Catholic
Safeguarding
Standards
Agency

Religious Life Groups Baseline Audit Programme

Overview Report 2025

Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 This is the first overview report of the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency's (CSSA) baseline audit programme for religious life groups (RLG)[1] in England and Wales. During the baseline audit programme overview reports will be published on an annual basis, covering RLG audits published in the preceding year[2]. On this occasion the report includes reports published during a 13-month period from December 2024 to December 2025. As an overview report, it does not contain new findings or specific actions for RLG but collates learning from the overall programme in order to identify systemic strengths and areas for development.

1.2 The report is intended to enhance public transparency and accountability of safeguarding in the Catholic Church in England and Wales. In turn, leaders and trustees of RLG are encouraged to use the report as a prompt for discussions about the continuous improvement of their own safeguarding arrangements.

2. Background

2.1 The *Independent Review of Safeguarding Structures and Arrangements in the Catholic Church in England and Wales* (hereafter the Elliott Review)[3] proposed the introduction of a standards-based model for safeguarding in which compliance is assessed and promoted through a national audit and review programme. This programme was to be delivered by the newly created CSSA.

2.2 The adoption of a standards-based model sought to formalise the existing 'One Church' approach to safeguarding by providing consistent expectations that all RLGs and dioceses in England and Wales would work to. By doing so, survivors and

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[1] The term 'religious life group' is not found in canon law but used in this context as a generic term for all religious orders.

[2] Individual audit reports are available here: [Audit Reports of Religious Life Groups]

[3] The Elliott Review, published in October 2020, was commissioned to review and make proposals for future safeguarding structures and arrangements in the Catholic Church in England and Wales. Its final report is available here: [Independent Review Safeguarding Report 2020 Re-Format 4]

others who may receive a safeguarding service should be able to expect the same quality of response, irrespective of the RLG or diocese with whom they have contact. The proposed eight national safeguarding standards[4] were subsequently adopted throughout the Church in England and Wales. The dioceses and two eastern rite eparchies are subject to a separate audit programme, so not further considered within this report.

2.3 The CSSA came into operational existence in June 2021 and, following a period of recruitment and the development of the audit model, the audit programme commenced with baseline audits of dioceses in 2022. Audits of RLGs began on a pilot basis in 2023, with the full audit programme commencing in August 2024.

2.4 There are approximately 300 RLG in England and Wales, ranging in size from those with only one or two remaining members to others with well over 50 members. Recent decades have seen a significant reduction in new members and RLGs, as a whole, are characterised by an increasingly elderly membership, often with personal care needs. Ongoing ministries are too wide and varied to be simply summarised here but may include work undertaken in the name of the RLG itself or on behalf of other organisations. From a safeguarding perspective, this does necessitate a degree of individuality in practical arrangements in order to meet the RLG's charism and attendant safeguarding risks.

2.5 The small size of the majority of RLG is such that there is no need for them to employ professional safeguarding staff, even on a part-time basis. Prior to the Elliott Review safeguarding support had been provided by dioceses, to which each RLG was affiliated. This practice was ended with the creation of the Religious Life Safeguarding Service (RLSS)[5], a specialist provider of safeguarding services for RLG. Individual RLG are nevertheless able to choose whether to contract to RLSS and how to deliver their safeguarding arrangements.

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[4] The eight national safeguarding standards are referenced later in this report and available, together with the substandards, here: The Eight National Safeguarding Standards Minor amendments have been made to the substandards since the publication of the Elliott Review.

[5] More information about RLSS is available here: Religious Life Safeguarding Service - Religious Safeguarding

Catholic **Safeguarding Standards** Agency

3. Overview of the baseline audit programme

3.1 The Elliott Review proposed a rolling audit programme in which RLGs' ongoing compliance with the national safeguarding standards and the continuous development of their safeguarding arrangements is tested. The initial round of audits are referred to as baseline audits, due to their deliberate focus on compliance with elements of the standards relating to safeguarding structures and policies. By assuring that they are in place, the CSSA will subsequently be able to assess progress from this point of reference and place a greater emphasis on the quality and impact of practice.

3.2 The initial baseline audits were completed on a pilot basis, in order to allow the CSSA to develop and refine its audit model. These 17 audits were completed at the invitation of the involved RLG; the CSSA's appreciation of their role in the development of the audit programme is noted. Pilot audits were completed between June 2023 and January 2024 and not published in view of this being a developmental phase. This was followed by a period in which the audit methodology and associated paperwork was refined, in consultation with RLGs, prior to the full commencement of the baseline audit programme in August 2024. Notwithstanding the pilot audit phase, the CSSA recognises its own need to learn and continuously improve its audit process. All RLGs are given the opportunity to provide feedback about their experience of being audited following the publication of their report, which has proved to be an invaluable means by which the audit methodology has been refined and auditors' skills developed.

3.3 The CSSA also recognises that, as a relatively new area of work, its understanding of the diversity of religious life groups, their safeguarding arrangements and the contexts in which they operate continues to develop. While the baseline audit programme provides a structured framework for assessment, it is not intended to imply a fixed or complete model of safeguarding within religious life. The CSSA will therefore continue to refine its approach as learning emerges from audits, engagement with RLGs and wider safeguarding practice, ensuring that its methodology remains proportionate, informed and responsive to the realities of religious life.

3.4 As has already been noted, this is the first overview report of learning from the RLG baseline audit programme and consequently covers a slightly longer period than will become the norm. During the period from August 2024 until the end of December 2025 82 audit visits were completed, with 67 audit reports being published. The remaining 15 reports were in production at the year end. Ten audits were postponed during the reporting period, seven being at the request of the RLG and three at the request of the CSSA. It is expected that approximately 240 RLGs will be audited as part of the baseline audit programme, which will take until early 2028.

