



THE NATIONAL BOARD FOR
SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN
IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRELAND

**Reviews of Irish Catholic Dioceses
Overview Report**

February 2024



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Reviews of Irish Catholic Dioceses: Overview Report – February 2024

1. Introduction

The National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (the National Board) was constituted:

- To develop and recommend in consultation with the Sponsoring Bodies, protocols for the safeguarding of children; and to recommend adherence by any Constituent or Constituents to those relevant protocols.
- To provide advice and training on policy and case management matters.
- To audit and review practice against the Church’s safeguarding standards (2016).

In their 2011 publication, *Towards Healing and Renewal*, the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference stated that, ‘As part of a specific commitment by the bishops to transparency about the past, the National Board has also initiated a review of current and past practice of all twenty-six dioceses in Ireland.’

This report concerns the second round of Reviews of the 26 Irish Catholic dioceses, which has now been completed. This exercise was initiated in March 2018, when the National Board piloted the new Review Methodology by reviewing the Diocese of Kilmore. The final diocesan Review was conducted in September 2023. The *Safeguarding Children - Policy and Standards for the Catholic Church in Ireland 2016* is the benchmark against which the performance of the dioceses in child safeguarding is measured in this series of Reviews.

The second round of diocesan Reviews took longer than anticipated, for a number of reasons, including the Covid-19 pandemic, concerns about the implications of GDPR, and a high turnover of reviewers.

It has proven difficult to recruit and retain reviewers because the National Board cannot offer them the guarantee of a regular and predictable income at a time when the employment market in Ireland has been buoyant. Reviewers’ work is completely dependent on Church authorities inviting the National Board to conduct a Review of their Church body.

2. General observations

The first round of Reviews measured compliance with the earlier Standards of 2008, therefore direct comparisons between the two series of Reviews are not possible; they each sought evidence on different aspects of safeguarding, and their purposes were distinct.

However, some findings can be highlighted.

- Eighteen (18) of the twenty-six (26) dioceses met all seven 2016 Standards, which is both commendable and heartening.
- The combined number of Recommendations made to dioceses arising from the earlier Reviews was two hundred and ten (210), while the current round of Reviews led to ten (10) Recommendations being made. A Recommendation is only made in the event of a diocese not meeting a Standard.
- Of the 210 Recommendations previously made to diocesan bishops, 202 were fully implemented. It is a matter for each individual bishop to decide whether to implement or not any Recommendation made to him, as the National Board cannot require that its advice be followed.
- The second iteration of reviews enabled greater input from bishops at the planning stage, and as a result, the approach adopted varied to take account of the specific focus that each bishop wanted to take. This has led to some difference in the detail and length of Review Reports.
- Pre-fieldwork meetings, most often via Zoom, helped significantly in the preparation of the Review fieldwork visits.
- While Covid-19 led to Review fieldwork sometimes being split and conducted over longer periods, *all* diocesan Reviews measured compliance against each of the seven Standards.

3. Assessment of Compliance of Standards

This section sets out where there were problems for dioceses in meeting individual standards, as well as showing examples of practices under each standard.

Standard 1: Creating and Maintaining Safe Environments

Twenty-five (25) Dioceses met this standard, with one whose safeguarding structures were complicated and not fully integrated, failing to meet the standard in full. The relevant bishop accepted that the safeguarding structure in his diocese did need to be streamlined to ensure that every element of creating and maintaining a safe environment for children would be in place. The Recommendation made about this to this bishop was accepted and is being implemented.

Standard 1 sets out the requirements for systems and processes to be in place to promote safe ministry for children. Below are examples of good practice highlighted by the reviewers.

- The creation and updating of accessible materials for safeguarding personnel at parish level, such as Safeguarding Children Parish Handbooks; Safeguarding Resource Packs; and Parish Checklists with essential summary guidance.

- Recruitment processes for voluntary safeguarding personnel have become more robust.
- Police vetting processes have been centralised and have become very efficient.
- There has been inclusion of child safeguarding risk assessment and management into ministries with children and young people.
- In many parishes, local safeguarding committees have been established, made up of the Parish Priest, Local Safeguarding Representatives, Sacristans, Parish Secretaries, children’s activity volunteers, and involved parents.
- Many Diocesan Secretaries have developed protocols for clergy who want to visit from elsewhere and minister when they come. They maintain excellent record systems to back up this requirement; and reviewers have been assured that unless a visiting priest completes this process of proving that they are in good standing, they are not granted permission to minister.
- Children and young people have actively participated in the development of Codes of Behaviour in ministries in which they are involved.

