



# **Safeguarding – Church of England Consultation Report**

**Prepared for: Church of England Consultation on Safeguarding Standards**

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## **SUMMARY**

**This report captures the key statements/principles that survivors felt important to underpin the National Safeguarding Team (NST) Responding To Victims And Survivors Of Abuse statement.**

### **Background**

**We had been engaged by the Church's National Safeguarding Team (NST) to consult survivors on one of the actions they are taking to improve current practice. This is in the context of national commitments to improving practice, from past debates at the national General Synod (the church governing body) in 2019 and February 2020, and following the publication of the IICSA report earlier this month.**

### **Goals**

**The purpose of the consultation was to help the NST to develop clear safeguarding standards that all churches, dioceses and safeguarding staff would be expected to meet. The primary focus was the standard: Responding To Victims and Survivors Of Abuse.**

### **Methodology**

#### **The Survey**

**An anonymous survey was created and circulated to a wide audience of survivors. Participants had the opportunity to suggest up to five statements/principles, plus an open 'anything else?' question.**

**Forty-six (46) survivors confirmed their status as survivors and their permission to use the data.**

**The maximum numbers of answers to any one question was 32.**

#### **The Focus Groups**

**Two focus groups consisting of 11 survivors were held following the survey.**

**Group participants would have been invited to complete the survey.**

**Group participants only attended one group.**

The words survivor(s), victim-survivor(s), discloser(s) and abused all refer to the person who has experienced abuse. The words are interchangeable and appear that way to reflect words used by the person(s) who had been abused.

## **THE STATEMENTS**

### **Responding To Victims and Survivors Of Abuse**

The message was consist in both focus groups and in the survey responses. Survivors were strongly of the opinion that the "Good looks Like" statements below must be underpinned by the qualifying comments. (*Supportive comments that are direct quotes from contributors are given in italics*).

#### **1. Survivors know that they are heard, understood, believed and will be supported.**

##### **Heard**

Survivors want to be properly listened to: in confidence, with compassion, without judgement, without the listener being in a 'role'; Survivors wanted to be recognised as whole people because abuse is not their whole story.

The survivors must be allowed to disclose as much or as little as they wish, and go at their own pace. The first response must be *to listen*, not to question, or rush to report or refer on.

##### **Believed**

Survivors feel strongly that the default position is to be believed and the person being disclosed to should reflect that *belief* in their responses to the survivor. So, those supporting survivors do not expect a clear and coherent retelling.

##### **Cared for**

Especially at first disclosure, survivors most wanted someone who would listen and demonstrate genuine *caring* and compassion.

Supporting comments received included:

*The person who receives the story from the survivor listens, engages their compassionate human heart, and stays attentive to the speaker until they have finished what they are saying without interruption, challenge, questions or the need for any form of proof.*

*When someone discloses abuse the person should be patient and understanding. Often*

*you just want someone to listen to you and accept you. To tell you that what you are experiencing is wrong and that you are of worth and value. People get scared because they think that you want them to solve the situation and that this is beyond them, but often you just want someone to listen and accept you. Having said that if they can signpost you to agencies who can support you, and even accompany you to meetings this is invaluable.*

Examples of helpful and supportive statements listeners could say included:

*That must have been terrible for you, I'm so sorry it happened.*

*We will be with you as this unfolds.*

*You will be heard*

*Tell me more*

*"Oh dear, I am sorry. Would you like a cuppa? I'll put the kettle on"*

*"I don't find that hard to believe."*

*It's really helpful to hear your story*

*How can I help you?*

## **2. The response by Church bodies and Church Officers to disclosures is victim-survivor-centred and does not cause further trauma to the person disclosing**

Survivors comprehensively felt that the Church ought to employ a **victim-survivor approach**. That means that the person disclosing is central and therefore they must have control, as much as possible. Responsible staff in particular need to be **trauma-informed**, and to go at the pace of the victim-survivor.

The Safeguarding Advisor or church worker receiving the disclosure should explore with the victim-survivor what they want to happen. Are they looking for pastoral care or investigation? Within the scope of mandatory safeguarding processes, what happens next should relate to what the survivor wants and needs. Survivors should not be made to feel responsible for protecting other victims.

Examples of supportive comments included:

*It is important that the person disclosing is central and therefore they must have control (where possible) in terms of the decisions made relating to the abuse and/or disclosure. In cases where an investigation is required (which may not necessarily be a desired outcome for the person disclosing, particularly to begin with), this needs to be handled appropriately and sensitively*

*The Church needs to understand trauma & why we are disclosing. Do we want pastoral care or counselling, support to heal our wounded heart, not investigation?*

*Always do what you say you will do, don't make promises you can't keep  
There must be no downplaying of the survivor's experience.*

*It is important that the person disclosing is not blamed, either directly or indirectly.*

*Survivors must not be met with disbelief, and there must be no harassment and further victimisation of survivors*

### **3. People with safeguarding responsibilities understand the impact of trauma and the best way to respond to it.**

When responding to victim-survivors the 'professionals' and 'safeguarding' personnel must be *vetted, independent and trained/experienced in managing trauma* and moderate language that supports the victim-survivor.

General members of the congregation ought to withhold commenting, and support with pastoral care and in prayers.

Many people felt that there should be much greater public awareness of the nature and extent of abuse and trauma, its impact, and how to respond to victim-survivors, not just those in positions of responsibility. All church members have a responsibility for mutual pastoral care and a role to play in supporting survivors.