3.5 Public transparency is provided to the CSSA's audit programme through the publication of the full reports on the CSSA website. By omitting identifiable information relating to safeguarding cases reports are written in a way that makes them publishable. However, in exceptional circumstances where publication could create a risk to a person linked to the RLG further redactions may be made. Consequently, one report was published without the inclusion of the RLG name.

3.6 As part of the audit framework, the CSSA operates a proportionate pathway for lower scoring RLGs. This includes enhanced monitoring activity and an earlier re-audit than would have otherwise been scheduled. The purpose of this approach is to obtain assurance that safeguarding arrangements are strengthened in a timely way and that any identified risks are mitigated. The nature and frequency of any additional activity is determined on a risk-based case-by-case basis.

4. Audit methodology

4.1 Baseline audits are completed in accordance with the Audit and Review Framework[6] for RLG, a final version of which was published at the conclusion of the pilot phase of audits. Audits are intended to be of current practice and therefore consider evidence relating to the last 12 months. It is acknowledged that this can cause a degree of dissonance for those whose primary, and sometimes negative

[6] The Audit and Review Framework and all other baseline audit documentation is available here: Quality Assurance Framework for Religious Life Groups

experience, of an RLG and their safeguarding practice occurred during an earlier timeframe.

4.2 Put briefly, the baseline audit process consists of a self-assessment and submission of evidence by the RLG, followed by a visit to the RLG by the auditor. Visits are tailored to the individual circumstances of the RLG, but would typically include interviews with key personnel, focus groups with other members and visits to places of ministry. Some audits of larger RLG necessitate visits to more than one place of ministry, while in others personnel are interviewed virtually. Auditors contacted dioceses in which the RLG the was situated and the RLSS (where the RLG was a member) to enquire as to their engagement with each. Finally, where an RLG had active casework case audits were completed.

4.3 In view of the disparities in the size and ministry of RLGs, alternative audit paperwork is used based on which of three levels an RLG is assigned to. Level 1, which is used for the smallest RLGs, is further subdivided between apostolic and enclosed RLG. RLG are graded using a Maturity Matrix[7], which provides a brief description of the practice necessary to achieve each of the possible grades for each standard. Grades for each standard are averaged to provide an overall grade. Different grading scales are used for smaller (Level 1) and larger (Level 2 and 3) RLG, consisting of three and seven points, respectively[8]. This reflects the greater sophistication in safeguarding arrangements that would be expected of a larger organisation.

4.4 Baseline audits are completed by Quality Assurance Analysts employed by the CSSA. All are experienced safeguarding professionals and offer expertise from a range of backgrounds. RLG audits are typically completed by one analyst, although a second may be involved for those that are larger or geographically dispersed.

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[7] The Maturity Matrices are available here: Quality Assurance Framework for Religious Life Groups

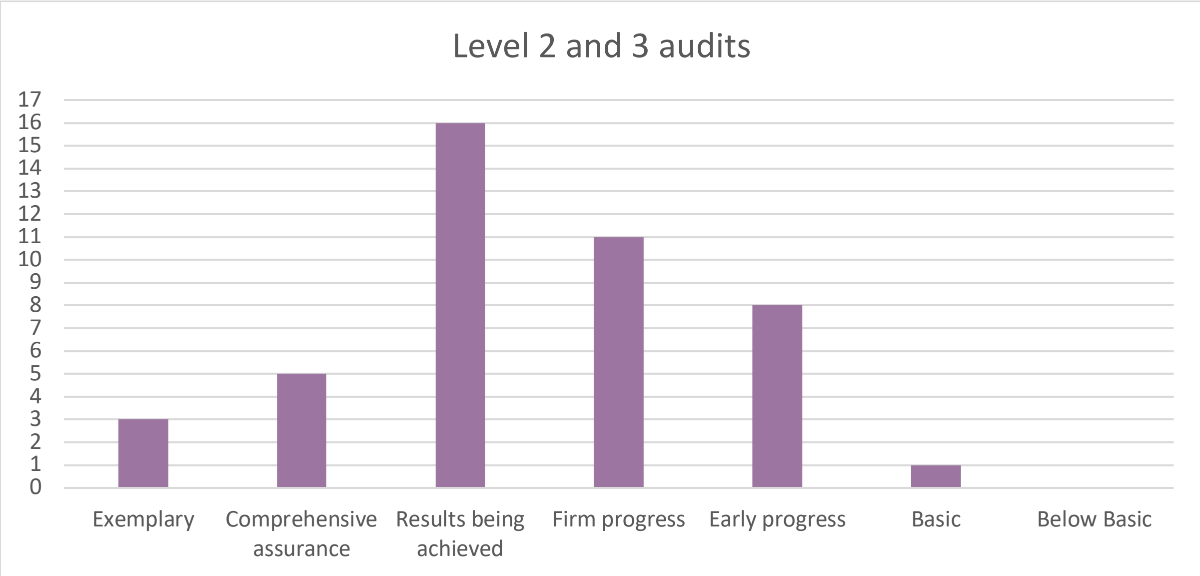
[8] For Level 2 and 3 RLG, the seven possible grades, in descending order, are Exemplary, Comprehensive Assurance, Results Being Achieved, Firm Progress, Early Progress, Basic, and Below Basic. The latter grade is reserved for situations in which expected practice is not being met to the extent that unsafe situations are created. For Level 1 RLG the three possible grades are Met, Met with Recommendations and Not Met.

Consistency is provided through the moderation of reports by the Quality Assurance Manager, with final sign off provided by a second senior manager.

5. Audit outcomes

5.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of outcomes and learning from the 67 baseline audits of RLG in the Catholic Church in England and Wales published in 2024 and 2025. In view of the focus on the RLGs as a whole, individual RLGs referred to are not named, other than in the good practice examples boxes.

