



STATEMENT FROM THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF ENGLAND AND WALES 24 SEPTEMBER 2018

As we gather in Rome for our visit 'ad Limina Apostolorum', we have spent time together reflecting again on the impact of the recent reports containing stark revelations of child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church, including in England and Wales, and of evident failures of local leadership.

These reports make it clear that both bishops and religious leaders, in various places, failed to protect the children in their care from those who have done them great harm. In particular, the failures of bishops to listen or give credence to those who have courageously spoken out about the profound damage they have suffered through childhood abuse, together with the steps some have taken in order to cover up or minimise the abuse that became known, are a great betrayal of the trust placed in them by the faithful and of the responsibilities that come with episcopal office.

Throughout our 'ad Limina' visit here in Rome, the impact and consequences of the shame and sorrow we feel will constantly be in our hearts and in our prayers, especially as we come to pray at the tomb of St Peter and at the tomb of St Paul, key moments in our visit. These themes will also be part of our conversation with Pope Francis, when we meet with him on Friday. Our visit, then, has a penitential heart, as in communion with bishops throughout the world, we seek forgiveness from the Lord and grace for our future ministry.

We have also reflected on the practical steps we must take. We do so in the light of all that has been achieved since the Report of Lord Nolan in 2001. We have endeavoured to build a culture of safeguarding within the Church's parishes and religious communities in England and Wales, thereby providing a safe environment for all. In every parish there is a Parish Safeguarding Representative. In every Diocese, there is a Safeguarding Coordinator and a Diocesan Safeguarding Commission, composed of experts in the main disciplines needed for effective safeguarding. It is these experts and independent Commissions that take the lead in handling every allegation of abuse, whether from the distant past or the present day. They do so in accordance with our nationally agreed protocols, to be followed in all cases, including the steps to be taken if allegations of abusive behaviour were to be made against a bishop. We have established a National Catholic Safeguarding Commission (the NCSC), with a strong majority membership of experts, independent of the authority structures of the Catholic Church. Much has been achieved. Much is to be learned.

These recent reports, shocking as they are, have caused us to reflect again on our own leadership and on the responsibilities we hold in England and Wales for ensuring that safeguarding is embedded in every aspect of the life of the Church.

Today we have decided to ask the National Catholic Safeguarding Commission to commission an entirely independent and comprehensive review of the safeguarding structures that currently operate within the Catholic Church in England and Wales. Importantly, we will seek to ensure that the voices of the victims and survivors of abuse, through the Survivors Advisory Panel established by the NCSC, fully inform the review and its recommendations.

In calling for this review, we are taking an important step towards meeting the Holy Father's recent injunction in his 'Letter to the People of God' in respect of sexual abuse: "no effort must be spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening" (20 August 2018).

Each bishop has decided that he will take steps to set aside time for the purpose of meeting with victims and survivors of clerical abuse who live in his diocese. This will be done in cooperation with the Diocesan Safeguarding Coordinator, to assist the bishop in responding in the best possible way to those who speak to him, in his pastoral role as their bishop, of their pain, hurt and anger.

May God guide us during this week and in this work, that the voice of Christ, crying out in those who have suffered, may be heard with compassion and discernment.