

St Werburgh's Chester – Safeguarding Update 16th/17th November 2024

Welcome

We would like to thank Fr Paul for allowing us, St Werburgh's Safeguarding Representatives, to speak to the Parish. Sunday 17th November has been designated by the Catholic Church in the UK as 2024 Safeguarding Sunday, which is an appropriate time to give the Parish a Safeguarding update. Our Safeguarding theme is: 'One Church, one day, one message.' Today we will be joining thousands of other churches across the UK to share this message and demonstrate unity as we work "Protecting vulnerable people, together."

Our Parish renewal theme is "Welcome". It is vital, therefore, that St Werburgh's and the broader Catholic Church should be a place where anyone can come and feel welcomed, loved, and part of a community. But with that openness comes responsibility, especially towards safeguarding vulnerable members of our community. The Catholic Church as a whole, and Bishop Mark here in Shrewsbury Diocese, have made Safeguarding a priority. Indeed, as you are all aware, our wider society has become increasingly conscious of the need to create safe environments where everyone can flourish.

Progress has been made since we last addressed the Parish. In this update, we will give an overview of Safeguarding Governance within the Diocese and share a summary of Diocesan Safeguarding activity and cases to give an insight into the scale and scope of the work done in this area. We will then summarise what we have done in the Parish over the last 12 months and close with how we want to move forward to create a wider understanding of Safeguarding within the Parish.

Theological background

Safeguarding is a task and commitment to which every member of the Church is called. Safeguarding is part of proclaiming the Gospel, for in all our efforts to care and protect the most vulnerable we give witness to Christ. Our buildings may provide safety, to an extent, from the elements. But it is the people who provide emotional and physical safety. It is you and I who look out for each other, for everyone and especially the vulnerable, young or old. And who knows when we too might be vulnerable? Safeguarding is by people for people. It is all our Christian calling. Let's all re-commit to that calling, today, on Safeguarding Sunday – and every day.

Governance

The Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency (CSSA) oversees safeguarding standards in the Catholic Church in England and Wales. Their vision is for a safe Catholic Church throughout England and Wales. And they work towards this vision by regulating safeguarding, and by sharing what they find. They are independent and aim to offer assurance to the public and to drive safeguarding standards in the Church.

Governance of Safeguarding and its direction in Shrewsbury Diocese is overseen by the Bishop who is supported by a Board of Trustees and a Safeguarding Committee.

The diocesan Safeguarding Co Ordinator Andrew O'Brien is responsible for delivering the Diocesan safeguarding plan and is their point of contact for the clergy, staff and volunteers including Parish safeguarding representatives. Andrew is responsible for liaising with statutory bodies such as the Catholic Safeguarding and Standards Agency and the Police and for implementing policy and procedures. He is also responsible for engaging with victims and survivors and ensuring that their voices are heard in diocesan safeguarding policy. Services such as Loud Fence and Safe Spaces which support survivors are advertised on the Diocesan website and our own parish. The Bishop has stated, unequivocally, Diocesan support for survivors. The Diocese of Shrewsbury is committed to treating everyone with respect and dignity. The Diocese is committed to moving forward and building a foundation and relationships based upon faith and in trust with all victims and survivors. The creation of a safe culture begins with the respectful, compassionate and non-judgemental response to people who have been affected by abuse in the Church regardless of where the harm occurred or who is responsible. The Diocese will meet victims and survivors where they are in their own journey, and will act justly, behave with integrity, and walk with them using the best supportive practices.

Safeguarding representatives are appointed by the Diocese in each parish. We have responsibility for conducting DBS checks on those who work with vulnerable adults and children. We are available for consultation on safeguarding by individuals or Parish groups etc. Many of our new parish groups have contacted us to see if volunteers need clearance and not all do. We are also available for consultation by individuals or volunteers about any safeguarding concerns. However, we never investigate such concerns but confidentially pass any available information to the Diocesan Officer who is experienced in dealing with such issues. An equally significant role and one we want to develop this coming year is that of raising awareness of safeguarding in the parish because, as the Bishop states, Safeguarding is a task and commitment to which every member of the Church is called.

Diocesan Safeguarding Activity

- Volunteers

The Diocese produces an annual safeguarding review which is available on the Diocesan website. This gives insight into the scale and scope of safeguarding work in the Diocese. As of December 2023, there were a total of 5758 volunteers in the Diocese who required DBS checks. There were 642 DBS checks in 2023 across new volunteers and renewals, which are required every three years. That is an increase of 267 over 2022. Again, these are volunteers who work with the most vulnerable in our Diocese.