5.2 Overall grades attained by RLG were as follows:



The majority of RLG therefore attained grades in the middle of the scales (results being achieved, firm progress or met with recommendations), with slightly more obtaining grades at the higher than the lower ends of the scales. Credit should be given to the three RLG obtaining an exemplary grade, which had not previously been achieved during the pilot RLG phase (or by a diocese). While Level 1 RLGs fared marginally better than those at Level 2 or 3, there were no discernible patterns relating to the gender or ministry of the RLG and their audit grade. Grades also remained stable during the reporting period, this does not suggest that RLGs are consistently learning from each other's findings.

5.3 The number of RLG attaining each grade overall and by standard were as follows:

	Standard 1	Standard 2	Standard 3	Standard 4	Standard 5	Standard 6	Standard 7	Standard 8	Overall
Exemplary	5	0	3	3	4	4	4	3	3
Comprehensive assurance	3	7	5	7	9	6	3	6	5
Results being achieved	19	7	16	16	13	13	11	8	16
Firm progress	6	19	10	11	14	12	17	8	11
Early progress	9	10	6	5	1	7	3	14	8
Basic	1	0	3	1	3	1	5	4	1
Below basic	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0
Met	6	5	7	9	11	7	5	5	6
Met with recommendations	14	15	15	13	11	14	12	13	16
Not met	3	3	1	1	1	2	6	5	1
Average (0-100)[9]	58.7	53.5	59.5	63.2	66.4	60.0	52.5	51.0	60.0

5.4 This indicates a variability in grading for individual standards, and while there are differences between Level 1 and Level 2/3 RLG these are not significant. Standards 4 and 5 were the highest scoring standards, with Standards 7 and 8 being graded less favourably. The focus of Standard 8 on quality assurance and continuous improvement is such that lower grading is inevitable for those whose

[9] This score is produced by assigning a numerical value to each grading and using these to produce an average value for each standard. This allows the Level 1 and Level 2/3 grades to be combined.

safeguarding arrangements are at an earlier stage of development, it would therefore be expected that an increase in grading for this standard would be seen over time. Lower grades for Standard 7 are less explicable with safeguarding training being readily available to almost all RLG.

6. Summary of findings by standard

6.0 The following section provides an overview of findings by standard drawing on commonly found strengths and areas for development, together with examples of individual good practice and questions that trustees of RLG are recommended to ask themselves. In a collection of 67 reports it is inevitable that individual areas of practice will have been raised as both strengths and areas for development. The following therefore references the most frequently identified strengths and areas for development but should not be taken to say that they exclusively fall within the one category. Good practice examples are necessarily brief, with more detail available in the full report that is published on the CSSA website.

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

6.1.1 The majority of RLGs are constituted as charities, for whom governance expectations are set by the Charity Commission for England and Wales. RLGs were generally found to have appropriately constituted boards of trustees who met at least twice per annum with safeguarding as a standing agenda item, as per Charity Commission recommendations. Evidence of trustees taking accountability for safeguarding and providing oversight and challenge was more limited, although the relatively brief nature of meeting minutes did not assist and is an easy area for improvement. In addition, the majority of RLGs had other forms of leadership groups and meetings, together with meetings for the wider membership. Safeguarding was often a standing agenda item on these meetings which is viewed to be good practice. Care should nevertheless be taken to ensure that decisions are taken in the right forum. For the minority who are not charities analogous governance arrangements are expected and were usually found to be present.

6.1.2 There was more limited evidence of the use of safeguarding action plans, as is expected by the national safeguarding standards. These should be used by trustees to plan, implement and review developments in safeguarding arrangements. For smaller RLGs, there is merit in framing this as an annual workplan of tasks. Likewise, few RLG had risk registers, which are a key means by which trustees should identify and mitigate risks to their charity.

6.1.3 The expectation to have a current safeguarding policy that meets the RLG's particular circumstances was generally met. Where it was not, this tended to be a result of adopting a wider provincial or congregational policy that did not reflect the safeguarding expectations in England and Wales or adopting a template policy without adapting it to the RLG's situation. A minority had either no policy or a substantially out of date policy. *Integrity in Ministry*[10] was not consistently known about or used, although creative examples were also seen of integrating its content into the life and ministry of RLG.

6.1.4 Reflecting the varied nature of the RLGs audited, a range of models for the delivery of safeguarding was evident. The majority appointed an operational safeguarding lead, either from within their membership or as an employee or contractor. In a small number of cases, the RLG leader undertook this role; however, this is not considered good practice due to the inherent lack of independence and capacity for challenge. Higher-scoring RLGs tended to be those that allocated greater resources to the safeguarding lead role or where the individual undertaking the role demonstrated a particular commitment to safeguarding. There was also good evidence of RLG leaders providing visible support for and commitment to safeguarding. Good practice was seen in some larger RLG which appointed a safeguarding trustee in addition to an operational safeguarding lead in order to strengthen oversight.

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[10] *Integrity in Ministry* is a code of conduct for RLG members ministering in England and Wales.

6.1.5 Operational safeguarding leads appointed from within the RLG's membership were generally effective in ensuring that key safeguarding arrangements were in place, including the development of policies, the maintenance of safe environments and compliance with safer recruitment and training requirements. However, access to professional safeguarding expertise is essential where RLGs are required to respond to allegations or manage respondents. For the majority of RLGs, this was secured through membership of the RLSS, with a small number making use of their own professionally qualified staff. A very small number of RLGs had no arrangements in place, leaving them vulnerable in the event of receiving an allegation and without clear mechanisms for accessing training provision or DBS checks. Similarly, those RLGs not contracted to the CSSA place themselves outside the One Church approach to safeguarding meaning that there is no independent oversight or assurance of their ability to follow due diligence, or to receive and respond safely to concerns arising.