Examples of supportive comments included:

*Awareness that it is a grief as complex as any bereavement*

*That emotional abuse is something that needs to be actioned as much as any other type of abuse*

*See the bigger picture: eg. teachings that internalise self-sacrifice; impact on the families of victims & perpetrators, etc.*

*The people with leadership or safeguarding roles, should be honest, caring, be able to listen and understand. General members should be supportive in prayer*

*Don't force them in to a corner. Listen. Be compassionate. Senior church leaders are too keen to be in role and do...No case is the same and cannot be treated as a formula. Love, listen and not give ultimatums.*

### **4. Churches create a culture of listening, transparency and respect that makes it safe to disclose**

This overlapped with the point about education to raise awareness of abuse and trauma, and how to respond, amongst all members of the church. Churches need to challenge bullying, abusive and exclusive theology, spiritual abuse and create a culture where all are welcomed and feel accepted and safe. We need to recognise and talk about all the different types of abuse, including abuse of clergy and within clergy

families.

Examples of supportive comments included:

*The church is aware that often the victim is blamed by others, the church will challenge any gossip that scapegoats the victim.*

*That the church community is welcoming to all*

*That all will be listened to (e.g. the young, the outsider, the regular member, the vicar.)*

*Embracing survivors as "us", not othering them as "them", so we can heal together & flourish in a better future*

*Recognition that domestic abuse within clergy families does exist and the need to support all as the consequences are far reaching and long term. Faith also comes under huge stress as the processes can help or hinder.*

#### **5. Victim/survivors and church workers know what process will be followed if someone reports abuse**

Victim-survivors want to see that workers have a clear transparent structure to follow. This needs to be well explained and easy to understand by everyone.

It was clear that an important discussion around mandatory reporting needs to happen, as survivors are not united in their views on this. While some people supported mandatory reporting, others felt that it would prevent them from disclosing. Everyone agreed that unless it was clear that there was immediate danger to a child, young person or vulnerable adult, the timescale for reporting should allow the survivor as much agency and choice as possible.

Examples of supportive comments included:

*Clarity in processes, no avoidance by safeguarding and clergy*

*Being told what will happen next*

*Our comprehension of what happened shifts & changes over time. Don't immediately on first reporting shuttle us into a system where everything taken out of our hands, and it's got to be reported and escalated into the legal system, when we're still trying to understand what the hell has happened to us and how it had happened.*

*That there is automatic follow-up (with the person disclosing) from the DSA on \*any\* report*

*Being kept up to date with any investigation/action*

*People who disclose will be in charge of what happens next*

*Survivors should be made aware that any further disclosure will take place when they are emotionally strong enough to take the next step.*

*The listener does NOT automatically assume they know what is best in this situation but asks the survivor what they would like to happen in response to this disclosure.*

## **6. Survivors are helped to receive the support they need, both from the church and other people/organisations**

Victim-survivors were strongly of the opinion that the church must offer support both fast and free. Therapy is viewed as an essential part of the healing and recovery process. Unfortunately, as devastating as abuse is, therapy is often a long time in coming and short in the period allowed on the NHS. However, *the Church ought to provide free independent therapy* where its clergy and other workers have transgressed, from the moment of disclosure. It's not just survivors who need care.

Examples of supportive comments included:

*The church will discuss with you how/if you would still like to worship at your church and enable this safely or seek other solutions acceptable to you.*

*Survivors receive help to overcome their trauma*

*It is important that help and support external to the Church is offered as opposed to attempting to keep the abuse within the organisation*

*Being adequately supported around the cost (emotional energy, time, childcare etc) of the justice process*

*Assurance of care for others affected (children, congregations.)*

*The listener asks what further help, care or assistance the survivor needs, be it spiritual, pastoral, financial, social or relational, and together they consider best routes to access this support.*

*Emotions can be overwhelming and when triggered I need time and space to process, just be a supportive presence*

*Recognise the impact now and long term on the abuser's family. PTSD is long lasting and slowly resolved.*

*There isn't a quick fix*

**7. Safeguarding concerns are acted upon appropriately, transparently, with accountability and in a timely fashion**

Victim-survivors were united in the need for an independent and transparent investigation. Not a Church controlled in-house 'independent' type investigation. It is an important point if churches are to regain public confidence.

Examples of supportive comments included:

*Deal with allegations quickly and openly*

*Independent investigation*

*That the church community will be open and transparent*

*All safeguarding processes will be externally audited*

**Additional Uncategorised Comments**

Victim-survivors expressed frustrations with past processes and poor responses:

- *Accept there are rotten apples in every walk of life! Innocence has to be protected*
- *Remove from office all who have been involved with abuse or poor responses to CSA*
- *The Church immediately needs to put the needs of the survivors ahead of the needs of the abusers in their midst, and apologise for not having understood the effect of abuse on the lives of innocent children and adults for all of these years. This apology is made real by providing a monetary fund to cover the costs for the necessary therapy and support for victims of the Church, and those affected by the abuse.*
- *Add more resource, more staff, trained staff in every discipline from law to psychotherapy, safeguarding to case handling, administration.*

Further feedback on other key statements in the QA framework does not come under the scope of this report, but was fed back to the Church of England Safeguarding Team unedited and in full.