

Synod, February 2025

The recent sitting of General Synod was widely misrepresented in the press, particularly with regard to safeguarding and Church-related abuse and that many people will consequently be distressed by what they think Synod has decided.

In fact, a number of very important steps were taken which makes this session perhaps the most significant Synod for safeguarding improvements in the history of the Church.

Synod members, have heard many heartbreaking stories of people who have suffered abuse at the hands of the church and then encountered attitudes and processes within the church that have inflicted what amounts to further abuse. Their anger and loss of trust in the Church is, tragically, justified.

Amongst the concerns Synod heard consistently from survivors are the following:

(1) Redress - Church is far too slow in providing redress, processes are complex, off-putting and lack compassion. They are far too slow. The buck is passed from one church agency to another and it takes forever to reach a fair settlement. Far too many survivors have been waiting for redress for appallingly long times after their complaints were recognised.

(2) Standards and consistency - with every Diocese responsible for its own safeguarding processes, there is a wide variation of standards between Dioceses, caused by factors such as (a) personal competence of bishops (a particular problem when such bishops are deferred to or ignore the advice of safeguarding advisers); (b) different budgets allocated to resourcing safeguarding functions; and (c) different safeguarding structures. Standards vary widely across the church and many fall unacceptably below those of secular organisations.

(3) Disciplinary processes - the systems for processing complaints against clergy (whether safeguarding or not) are inadequate. They do not ensure just dealing either for complainants or respondents and the sanctions available are not fit for purpose.

(4) Overly complex structures - the Church's structures are too complex making it difficult to identify which body was responsible for a bad decision or bad practice. This makes accountability very difficult.

All of these are widely recognised on General Synod as legitimate and need addressing. Whilst there is a limit to what can be achieved in a single sitting of Synod, over the past week, Synod has taken very important steps towards addressing all of these concerns.

Firstly, Synod passed a new Clergy Conduct Measure, significantly improving the disciplinary processes for complaints against clergy. This has also gone for Royal Assent and will come into force soon. It will ensure a much fairer system for both complainants and respondents and give us many more tools to allow appropriate justice to be done. In

particular, it addresses a key issue in the recent Bishop of Liverpool case. It abolishes time limits for serious misconduct, which would have meant that the Bishop of Warrington's sexual misconduct case against the Bishop of Liverpool would not have been ruled out of time. It could have been heard with proper processes for both parties to achieve justice.

Secondly, synod introduced independent safeguarding scrutiny for the Church for the first time. A new oversight body will be established to ensure that safeguarding standards and processes are applied consistently across the Church. It will be centrally funded, so that it is not subject to variations of Diocesan budgets. And it will have teeth to ensure that survivors whose complaints are not properly handled within a Diocese will have an independent body they can refer their cases to. This is by far the most important step to ensure adequate safeguarding standards and consistency across the Church. It comes on top of recent changes already implemented to ensure that Diocesan Safeguarding leads have independent executive function - they no longer merely advise bishops (who could ignore them), but can make things happen regardless of their bishops. Findings from the independent auditors INEQE, who have audited a quarter of the Dioceses indicate that this is already having significant positive impact - see <https://ineqe.com/churchofengland/#annual-report>.

Thirdly, structures are simplified by progressing a new Governance Measure creating a new national governing body, Church of England National Services (CENS). This combines a number of different national bodies (including the Archbishops' Council) into a new single body. There is still much to do with simplification, but this is a major step forward. In particular, it addresses the debacle around the establishment and hasty dissolution of the Independent Safeguarding Board by the Archbishops' Council in 2023. Archbishops' Council has been held to account for that decision and will cease to exist.

All of these represent probably the largest steps forward in safeguarding and governance at a single sitting of Synod that the Church has ever seen. Indeed, they address many of the most critical changes that the Church needs to make and have changed the landscape.

The criticism you will have read in the press over the last week, surround one aspect of safeguarding which the Synod did not immediately adopt, relating to operational independence. Baroness Jay had strongly advocated for us to go further than independent scrutiny and outsource entirely our safeguarding function to an independent body. This was also strongly supported by a number of survivor groups and synod therefore gave it considerable attention. However, Baroness Jay acknowledged that outsourcing our safeguarding responsibilities is not currently possible under charity law. It would require the government to change the law for us and the government has given no indication that it will do so (by way of explanation, General Synod can change ecclesiastical law, but not the general law - only Parliament can do that).

Moreover, a very large number of highly respected safeguarding experts disagreed with Baroness Jay and told us that such outsourcing was highly problematic and could make the church less safe. What is universally acknowledged is that it is an untried system - no other organisation has ever done it - so there is no evidence as to its effectiveness. In

the light of these significant concerns, it would have been speculative and irresponsible for synod to have endorsed Baroness Jay's model of operational independence at this stage.

However, synod did not reject it. Instead synod has referred it for further scrutiny to ensure that it is both deliverable and effective before taking such a radical step. The press has reported this as delay and equivocation. It was, in fact, responsible governance. Once Baroness Jay's model has been properly assessed as to its feasibility and impact, synod will consider passing it.

It is important to note that the reason why Baroness Jay is calling for the church to take a unique and unprecedented approach to safeguarding is that many survivors have so completely lost trust in the Church that the only solution they can now trust is for the Church to stop doing safeguarding entirely and outsource it to an external agency. We have to acknowledge that the Church has deserved that lack of trust. But that alone should not determine the solutions we look for. Why is the Church a special case when other organisations have justified as much loss of trust, but they are not adopting this approach? We are, though, still listening, both to survivors and experts and no solutions are off the table.

If you wish to contact our diocesan safeguarding team #

safeguarding@lincoln.anglican.org

01522 50 40 50

<https://www.lincoln.anglican.org/parish-support/safeguarding/>

Safe Spaces is also available should people wish to speak to an independent victim service

0300 303 1056

Monday to Friday: 09:00-21:00

Saturdays: 09:00-13:00

Sundays: 13:00-17:00