A very important new perspective for reviewers during this second round of Reviews has been provided through the opportunity to visit, observe and talk with children and young people who are participating in Church ministries and activities. Among the groups that reviewers visited were sacramental preparation groups, Pope John Paul II Award schemes, altar servers, youth ministry groups, youth choirs, and pilgrimage organisations that have involved volunteers under 18 years of age. Where possible, the reviewers also spoke with parents of participating children and young people, and with group activity leaders. It was clear that parents are satisfied that their children are safe when engaged in Church ministries and activities, and many shared that they have become more involved themselves as volunteers to support safeguarding at parish level. The children and young people who met with reviewers were enthusiastic about their involvement, while also being aware of how to deal with situations in which they might not feel comfortable or safe.

Overall, the National Board believes that significant effort is being made by volunteers, lay staff, clerics religious and bishops to create safe ministry for children; however, there are some areas that would benefit from further development.

- Bishops need to ensure that if any of their incardinated priests wish to minister outside of their home diocese, they must be made aware of this and ascertain that each individual priest will observe the child safeguarding policies and procedures of the external Church body in which they will be ministering. While it has been stated to reviewers that this practice is followed, it is easy to see how this stipulation can be circumvented by individual priests making their own arrangements without reference to their bishop, especially if they are providing cover for priest colleagues in other Church bodies who have to be away for a short period. To avoid the growth of laxity

concerning this requirement, the National Board needs to circulate a reminder to Church authorities about the importance of supervising the movement of priests.

- Ministry by lay associations is important in many dioceses, and greater attention needs to be paid to ensuring that such bodies adopt the Church's safeguarding policies and implements practices, with which the bishop is happy in relation to safeguarding.

Overall, there has been a marked improvement in the level of awareness of the need to keep children and young people safe within the dioceses on the island of Ireland. This round of Reviews moved beyond establishing that structures and policies were in place, to seeing evidence that these are working in practice.

Standard 2: Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Suspicions, Concerns, Knowledge or Allegations

This standard proved the most challenging for dioceses. Twenty-two (22) dioceses were able to demonstrate that they met the standard, while six (6) did not fully comply with it. Among the difficulties that were apparent to reviewers were:

- There were avoidable delays in making statutory notifications to the Gardaí / PSNI, and/or to Tusla / N.I. Trust Gateway Children's Services, and/or delays in notifying new allegations to the National Board.
- Some allegations of physical abuse were not notified to the statutory agencies. There was some confusion about the need to notify forms of abuse other than sexual abuse. Physical assault of a minor, whether causing injury or not, is not a delict under canon law, but it is a crime in civil law, and under legislation in both jurisdictions all forms of abuse must be reported to HSCT/Tusla.
- In one diocese, appropriate canonical action was not taken in a number of cases.
- In two dioceses, the quality of case file recording was poor, and did not allow the reviewers to establish whether required actions had been taken.
- Not all case file entries were signed and dated.

The overall statistics on the number of allegations received by individual dioceses since their first Review is set out here. It is important to note that allegations are not proven cases of abuse. The majority of the allegations received were of sexual abuse.

Allegations against named diocesan priests (living or deceased or laicised)	Allegations against unidentified diocesan priests	Allegations against priests (living or deceased or laicised) from other Church bodies
219	12	43

The above figures do not include Religious Sisters or Brothers against whom allegations have come to the attention of diocesan safeguarding services.

- Compared with the first round of Reviews, the maintenance of case management files has improved significantly, with more rational file structures and the typing of file entries evident. That said, annual case summaries and case closure summaries would make it easier for persons other than the relevant DLP to obtain a quick sense of developments in and management of each case.
- In some dioceses, Interagency Meetings have been organised or have continued, with the participation of police and statutory child protection services. Unfortunately, this approach is not possible in all parts of the island, and seems to depend on the willingness of individual statutory service managers to participate.
- It appears to the reviewers that relationships with relevant statutory agencies are working at local level. When these agencies responded to requests from National Board reviewers for observations on the effectiveness of safeguarding in a particular diocese, no problems were highlighted.

