

Safeguarding Stories: Series 1: Guest Voice 1:

Jim Hopkinson, Safeguarding Director, Ampleforth Abbey Trust

1. The story before

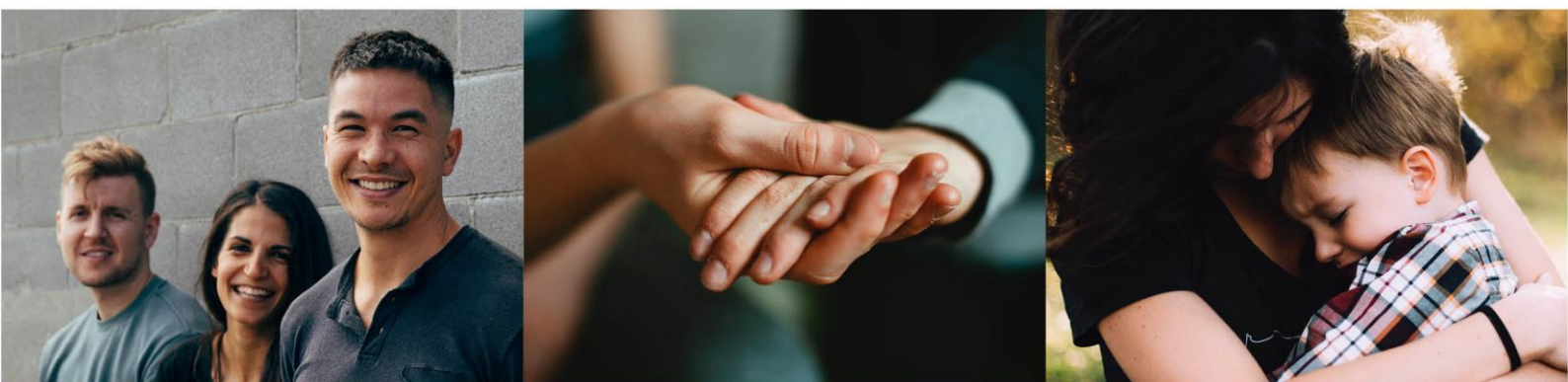
“There was concern about safety, with reason, previously.”

Ampleforth has had a very difficult history which has been documented in the IICSA case study of the English Benedictine Community. This quite rightly prompted other regulators to take notice, for example our local Safeguarding Children’s Partnership and the Charity Commission. There was increased concern about safety at that time, I would say, with reason. We risked losing our charitable status, we faced an independent regulatory inquiry – both of Ampleforth Abbey Trust and Ampleforth College. So, it was a perfect storm, and it was horrendous.

The decision was taken to separate Ampleforth Abbey Trust and Ampleforth College into two charities, which of course had implications for safeguarding. Today we are separate in terms of all governance including safeguarding policies.

2. What audit meant

“We knew we wanted a full audit at the earliest opportunity.”



Because of our history, and because of the journey we had been on (all the subsequent work to keep people safe) we were very keen to open our doors to the CSSA. We wanted our work to be reviewed at the earliest opportunity.

We wanted to know how we were doing, what still needed to be done. And we wanted to both be assured, and offer assurance to statutory agencies, about our progress.

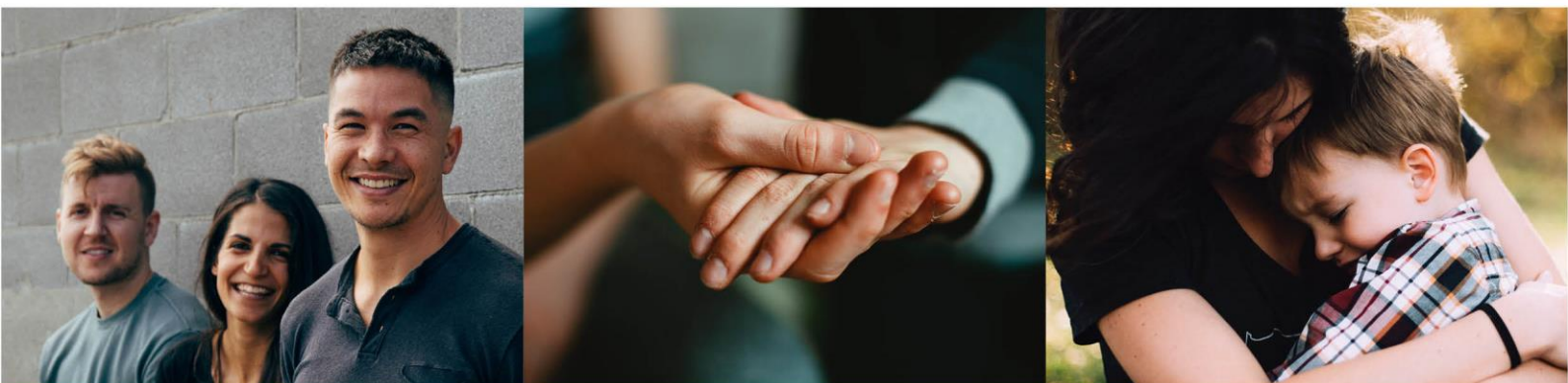
Initially, we asked the CSSA to do a case work audit – that meant opening every case that had been before our safeguarding panel and reviewing low level concerns as well. There were a significant number of recommendations which we actioned and were keen to share our improvement work with others.

