

Sisters of St Mary of Namur

Baseline Audit Report
September 2025

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1. Introduction

1.1 This is a baseline audit of the safeguarding arrangements of the Sisters of St Mary of Namur in England, who for the remainder of this audit report will be referred to as the SSMN or the community. Where there is reference to the Congregation, this is in reference to the International Congregation. This audit has been undertaken as part of the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency's Baseline Audit phase of Religious Life Groups (RLGs).

1.2 The Sisters of St Mary of Namur is an international Roman Catholic Apostolic Religious Congregation currently comprising of 325 sisters worldwide. Including 13 novices. Previously the sisters in Britain were referred to as the British Province. However, due to the falling number of sisters, the former Provinces changed its status and became known within the Congregation as the British Region. The Congregation was founded in 1819 in Namur, Belgium, where the motherhouse is still located, and the Congregation is now divided into three Provinces and five regions across nine countries. The community in England consists of 12 sisters, two who reside in one convent in London and nine who are divided between two convents in Liverpool and one sister who requires additional care and lives in a care home also in the Liverpool area. Active sisters engage in a variety of ministry through other organisations including, education, police and charities. Sisters also offer spiritual direction and some members of the SSMN offer retreats and days of prayer in Liverpool, and upon request offer retreats and spiritual direction at other locations. Sisters also support services offered by the local dioceses including foodbanks. The regional leader is also a member of the Bishop's Advisory Council for the Archdiocese of Liverpool. The sisters employ a care and support worker, a cook and gardener. With the exception of the member in a care home, all the SSMN are active, and they are not provided with any care. The role of the care and support worker is to facilitate the independence of the sisters, which can include tasks such as attending appointments and shopping.

1.3 This audit seeks to assess the effectiveness of current safeguarding arrangements by the SSMN by considering practice against the eight National

Safeguarding Standards over the last twelve months. The SSMN are not managing any casework and there are no known complaints against the community.

1.4 The CSSA has devised a categorisation scheme for religious life groups taking part in safeguarding audits. This categorises Groups on a scale from Level 1 Apostolic or Level 1 Enclosed (small communities with minimal outreach and no known safeguarding concerns), Level 2 (a medium sized community with some outreach with vulnerable populations and/or providing some Diocesan Activities such as a Parish Priest) or Level 3 (a large community and/or one with significant outreach with vulnerable populations and/or a disproportionately high number of open safeguarding cases). The SSMN have been categorised as a Level 1 Apostolic audit due to the small number of members in England, levels of outreach work and given there are no safeguarding concerns or complaints against the community.

1.5 The CSSA recognises the rich diversity of religious Life groups and acknowledges that the religious life groups within any category may vary significantly in terms of size, ministry and safeguarding practice. Consequently, CSSA analysts may use professional judgement to ensure that religious life groups are graded against the national standards in such a way that reflects their uniqueness.

1.6 The CSSA would like to thank all sisters and agencies who have contributed to the completion of this audit.

2. Methodology

2.1 Initial contact was established with the SSMN on 13 January 2025 and a follow up Teams call was organised for 2 April 2025 where further clarity about the ministry of the sisters was established, and the audit was discussed in more detail.

2.2 This Baseline Audit was undertaken following the submission of the Level 1 Apostolic Self-Assessment and supporting documentary evidence provided by the safeguarding lead and regional leader on 17 May 2025. Additional evidence was

reviewed by the auditor during a site visit on 17 June 2025. The Religious Life Safeguarding Service (RLSS)¹ have also contributed to this audit.

2.3 Interviews have been completed with the following:

- Virtual London sisters focus group 16 June 2025
- In person interview with the safeguarding lead 17 June 2025
- In person interview with the Trustees 17 June 2025
- In person interview with the care and support worker 17 June 2025
- In person interview with the regional leader 17 June 2025

3. Audit Grading

3.1 Safeguarding practice is assessed against the eight National Safeguarding Standards adopted by the Catholic Church in England and Wales². Safeguarding practice is graded in accordance with the CSSA Maturity Matrix for Level 1 Religious Life Groups. Each standard is graded on an ascending three-point scale of Not Met, Met with Recommendations and Met. Grades for individual standards are combined in order to produce an overall grading for the Religious Life Group as an outcome of the audit. The audit draws on evidence generated from self-assessment, interviews and focus groups and liaison with the RLSS.

