

SAFEGUARDING MATTERS

in the Catholic Church in Scotland

JANUARY 2026



“What have you done to make the Church safe?”

National Safeguarding Conference, Glasgow, Saturday 8th November 2025

THEME: ‘Journeying in Hope: transforming the Safeguarding culture of the Church’

Among 237 attendees (both in-person and online) from Catholic dioceses across Scotland, were Bishops, parish clergy, Safeguarding volunteers and diocesan staff, as well as representatives of Religious Congregations and lay Catholic organisations.

Of those who gave feedback, 99% stated they enjoyed the conference, and 89% felt it had addressed its theme very well or excellently.

The morning sessions in particular received a great deal of praise and acclaim: Inputs from keynote speaker Matthew McVarish, from the Brave Movement, who provided a traumatic account of being sexually abused as a child by an uncle, and the reflection following on from Matthew’s input by Fr Roger Dawson SJ.

Matthew’s account of his experience was described as “moving”, “raw”, “honest”, “impactful”, and “the best I have heard”, while his ability to turn his lived experience into something positive through his work for the Brave Movement was clearly an inspiration to many listeners.

Fr Dawson subsequently spoke on how “dangerous memories” should help the Church confront her failures and culture of secrecy. His reflections on the Paschal Mystery provided a meaningful framework for many and, as one attendee put it, “dovetailed beautifully” with Matthew’s testimony.

The afternoon session consisted of breakout groups, a keynote input from Stewart Stobie of the Lucy Faithfull Foundation Scotland and a short input by Bishop Brian McGee, recounting the words of Pope Francis to the Bishops of Scotland on the abuse crisis.

It has been gratifying to find that so many attendees specifically commented on the congenial atmosphere of the conference, no doubt stimulated by the openness and courage of the speakers, and the feelings of hope, honesty and sincerity that followed. As one attendee put it: “The vibrant gathering of so many who had given their day to attend was also inspirational and a true sign of hope.”



CONGRATULATIONS!

The Honourable Lady Rae KC, Chair of the SCSSA Board, has been appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the 2026 New Year Honours list. She has been recognised for her extensive services to the Law, to Charity and to Education in Scotland.

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Journeying in Hope:

MATTHEW McVARISH, keynote speaker at the 2025 National Safeguarding Conference, reflects on his experience and makes a plea for everyone to bring about improvements.



It was an honour to contribute to this important national discussion. I wasn't sure how I, or what I had to say, would be received but thankfully it felt cathartic, as if the child I once was now finds healing in witnessing the Church finally give voice to these issues and take steps to address them.

The tabloids would have us believe that safeguarding requires little more than catching the minority of wayward individuals posing as clergy. My childhood, as well as insights gained from survivors of clerical abuse across the world, tells me that dangerous individuals exploiting access to children are a symptom of a broken culture, not the cause.

Creating a Church that is truly safe, for children and all vulnerable people, requires the active participation of every single person who believes themselves to be a member. We cannot remain indifferent and expect the future to miraculously be different.

For all those years I was secretly being abused by my uncle, I was surrounded by other safe adults at home, at school and at Church. Help was literally in the room, but I couldn't reach it. Let's change that first.

If "charity begins at home", start with your own household. If you have children, before they go to bed tonight, look them in the eye and ask clearly: "Do you know there is nothing you cannot talk to me about?". Never assume they do know that. They might currently be trying to protect you from the heaviness they carry alone.

Everyone must be part of the change.

If you don't have children, why not ask your siblings, your elderly parents, your friends? It's never too late to begin healing. Up to 30% of people experience sexual violence in childhood. You know someone who has been carrying a heavy secret all their life, and no one has ever created a safe space for them to voice it.