As soon as the CSSA had published their eight standards, we knew we needed a full audit as well. We wanted to be open and transparent about where we were against all eight standards. Only this way could we assure our local Safeguarding Children's Partnership, the Charity Commission, a wider public, and survivors.

3. The audit process.

“We wanted assurance.”

As a larger (tier three) religious life group, our audit followed pretty much the same process as a diocesan one would. It also functioned as a temperature check about our progress – how far we'd come, what we still needed to do.



Here at Ampleforth we've got very experienced people, both in terms of safeguarding professionals in the team, and experienced lay people on our safeguarding panel and committee. We felt instinctively that our progress was good, but we wanted that external validation, and our trustees quite rightly wanted that assurance.

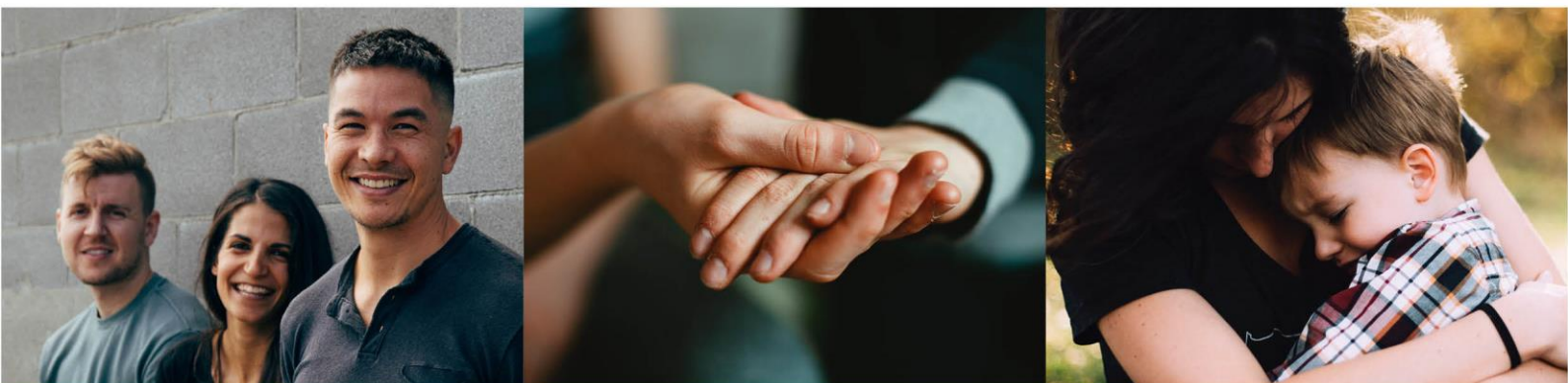
"Do you prioritise victims over reputation?"

The one thing that is hardest to evidence, I would say, is a safeguarding culture. It's a legitimate question for the whole Catholic Church – is there any risk that you have a culture of deference? Is there any possibility that you prioritise reputation over victims? You need to know for yourself, and you need to demonstrate to others, the answers to these questions.

We knew the CSSA would be able to take a helicopter view of our culture. They'd be able to compare it with other church bodies and tell us straight how we were doing. They could also point us to where we could learn.

We can say, hand on heart, we are no longer that organisation that puts reputational issues over the needs of others. But we wanted an external view on that.

Because of our awful history (which we fully acknowledge and continue to apologise for) we understand why people wouldn't know what our culture is like now. We must prove ourselves.



4. Tips for preparing for audit.

“It was time-consuming but cathartic.”

Preparing for a baseline audit takes a lot of time, but the process is ordered and logical. We were drafting and refining self assessment a long time before, together with our safeguarding committee. I would recommend that you put in that level of preparation before any audit.

