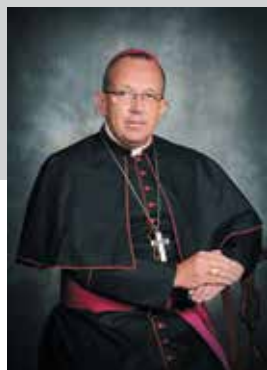


Newsletter



Updated guidance from Bishop Deenihan



In May 2019, Bishop Deenihan wrote to all parishes, asking them to ensure that the correct child safeguarding posters and information are available in churches, parish halls and online. It is essential that the name of the correct DLP, Marie O'Sullivan, is recorded on posters in church porches and parish websites. Her address is dlp@dioceseofmeath.ie.

The "Child Safety Statement", which is a statutory requirement under the Children First Act, must also be displayed in churches and places where church related activities with children take place.

In addition, parishes should ensure that the previously distributed notices concerning the need for visiting clergy to have a valid and current *celebret* are displayed in the sacristy of each church. Additional copies can be forwarded as required.

Finally, it is crucial that proper sacristy registers are kept in each church and that each Mass is recorded. Each priest must sign in and when there are no servers present, that should also be recorded. Veritas have copies of the official parish registers.

Mandated Persons

The Children First Act 2015 defines mandated persons as persons who have contact with children and/or families and, because of their roles, are in a key position to protect children from harm.

Mandated persons include professionals working with children in the education, health, justice, youth and childcare sectors.

Members of the clergy or pastoral care workers of a church or religious community are also classified as mandated persons.

Volunteers are not generally classified as mandated persons; however, DLP or Deputy DLP who are volunteers are so classified under Church safeguarding standards.

Mandated persons have two main legal obligations under the Children First Act 2015

- **To report harm of children, above a defined threshold, to Tusla**
- **To assist Tusla, if requested, in assessing a concern which has been the subject of a mandated report**

Mandated persons, under the legislation are required to report any knowledge, belief or reasonable suspicion that a child has been harmed, is being harmed, or is at risk of being harmed. The Act defines harm as assault, ill-treatment, neglect or sexual abuse, and covers single and multiple instances.

Training will be provided for all mandated persons.

The Criminal Justice (Withholding of Information on Offences against Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012 requires that any person who has information about a serious offence against a child, which may result in charges or prosecution, must report this to An Garda Síochána. Failure to report is a criminal offence under that legislation. This obligation is in addition to any obligations under the Children First Act.

Further information on the responsibilities of mandated persons to assist Tusla is available in the document Mandated Assisting Protocol for Tusla Staff on [www. Tusla.ie](http://www.Tusla.ie).

▶ Co-ordinator of Safeguarding

A new person will be appointed to this diocesan role in the coming weeks. Expressions of interest are now welcome.

▶ Deanery level training in October

The annual local training sessions for all parish clergy and parish safeguarding representatives will take place in October. Further details will be circulated by email.

▶ Training for new Parish Safeguarding Representatives and volunteers

This full day programme will be held on Saturday 9 November in the Parish Centre, Trim. The booking form will be posted on www.meathsafeguarding.ie shortly.

▶ Safeguarding Sunday - 13th October

This annual initiative will include a message from Bishop Deenihan, thanking parishes for involving children in parish activities and encouraging greater levels of participation of children.

▶ Sharing good practice and ideas

There are great examples of good practice in child safeguarding in many parishes and we would like to share these ideas. Have you some examples from your experience that you are willing to share? If so, we would be happy to hear from you. Contact us at meathsafeguarding@gmail.com.

Parish Safeguarding Self - Audit 2018

Independent Assessor Evaluation

In the course of this assessment of the self-audit for the year 2018, 59 individual forms completed by Parishes were evaluated, noting that some forms referred to two parishes in light of the current organisational structure of the Diocese. This represents a very high level of compliance with the Diocesan policy of requiring parishes to complete self-audits on an annual basis.

It is noted that the self-audit forms have been designed centrally at a national level and made available at Diocesan level for use in the process. As well as addressing the issue of compliance and assurance within the Diocese of Meath arising from the audit, it is evident to this assessor that there are a number of lacunae with the forms, which might usefully be brought back by the Diocese to a national level in order to further enhance the overall Church measures in this context, thereby bringing greater assurance to and public confidence in the outcomes. Consequently, this report will deal with both aspects.

Having also completed the independent assessment of the audit process in 2017, which was the first year of use of the new-template reporting form, it is apparent that those completing the process were considerably more comfortable in the task this year. To this end, credit must be given to the Safeguarding Resource Team who assisted the parishes last year in reviewing their initial completion of the form, thereby embedding good practice in this context, and providing valuable follow up in the course of 2018 and for the purposes of completing the 2018 audit.