Standard 3: Care and Support for the Complainant

Twenty-five (25) dioceses met this standard. The case management records in one diocese contained insufficient information to demonstrate whether work had been undertaken with and for complainants.

Three hundred and eighty four (384) complainants have made allegations against identified diocesan priests since the first round of diocesan Reviews. Reviewers were able to interview eighteen (18) complainants, representing ten (10) dioceses, and received written correspondence from six (6) complainants representing two (2) additional dioceses. The feedback received was generally positive about the support and assistance that they had received from the diocese with which they had engaged. However, this number of complainants is less than 7% of all complainants, so no strong statement can be made about the degree of satisfaction felt by complainants in general.

- Compared with the practices described in the first round of Reviews, there was evidence of a reduced reliance on legalistic responses to complainants, and examples of bishops being more prepared to meet with complainant. The National Board welcomes this approach.

- In the recent past, a number of school-related abuse disclosures has led to the Minister for Education establishing a Scoping Inquiry into Historical Sexual Abuse in Schools, to establish the best way to investigate the extent of this emergent crisis. This new concentration on and engagement with victims will bring their identified needs and demands into sharp focus, and will challenge individual bishops to review the generosity and effectiveness of their pastoral outreach.
- The use of Support Persons has diminished over time, and it is apparent that DLPs are now more likely to be the diocesan safeguarding team member to maintain supportive contact with complainants. This change may require a specific piece of further training for DLPs involved in this support work.

Standard 4: Care and Management of the Respondent

Twenty-four (24) dioceses met this standard in full.

Of the two dioceses that had problems with compliance with this standard, this was because,

- The structures and personnel needed to support and manage respondents were underdeveloped.
- Support and management of respondents was not adequately recorded in case management files.

The reviewers interviewed twenty-seven (27) Priest Advisors, representing twenty-two (22) dioceses. It was not possible to arrange to interview Priest Advisors in the other four dioceses due to pandemic restrictions and/or unavailability of priests within the fieldwork timetable. Where Priest Advisors have been accepted or chosen by respondent priests, they have been very effective in providing emotional and practical support to these men. The reviewers were very impressed with the calibre of the priests who have taken on this role.

The reviewers received representations from thirty-two (32) priest respondents, representing 15 dioceses. Most of the contact with these men was via anonymous questionnaires, while three priest respondents requested to meet with a reviewer for a face-to-face interview. The views of respondent priests about how they have been treated by their diocese since child safeguarding concerns in relation to them had been reported, varied from 'very dissatisfied' to 'very satisfied'. Two recurring themes were evident from their communications with reviewers.

Firstly, even though there is meant to be a presumption of innocence, the respondent priests suggested that it is extremely difficult for them to uphold their innocence and have their reputation protected during the period of the investigative and assessment processes. Some complained that there had not been enough care taken in these regards.

The other regular concern raised was in connection to the time it took for a final decision to be reached in relation to the allegations received, and the distress that this caused. The reviewers themselves were concerned about how long all aspects of the process take, including police investigations, decisions about criminal prosecutions, and delays in canonical processes, particularly when cases were forwarded to the CDF / DDF.

Following from initiatives taken by Pope Francis, the canon law requirements for managing accused priests have become clearer and stricter, and this is reflected in case management practices in dioceses since *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* was promulgated in 2019. Unfortunately, lengthy delays in cases being addressed within the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) remain and can cause further hurt and harm to all involved.

Four dioceses maintain their own Advisory Panels, all of which have protocols that allow them to seek the advice of the National Board's NCMC (National Case Management Committee) in certain complex cases.

Two dioceses provide group support to respondent priests.

Standard 5: Training and Support for Keeping Children Safe

The National Board has a published three-year Training and Support Strategy, and is responsible for the registering of appropriately trained trainers who provide safeguarding training at diocesan level. This is supplemented by training developed by individual dioceses to address particular local needs, as well as by training provided directly by the National Board and by external agencies.

All dioceses met this standard. It is clear to the reviewers that:

- Diocesan Safeguarding Children Committees are keeping training needs for priests, safeguarding personnel and others under consideration through the conduct of the annual self-audits and regular reporting from Safeguarding Coordinators.
- Bishops are supportive of safeguarding training, both by encouraging it and by providing sufficient funding for training as required.
- There are sixty-six (66) diocesan Trainers registered with the National Board, which along with an additional thirty-one (31) registered Trainers attached to other Church bodies constitutes a very important and significant all island child safeguarding resource that needs to be supported and maintained.
- Training was mentioned in a positive way by many of the bishops, priests and safeguarding personnel who reviewers met.
- Specific targeted training for people involved in organising pilgrimages, summer faith camps and children's and youth ministries is greatly appreciated and positively evaluated by them.