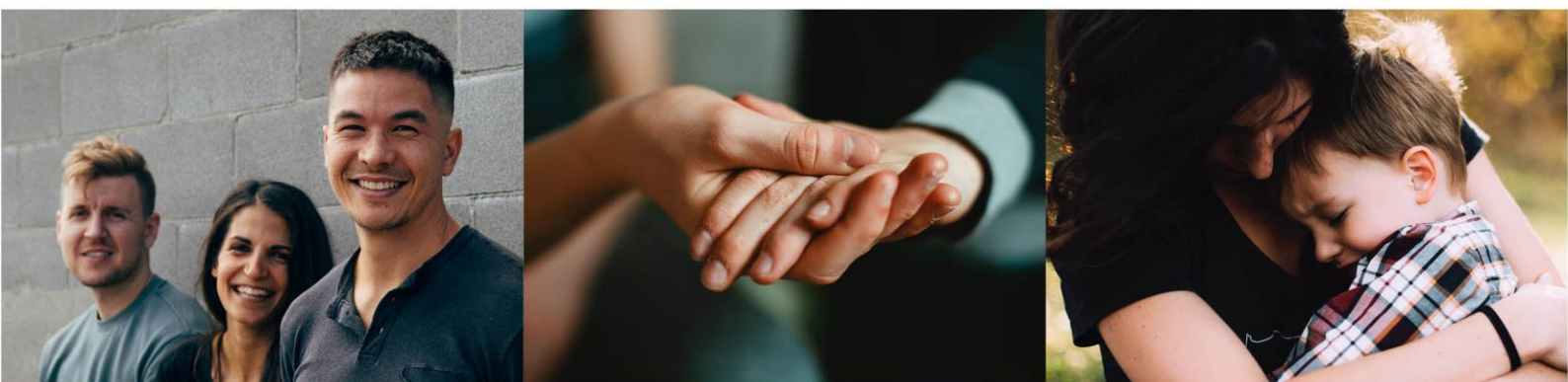
The self-assessment was a lot of work. It's time consuming, but it's worth it. In our case, we submitted 115 pieces of evidence. Our mindset was “if we are asked TODAY to evidence our work, have we got it all together in one place to do that?” It's the logistics that take the time. We wanted to make it as easy as possible, both for ourselves and the assessor. My tip would be to start now by bullet-pointing your evidence in advance – it will save you time when you get the call.

Assessing yourself is hard. You don't want to look arrogant, or deluded, but you do want to show where you have confidence in your work and processes.

The self assessment was actually quite a cathartic process. You can see how much work you and your organisation have done.

“Safeguarding is everybody's business.”

The assessment process was everyone's highest priority. Whether setting up interviews or collating written evidence, nothing is more important than demonstrating the highest possible standards of safeguarding.

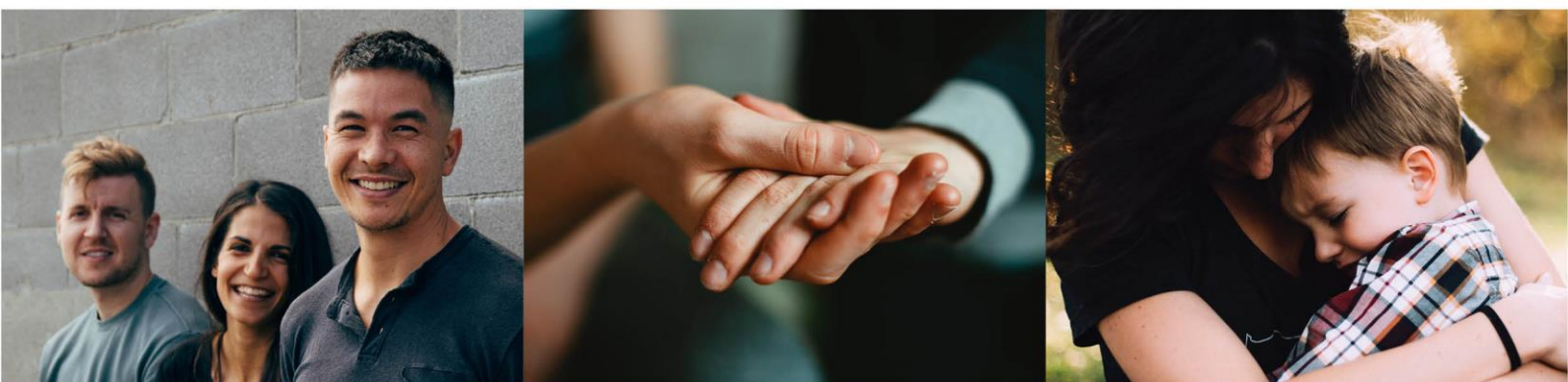


It's important to remember, I think, that the audit is not an assessment of the safeguarding team, it's an assessment of your whole organization and its safeguarding activity and culture. We take the approach that safeguarding is everyone's business, therefore the audit is everybody's business.