3.2 The SSMN have achieved an audit outcome of Met, this is a result of the good practice that has been observed across all eight of the National Safeguarding Standards. The sisters have developed appropriate policies and procedures to manage safeguarding and all interviewees and focus group attendants demonstrated an appropriate knowledge of how to respond to a safeguarding concern in line with policy expectations. The sisters are committed to safeguarding training with excellent training compliance across the region. Areas identified for improvement are to embed the good practice that has been developed.

¹ The Religious Life Safeguarding Service (RLSS) is an independent team of safeguarding professionals offering safeguarding services to the Religious of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. Their website is available [here](#)

² A description and full details of the Standards can be found on the CSSA website [here](#)

Overall Grading	Met
Standard 1 – Safeguarding is embedded in the Church body's leadership, governance, ministry and culture	Met
Standard 2 – Communicating the Church's Safeguarding Message	Met
Standard 3 – Engaging with and Caring for those who report having been harmed	Met with Recommendations
Standard 4 – Effective Management of Allegations and Concerns	Met
Standard 5 – Management and Support of Subjects of Allegations and Concerns (respondents)	Met
Standard 6 – Robust Human Resource Management	Met with Recommendations
Standard 7 – Training and Support for Safeguarding	Met
Standard 8 – Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement	Met

4. Audit findings

4.1 Standard 1 Safeguarding is embedded in the Church body's leadership, governance, ministry and culture

4.1.1 The SSMN have a designated safeguarding lead who has been in post for four and a half years and is based in Liverpool. The safeguarding lead is a retired nurse and has professional experience in safeguarding working in the NHS with children and vulnerable adults. In addition to her responsibilities as the safeguarding lead for the region, the safeguarding lead also provides chaplaincy to the police in Liverpool. There is a job description for the safeguarding lead role adopted from the RLSS template, detailing key responsibilities, values and personal qualities needed. The safeguarding lead has accessed a range of training including safeguarding lead training with the RLSS.

4.1.2 The safeguarding lead is supported in her role by the regional leader, who has previously held the position of safeguarding lead for the region. The regional leader is a retired headteacher who has professional experience in managing safeguarding concerns, has held the position of safeguarding officer in other roles and is on the Bishops' Advisory Council for the Archdiocese of Liverpool. In addition to missionary work, members of the SSMN have experiences in safeguarding from roles in teaching and charitable work with vulnerable groups in the UK, and report that working in professional settings supports their understanding of safeguarding and safety.

4.1.3 The SSMN have an up-to-date safeguarding policy which has been adapted from the RLSS template. The safeguarding policy highlights the scope of the policy, key safeguarding roles and responsibilities within the community, training expectations, practice guidance and procedures, whistleblowing, recording and storing of information and safer recruitment guidance. It is an appropriate policy to support the ministry of the sisters, as most of their ministry is now provided through other organisations, who have their own policies for the sisters to follow. The safeguarding policy will be due for review in February 2026 and has been

shared with all members and the care and support worker, who all sign to acknowledge that they have read and understood the policy.

4.1.4 The sisters have also recently developed the '*safeguarding ethos plan*', which is a statement of commitment from the sisters to ensure effective safeguarding in the SSMN and is displayed as a poster in rooms used by the public in convents. Whilst the ethos plan is a newly published document, focus group participants and interviewees shared that the plan is closely aligned with the policies of the SSMN, the constitutions and the pastoral standards document 'Integrity in Ministry'³. Interviewees and focus group participants shared that Integrity in Ministry is a helpful document, but that safeguarding and safety is embedded in the way of life for the sisters, who have conducted international ministry in areas of conflict.