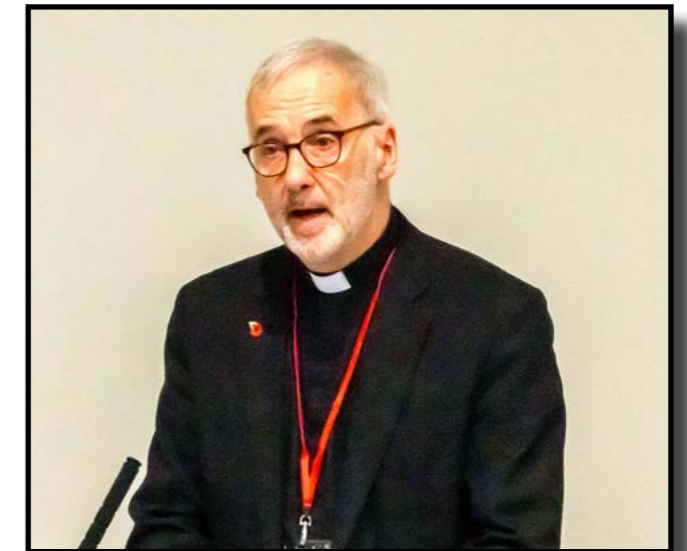
Next, make your community safer. I presented the guidelines on how to give and receive a disclosure. You could print these and ensure they are posted in toilets and on pin boards at your church, and at your workplace. Someone really needs to see them.

Don't stop there. If you work in a school, or have children who go to school, insist that all teachers there have completed the compulsory 'inclusivity training'. I appreciate this might be challenging, but while other governments maintain laws that endanger gay people, in Scotland it is illegal to teach children that being gay is wrong. The pervasive homophobia in my schools made it impossible for me to discuss what a man was doing to me. We must change this. Dismantle the oppressive culture of shame and create transparent environments where all children feel safe to speak about anything. If you do not feel you can do this, then be the one to start the discussion at your church/school about why this is a challenge for you, and how together you can protect your beliefs and still make progress towards a safer inclusive environment for our children. Be brave.

It's possible. It requires effort. Everyone must be part of the change we wish to see. It's been 2 months since the conference. If "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing", ask yourself - 'What have I done to make our Church safe?'

transforming the safeguarding culture of the Church

FR ROGER DAWSON SJ, who was invited to respond to Matthew's input with a reflection explains here how his response developed.



Over the years I have been aware that in all the safeguarding training I have received the missing voice in the room has been that of the victim-survivors, and I have often thought that many people's views and perspectives would change if their lived experiences were told and heard. I trained and worked as a clinical psychologist in adult mental health in the NHS before I entered the Jesuits, and have heard many accounts of what people have experienced and suffered due to sexual abuse. I was therefore very pleased to hear that this year's National Safeguarding Conference planned to invite Matthew McVarish, a victim-survivor and advocate, to speak at the conference, and once we had met Matthew online at one of the planning meetings I was sure that he would speak not just powerfully, but prophetically.

During the planning meeting I expressed a certain frustration that our responses to abuse in the Church and our strategies for prevention often focus on policies and procedures. These are without doubt indispensable, but my concern was that we do not reach for the spiritual and theological resources that our faith in Jesus Christ has to offer us. After all, surely our faith in life, death and resurrection tells us that, even after the worst of experiences, even terrible crimes, there can be a resurrection and new life? I gave a few examples of what I meant, and someone said, 'Fr Roger, why don't you speak after Matthew?' 'And say what?' I answered. 'What you have just said', came the reply.

Nonetheless, it was with trepidation that I prepared for speaking after what I knew would be a powerful and moving testimony from Matthew. I had no wish to spiritualise what he said or what we had heard, and I know that psychologists and theologians are keen on models and theories. I was pretty sure that Matthew's experience could not be tidied up and put into any theoretical or theological box, and that he would not thank me for trying.

My talk focussed on Johann Baptist Metz's idea of "dangerous memories" in the Christian faith, particularly those tied to suffering, death, and resurrection, where Jesus' Passion is the primary 'dangerous memory'.

These memories, especially of abuse, challenge complacency and expose deep injustices within institutions, including the Catholic Church. Dangerous memories also demand that we remember suffering truthfully, and in the abuse crisis this is essential not just for the Church's integrity, but for her fidelity to Christ: the Church has to confront her failings, be accountable and stand in solidarity with victims, embracing painful truths to allow transformation and resurrection.

I also explained the concept of 'hard consolation' in spirituality, where God's presence is felt even during painful, even terrible, experiences. The Church needs to remain in this uncomfortable yet transformative space of truth-telling, listening to victims, and offering healing, and trusting that beyond this suffering, both individual and shared, there is resurrection and new life. When the Church as the Body of Christ is faithful to herself, she remembers justly, bringing hope to survivors and fostering a culture of care, justice, and healing.

Sacraments in the Catholic Church consist of both words and gestures. Words can only take us so far, and words on their own are not enough. What meant most to me at the conference was that after my words Matthew came over and embraced me.