6.1.6 RLG leaders and members provided evidence of a strong understanding of the application of practical safeguarding arrangements in their ministry, including the ways to maintain the safety of those with whom they have contact and themselves. This was generally seen to be intrinsic to their ministry as opposed to an add on. Where gaps were seen these tended to arise from not considering all areas of ministry and contact with the public, or all locations that the RLG is resident or ministers from. CSSA audits do not consider service provision that is otherwise regulated, so any care provision that is CQC registered falls outside their scope. Examples were seen of good quality care provision in non-CQC registered settings, difficulties tended to arise responding to members' changing needs and the demands that this placed on other members and employees.

Good practice examples

- The leader of the Capuchin Franciscans has a clearly articulated vision for safeguarding, including a commitment to embedding the eight safeguarding standards, on the RLG's website. All policy documents support this vision and a three-year strategic plan details how it will be achieved. The plan is reviewed in every Provincial Council meeting and progress reported to trustees.

- The Hospitaller Order of St John of God has a clearly defined governance structure for safeguarding in which responsibilities and flows of information between the trustees, the province-wide safeguarding committee and UK local group are recorded, understood and seen to operate in practice. Individual roles are likewise defined and seen to be delivered on.
- The Religious of Mary Immaculate have a Code of Conduct for members, employees and volunteers that includes a zero-tolerance approach to abuse and is clearly based on the principle of *Integrity in Ministry*. It also includes the process for conflict resolution.
- The Sisters of St Mary of Namur have completed a safeguarding risk assessment for their entire region considering potential risk scenarios, who is at risk and what controls are in place. Risks are categorised as low, medium or high and a risk reduction summary has been devised. It will be reviewed annually.
- The Poor Clares of Arundel provide for sisters' personal safety through the addition of glass panels to rooms where they meet with the public and through clear signage indicating boundaries to private. The porch has an alert that can be set off if a sister feels at risk from someone who has come to the door. Public events are managed to ensure that sisters are never alone with children or adults at risk, while others are by invitation only so that visitors are known.

Questions for trustees and leaders to ask

- What is our vision and plan for safeguarding?
- Are our governance arrangements clear, applied in practice and compliant with Charity Commission recommendations?
- How do we know that safeguarding is embedded across *all* aspects of our ministry, governance and community life?

- How do we support our safeguarding lead in their role and ensure that they have sufficient resources (including time) to undertake it?

Standard 2: Communicating the Church's safeguarding message

6.2.1 Standard 2 was a less well-scoring area overall, although the majority of RLG were able to evidence some forms of safeguarding communications, most commonly in the form of posters and other physical information in public and communal areas. These ensured that contact details for the safeguarding lead were generally known. RLG members regularly reported receiving safeguarding updates in house meetings or through informal conversations. There is clearly value in this approach, however care is needed to ensure that all members are included. There was emerging evidence of the use of RLG websites to share safeguarding information, although this is a means of communication of which much more use could be made (it is acknowledged that it will not be appropriate for all RLG to have a website).

6.2.2 The most effective examples of safeguarding communications were those in which thought had been given to the RLG's circumstances and ministry, who they interacted with and what needed to be communicated. This was then captured in a communications plan (which can be part of a safeguarding policy or wider safeguarding action plan), which was seen to be delivered on and reviewed. The national safeguarding standards include seeking stakeholder engagement for safeguarding communications. This can be as simple as checking with individual members whether updates provided are understandable and in a suitable format. Other RLG used discussions in house meetings to check whether materials had been received and understood.

6.2.3 More commonly seen areas for development were ensuring that all members or areas of ministry are included in safeguarding communications. Public communication of how and to whom to report concerns was found to be inconsistent, with greater prominence also needed for survivor support services, including Safe Spaces[11].

Good practice examples

- The Franciscan Sisters of St Joseph have a detailed communication plan, including internal and external audiences. Communications were seen through a number of channels and were widely accessible. These included detailed information on their website, a safeguarding spotlight section in their congregational newsletter, discussions in meetings and individual emails.
- The Daughters of the Cross of Liege distribute safeguarding bulletins on topics relevant to the group's circumstances, previously including organisational abuse in a care setting, and spiritual abuse. Safeguarding quizzes are held to ensure that expectations are understood.
- The Institute of Our Lady of Mercy website includes multiple means by which abuse can be reported, together with information about and links to support available to survivors. Information about safeguarding governance, policies and training is also included.
- The Daughters of St Paul have safeguarding folders in all locations in which they minister or reside that include policies, posters, contact details and a range of other information. A four-page booklet is available to all who they minister to which includes the safeguarding statement, core principles, contact details and more. All documents are available in large-print or translation on request.

Questions for trustees and leaders to ask

- How do we know that safeguarding information is accessible, visible and understandable to everyone we have contact with?

[11] Safe Spaces is a specialist provider of support to survivors of abuse within a Church context commissioned by the Catholic Church in England and Wales, the Church of England and the Church in Wales.

- How easily could a survivor of abuse find out how to report their experiences and seek support?
- How do we decide and plan what messages to communicate about safeguarding?
- How do we know that our safeguarding communications are effective?

Standard 3: Engaging with and caring for those who report having been harmed

6.3.1 The majority of RLGs audited had no experience of engaging with survivors, responding to allegations of abuse or managing respondents. This naturally limited the level of assurance that the RLGs were able to provide. In these circumstances, assessments of Standards 3, 4 and 5 were based on a review of policies and procedures, and interviews with those who would have a role.

6.3.2 Even without the practical experience of having responded to a disclosure, the vast majority of members, employees and volunteers spoken to during audits were able to describe how they would respond to a person making a disclosure both on a personal level and in terms of practical actions. This included a knowledge of where to report a disclosure and of support services that could be signposted to, alongside a recognition of the vulnerability and likely support needs of those making a disclosure. Recommendations were often made to learn from the experiences of RLGs who have worked with survivors. Some good examples of this including links established with other RLG in the vicinity and learning from experiences elsewhere within an international congregation.