4.1.5 Safeguarding practice is overseen by the board of Trustees, and all Trustees are members of the community. The board of Trustees meet at least three times a year and minutes of meetings highlight that safeguarding is a standing agenda item. The safeguarding lead attends the Trustee meeting to provide a verbal update on safeguarding for the region, providing a simple written report on key performance indicators such as DBS and training compliance and any allegations and concerns, would allow for tracking in the event that there were any issues. There is evidence that 'exceptional' meetings are convened to address unexpected issues and mitigate risks that could potentially impact the safety of sisters. Minutes of Trustee meetings highlight that senior leaders will ensure a 'hands on' approach to supporting the needs of more vulnerable members.

4.1.6 The sisters have completed a safeguarding risk assessment for the entire region considering potential risk scenarios, who is at risk and what controls are in place, this is an example of good practice by the sisters, and evidences how important safeguarding is within the community. The risks are categorised as low, medium and high and a risk reduction summary has been devised. The risk

³ Integrity in Ministry is a code of conduct for clergy and religious engaged in Ministry.

assessment provides a good foundation for assessing and mitigating risks, however it should be shared with the RLSS for additional oversight and contributions. The risk assessment will be reviewed on an annual basis.

4.1.7 The SSMN provide day retreats at the convent in Liverpool where a register is used to sign guests in and out of the building. All resident sisters and the care and support worker are advised in advance who will be attending retreats. The sisters have closed circuit television cameras installed at the convent and are able to check the identity of visitors prior to allowing access to the convent. Spiritual direction is provided by sisters in a room at the front of the convent and sisters are encouraged to sit near the window and keep the blinds open, and there is always at least one other sister in the convent, demonstrating awareness of practical safety and compliance with the '*safeguarding risk assessment*'.

4.1.8 In preparation for the audit the sisters identified that a 'safeguarding action plan' would be beneficial and so a plan identifying several tasks has been developed and shared with all members. The safeguarding action plan could be improved by aligning each task to a standard and identifying action owners. Actions could be reviewed more regularly at the Trustee meetings, where actions can then be marked as completed and replaced as appropriate, ensuring that the plan is a working document.

4.1.9 The SSMN have signed contracts with the CSSA and RLSS, and the leaders have attended the RLSS annual safeguarding conferences in 2025.

Graded: Met

4.2 Standard 2 Communicating the Church's Safeguarding Message

4.2.1 The SSMN have recently developed a simple safeguarding communications plan, that is delineated into objectives, key audiences, core messages and communication channels and each action has an assigned action owner. The plan

is due to be reviewed in 2028. Whilst it is positive that the plan has been shared with all members, the SSMN would benefit from consulting with intended audiences about the contents of the plan whilst it is in draft. All able sisters, the care and support worker and those attending retreats could be consulted as to their views, and this could be used to further develop practice.

4.2.2 As identified in standard one, there are safeguarding communications in the convent in areas accessed by the public. The safeguarding policy, *Integrity in Ministry* and the safeguarding posters containing details for the safeguarding lead are all on display. It is reported by members that those on day retreats are directed to the posters and advised of the contact details of the safeguarding lead. Although there is no safeguarding poster in the room used for spiritual direction the signing in record is in the room with safeguarding communications, and so sisters are advised to continue to ensure that this is pointed out to guests on entry and exit.

4.2.3 Safeguarding has been discussed at a regional day for members in May 2023 where a guest speaker gave a talk on safeguarding and religious life. In May 2025 in preparation for the general chapter a member has provided a presentation on safeguarding and abuse within a religious context, and questions were posed to generate discussion which included *"in our ageing communities, is there not sometimes abuse by omission ? or abuse by conscience? What can we do to encourage the flow of fresh air ?"*

4.2.4 The sisters are contracted to the RLSS and receive monthly updates, which the safeguarding lead shares with all members. The safeguarding lead also shares information via email, for example of training opportunities. There is a general chapter meeting planned for later in the year and the regional leader reports that safeguarding within the congregation will be discussed within this chapter meeting.

4.2.5 The SSMN do not have a regional website, and given the limited ministry of the sisters, there are no plans to develop one. The safeguarding lead has developed a small folder containing all policies that have been shared with all members. Focus

group participants and interviewees have shared that emails are effective methods of communication, unless a matter is urgent or significant then a regional meeting is more appropriate.