[The full text of Fr Roger's input, together with all the main Conference presentations, is available here on the SCSSA website.](#)

Clergy Safeguarding: Consultation



Your experience will shape the future

The SCSSA is undertaking a national safeguarding consultation with Catholic clergy. The purpose is straightforward: to listen carefully to the lived experience of priests in order to ensure a new formal safeguarding formation package for seminarians and clergy is informed by essential voices - your own. No conclusions have been drawn in advance.

Why this is happening - and why now

Across Scotland, safeguarding practice continues to develop in response to survivor-informed research and reviews, and dioceses have made significant advances in recent years. As this work strengthens, it has become clear that the day-to-day impact of safeguarding issues on clergy themselves is often overlooked; yet, as leaders of their parish communities, it is critical that priests are not only fully aware of best safeguarding practice, but also feel safe and supported themselves.

This consultation is therefore being undertaken now to ensure your lived experience as a serving priest will be central to determining what clergy need in terms of safeguarding learning, formation, and support with your pastoral responsibilities. This will ensure that any future provision is shaped by real experience rather than assumption.

The importance of your contribution

Safeguarding is rooted in the doctrine of Imago Dei, but can all too often be equated with bureaucracy and compliance. This misses a real opportunity to promote the human dignity that is inherent

in all God's people, and serves neither the priest nor the people they minister to. 'In God's Image' stipulates that all members of Scottish Catholic Clergy must attend annual safeguarding training. For safeguarding learning to be of real value, it must reflect the realities of a priestly vocation. Your insight will help ensure that any future learning supports are proportionate, practical and genuinely helpful.

Scope of the consultation

This consultation focuses exclusively on learning, formation and support for clergy. It seeks to understand:

- the safeguarding challenges most often encountered
- the learning and guidance that are most useful
- what additional support or expertise may be beneficial
- how safeguarding formation can be sustained in priestly life.

This consultation is not concerned with safeguarding procedures and no procedural changes are being proposed or considered.

Confidentiality and independence

Confidentiality is central to this consultation process. The SCSSA has invited the Kinharvie Institute – an independent facilitation charity established in 1981 by the Marist Brothers – to lead the consultation. All data will go directly to Kinharvie, who will analyse it and produce an independent thematic report. No raw data will be shared with the SCSSA or dioceses.

How the Consultation will proceed

Kinharvie will gather insight through four methods, each with a distinct role:

1. *Online survey - breadth of experience*
 - » Distributed to all clergy in January 2026 to capture a wide range of views and identify key themes.
2. *Online focus groups- depth of understanding*
 - » Facilitated discussions exploring survey themes in greater depth. Participants may be nominated by their diocese or may nominate themselves or others.
3. *One-to-one conversations - detailed reflection*
 - » Optional confidential interviews for exploring sensitive or complex matters more fully. Participants will be selected by their diocese.
4. *Written submissions- additional reflections*
 - » An open route for any clergy member to contribute further written insights.



A working group of clergy, survivors and relevant experts will review the insights gained in the process and work with the SCSSA to develop the training, support and/or resources that best meet the needs identified.

Call to Action

In January, you will receive the online survey through diocesan and SCSSA communication channels. You are invited to complete it, and even a brief response will be of real value and will be treated in strict confidence by Kinharvie. You are also warmly invited to consider participating in the online focus groups, which allow for robust conversations in a structured environment and are most helpful for shaping resources.

Your experience will help shape safeguarding learning and support for seminarians and clergy that is grounded in the realities of priestly ministry and serves the Catholic Church in Scotland with integrity and care.



You can find out more about the Kinharvie Institute and its work here: <https://www.kinharvie.org.uk>

New PSC Training on the horizon

Over the past eighteen months, a new training package for Parish Safeguarding Co-ordinators (PSCs) has been in development. **HELENA RAMECKERS** (Head of Safeguarding Training) explains how this new training has been developed in collaboration with PSCs to meet their needs.

How has the new training package emerged?

The process began with discussions at the annual Safeguarding Training Advisory Group (STAG) Development Day in August 2024, where the breadth of knowledge and additional 'soft skills' required by this important cohort of parish volunteers was acknowledged. It was agreed that care must be taken to develop practical resources that would assist with the regular duties of a PSC. It was also agreed that, in order to recognise the considerable skills required of this large group of volunteers, any new training package ought to be formally accredited to assure its validity and effectiveness.

