



social care
institute for excellence

A safeguarding audit of Downside Abbey & School February-March 2018

Executive Summary

The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) was commissioned by Downside Abbey to conduct an audit of the current safeguarding arrangements of both the abbey and the school attached to it, and of the inter-relationship between the two in terms of safeguarding governance and procedures. The audit worked collaboratively with Downside to help identify strengths and areas for improvement in safeguarding, using SCIE's established Learning Together systems methodology. SCIE has no regulatory or inspection powers in relation to the school or abbey, but the report identifies issues the auditors believe Downside should think about as they aim to develop and improve the safeguarding of everyone involved.

Safeguarding Leadership and Governance

- The set-up of Downside Abbey General Trust and its current relationship to the school creates challenges to safeguarding leadership and governance. The trust, led by five trustee monks, has ultimate responsibility for Downside School, as well as Downside Abbey Church, the monastery, and other interests.
- We found that this leaves a key barrier to effective safeguarding governance unresolved; while most operational decisions are left to the school, the final authority rests with trustees, who are not safeguarding professionals, or trained as such. Separating the school and the wider Abbey Trust would resolve this problem, allow both to focus effectively on their own safeguarding arrangements, and remove potential conflicts of interest.
- We found a good awareness of these issues and renewed efforts to find solutions.

Culture

- We identified as positive that safeguarding awareness in the abbey is developing, and noted that monastic leaders are actively engaged in this effort. We also learned that some monks feel so criticised, in the face of negative publicity, as to make positive engagement with safeguarding difficult. We support plans to enable reflection on the issues that have beset Benedictine schools.
- Deference to and within the abbey is a feature of life at Downside. We have highlighted the risks this creates, because effective safeguarding requires an atmosphere where concerns can be raised without consideration of people's status or role.
- We found that within the school, a safe culture is very well-embedded, and an awareness of safeguarding is wide and deep. We recognised the supportive environment that has been created, which helps the early identification of bullying where it emerges and helps tackle it effectively.
- Close attention is paid to the management of alcohol, mobile phones, and other welfare risks. The safeguarding risks inherent in boarding are well-managed.
- Benedictine culture is at the heart of Downside. There are many strengths to this. One drawback is a potential lack of diversity of input, which risks creating a narrow perspective about safeguarding. We recommend this is mitigated by actively seeking a broader range of views to inform safeguarding discussions.

Designated Safeguarding Roles and Other Welfare Roles

- We found that the DSL/acting Headmaster performs his role to a high standard. Casework is managed effectively; training is thorough and of high quality. It became evident through the audit how his safeguarding leadership has been central to the improvements across Downside.
- We found a well-functioning team resource for safeguarding. Two deputy DSLs support the acting Headmaster, and are well-regarded in this, and in their wider pastoral roles.
- We noted the impressive range of pastoral support provided within the school.
- We noted that the school is aware that South-East Asian and other overseas pupils have distinct welfare needs. We have made recommendations to support a deepening understanding of cultural factors which impact safeguarding and to develop further the safeguarding provision for this group.

Safeguarding in the Governing Body and Committee Structures

- We have highlighted how the decision of the Prior Administrator to step down as chair of the Board of Governors ameliorates the conflict of interest that previously existed. It therefore has positive implications for safeguarding governance.
- We have noted that the new Chair of Governors has identified the need to strengthen the Board of Governors. We support this and have identified areas which should be considered in this process which would affect safeguarding. These include reviewing membership to secure plurality of input, clarifying the role of trustee-governors, and identifying a suitable governor to take on responsibility for safeguarding, to move from the temporary arrangement whereby the Chair also holds the position of safeguarding governor.
- We have noted that Clifton diocese's input on the safeguarding committee is a positive aspect of safeguarding governance. It expands the range of perspectives and expertise, and encourages independent oversight.

Guidance, Policies and Procedures

- We found the safeguarding policies of the school to be comprehensive and to cover the required information. We have highlighted that the child protection policy runs the risk of falling between two aims of being a comprehensive toolkit and a straightforward policy and should be reviewed with this in mind.
- The Bounds policy forms a key safety mechanism and we identified that it will be strengthened with a clarification of a line which refers to visits to houses of the School's teaching staff.
- The abbey uses safeguarding policies in relation to guests and to parochial work done by the monks, which helps to manage any potential risks.