6.3.3 Better scoring RLG tended to have considered the most likely people within an RLG to receive a disclosure with training provided accordingly, have multiple means by which a survivor could make contact and have resources readily available to support the receiving the disclosure and to signpost the survivor on to. Securing specialist training for survivor engagement was nevertheless an often cited area for development. Learning from experiences of responding to survivors was also seen to be key to developing practice. This could be by seeking feedback from survivors currently engaged with or through reflection on past experiences.

Good practice examples

- Any survivor contacting Belmont Abbey receives a written response and letter, including apology, from the Abbot. The content of letters reflected the Abbey's stated values of openness and transparency. An offer is made of therapeutic support and feedback sought at an appropriate time.
- The Congregation of the Mission (Vincentians) have produced a handbook to provide guidance and support to members who may receive a disclosure. It reflects the expectations of the national safeguarding standards and is updated annually to reflect any new learning from practice.
- The Roman Union of the Order of St Ursula have recognised the disclosures of harm may also come from members of the community. This is reflected in their safeguarding concerns form which is framed to enable anyone wishing to make a disclosure to do so.

Questions for trustees and leaders to ask

- What would it be like to be a survivor who disclosed abuse to a member, employee or volunteer in our RLG?
- How do we assure ourselves that those who report harm receive a compassionate, trauma-informed and survivor-centred response?
- Have we identified who might receive an allegation in our RLG and given them the training and tools to respond?
- How do we learn from the experiences of those who have reported harm to improve our safeguarding practice? How can we do this if we have not had any harm reported to us?

Standard 4: Effective management of allegations and concerns

6.4.1 Similarly to Standard 3, the vast majority of RLGs had policies in place to support the management of allegations and those spoken to were able to describe what they would do in these circumstances. This extended to understanding expected reporting pathways, timeframes and recording requirements. The need for policies and procedures to reflect the RLG's circumstances and ministry was particularly important in this area, and positive examples were seen of arrangements made with organisations who the RLG ministered alongside and for ministries in more challenging environments. Variation was seen in expectations of tasks that the RLG would complete and those that they would expect RLSS to take on, however this was not seen to cause undue difficulties in practice. RLG members tended to have a good understanding of thresholds for reporting to statutory services and examples were seen of managing low-level concerns at an appropriate level.

6.4.2 Areas for development tended to reflect the practical application of policies when allegations or concerns were received. This highlights the difference between having policies in place and needing to apply them in practice. Recommendations consequently included the need to improve the recording of safeguarding cases and to include audit trails of decision making. Trustee responsibilities for oversight were often not clearly established and relied too heavily on informal information sharing that risked leaving gaps in who was told or the recording of decisions. While RLGs are often small charities it remains important that trustees are formally sighted on and manage known risks. Similarly, clear formal processes should be in place for decision making in respect of reporting serious incident to the Charity Commission. There was room for improvement in how learning is taken from the management of allegations and concerns, and how this filters through to reviews of policies and procedures.

Good practice examples

- A number of RLGs had detailed packs and reporting forms, often including body maps, to enable comprehensive recording of allegations and to support onward reporting.
- Having considered the nature of their ministry, the Daughters of St Paul considered it more likely that they would encounter low-level concerns than substantive safeguarding allegations. They consequently developed a low-level concerns policy that defines a low-level concern, provides

guidance on recognising one and expected actions. The safeguarding lead monitors any patterns in reporting to inform future action.

- The Society of the Divine Saviour have a paper recording system for any allegations and concerns. Each record includes a section in which details of reports made to statutory authorities are recorded together with the response received. It is clear in the safeguarding policy that the actions of statutory authorities will take precedence of those of the Church. Records are kept physically secure and anyone accessing them is required to sign and date a log.
- Following an unsubstantiated concern the Daughters of the Cross of Liege reviewed their policies and procedures in light of their experiences. Having identified that anxieties were increased amongst staff by the level of information they received, they reviewed the communications policy and will manage any future concerns accordingly.
- All safeguarding incidents or low-level concerns reported to the Capuchin Franciscans are reported to their trustees who take full responsibility for their management, ensuring that all practice is informed by civil and canon law advice. Actions taken are evaluated and learning shared with all friars.

Questions for trustees and leaders to ask

- How confident are we that any allegation or concern would be responded to promptly, appropriately and in line with statutory requirements?
- What oversight should we have of safeguarding case management and decision making? Does this happen in practice?
- How do we monitor the quality, consistency and security of safeguarding records?
- How do we learn from safeguarding responses?

Standard 5: Management and support of subjects of allegations and concerns

6.5.1 Standard 5 was the highest scoring standard overall. This reflects a strong understanding evidenced by RLG leaders and safeguarding leads of the practical response required in the event of a member becoming the subject of an allegation or concern. For some this was simply a theoretical knowledge of what they would need to do while, for the highest scoring, arrangements for support persons, accommodation and other practicalities were already in place. Most had the benefit of access to canon law advice from within their wider congregation. Smaller RLG tended to experience greater challenges due to having fewer accommodation options or people available to undertake support roles.

6.5.2 Where safeguarding plans[12] had been necessary there was evidence seen of these balancing the approach between risk management and care. Reviews were usually undertaken in conjunction with all involved parties, including the subject, and changes made to reflect evolving circumstances. Better oversight was needed of safeguarding plans, including by trustees, though to ensure their ongoing effectiveness. With some plans lasting many years it is important to ensure that they remain meaningful and do not drift.

6.5.3 Areas for development primarily related to the need for more formality in arrangements. These should be documented to ensure that members of the RLG are aware of the process that would be followed in the event of an allegation being made against them. This would address the uncertainty (and sometimes fear) that analysts often found amongst members when discussing this topic. Equally, information should be available to provide to a member in the event that they need to be informed about an allegation against them. Finally, greater consideration was often required of the support person role. There is a need to ensure that they are suitably independent from the investigation process and any subsequent decision making, and they are trained and supported to undertake the role.