PSC Survey

With the aim of understanding which aspects of the role of a PSC required the most development, a survey was circulated in Dec. '24 – Jan. '25 which was completed by 34 PSCs from around Scotland – around 33% of our total cohort.

- PSC activities were ranked according to how much time is allocated to them.
- PSCs were asked to indicate any activities they carry out which were not listed.
- A final question invited PSCs to reflect on any specific requirements or suggestions they had.

A report summarising the outcome of this survey has been published and is [available here on our website](#).

New training package and resources

Using the feedback from PSCs as a basis, an initial draft of a formal training session with accompanying practical resources was created and circulated for comments to members of the Safeguarding Training Advisory Group (STAG) and Diocesan Safeguarding Advisors. This phase of consultation identified necessary adjustments and changes, which were discussed, with next steps agreed at the STAG Development Day in August 2025.

PSCs who had completed the survey were invited to review the adjusted resources throughout September and October. Meetings of three online focus groups were held (see below) and numerous individual submissions were received, capturing the thoughts of almost all PSCs who had completed the initial survey.

CPD accreditation

This PSC consultation phase coincided with the process of exploring CPD accreditation for the full training package via CPD-UK. In November 2025, the SCSSA received notification that both the formal training session and the accompanying practical resources have been formally CPD accredited.

The SCSSA Board are currently reviewing the training package and accompanying resources.

It is anticipated that this important new PSC training will be available in dioceses early in 2026.

SOME PSC CONSULTATION FEEDBACK:

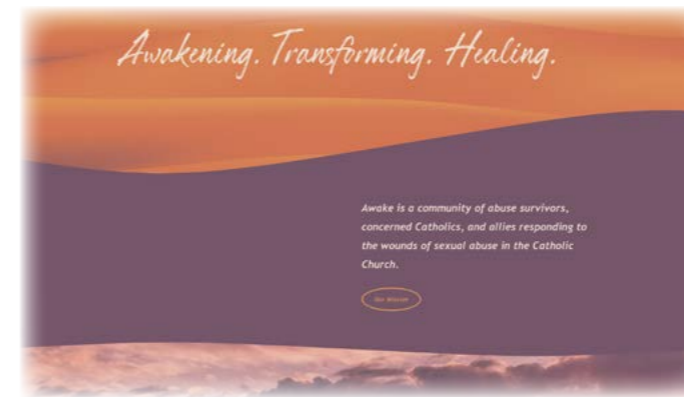
Living as I do in Shetland, it is easy to become isolated and we need to guard against becoming complacent in Safeguarding matters. It is easy to assume that as we know everyone, we are safe. Taking part in Diocesan and in national Zoom calls keeps good Safeguarding practices at the forefront of our minds, and helps affirm national policies. The recent Zoom meeting was an excellent opportunity to discuss matters with like-minded people and to be assured that, although we are very rural, we in Shetland are very much part of the Church in Scotland. It was also interesting to hear of similar challenges being faced by parishes larger than ours.

Barbara Sandison (Diocese of Aberdeen)

It's always helpful to pray together in our Safeguarding work and to remember how many of us are working to keep people safe in our Church. Also it's helpful to share the small challenges we meet in Safeguarding within our parishes and to share how we meet these challenges. We learn that the work can't be completed; it's part and parcel of parish life.

Miriam McKernan (Diocese of Motherwell)

How AWAKE supports survivors



In June 2025, **Sara Larson**, Executive Director of **Awake**, spoke to delegates at the International Safeguarding Conference in Rome about the work of her organisation. Awake is a United States-based community of abuse survivors, concerned Catholics and allies responding to the wounds of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Awake was founded in 2019 and focusses on supporting survivors, educating Catholics, equipping Church leaders, and fostering culture change. <https://www.awakecommunity.org>

When Sara spoke in Rome, a deep respect for, and profound commitment to, honouring the experiences and wounds of abuse survivors was evident. Awake's model of accompaniment of survivors seemed to be one that people working in safeguarding could learn from. To this end, the SCSSA invited Sara to give a webinar for Scotland's Catholics to learn more about the work of Awake. We are deeply grateful to Sara for the generosity with which she gave her time to discuss our needs, and to develop and deliver the webinar for us.

On 19th November, Sara joined us from Wisconsin. Attendees learned about Awake's foundations, its growth to date, and its founding principles, and had an opportunity to ask questions.