Graded: Met

4.3 Standard 3 Engaging with and Caring for those who report having been harmed

4.3.1 The SSMN do not have any previous experience of, and therefore there is no practice evidence available that would enable a direct assessment of how the sisters care for those who report having been harmed. The SSMN have adopted the RLSS safeguarding policy which provides a basic overview of what will happen should a disclosure of harm be received by the sisters, and it is highlighted that action must be taken in line with the Church's mandatory reporting policy.

4.3.2 The safeguarding policy highlights that the safeguarding lead and regional leader must be made aware of concerns, unless the matter relates to either of these people. The safeguarding policy highlights that the SSMN will pass the concern and all associated records to the RLSS immediately.

4.3.3 All active sisters have completed safeguarding training in line with their ministry and have shared their understanding that support would be required for a survivor of harm. The safeguarding lead has shared that sisters would respond to the presenting needs, liaising with appropriate services such as the RLSS or other organisations, highlighting local counselling and support services, which was echoed by focus group participants.

4.3.4 The regional leader and Trustees have shared that resources would be provided to a survivor of harm, if harm had been caused by a member of the community, and following consultation with the RLSS the regional leader would seek to meet with a survivor of harm if this was deemed appropriate.

4.3.5 The regional leader, Trustees and members recognise that sisters may also be survivors of harm and have shared that resources for support have been made available to sisters who have required specialist intervention and support.

4.3.6 The SSMN should engage with peers who have direct experience of working with those who report harm as to reflect on their experience and any learning that could be relevant to the sisters. The sisters should also ensure that a thorough review is conducted following any disclosure of harm to identify any learning for the sisters, and that learning is shared across the community with all sisters.

Graded: Met With Recommendations

4.4 Standard 4 Effective Management of Allegations and Concerns

4.4.1 The SSMN do not have any experiences, and therefore there is no evidence available that would enable a direct assessment, of the management of allegations and concerns, however, focus group participants and interviewees all indicated that they would respond in line with the safeguarding policies operational within the region and their other ministries. The sisters demonstrated appropriate knowledge of policies and procedures and reporting timescales within the Catholic Church.

4.4.2 The safeguarding lead has shared that whilst the sisters do not receive allegations or complaints she is confident that should the sisters receive any allegations members would be able to listen and remain calm, avoid interruption, and ensure that survivors felt believed. The safeguarding lead advises that issues of confidentiality would be discussed with the person making the allegation or disclosure. The safeguarding lead demonstrated knowledge of national support

services such as Safe Spaces⁴ and more local counsellors who offer support services.

4.4.3 The safeguarding policy provides guidance to the sisters in respect of recording and storing information, under the title "*the recording and storage of safeguarding concerns and case files*", where it is reported that the safeguarding lead in partnership with the regional lead has a responsibility to ensure that all case files held are accurate, up to date and stored securely. The safeguarding lead reports that confidential information is stored in lockable cupboards. Focus group participants and interviewees shared that any allegation or concern would be reported to the safeguarding lead, and the sisters have adopted the CSSA '*quick guide flowchart for responding to allegations and concerns*' which includes the contact details for the safeguarding lead for the region, RLSS and CSSA, and there is guidance to contact the police in an emergency.

4.4.4 The safeguarding lead and regional lead have shared that they are confident in identifying and responding effectively to low-level disputes between members of the community and more serious concerns such as an allegation of abuse. Leaders conduct canonical visits to members where each sister can share any concerns, although the regional leader has contact with most sisters daily and sees sisters who live further away approximately three times a year. Members have reported that there is a flexible approach to support from the leaders and relationships are valued in the SSMN.

4.4.5 To ensure that any allegations were managed in line with Canon law expectations the SSMN would liaise with the international congregation to provide legal advice or they would consult with the RLSS.

Graded: Met

⁴ Safe Spaces is a free and independent support service, providing a confidential, personal, and safe space for anyone who has been abused by someone in the Church or as a result of their relationship with the Church of England, the Catholic Church in England and Wales or the Church in Wales.

4.5 Standard 5 Management and Support of Subjects of Allegations and Concerns (Respondents)

4.5.1 The SSMN do not have any experience of, and therefore there is no practice evidence available that would enable a direct assessment of the management or support of a sister who might be the subject of an allegation. The SSMN promote the RLSS guidance '*maintaining safe yet caring boundaries*', to assist the sisters in role modelling safe practice.