Before dealing with the detail of the audit process a number of general observations can be made. All reporting parishes have at least one and generally more parish safeguarding representatives in place. They have all received child protection awareness training, other than in one or two instances of recent appointees (though it is important to note that there continues to be existing safeguarding reps in those parishes). It is evident that the understanding among parishes of the requirements for robust child welfare and protection safeguards extends beyond simply adherence to the stated obligations, and encompasses a deeper understanding and congruence with the various indicators of good practice as set out in Standards 1, 5 and 6 of the revised national policy and standards. This is most keenly evidenced through the concerted efforts which have been made, and sustained through undertaking initial and further training, thereby keeping abreast of developments in the area, in respect of training and information for those in parish communities working directly with children, on a clerical, professional and volunteer basis. As noted above, the Resource Team continued to provide general training and specific follow-up to issues raised by individual parishes in respect of the 2017 audit in assisting them in meeting their obligations.

In relation to the audit process itself in 2018, a number of observations can be made which have application locally within the Diocese and may be useful nationally, viz.

1. Three different audit forms were used this year. In many cases, these were the form currently shown for use on the "Meathsafeguarding.ie", while a significant number used the same form as used for the 2017 audit. One significant difference is apparent between the two forms, the 2017 form asked parishes on the cover page for a list of Church related activities which involve children in the parish, while the form currently on the website does not ask for this information. It is considered by this assessor that the 2017 form is actually more effective in this context as it helps a reviewer of the form to focus attention on seeking assurance subsequently from the audit that those involved in leading the particular activity involving young people have been encompassed in the child safeguarding endeavour undertaken at parish level. Finally, one parish completed the audit using a different (shorter) form, which, while completed appropriately, provided significantly less detailed information than either of the two referred to above.
2. In some cases the audit forms were completed on what were clearly pre-printed booklet productions. In other cases the forms were downloaded and printed in individual page format. The pages on all versions of the audit forms used are not individually numbered. This was an issue to the extent that in a small number of cases where forms had been downloaded and completed electronically some pages were not subsequently printed down and submitted for audit. In addition, though less evident, some forms which had been downloaded and completed in pen, had some pages missing from the submitted material. A suggestion in this context would be that pages are numbered individually by the designers of the form, thereby assisting with a coherent approach to the completion process at parish level.
3. The question style on the audit form uses a mix of "yes//no" or "yes/no/not applicable" format. In the case of questions requiring a "yes/no" answer this is a weakness as in some cases these have been left fully unanswered. It is challenging for an external reviewer to reach a firm conclusion as to whether these have been missed inadvertently or, very likely, where a "not applicable" response is actually the correct and appropriate response. Equally, a requirement to complete all elements of the form would assist with future assurance.
4. There are 4 pages on the form containing tables for completion in respect of basic awareness training for four categories of personnel, ie clergy; those with a specific role in safeguarding; those in a leadership role working with young people; and, all other church personnel. In a number of instances the latter two forms were blank. It is not clear as to whether this was through lack of understanding of the purpose of each form; where no such training has taken place, or simply was not necessary in the context of the situation applying in that parish. This is an

important consideration when the “new” 2018 form has been used, as it did not require listing activities involving young people on the cover page. This prevents a cross-referencing of activity to leadership in the activity subsequently in the audit. Again, a requirement to complete these tables, even through having to tick a box to indicate not applicable, where appropriate, would enhance the process.

5. A key element of the Church’s efforts in relation to child safeguarding relate to promulgating the message regarding the safeguards in place, complaint procedures etc. The audit form asks for details of any initiatives taken in this context. It is presumed that the designers of the form expected parishes to outline the range of publication measures in place, eg parish noticeboards, newsletters, Safeguarding Sundays, meeting with parents of and children becoming altar servers etc. However a surprising number of forms are fully silent in this regard. Perhaps those completing the forms assumed that the use of the term “initiatives” sought details on something new or innovative being undertaken as opposed to continuing to provide the well-tried and tested measures as listed earlier.
6. An accompanying FAQ document, section by section, might be considered helpful for future audits, as the form is only required annually and those completing it will

forget details from year to year. The FAQ document might usefully suggest examples of good practice in light of the actual experiences/activities evident across the Diocese of Meath, in respect of each question. The reason for this is that some of the questions are quite bald and don’t allow a nuanced (yet valid) answer.

7. One question asks, “does the group have an appropriate hazard assessment process ? A number of forms answered no or left this blank. The FAQ here might usefully advise that hazard in this context relates to child safeguarding, rather than, presumably, the normal understanding of slips, trips and spills etc
8. Another question relates to a Protected Disclosures Policy – a sample would be helpful as part of the FAQs, as a number of parishes answered no here.
9. The audit form deals with a snapshot at a point in time and relates to a twelve months period. However, some questions are more open-ended and could certainly cause confusion, eg in Standard 1, “In recruiting applicable personnel working with children, have you ensured that...” This could easily involve a Parish trying to review previous practice (including for long serving personnel) and where records may be difficult to locate, with the attendant difficulties in completing it.