Sara explained that Awake began as a small grassroots community of concerned Catholics in response to the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report and revelations about Cardinal McCarrick. She accounted for its rapid growth as "meeting a need. We were speaking to something that people had been longing for... primarily a place to be really honest about the seriousness of the problem while also being grounded in faith and hope".

Sara spoke about some of Awake's "key offerings", including online Survivor Circles, weekend retreats of conversation, community building, silence and optional prayer, a blog, and online monthly speakers dealing with topics such as coping with trauma. Sara also shared Awake's grounding principles of humility, shared humanity, and hope.

Speaking about shared humanity, Sara explained that we are all brothers and sisters who are all made in the image and likeness of God yet are all wounded. She added, "we all have something to give and we all have something to receive". Hope, which Sara admitted could be difficult in this space, was defined as: "while moving through darkness and pain we choose to ground ourselves in hope, celebrate progress, and resist the temptation to cynicism and despair. We trust that God is at work, and believe that transformation and healing is possible".

Following the webinar, attendees were invited to participate in an online discussion a few days later to explore whether, and how, Awake's model of survivor accompaniment could be replicated in Scotland. Discussions were insightful and reflected the vast experience and knowledge that is held by the Catholic Church in Scotland's Parish Safeguarding Co-ordinators and clergy – all the more remarkable given the volunteer status of PSCs.

The greatest strength of Awake was considered to be the fact that it exists independently of the Church or any official safeguarding organisation – a conclusion Sara agrees with. The need for trauma-informed responses, safe spaces that exist independently of the Church, and acknowledgement that Awake does not seek to replace or provide formal support in the form of therapeutic interventions were discussed. One contributor summarised it this way: "it is no more than a safe and welcoming conversational space where survivors can be heard".

A small group of webinar attendees agreed to continue the conversation between themselves, and at least one grassroots consultation with survivors has already taken place. While the SCSSA will not be formally involved, due to the benefits of independence from safeguarding organisations, if anyone would like to know more at this stage please email comms@scssa.org.uk and we will endeavour to introduce you to other interested parties.

You can access a video of Sara's presentation at the webinar here on the SCSSA YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmBq1EhJQO8>

Looking ahead to 2026

Paul Donaldson previews some work planned by SCSSA for 2026.

- We will embark on a structured process with all Church bodies to foster open dialogue, clarify roles and responsibilities, and strengthen trust across the Safeguarding ecosystem.
- We will commence a Clergy Safeguarding Learning Project – a national consultation with clergy, survivors, dioceses, religious, and relevant experts to shape clergy, seminarian and diaconate training and support that is practical and meaningful.
- We will develop a new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) to monitor Safeguarding standards, share best practice, and embed continuous improvement.
- We will introduce new accredited Parish Safeguarding Co-ordinator (PSC) Training to support and recognise these vital volunteers.

These initiatives will build on the good practice that already exists across the Safeguarding structures in Scotland and from the insights obtained from our recent Safeguarding analysis. We will look to explore opportunities to continually improve IT infrastructure, data management, communication, and training, as well as doing more to incorporate the voices of victims and survivors in our work. We continue to commit ourselves to engaging with others to develop high quality best-in-class Safeguarding protocols and promoting a culture of care that prioritises safety and wellbeing across the Church in Scotland.

Safeguarding Self-Evaluation 2026: Important Update

As part of the significant work planned for this year, it has been agreed that the self-evaluation process for 2026 will be abbreviated. This means that dioceses, religious congregations, and Catholic organisations will only need to provide a selection of key data sets relevant to Standards 1–5 of 'In God's Image'. The abbreviated process will help us maintain oversight while allowing focus on the wider Safeguarding initiatives currently underway.

Individual parishes will NOT be asked to submit data at this time. However, we strongly encourage all Parish Priests to participate in the short Clergy Survey, which will be distributed soon. Your input will be invaluable in shaping future training and support for clergy.

Thank you for your continued commitment to safeguarding and for working with us to ensure that our Church remains a safe and welcoming environment for all.



Dates for your diary

Day of Prayer for Survivors of Abuse

Friday 20th February 2026

Safeguarding Day for Religious

Thursday 14th May 2026

International Safeguarding Conference

Rome 16th - 19th June 2026

SCSSA Webinars being planned (dates to be confirmed)

- Online Safety: advice from Police Scotland
- How MAPPA processes may impact on Safeguarding in dioceses