Good practice examples

[12] Safeguarding plans are written agreements used to enable respondents to allegations or others who have been identified as presenting a risk to participate in the life of the Church.

- The Franciscan Friars of the Renewal's safeguarding policy provides a comprehensive view of the processes for supporting and monitoring a respondent. Members are available and trained to implement safeguarding plans and to provide support to respondents, with external support options also identified. Accommodation arrangements are also in place.
- The Daughters of Wisdom are able to draw on the experience of a member who has experience of training with and volunteering for Circles UK[13], who could act as a support person.
- In addition to formal meetings to review safeguarding plans, the Mill Hill Missionaries hold 'Wellness meetings' with respondents in order to ensure that time and space is available to discuss both risk management and wellbeing.
- The Roman Union of St Ursula employ lay staff to support members with practical tasks and any care needs. Training has been provided by a private company for lay staff and sisters to help reduce the risk of allegations arising from misunderstandings.
- The Hospitaller Order of St John of God have a safeguarding resource pack that is provided to all members. This includes written information about what to expect in the event of being the subject of an allegation. Members spoken to expressed confidence that any allegations would be managed in accordance with safeguarding procedures, with appropriate support and clear information provided to those involved.

Questions for trustees and leaders to ask

- How do we assure ourselves that respondents are supported in a way that is fair, proportionate and pastorally sensitive, while managing risk?
- How well prepared are we to support a respondent should the need arise?

[13] Circles of Support and Accountability build safer communities through local volunteers working with sex offenders to minimise alienation, support reintegration and so prevent sexual reoffending.

- What oversight do we need to have of risk management and support arrangements for respondents?
- How do we ensure that roles, responsibilities and boundaries are clearly defined in supporting respondents?
- How do we monitor whether respondent support arrangements remain appropriate and effective over time?

Standard 6: Robust human resource management

6.6.1 Perhaps more than any other standard, required human resource management activities varied widely depending on the nature of the RLG being audited. The vast majority had safer recruitment policies, sometimes as part of their safeguarding policy, which would be applied for any lay employees or volunteers. Some RLGs with larger numbers of employees (often in caring roles) were able to demonstrate comprehensively implemented and monitored safer recruitment processes, with areas of good practice noted in respect of interviews, telephone checks of references and processes for blemished DBS checks. Checks for volunteers were less well evidenced, although positive practice was seen in reviewing roles and undertaking DBS checks for volunteers who had been in post long before safer recruitment requirements were in place.

6.6.2 Processes for completing DBS checks of RLG members tended to be well established, with checks either completed directly by the RLG (usually through RLSS) or by the diocese or other organisation that the member was ministering on behalf of. On occasions additional care was required to ensure that those with changing or declining ministry were only checked at the level that their ministry warranted. Likewise, care is needed to ensure that that members (or employees) who come to assume caring roles are checked accordingly.

6.6.3 While prospective new members were typically in short supply, many RLGs evidenced comprehensive programmes for their recruitment and formation. These tended to include expected safer recruitment elements, including the use of an application form, references, interviews, DBS checks and the equivalent of a probationary period. The routine use of psychological assessments provides an additional check as to the suitability of the candidate that goes well beyond that seen in secular employment. Processes for members arriving from overseas were not always as well documented but did usually include the seeking of a testimonial of suitability and overseas police check, followed by safeguarding training or induction and some form of enculturation programme on arrival. Good practice was seen in a number of audits in which RLGs routinely checked and recorded the celebrets of visiting priests, with examples seen of refusing or supervising access of those without.

6.6.4 The safeguarding standards expect RLGs to have safeguarding complaints[14] and whistleblowing policies. These were generally in place, although virtually no examples of them being used were seen meaning that no comment on their application can be passed. In larger organisations the whistleblowing policy was often linked to other policies, for example grievances. Statutory whistleblowing protections do not apply to RLG members, and many chose not to extend their policy to members instead relying on analogous provisions within their constitutions. Where these do provide similar freedom to report and protection this is considered to be a reasonable approach. Many audits did note a need for greater sharing and publication of these policies.

6.6.5 A commonly cited area for development in this standard related to trustee oversight of safer recruitment processes. This was often as simple as ensuring that trustees had oversight of safer recruitment processes that were well documented by the safeguarding lead or others. On some occasions though RLG were found not to have any central records of processes, this was particularly the case where DBS checks of members were completed by dioceses and other organisations.

Good practice examples

- Lay staff employed by the Roman Union of St Ursula are subject to a probationary period in which their supervisor completes a log sheet that evaluates the person's standard of work, behaviour and manner.

[14] This refers to complaints about safeguarding services that have been provided.

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- The Capuchin Franciscans review each friar's DBS status at their annual individual personal formation plan meeting, with evidence maintained on a DBS register. This enables any gaps in checking by host organisations to be identified.
- The Missionary Sisters of Christ the King have a comprehensive DBS register that includes all Sisters, whether eligible for a check or not and those who are no longer in the country. Checks completed by the RLG and other organisations are included. This enables a comprehensive understanding of compliance within the RLG.
- The leader of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament meets with new volunteers to discuss the role and give the opportunity to ask questions. Volunteers are asked to sign an agreement that includes expectations for both parties and a complaints process. Similarly, the Priestly Fraternity of St Peter have an induction document for all new members, employees and volunteers.

Questions for trustees and leaders to ask

- How do we assure ourselves that all stages of the safer recruitment process for all positions and roles are completed?
- Where external organisations are responsible for DBS checks, how can we ensure that we identify any gaps or blemished checks?
- How can we assure ourselves that full information is received in respect of members joining from overseas?
- How do we ensure that those who might want to make use of them are aware of complaints and whistleblowing policies?