4.5.2. The SSMN have shared that they have strong links with the RLSS and would seek advice from them and the International Congregation to ensure that those subject to allegations or concerns were appropriately risk assessed, managed and supported. The community have recognised that there may be occasions where a sister could no longer remain within the community and so they have identified an alternative location for sisters to reside where emotional support from a counsellor with a religious background is available on site. The sisters advise that the constitutions allow for a sister to reside separately from the community.

4.5.3 The safeguarding lead has completed safeguarding lead training with the RLSS, and whilst she has not completed any training in respect of managing a safety plan, she would seek this training if it became necessary and has familiarised herself with the expectations of a safety management plan.

4.5.4 Interviewees and focus group participants have all shared that they feel they would be effectively supported by the congregation if they were to be the subject of an allegation.

Graded: Met

4.6 Standard 6 Robust Human Resource Management

4.6.1 The SSMN have a section on safer recruitment for members, lay staff and volunteers within the safeguarding policy, in which it is highlighted that

“appropriate DBS checks will be completed in line with both statutory and Catholic Church requirements” and that “appointment to a role will not be confirmed until a satisfactory DBS check has been received and previous employment references confirmed as being acceptable”. The SSMN do not have a process to manage a blemished DBS, however the safeguarding lead has advised that the SSMN will not employ any new staff with a blemished DBS and if an existing staff member returned a blemished DBS that this would be shared with the RLSS for guidance.

4.6.2 New staff members are subject to a six-month probationary period, and are supported via an induction, which includes reading all relevant safeguarding and health and safety policies. Supervision is provided to the care and support worker by the community bursar on a monthly basis. The care and support worker whilst not offering care at this time to any sister has experience of working within Care Quality Commission⁵ settings and reports that she will work to these high standards.

4.6.2 The SSMN commission the services of an independent HR consultancy firm to support with safer recruitment of employees, who assist with developing job descriptions, supporting interviews and gaining references. The sisters have developed an Employee Handbook where whistleblowing processes are briefly outlined. The whistleblowing policy is also contained within the safeguarding policy, which is provided to new staff and highlights that the RLSS can be contacted if there are any concerns.

4.6.3 All active members of the SSMN in England have an Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service certificate (DBS)⁶ as does the care and support worker. The safeguarding lead retains copies of DBS, however would benefit from a simple spreadsheet or Word document where DBS numbers and expiry dates for all members could be easily tracked.

⁵ The Care Quality Commission (CQC) is England's independent regulator of health and adult social care. The CQC's primary role is to monitor, inspect, and regulate health and social care services to ensure they provide safe, effective, compassionate, and high-quality care.

⁶ [Disclosure and Barring Service – GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service)

4.6.4 The SSMN do not have anyone in Formation in England and Wales and they do not anticipate any new arrivals. The sisters do receive visits from other sisters within the wider congregation. A sister may visit for a time limited period, although will not minister when visiting. The SSMN have shared that as an ageing population younger sisters may struggle to integrate into the community, and it would not be reasonable to burden younger sisters with significant caring responsibilities for older members.

4.6.5 There is a complaints procedure in place for the region which advises that the SSMN aim to acknowledge complaints in writing within 48 hours and aim to provide a response within five working days, highlighting that the SSMN aim to resolve complaints quickly. The complaints procedure is not specific to safeguarding and so a safeguarding specific complaints procedure would be beneficial, and should include how to make a complaint and to whom, what role if any the RLSS will have in the management of complaints, and it should highlight the CSSA as the final port of call for complainants that are not resolved within the internal structures of the community or congregation.

Graded: Met with Recommendations

4.7 Standard 7 Training and Support for Safeguarding

4.7.1 The SSMN have completed a range of safeguarding training with the RLSS and other providers specific to their roles. The safeguarding lead has attended '*training for safeguarding leads*,' '*social media and safeguarding*,' and '*use of manipulation and control*'. The training of other members has included '*safeguarding for spiritual accompaniment*' and '*safeguarding in the context of catholic social teaching*'. All Trustees have completed '*safeguarding for Trustees*' training with the RLSS in addition to Trustee training completed with the insurers for the charity. The care and support worker whilst new in role has completed both basic and advanced safeguarding training with the RLSS.