General Observations on the Parish Safeguarding Audit Form.

Form cover could have space for year and Parish Name. Form does not require signatures of those completing it. Form makes no reference to children with special needs.

Standard 1: Question asks re “all” groups, and does not specify groups where children are involved – quite a number of forms left this section blank. A supplementary (or replacement) question might ask about the maintenance of a register of all groups working with children, as this would be more easily answered (and is actually more germane to the purpose of the audit)

Standard 6: Recording Section needs to be answered item by item – FAQs or more clear guidance here would be very beneficial.

Final Page: Following completion of audit is there any follow up action to be taken? And immediately underneath, the form asks If you require assistance from the Resource Team.....

There should be space between these, and form (or FAQs) should specify that a list of actions where “no” answers given earlier should be addressed here by means of an action list at parish level– this would bring completeness to the process and allow for a significantly greater level of assurance that issues identified will be addressed (if necessary). Equally, if the “No” answers actually mean not applicable, this could be noted on the form and bring completeness and greater assurance to the outcome.

The observations made above have been raised in the context of seeking to enhance the assurance and confidence possible through an external review of a self-audit process, noting that, separately, the Meathsafeguarding.ie website states that

- Audit returns are scrutinised for compliance by the committee.
- An annual report is prepared for the Bishop, with a review of compliance and recommendations for further action and improvement.
- Recommendations for change are incorporated into to the three-year Child Safeguarding Plan.

What is quite apparent from my evaluation of the 2018 audit, as in 2017, is that consistent and focussed attention to child welfare and protection has been taken as a matter of policy by the Diocese and implemented as a matter of practice at parish level. This is evidenced in particular by the commitment to training over many years now which demonstrates that the Diocese of Meath, at individual parish level, has been embedding this key message in its work through all of its agents who work with children.

It is evident and appropriate that the Diocese continues to support parishes in their work in this important area of child safeguarding and that the self-audit process, along with follow-up by the Diocesan Committee through the Safeguarding Resource Team, assists parishes in maintaining a focus, and enhancing, where necessary, their individual endeavours in this regard.

A helpful check-list for Parish Safeguarding Representatives

While we are enjoying some summer rest, we are aware that many parish activities involving children will be resuming in September. Here is a check-list for Parish Safeguarding Representatives:

General Questions

- Is the Diocesan Safeguarding Children Policy Statement on display in church porches and parish halls?
- Are the contact details for Gardaí, Tusla and Designated Liaison Person prominently displayed?
- Are the names of the Parish Safeguarding Representatives available?
- Is the celebret sign on display in the sacristy?
- Is there a Sign-in register from Veritas in the sacristy?
- Do you have a fully stocked First Aid box in the sacristy?
- Is the parish website compliant with the relevant social media policy?

Spreading the Safeguarding Message

- Have all Safeguarding Representatives and Priests attended safeguarding training?
- Have the safeguarding representatives been introduced to parishioners?
- Do the parish safeguarding representatives provide support to the volunteers and check that all safeguarding procedures are complied with?
- Is the parish newsletter used to spread the safeguarding message?
- Is there structured regular contact between Parish Safeguarding Representatives, and local clergy?

Confidentiality

- Does the parish have a system for storing confidential forms?
- Does the parish have a system for checking references of volunteer working with children?
- Has the guidance on the use of digital media and social media been implemented?

Young People

- Do young people involved in youth activities in your parish complete membership forms with signed parental consent?
- Does your parish keep an attendance record at youth events?
- Are young people and their parents asked to sign a Code of Behaviour?
- Are parents informed about the Church's policy in relation to safeguarding children?

Forms:

- Do you have copies or know where to obtain the following forms?
- Parent/Guardian Consent Form
- Complaints Form
- Incident / Accident Report Form
- Staff/ Volunteer Application Form
- Garda Vetting Form
- Renting Parish Hall

Recruitment of Volunteers

- Does your parish follow recruitment guidelines in place for relevant roles within the parish?
- Does the parish advertise for a position when it becomes available?
- Do staff / volunteers in your parish fill in application/declaration forms?
- Have your staff/volunteers submitted a Garda Vetting Form?
- Are recruitment records maintained and kept updated?
- Do volunteers have access to Child Safeguarding training?
- Have all staff/volunteers been made aware of the procedure for reporting incidents, allegations or disclosures of abuse?
- Have your volunteers received and read a copy of the concise version of the Child Safeguarding Policy and signed that they have done so?

Health and Safety

- Have all non-parish groups using parish facilities completed the Renting Parish Hall form?
- Do persons using parish halls and facilities have a child safeguarding policy and insurance?
- Are all facilities in use compliant with health and safety standards?
- Does each parish group involving children have an appropriate number of volunteers to supervise activities?

At a minimum, two adults are required for each activity. In addition, the minimum following ratios should be applied, depending on the number of children:

seven to twelve years = one member of staff to eight children
thirteen to eighteen years = one member of staff to ten children