Standard 7: Training and support for safeguarding

6.7.1 Published audits have demonstrated widespread completion of safeguarding training by RLG members, employees and volunteers. Much of this was delivered by either the RLSS or dioceses and therefore directly relevant to the Church environment. Training provided by schools and through other employment was also commonly seen to have been completed. Trustees and safeguarding leads furthermore routinely completed role specific training. This training was underpinned by a generally seen commitment to ensuring that members, employees and volunteers were competent to meet safeguarding expectations. In return members complied with training expectations with few instances identified of action being needed to secure compliance. Most RLGs audited were able to demonstrate some form of monitoring of training compliance, which was used to ensure refresher training was completed at expected intervals. Ensuring that this includes training completed in different settings was a common challenge.

6.7.2 Standard 7 was the second lowest scoring which reflected a general need for a more systematic approach to training. While some examples were seen of specific training being provided to meet particular needs, training needs analyses were rarely completed, which limited the RLG's ability to understand what training would be most beneficial for each role. Similarly, there was little evidence of the evaluation of training provided, which would be a key means of understanding both future needs and whether the current offer could be improved. Training currently provided tends to be restricted to generic safeguarding courses and it would be expected that through properly analysing training needs more specific training needs could be identified and provided for. That said, some examples of sourcing training to meet particular ministries and circumstances were seen. Formal trustee oversight of training was often found to be lacking which could be simply remedied given the records usually held by the safeguarding lead.

Good practice examples

- The safeguarding lead for the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Evron supports formal training provision with "Safeguarding: Back to Basics" sessions which are specifically tailored to the roles of members who are attending. Safeguarding coffee mornings for those with no active ministry are used to maintain awareness. A questionnaire of members has been used to assess the effectiveness of training, identify areas for improvement and assess future training needs.

- The Religious of Mary Immaculate deliver annual safeguarding training to members, employees and volunteers. It is updated annually, based on the principles of *Integrity in Ministry* and tailored to their specific ministry of hostel provision to include how to keep themselves and residents safe.
- Sisters of the Daughters of the Cross of Liege who have a higher level of care needs are provided with an easy read safeguarding document to help them understand and identify potential forms of abuse. This should empower them to report any concerns that they may have about their own care.
- Sisters and employees of the Daughters of St Paul were seen to have completed extensive additional training relevant to their roles, which had been identified through a training needs analysis. Learning from training is shared more widely through the internal newsletter, which is also used to share further training opportunities. Training compliance is reported to trustees on a quarterly basis.
- The Congregation of the Mission (Vincentians) run series of monthly workshops based on individual safeguarding topics, each includes a self-assessment exercise that tests knowledge and supports the identification of areas for further development. Feedback from these is reported to trustees and is used to inform revisions made to the RLG's safeguarding handbook.

Questions for trustees and leaders to ask

- How do we assure ourselves that all members, employees and volunteers receive safeguarding training that is appropriate to their role and responsibilities?
- What safeguarding training do we need to improve our effectiveness?
- How do we monitor training compliance and address any gaps?
- How do we know whether the safeguarding training that we provide is effective and makes a difference?

Standard 8: Quality assurance and continuous improvement

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6.8.1 This standard encompasses work that RLGs undertake to review, quality assure and improve their safeguarding arrangements. As such, it presupposes that these arrangements are in place and will naturally lag behind other standards in reaching maturity. While it was expectedly the lowest scoring standard, there were good examples of both individual actions taken in this respect and of systemic approaches to developing the quality of safeguarding practice. It is also acknowledged that the vast majority of RLGs engaged positively in the audit process thereby demonstrating a real commitment to learn and develop.

6.8.2 A wide range of ways of assessing safeguarding arrangements was seen. Various means of conducting internal audits were employed, including overall reviews by the safeguarding lead, asking specific areas of ministry or locations to complete self-audits, the routine completion of quality assurance checklists (this was in a care setting), and visits by the safeguarding lead or RLG leader, which could be part of a canonical visitation. Meetings with individual members were additionally used to assess the overall safeguarding arrangements. Reviews were also seen to be completed of individual case work, of historic safeguarding and other files and through incident-led learning.

6.8.3 Various examples were seen of using external people and agencies to support improvement activity. This could be through seeking external views on or audits of current arrangements. These could be from RLSS, other organisations with safeguarding expertise or through peer networks. Examples were also seen of using learning from outside the RLG, this could be from published reviews, or from the wider RLG or Church structures, with good use often made of support provided in Ireland and Scotland.

6.8.4 Stronger graded RLGs for this standard were able to demonstrate that trustees used these activities to inform the development of their safeguarding action plan and to drive forward improvements in their safeguarding arrangements.

6.8.5 The safeguarding standards include reference to an annual safeguarding report. The CSSA recognises that this can be fulfilled in different ways, including a report from the safeguarding lead to trustees or through the inclusion of meaningful analysis within the annual report to the Charity Commission. However it is completed, it should provide an analysis of activity over the preceding year, an assessment of current arrangements and intended actions for the forthcoming year.

Good practice examples

- The Capuchin Franciscans have an internal audit process for safeguarding compliance at each house, with actions arising from these being assured during subsequent visitations. They have commissioned external auditors to review files of deceased members against whom allegations have been made. Learning from this has been discussed by the Provincial Council and shared with Friars. Feedback is sought from all with whom they engage with in a safeguarding context, and from Friars. Evidence was seen as to how this had resulted in changes to practice. All necessary actions are captured within a three-year action plan which is reviewed at every monthly Provincial Council meeting. All policies, safer recruitment activity and training needs are reviewed an annual basis by trustees.
- The Society of the Divine Saviour make detailed reference to the eight national safeguarding standards within their safeguarding policy and have provided training to members about them. The safeguarding lead completes an annual review of safeguarding practice which is shared at an annual gathering of all members. A safeguarding panel routinely reviews the safeguarding and communication plan in which actions are clearly allocated and tracked.

