers to be identified that, if not addressed, will prevent future cases from being handled better.

Routine audits, in contrast, allow constant learning and improvement to be achieved proactively, by inviting in people with fresh eyes and safeguarding expertise before any one has suffered harm. These benefit from being conducted as collaboratively as possible, rather than being seen as something that is done to organisations. There is also a longstanding fear in some communities of independent oversight leading to religious persecution. The quality of audits will benefit from co-production with abuse survivors in the design and delivery.

Improving safeguarding practice in faith-based groups

While the participants at the breakfast were open about the challenges faced, a number of examples of good practice were highlighted.

Theological leadership

Promoting an understanding of safeguarding as a positive and integral part of the particular faith's beliefs is at the heart of good faith-based safeguarding. Faith groups share a desire to protect children, and to be a place of welcome for everyone who shares their beliefs, including children and adults with particular vulnerabilities. Recognising that safeguarding is therefore at the heart of theology, rather than a secular, tick-box add-on is important in the effort to win hearts and minds and change culture.



Jo Kind (from survivor support group MACSAS) and Dr Sheila Fish (pictured), from SCIE, speaking to the Church of England General Synod. Jo was the first survivor to be invited to address Synod directly. Sheila shared key themes from a survey of the views of survivors of abuse.

Valuing safeguarders

Senior leaders in a faith can take the time to publically back, thank and reward the volunteers who help keep safeguarding going in congregations. This can go a long way to maintaining people's enthusiasm and commitment.

Appropriate and accessible training

Faith groups need to get the safeguarding message out to a wide variety of people, in diverse roles, and with different levels of safeguarding awareness. Tailored training for people in different roles that fits in with their busy lives is vital to making sure that the message is received.

Committing to electronic DBS checks

Managing DBS checks for the many people who make faith groups tick can be arduous if not done electronically, and can lead to a sense that safeguarding is a purely bureaucratic concept. Signing up to electronic DBS systems can remove a headache for hard-pressed volunteers at ground level.

Monitoring and learning lessons

Knowing what is happening in safeguarding can be a challenge, so systems that allow for audits, surveys, visits and other tools to keep an eye on what's going on are really helpful. Even more useful is then learning from what has been discovered, so there is an ongoing cycle of improving practice.

Independent oversight and expertise

We have discussed how a faith group can instinctively find it hard to accept that abuse may occur in its midst. Employing expert safeguarding professionals, or using them in a scrutiny role – e.g. on a local safeguarding panel – can help shed a knowledgeable and independent eye over what is taking place.

Linked to this, external scrutiny – such as benchmarking, auditing and reviewing, can be an important tool in safeguarding improvement.

Engaging in inter-faith practice sharing

Participants spoke about the sense of isolation you can feel when faced with a safeguarding issue. There was a strong sense of wanting to learn from each other at the breakfast and an informal commitment was made to fostering dialogue with each other and sharing both best practice and learning from mistakes. Faith leaders should explore opportunities to build learning networks and practice sharing opportunities between people of different faiths with safeguarding roles.

Need for more examples of good practice

In many areas of safeguarding practice, there is now an abundance of good practice and guidance, but most participants at the seminar felt this was lacking for faith communities. There was a desire for there to be a directory of good practice, templates and signposts to expert advice.

Leading by example

Members of the breakfast seminar spoke passionately about not only wanting to protect the members of the communities and meet the requirements of current legislation, but to lead by example, as one representative said: 'Safeguarding should be a light that shines in every part of the community'.

'Church has the unique potential to respond well to those who have been harmed by abuse and those who pose a risk to others, as it seeks to welcome all.'

Graham Tilby, Church of England.

Conclusion

Faith-based communities and places of worship have a huge part to play in keeping people of all ages protected and safe. There is a huge amount going on in all the faith-based organisations we are working with to strengthen leadership, systems, skills and practice to create safer communities of faith.

Faith communities are in a wider network of organisations involved in keeping people safe, such as local authorities, the police, the NHS and schools. They are also part of a wider network of faith-based organisations, including those representing different religious communities.

A key message from SCIE's breakfast event is that faith communities need to look outwards, and seek support, and opportunities to learn from others. They also need to focus on:

- **getting the foundations right** – having good and well understood policies and procedures in place
- **creating clear leadership and governance structures**, so that everyone connected to their communities knows who to go to for help
- **ensuring staff and volunteers are trained and confident**, so that they understand what to be aware of and how to respond to concerns or issues.