Standard 6: Communicating the Church’s Safeguarding Message

All dioceses complied with this standard by communicating the Church’s Child Safeguarding message adequately and appropriately.

- Some dioceses have improved the safeguarding section of their websites considerably, and it is obvious that these dioceses regularly update and refresh the content and appearance of this domain.
- Some dioceses are using social media platforms on which to communicate a variety of messages, including child safeguarding.
- Examples of excellent printed materials, attractively produced, and well distributed and utilised, were noted by reviewers.
- Diocesan and parish newsletters, where these exist, regularly carry information on safeguarding children.
- In some dioceses, children and young people have been involved in the design of age-appropriate printed safeguarding materials.
- Dioceses with resident populations of non-national peoples have developed and produced printed safeguarding materials in relevant languages other than English.
- Most dioceses organise and run Safeguarding Sundays / weekends, or diocesan conferences and seminars at which important safeguarding children information is disseminated.

Standard 7: Quality-Assuring Compliance with the Standards

All dioceses complied with the requirements of this standard, where the emphasis is on governance and quality control. They did so through a variety of methods, including,

- The operation of Safeguarding Children Committees, many of which work with appreciable focus and energy, and which have significant impact.
- The conduct of annual self-audits, which are often supplemented by supportive parish visits by diocesan safeguarding personnel.
- The production of well-researched reports by the diocesan DLP and by the Chair of the Safeguarding Children Committee on their respective work in the reporting year.

The revised policy and standards, due to be published by the National Board in the first half of 2024 will further develop requirements and guidance on good governance of child safeguarding by Church authorities.

4. Concluding remarks

There is evidence from the twenty-six diocesan Reviews undertaken by the National Board, that the quality of child safeguarding structures and practices have greatly improved over the past ten years. The fact that eight dioceses did not meet all standards need not be a cause of disappointment or criticism, if the feedback provided to the relevant bishops is taken account of, and the required changes, mostly quite small, are implemented. It would be unrealistic to expect that every diocese would 'score' 100% in such an external audit.

While the two rounds of Reviews cannot be compared, as the standards and methodologies used were different, it is still possible to show that a lot of progress has been made, and plans are in place to advance this further.

The pandemic has certainly had a very negative impact on the Catholic Church in Ireland, in that it has led to a measurable reduction in attendances at Sunday Mass, the halting of children's and youth ministries, and very real challenges of reopening and renewing activities, especially for older priests.

There have been very important developments in guidance to the Church from Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, as well as in canon law over the period under review.

What is evident is that volunteers, lay staff and Church personnel take their responsibilities seriously, so that children can participate in Church ministries and activities, knowing that there are adults that they can go to if they are worried or concerned. The children, with whom the reviewers engaged, reflected very eloquently their feelings of warmth about and safety in Church life.

Case management has also improved in terms of better processes, better record keeping and greater understanding of the need for fair and just responses. Whilst complainants overall were very satisfied, the records in some files did demonstrate a lack of satisfaction with how the Church was caring and responding to their allegations of being abused as children. The National Board believes that the dissatisfaction described by complainants and respondents alike relates to an absence of regular communication – even when nothing is happening in the management of their situation.

The National Board has produced two guidance papers, GAP Paper 2 *Compassionate Response to Complainants*,¹ and GAP Paper 12 *Transitional Justice - Responding to Child Abuse within the Catholic Church in Ireland*,² which can help shape a more consistent, compassion response across the Church. Those accused also felt that a more compassionate approach was warranted.

¹https://www.safeguarding.ie/images/Pdfs/GAP_Papers/GAP%20Paper%202%20Compassionate%20Response%20to%20Complainants.pdf

²https://www.safeguarding.ie/images/Pdfs/GAP_Papers/GAP%20PAPER%2012%20Transitional%20Justice.pdf

In conclusion the National Board acknowledges the stress involved in being reviewed and would like to extend our thanks to bishops and staff and volunteers who received the reviewers with openness and willingness to learn.



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