

Safeguarding Children – Policy and Standards for the Catholic Church in Ireland 2016

It is difficult to think of anything that has caused as much destruction to a child as that caused by sexual abuse. The emotional scars endure for life. It is shocking to realise that so many children have been abused by Irish priests and religious within the Catholic Church. It is soul destroying to think that those crimes of sexual abuse against children were not appropriately dealt with by those who held power within the Church. This is the backdrop to our current work in safeguarding children from abuse in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

In 1996, the first guidance document for dealing with child abuse was issued, this was entitled: “Child sexual abuse: Framework for a Church response”. In 2005, “Our Children, Our Church” was developed and this recommended the establishment of The National Board. The role of the National Board is set out in the Memorandum and Articles of Association of Coimirce.

One of the 3 functions given to the Board by the three sponsoring bodies – The Irish Bishops’ Conference, The Conference of Religious and The Irish Missionary Union is to assist in the development of Child Safeguarding policy, procedures and practice. Once this advice is given by the Board, it is for the Church Leaders – the Bishops/Provincials and Regional Leaders - to ensure implementation of the policy and procedures

In line with this role of offering advice on policy, in 2008, the Board produced “Safeguarding Children, Standards and Guidance for The Catholic Church in Ireland” which was adopted by all Dioceses and Religious Orders/Congregations as the one Church approach to dealing with child abuse in the Church. It set out the expected performance on reporting, preventing abuse, accessing advice, communicating the Church’s message, training and auditing of practice.

Following reviews of child safeguarding practice in dioceses and religious orders/congregations, as well as developing an increased awareness of what constitutes best practice in child safeguarding, a review of the 2008 standards began in July 2014. Views received during 18 months of consultation inside and outside the Church assisted the Board in producing a revised policy and standards document which was submitted for approval and adoption by the Bishops’ Conference of Ireland, The Conference of Religious in Ireland and The Irish Missionary Union in December 2015.

“Safeguarding Children” – Policy and Standards for the Catholic Church in Ireland, was issued on the 1st of March 2016 and represents for the first time, a one Church policy, accompanied by 7 expected standards of practice, which ensure the policy is lived out in all ministries.

The Seven Standards are

1 Creating and Maintaining Safe Environments

This standard refers to all procedures and systems required to ensure that those ministering with children are properly selected for their role, so as to minimise risk to children. It also refers to codes of behaviour, complaints and whistleblowing

procedures, use of information technology and the use of Church property by external organisations.

2 Procedures for responding to child protection suspicions, concerns, knowledge or allegations.

This standard highlights the requirements around mandatory reporting of allegations, suspicions, concerns and knowledge of child abuse to the statutory authorities.

3 Care and support of the complainant

Those who have been harmed by abuse in the Church need to be enabled must feel that they are able to come forward in the knowledge that they will be responded to compassionately and that their allegation will be notified to the civil authorities and processed thereafter through Church law. Standard 3 defines the requirements around a pastoral response to the complainant and access to professional counselling and support.

4 Care and management of the respondent

Standard 4 outlines the fair process which must be in place for investigating and managing concerns following the conclusion of investigation by the statutory authorities. It also outlines the risk management arrangements which must be in place once the threshold of credibility has been reached to ensure that any risk to a child, by the respondent is minimised.

5 Training and support for keeping children safe

This standard outlines the training which must take place at all levels of the Church to raise awareness of child safeguarding and it also includes the need for those who have a role in safeguarding children in the Church to be supported in their role.

6 Communicating the Church's Safeguarding message

This standard identifies the importance of providing information about the Church's safeguarding work.

7 Quality assuring compliance with the standards

This standard requires close monitoring of practice to ensure that all other standards are being adhered to. Responsibility for compliance rests with the Church Authority.

Each standard has a set of indicators which when adhered to, demonstrate compliance with the stated standard. Unlike the previous Church approaches to child safeguarding, the revised standards better reflect the diversity of ministries across the Church, and the indicators that apply to each Church body will vary depending on the level of ministry they have with children.

Induction on the new policy and revised standards has been taking place, led by National Office staff in Dublin, Tuam, Cashel & Emly and in Armagh. The National Board is keen to ensure full understanding of the standards across all Church personnel.

There is no doubt that there has been a culture shift in relation to child safeguarding and responding to allegations of child abuse in the Catholic Church in Ireland. The standards simply underpin the practice, it is the hearts and minds and efforts of thousands of committed priests, religious, staff and volunteers that safeguard children.

There may always be people who wish to harm children in the Church. It is not possible to screen out everyone who has a sexual interest in children. But it is possible through vigilance, good procedures and committed practice to reduce the likelihood of harm and to respond promptly when concerns are raised.

For further information please log onto: www.safeguarding.ie