Our assessor was very thorough. I'm very used to Ofsted inspections from my years in children's services. This was no less thorough, I would say. The assessor was incredibly professional. The questions were challenging, but they were always coming from a place of assisting our learning. There weren't trick questions. It felt genuine. "We want to understand your strengths and weaknesses, so you can improve your safeguarding and meet the CSSA standards." That's what it felt like.

The assessor also shared where there were best practice examples that we could learn from, and even asked to share our practice with other church bodies. We're not in competition with anyone, so we were pleased to do so. The eight standards give us that framework to be able to share best practice. Whether it's the escalation process or training, if there's somewhere where it is happening better, it's only right that we share and learn. The safeguarding standards help focus that conversation. It's only going to help better safeguarding.

Peer reviews are a really good idea, too. They focus the mind. A really helpful byproduct of the audit process. I think.



5. Audit results

“Challenging but fair”

We were grateful to get verbal feedback from the auditors ahead of the written report, which came back within about two weeks. We could suggest any changes in factual accuracies such as names, or places, but otherwise we knew what to expect.

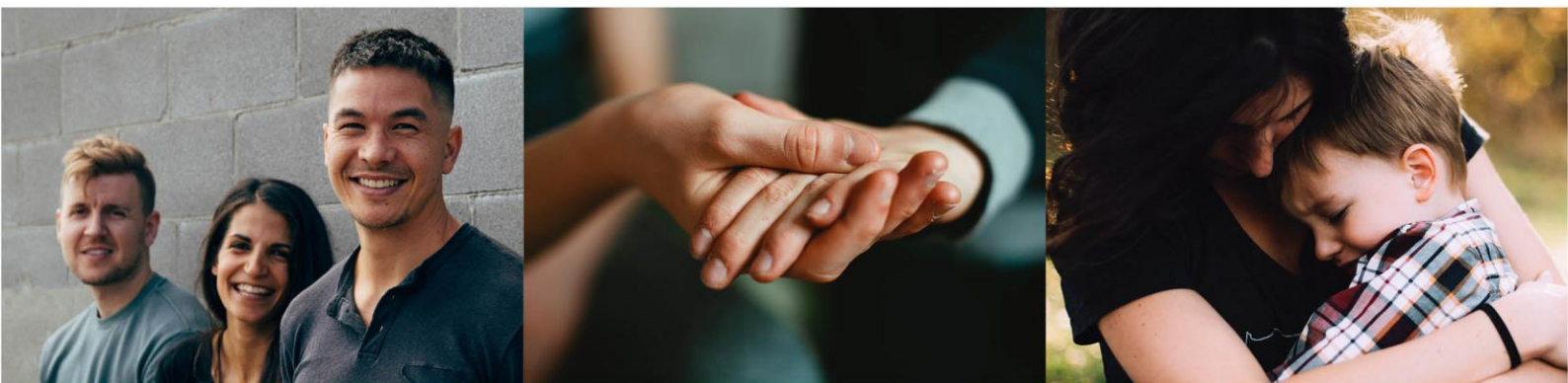
The recommendations were fair – challenging but fair. The written report was comprehensive, concise, and written in a way where we can share it with anyone who wants to see it. The language is accessible, which is important. Anyone can make sense of it, I think.

6. Beyond audit

“We’re more confident now, but in no way complacent.”

We’re pleased we were audited. Pleased our journey, from a frankly horrendous history, had been recognised. We were pleased what we were doing well was recognised. Particularly the change in our culture – that we’re committed to the highest possible level of safety for children and adults at risk. That we’re open and transparent.

Our audit has given us confidence but we’re in no way complacent. We will now redouble our efforts – to act on the recommendations, to continue to build on things that are going well.



The assessors will check in with us on progress. We keep the action plan on the agenda of our safeguarding committee. Always.

7. Safeguarding regulation in the Catholic Church – the bigger picture

“How can we trust you?”

Independent regulation of safeguarding across the Catholic Church is crucial. In our case, Ampleforth had previously lost trust from regulators because of historical failings. “How can we trust you now?” was the question we had to answer.

The CSSA is independent, their credentials mean they are experienced auditors. They know what they’re doing.

We need an independent organisation. We’re not marking our own homework on safeguarding.

That trust is vital for us all.

ENDS

You can read the Audit Results of Ampleforth Abbey Trust [HERE](#)

To express an interest in being a future guest of the Safeguarding Stories Series please email sarah.leadall@catholicsafeguarding.org.uk