- Cases

The Diocesan Safeguarding Officer supported by his two colleagues in the Diocesan Safeguarding Office also provides advice and support to priests, deacons parishioners, volunteers, Diocesan Staff and members of the public engaging with

the Catholic community as well as survivors and those in need due to circumstances in their own families or relationships. In 2023 the Diocesan safeguarding office dealt with 29 cases which included issues such as parishioner conduct, sexual abuse, financial conduct and mental health.

- Safeguarding Plans

In certain cases, Andrew will draw up a Safeguarding Plan which is an agreement initiated when information is made known to the Safeguarding Office regarding allegations, live statutory authority investigations, criminal convictions or where concerns remain pertaining to an individual engaging with parishes. These agreements enable effective safeguarding for all involved to facilitate safe worship and engagement, where appropriate. Reconnecting those who have offended with their parish is part of the process of rehabilitation that reflects the Catholic social teaching principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. Safely managing this rehabilitation, at the same time as caring for and protecting the parish community, is achieved through putting in place safeguarding plans.

The Diocese drew up 24 Plans in 2023. Whilst some of these plans related to incidents of sexual abuse, others related to, for example, financial abuse and domestic abuse.

Parish Safeguarding Activity

- Parish Safeguarding Representatives

The Parish Safeguarding Representatives in St Werburgh's are appointed by the Diocese with training and direction provided by the Diocesan Safeguarding Coordinator. We both attend Diocesan Safeguarding training and meet regularly with Fr Paul and Andrew O'Brien. Chris has regularly attended the annual Diocesan Safeguarding Mass. Liz was part of the group that offered feedback to the inspectors when the Diocese underwent a Safeguarding audit by Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency. The overall audit report result for Shrewsbury Diocese was 'Results being achieved'.

- Activity

Our Safeguarding focus at St Werburgh's over the last 12 months has been on DBS Clearance of volunteers and creating a process for tracking renewals on a 3-year cycle. During this period 78 Volunteers across 8 Parish Groups have applied for DBS Clearance for working with children or vulnerable adults. The following Groups were involved: Eucharistic Ministry to the home, The SVP, Altar Servers, Children's Liturgy, Confirmation, 1st Sacrament, and Youth. We are grateful to the leaders and volunteers in these groups for their co operation with DBS applications

We already know 2025 will be a busy year as 38 volunteers were cleared three years ago and so will be required to make new applications.

- Current Parish Situation

We are confident that we have a DBS Clearance Process in place, it is working well and there are good systems for monitoring re-application after the required 3-year period.

Safeguarding Continues to be well supported by Fr Paul who, alongside other priests and deacons in the Diocese, receives regular training from the Diocesan Safeguarding Officer. Parish group leaders are also proactive in contacting us with questions and clarifications. The presence of this process significantly reduces risks in our parish to children and vulnerable adults in church groups. However, as we know from the Diocesan experience, not all Safeguarding issues are related to Volunteer Groups.

Next steps for Safeguarding in the Parish

With the support of Fr Paul, the parishioners and the Diocese we aim to move to the next stage of our Parish Safeguarding initiative and to create a broader understanding and awareness of Safeguarding across the Parish. The purpose of this is to help us all understand our roles and responsibilities in safeguarding, to protect the vulnerable and to protect ourselves, and that we know where to go for support and advice. This is to ensure that everyone is welcome and feels safe to participate and flourish in all Parish events and activities. We also want to help the Parish understand common signs/symptoms of abuse, so that, if there is an issue, it can be identified, and the appropriate action/support put in place.

How are we going to develop a culture of safeguarding.

We are going to continue the DBS process for new volunteers and renewals. We have already had discussions with the Parish Health and Safety representative to ensure that Safeguarding is include, where necessary, in Parish risk assessment activity.

We also plan to deliver a Safeguarding presentation to the Parish on Tuesday 14th January. This presentation will cover the following topics:

- Understanding your role & responsibilities in safeguarding
- Protecting the vulnerable & protecting yourself
- Knowing where to go for support and advice
- Helping to develop a culture of safeguarding
- Accessing free training.

We hope, through this presentation in January, to increase Parish awareness of Safeguarding issues to help us reduce any risk to children and vulnerable adults across the Parish. We will also identify where you can obtain more information/training should you wish to.

Conclusion

That concludes our presentation. Again, we would like to thank Fr Paul for allowing us to do this and all the Parish Groups who have worked with us. We have a few copies of the presentation available after Mass, and it is also on the Parish Website.

Thank you.

Liz Aiello and Chris Proudfoot