Useful links and resources

- [Safeguarding adults resources, policies, guidance and videos](#) (SCIE)
- [Safeguarding adults e-learning](#) (SCIE)
- [Safeguarding adults and children training courses](#) (SCIE)
- [Working together to safeguard children](#) (Department of Health)

Support from SCIE



SCIE's knowledge and experience of safeguarding means that we are well placed to support your organisation on your safeguarding journey. Our collaborative approach provides organisations with the tools to learn from safeguarding incidents and put in place the right measures to improve safeguarding in the future.

'SCIE's safeguarding training was extremely well run and sensitive to our specific needs.'

Avi Lazarus, Chief Executive Officer, Federation of Synagogues

Why work with SCIE:

- SCIE has worked with a range of faith-based organisations and has developed a deep understanding of the context, sensitivities, issues and concerns relating to safeguarding.
- SCIE knows that safeguarding applies to both adults and children and that abuse can take many forms.
- Co-production is fundamental to what we do and we understand the importance of involving survivors, congregations and people who use services in that safeguarding journey.

SCIE works with faith-based organisations to support them through tailored programmes of learning and development and audit and review. We can work with your organisation to embed good safeguarding through:

- developing and updating safeguarding policies and procedures that reflect latest legislation, good practice and your organisational context
- Learning Together, a systems-based approach to support with statutory case reviews, routine audits and learning reviews
- CPD-accredited, tailored, classroom and e-learning training courses for managers, safeguarding leads and frontline staff

- free online resources for safeguarding adults and children.

Case studies

SCIE's work for the Church of England

The Church of England commissioned SCIE to provide an independent audit of diocesan safeguarding arrangements, including a survey of survivors views on what a good response from the Church would look like.

The process began with four audits designed to test the planning, the conduct and output of the audit approach in 2016. The dioceses in Portsmouth, Salisbury, Blackburn and Durham volunteered to participate in the pilot stage of the project, which enabled the audit methodology and supporting documents to be amended on the basis of the evaluation of the pilots.

SCIE has now completed 42 independent audits across all dioceses in England. The audits can be accessed via the Church of England website (under Reviews and Reports). SCIE has subsequently been commissioned to conduct audits of the Church of England's palaces and Cathedrals.

Downside School and monasteries

Downside Abbey incorporates a Benedictine monastery and a Catholic boarding school in Somerset.

As part of a commitment to keeping children and young people safe, Downside wanted to gain an understanding of how well the safeguarding of children is practised and promoted within and between the school and the abbey. SCIE was commissioned to carry out a systems-based joint audit of both the abbey and school, testing current arrangements and ways working against models of good practice. The process and outputs were designed to provide independent, rigorous and constructive challenge, which will enable all parties to progress on the journey of better keeping children safe.

Drawing on SCIE's Learning Together model, an approach that is collaborative in nature, SCIE and Downside embarked on a review that involved site visits across both the school and abbey to conduct conversations, focus groups and review case material. Engagement took place with not just senior leaders from Downside but also current staff, pupils and parents, past pupils and those that have previously held safeguarding roles. This process concluded with a final report delivering a challenging and constructive review of safeguarding arrangements that looks forward to how to consolidate progress and tackle remaining difficulties.

Reshet – Children and young people's safeguarding in the Jewish community

SCIE is supporting Reshet with developing and strengthening best practice in child protection and safeguarding for synagogues and communal organisations; and in working with children and young people. Reshet is a specialist team, funded by UJIA and supported by the Jewish Leadership Council, to build capacity and confidence in the provision and delivery of informal education to children and young people across the Jewish community. Informal Jewish Education engages with over 10,000 children and young people engaged on a weekly basis in schools, synagogues, youth centres and home hospitality.

Over the last two years SCIE has provided a range of support; training and advice to organisations in the Jewish community. Highlights have included:

- Child protection and safeguarding training for multiple synagogues across London- including rabbis, volunteers and staff
- Supporting Reshet on the development of the first children and young people's safeguarding position paper for the Jewish community. This paper was launched in March 2018 at the SCIE offices, with over 50 senior members from across the Jewish community present
- Tailored designated safeguarding lead in October 2017 for Designated Safeguarding Leads across the community. Thirteen separate organisations participated from across the reform, masorti, united and orthodox community
- Providing policy support and review for an ultra-orthodox outreach service; a liberal and orthodox synagogue.

At the heart of each relationship is an understanding of the specific needs of the community - whether liberal or orthodox- and ensuring that we build a learning approach that is inclusive. We have taken each relationship with separate communal organisations slowly to try understand what the specific needs of each community are, given that provision ranges from liberal to ultra-orthodox. This has enabled us to build trust and a strong rapport with synagogues, charities and youth movements. As a direct result we have seen our work within the community grow and we are currently in talks with Reshet to develop accredited training for the community; and also more designated safeguarding lead training.

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Avi Lazarus, CEO, Federation of Synagogues.

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