4.7.2 Whilst the safeguarding lead has copies of all training certificates, ensuring that there is a central record i.e. spreadsheet or word document of all training will allow for easier oversight and reporting to the Trustees.

4.7.3 Focus group participants shared that whilst they appreciated the quality and availability of training, due to the frequency in which they access safeguarding training, the duration of training could be reviewed, particularly where this is accessed online, as staring at a screen can cause strain to their eyes. Developments in standard seven will be for the sisters to establish mechanisms to evaluate training and consider further suitable training opportunities. The SSMN should also amend their safeguarding policy which currently states safeguarding training should be completed every three years, with two years considered to be good practice.

4.7.4 The SSMN have liaised with the RLSS in respect of providing a bespoke training day for the sisters in 2026, enabling sisters who have responsibilities in normal working hours to attend.

Graded: Met

4.8 Standard 8 Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement

4.8.1. The SSMN are committed to continuous improvement and are using the *safeguarding risk assessment* and *safeguarding action plan* to identify and address issues of risk and drive practice improvement, ensuring that the safeguarding action plan is clearly aligned to the eight national safeguarding standards will enable any issues of non-compliance to be identified and addressed quickly. The sisters have identified that conducting an annual safeguarding audit, gathering feedback from members on the safeguarding culture and evaluating and adapting practice as and when needed will all support continuous improvement in safeguarding. Whilst there is some good practice planned to improve safeguarding this will need to be embedded within the SSMN.

4.8.2 The SSMN have signed contracts with both the RLSS and the CSSA and the RLSS report that the sisters have sought advice and guidance from them as and when needed. All able sisters have attended training organised by the RLSS and other providers in line with their individual ministry and both the safeguarding and regional leader have attended the RLSS Annual Safeguarding Conference in March 2025.

4.8.3 The regional leader has shared that the SSMN are part of the Conference of Religious⁷ where she reports information about safeguarding is discussed with other leaders which promotes learning. During yearly canonical visits the regional lead will visit each community and as part of this visit will consider the well-being of members, whether sisters need additional support and their approaches to safeguarding, which the SSMN report is part of self-evaluation and continuous learning for the region.

Graded: Met

5. Summary of Overall Findings

5.1 The Sisters of St Mary of Namur have evidenced their awareness of the importance of safeguarding having appropriate policies and procedures in place, and leaders promote training and engagement with safeguarding professionals such as the RLSS and the CSSA.

5.2 The SSMN have no frame of reference for supporting those who have been harmed, or of the management of allegations and concerns or of supporting the subjects of allegations, however all interviewees and focus group participants have shared their understanding of implementing the guidance contained in the safeguarding policy and ensuring that a caring approach is provided.

⁷ The purpose of Conference of Religious in England & Wales is to provide a collective voice for leaders of religious life.

5.3 The SSMN are committed to developing safeguarding practice which is evidenced in the development of the safeguarding risk assessment and safeguarding action plan, and the proposal to complete an annual safeguarding audit.

6. Recommendations

To support improvement, the following recommendations are made and should be completed within 12 months.

- Share the safeguarding risk assessment with the RLSS for oversight and contributions.
- The safeguarding lead should produce a simple report for Trustees on key performance indicators for including training and DBS compliance and any allegations and complaints.
- Share communications plan with key stakeholders for feedback.
- Engage with peers who have direct experience of working with those who report harm as to reflect on their experience and any learning that could be relevant to the sisters.
- Develop a safeguarding complaints policy highlighting the CSSA as the final port of call for complaints that are not resolved within the internal structures of the Sisters of St Mary of Namur.
- Review safeguarding policy and ensure safeguarding training requirements are in line with good practice expectations of every two years.
- Align the safeguarding action plan to the eight National Safeguarding standards.

7. Arrangements for Follow-up

7.1 In line with overall rating of Met, a re-audit of the Group by the CSSA should not normally take place for a three-year minimum period, subject to no indicators of a raised safeguarding risk arising.