Pupil Voice

- Our engagement with pupils indicated that they feel safe at Downside, and experience it as an inclusive, supportive environment. This is bolstered by a good awareness of the support options available to them.
- We noted that pupils typically feel comfortable in the presence of adults and older children.
- We have highlighted improvements to the way in which evening assemblies can be managed.
- We also suggested that pupils can be engaged more proactively with Downside's safeguarding history.

Parent Voice

- We have noted the challenges created by Downside's geographically and culturally disparate parent body. This complicates the development of a shared understanding of safeguarding with parents.
- In addition, we identified how the marked attachment to Downside felt by many parents increases the risk that concern for its reputation may negatively affect their preferences for how safeguarding/disciplinary matters are handled.
- We noted that the school is alert to, and confident in its ability to handle, the additional complexities should safeguarding concerns arise in relation to the children of teachers who are also parents.

Quality of Response to Allegations/Concerns

- It is a positive finding that, within the school, the handling of safeguarding cases is generally strong, with timely and appropriate involvement of statutory and diocesan support.
- In a small number of cases, we identified areas with the potential for further improvement:
 - the strength of disciplinary responses to safeguarding concerns;
 - the early identification of potential problems;
 - the proactive seeking of opportunities to support people to disclose possible concerns.
- We found the recording and sharing of issues to be excellent. This minimises the risk of anything being overlooked, and increases the chance of patterns of small concerns being identified.
- We have highlighted the risks associated with lapses in the routine and rigour with which safeguarding cases involving Downside monks no longer resident at Downside are managed by the Abbey. Monitoring and recording need more consistent prioritisation.
- We identified that there is a gap in safeguarding training, with monks not being trained in responding well to abuse disclosures.

- Creating a designated safeguarding lead for the abbey would help lessen the risk that this work slips down otherwise busy agendas.

Training

- We found safeguarding training to be thorough and engaging. It is well-monitored through the school's Single Central Register (SCR).
- We highlighted the benefits of increasing the variety of training input and personnel.
- We also suggest that additional tailored, relevant training for the monastic community is required.

Safe Recruitment

- We found that effective use of the SCR enables the recruitment of all staff at Downside to be extremely well-managed. Potential problems are reliably identified and tackled.
- This extends to the management of visitors, contractors and others.

Information Sharing

- We found good use being made of the safeguarding committee and sub-committee, for information-sharing between the school, abbey and diocese.
- We did not identify any problems with information being shared appropriately with other organisations where concerns arise.
- We highlighted the benefits of clarifying what people in wider pastoral roles record, and how they share information.

Links with Other Religious and Educational Organisations

- Across the school and abbey we found good use being made of external organisations in the support of safeguarding practice. Downside has strong links with the Clifton diocese, where safeguarding officers have provided support to Downside's efforts to improve safeguarding.
- The abbey is subject to four-yearly visitations from the Abbot President of the English Benedictine Congregation, which include a review of its safeguarding arrangements. We found this used constructively to critically review safeguarding arrangements in preparation for the visitation.
- We also saw the way in which the safeguarding awareness of Downside monks who work in local parishes has been positively informed by that wider experience.

School/Overseas Trips

- We saw appropriate vigilance about safeguarding on school trips. School trips are categorised by risk/location, with each type of trip requiring different risk assessments and preparation.

- Monks participating in overseas trips, for example as chaplains, receive the requisite safeguarding training.

Geography and Architecture of the School

- Downside is a large site, and we noted the clear, rigorous management of risks associated with the geography of the school. Everyone within it has certain restrictions about where they can visit. A systems of coloured lanyards, clear prohibitions, and doors secured by keys/passcodes help manage this, and broadly we found this set-up to work well.
- We have highlighted some aspects of the management of people's movement around Downside which create weaker links, and have recommended they are reviewed.
- We identified the need to clarify for some staff the rules regarding access for monks who are wearing an identity badge with a green lanyard, denoting monastic community/abbey staff, to ensure they feel confident about what the rules are.