

Safeguarding – A final review

I write this as a final review after some 15 years advising on Safeguarding matters for the Council, having decided that it is time to handover the reins before the end of the year. An updated Safeguarding guidance document is being posted on the Central Council website and this incorporates all known developments which have arisen. In order to emphasise the current situation, the following reviews where bell ringers stand within the context of Safeguarding during their activities.

Since the initial issue of the Church of England's document "Protecting All God's Children" in 2004, there has been a steady stream of directives and interpretations coming from Church House. In parallel there have been Government Acts defining the civil requirements in relation to protecting vulnerable persons, both children and adults. Similar arrangements have been developed for the churches in Scotland and Wales and for the Catholic Church. During the intervening years the Council has sought to keep guidance up to date and has published articles through *The Ringing World*.

What has not been seen is the work behind the scenes ranging from queries submitted by individual ringers and parishes, to resolving local disputes and addressing specific cases. The latter has involved enquires from Dioceses and police, giving evidence at joint meetings, monitoring allegations and issues relating to ex-offenders returning to ringing. Clearly most of this activity is very confidential and requires both discretion and tact. The overall maintenance of good relationships with Church authorities has involved scrutiny of all new procedures and ensuring bell ringers' concerns have been addressed. The latter has been pursued through exchanges and meetings with central staff at Church House and lead Bishops for Safeguarding.

Those ringers merely assisting by ringing other bells as part of a team do not need checks but, in the interests of sharing knowledge, are recommended to undergo awareness training. There was an inference at the ART conference in March that such training was mandatory, but the latest Church Practice Guidance confirms this is not so.

I am pleased to say that after some resistance in the early years, the requirements for DBS checks for those working closely

with children has been largely accepted and most societies have their dedicated Safeguarding Officers. Where young people under 18 are being trained the general requirement is that those undertaking face to face teaching, both tower captains and deputies, should undergo both DBS checks and attend Safeguarding Awareness training. Those ringers merely assisting by ringing other bells as part of a team do not need checks but, in the interests of sharing knowledge, are recommended to undergo awareness training. There was an inference at the ART conference in March that such training was mandatory, but the latest Church Practice Guidance confirms this is not so.

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Despite assertions that those leading adult only teams do not require DBS checks, there is no general dispensation from the church for such group leaders. Although legally they cannot be compelled to undergo such a check as not meeting the "Regulated activity" criteria, the church views group leaders as being Church Officers who as figures of authority can command respect of young people wherever they may be encountered. The reality is that a Tower Captain should be able to receive new young ringers for training without admitting to parents/guardians that they are not certified and trained – we don't want to turn away such youngsters.

A similar argument applies to Guild/Society Officers in relation to running meetings and practices where they are acting "in loco parentis" for young people. The frequency of such meetings may or may not meet the criteria of a "regulated activity" but it is desirable that there should be suitably certified and trained adults present, usually through checks and training carried out through their home parish.

I have made no reference to "vulnerable adults" since there is conflicting approach between civil legislation, which strictly defines such persons as coming under institutional care, and church view of embracing any person who might be "vulnerable" due to circumstance. This matter is unresolved but since ringing does not purport to provide social care, the matter can be argued that we do not operate under this definition. Ironically, ringing has a few people who can be defined as having disabilities but who have overcome them to become proficient ringers and would probably be offended to be classed as "vulnerable adults".

A long-standing issue has been the portability of DBS checks in relation to

ringing. In this context I would reiterate that a DBS certificate issued for training young people in one parish can be used in another parish in the *same Diocese* for the same purpose. Cross boundary teaching by ringers is a recognised activity and where an individual has signed up to the DBS "Update" service, their certificate may be used as evidence to parishes in another Diocese. Note there is **no portability** of certificates for activities outside the church, e.g. teaching, nursing.

One difficulty for ringers is coping with allegations against one of their number with an understandable reaction to "close ranks". Such attitude is not helpful to the reputation of ringers amongst church workers and does not assist either the accused or alleged victim. Whilst being difficult, the best course of action is to be factual and co-operative with those involved in any investigations. The requirement to keep attendance registers, although disliked and difficult, can sometimes assist with evidence. Unlike clergy who now have a formal process for dealing with allegations, there is unfortunately no parallel convention for dealing with volunteers so there must be reliance on the integrity of parish, Diocesan and police involvement.

Another sensitive issue is the return of ex-offenders to ringing activities and there is no general practical reason for such rehabilitation to be excluded. Any former offenders will be subject to agreement with the church regarding what activities they may join and what restrictions might be applied after taking account of Diocesan and police views on risks. It is to be hoped that ringers would apply Christian attitudes in these cases but since it is finally down to parish authorities, there have been unfortunate instances of the latter being unwelcoming.

On the question of welcoming visiting ringers, it is a facet of ringing that we take for granted but there have arisen some instances of ringers being asked about safeguarding when requesting visits. There is no general directive within the church requiring such interrogation but might I suggest that when making a request for a visit wording along the following lines be included – "In requesting the visit, it is confirmed that necessary arrangements have been made to comply with Safeguarding Policies in relation to any children under 18 who may be in the group, including appropriate supervision, parental permission and transport considerations." If it is not desired to send this statement as a pre-emptive measure it could be used to respond to parish requests for reassurance.

In writing this piece I am conscious that despite efforts by the church to spread a common practice for Safeguarding and ensure that it is adhered to, there is still some variation in local interpretation and implementation. I hope that over time ringers have become more understanding of the important role of protecting those amongst our numbers and will continue to support the close engagement with the church necessary for the mutual wellbeing of our future.

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