Questions for trustees and leaders to ask

- What evidence do we have that our safeguarding arrangements are working in practice?

- How do we track and monitor actions taken to implement improvements to our safeguarding practice?
- What would be the most effective way to produce and make use of an annual safeguarding report?
- What external scrutiny or challenge do we receive regarding our safeguarding? How do we respond to this?

7. Conclusions

7.1 This overview report draws together learning from the first 67 baseline audit reports of RLGs published as part of the CSSA's baseline audit programme. Taken together, the findings present a broadly positive picture of safeguarding arrangements across religious life in England and Wales and provide a useful basis for reflection and learning within RLGs. The majority of RLGs achieved grades in the middle of the applicable grading scales, indicating that core safeguarding structures and policies are generally in place, albeit with varying levels of consistency, formality and assurance.

7.2 Slightly more RLGs attained grades at the higher end of the scales than at the lower end, and only a small minority were assessed as operating at a basic or below basic level overall. The achievement of three exemplary grades, including the first awarded within the RLG audit programme, demonstrates that high-quality safeguarding practice is achievable within religious life contexts of differing size, governance arrangements and ministries. No discernible relationship was identified between audit outcomes and the gender, size or principal ministry of RLGs, reinforcing the conclusion that safeguarding effectiveness is more closely linked to leadership, governance and prioritisation than to structural characteristics.

7.3 Variability in grading across the eight standards was evident. Standards relating to the management of allegations and concerns, and the management and support of respondents, were generally the strongest. This reflects a widespread understanding of statutory reporting expectations, safeguarding thresholds and the need to balance risk management with care and pastoral sensitivity. By contrast, Standards 7 and 8, relating to training and to quality assurance and continuous improvement, were graded less favourably overall. In the case of Standard 8 this was anticipated, given its focus on more mature safeguarding systems that develop over time once foundational arrangements are established.

7.4 Standard 3, engaging with and caring for those who report having been harmed, highlights an important contextual feature of safeguarding for RLGs in that the majority of those audited had no direct experience of receiving disclosures or responding to survivors. This does not diminish the importance of preparedness, compassion and clarity of response should someone come forward, which was evident in most leaders and members being able to articulate how they would respond to a disclosure in a compassionate and appropriate manner, including knowledge of reporting pathways and support services. Stronger practice was associated with RLGs that had proactively considered how survivors might make contact, identified those most likely to receive disclosures, and ensured that appropriate guidance and resources were readily available. The audits also indicate the value of learning from the experiences of other RLGs and from wider Church and safeguarding contexts, particularly where direct experience is limited.

7.5 A consistent theme across several standards was the gap between the existence of policies and their consistent application in practice. This was particularly evident in relation to the recording of safeguarding concerns, maintaining clear audit trails, and the formal oversight of safeguarding activity by trustees. Where safeguarding arrangements were strongest, they were characterised by clear governance structures, defined roles and responsibilities, and routine mechanisms for monitoring, review and challenge. Governance and trustee engagement therefore emerged as a critical driver of safeguarding maturity.

7.6 Most RLGs demonstrated good levels of safeguarding training completion among members, employees and volunteers, often through provision offered by the RLSS or dioceses. However, training activity was frequently reactive and generic, with limited use of training needs analyses or evaluation to align training more closely with specific roles, ministries and safeguarding risks. Similarly, safeguarding communications were often effective within communities but less consistent in ensuring that all audiences, including the public and survivors, could readily access clear information about reporting concerns and available support.

7.7 The findings also underline the central importance of safeguarding culture within religious life. Leaders and members frequently described safeguarding as intrinsic to their ministry and values, rather than as an external requirement. This values-based commitment is a clear strength. At the same time, audits identified areas of uncertainty and anxiety, particularly in relation to how allegations against members would be managed. Clearer documentation, transparency in processes and greater confidence in roles and responsibilities were found to be important in supporting a safeguarding culture that is both robust and compassionate.

7.8 Overall, the baseline audits establish a clear reference point for safeguarding within religious life groups in England and Wales. They demonstrate widespread engagement with the national safeguarding standards and a willingness to learn and improve. The next phase of safeguarding development will require a shift from establishing structures to embedding consistency, assurance and reflective learning in practice, underpinned by strong governance and a culture that keeps safeguarding, and the experience of those who may be harmed, firmly at its centre.

8. Next steps

8.1 This overview report is intended to support reflection and learning within RLGs, as well as to enhance public transparency about safeguarding arrangements within the Catholic Church in England and Wales. Leaders and trustees of RLGs are encouraged to consider the themes, strengths and areas for development identified in this report alongside their own safeguarding arrangements, using the learning and reflective questions as prompts for discussion and continuous improvement in a way that is proportionate to their circumstances.

8.2 The CSSA will continue to deliver the baseline audit programme for RLGs throughout 2026, in line with the published Audit and Review Framework. As further audits are completed and published, additional overview reports will be produced on an annual basis, enabling learning to be tracked over time and shared more

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widely throughout the Church. Reports of re-audits undertaken as part of the CSSA's pathway for lower-scoring RLGs will begin to be published from 2026.

8.3 The CSSA will also continue to review learning emerging from the baseline audit programme to inform the ongoing development of its audit and review activity, supporting consistency, quality and transparency in safeguarding assurance across the Church. Engagement with RLGs, safeguarding service providers and other stakeholders will remain central to this process. In doing so, the CSSA recognises that its understanding of religious life, its diversity and the safeguarding contexts in which RLGs operate will continue to develop. Its approach will therefore remain iterative, drawing on emerging learning to ensure that audit activity remains proportionate, informed and responsive to the realities of religious life.