

# Independent Safeguarding Review of Scouting Ireland

## Introduction:

Following the submission and acceptance of the **Learning Review** last year, it was agreed by the Board of Scouting Ireland that the safeguarding policies, procedures, and practice of the organisation would be independently audited and reviewed every two years. **The Learning Review**, which was published in early 2020, had brought to light many issues that had both shocked and motivated the leadership to ensure that safeguarding and protecting of all their members, should receive greater attention. This Review is evidence of that expressed commitment.

The Review has been completed in the middle of a severe health crisis which has meant that all travel was greatly curtailed. Consequently, the fieldwork for the Review was all undertaken remotely and not supported by any site visits or “face to face” interviews. Despite this handicap, it has been possible, in my view, to assess and comment on the improvements and developments that have taken place, since the publication of the **Learning Review**. It is gratifying for me to confirm that these have all been both positive and impressive.

Scouting Ireland remains a strong and vibrant youth organisation, serving many thousands of young people the length and breadth of the island. It makes a positive contribution to their lives and its popularity has not been diminished by the recognition of past bad practice. It now has a developing accountability process where serious misconduct can be addressed and dealt with. Ensuring that Scouting Ireland continues to thrive and to improve its practice, is a matter of significant interest to many, both inside and outside of scouting.

## The Elements of the Safeguarding Review:

In early December 2020, it was agreed that the focus of the Review would be the following:

1. Desktop review of all existing safeguarding policies, protocols, and practices that are currently in use across Scouting Ireland
2. A review of the safeguarding structure including roles, levels of staffing, within Scouting Ireland
3. Review of the current safeguarding workload within Scouting Ireland including liaison commitments and how they are operating
4. Examination of a random sample of cases to confirm practice
5. Review of safeguarding training materials and programmes delivered
6. Support of victims' in line with the policy

To cover these elements, the reviewer arranged zoom meetings, reviewed the website, and had telephone calls with relevant individuals.

### **Safeguarding Policies, Protocols, and Guidance:**

These were examined through the Scouting Ireland website. ([www.scouts.ie](http://www.scouts.ie)). Safeguarding is prominent on the website and the various elements are easily navigated. Parents, as well as young members, should be able to find information that they need to answer any questions they may have. If they cannot find the answer there, they are given the option of emailing or ringing staff to pursue their inquiry.

Checking through all these options, I found that all the icons and links worked except for the icon for "Victims Policy". This file cannot be found and has either been removed or is temporarily unavailable.

The Code of Conduct has been extensively revised and rewritten which makes it not only more relevant but much more easily read. This is a relatively new posting to the site, but it would be good to monitor the number of times it is accessed or downloaded.

The safeguarding policies and procedures of an organisation are critical to achieving consistent practice across a large and diverse organisation like Scouting Ireland. The way in which they are presented is also a good indication of the attention that the organisation pays to achieving high quality practice. Much effort has gone into trying to make these accessible, and easily followed by all involved in scouting. I would regard them highly.

### **The Safeguarding Structure:**

The current staffing for safeguarding was described to me as being adequate, given the workload for the organisation by the Safeguarding Manager. A recruitment process is underway to provide an administrator for the office which should help greatly. The staff now have dedicated office space, with secure storage available for their records. These offices private interviewing space which is well furnished and suited to their needs. It is a massive improvement on the cramped and poorly equipped office space that they previously had to use within the Larch Hill facility. Overall, the physical office space is now excellent.

The present safeguarding manager had a successful career in policing. He is a highly experienced and strongly motivated individual who has made a positive contribution to developing the role of safeguarding within Scouting Ireland and building on the good work of his immediate predecessor who also came from the Gardai. There is a strong emphasis on ensuring that policies are followed, and good communication channels are in place between Scouting Ireland and their statutory partners in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. Liaison meetings and conversations take place regularly, and strong links are being built up.

A safeguarding committee has now been introduced which is chaired by a member of the Board. In all, three members of the Board participate in this meeting. The fact that this development has taken place is further evidence of the importance placed on these issues by the current Board. Its primary role is to comment and advise on proposed policy developments. It does not have a role in relation to case management.

Along with the introduction of a safeguarding committee, the safeguarding manager meets with the full Board on a quarterly basis. At these meetings, he provides an update on significant developments that have taken place as well as providing a briefing on the current workload.

It is important that the information gained by the safeguarding manager on the frequency and content of identified safeguarding concerns, should be shared with the leadership of the organisation. The Safeguarding Manager has a quarterly face to face meeting with the Board as well as providing a monthly update. Previously, there was a gap between practice management and those who held authority in the organization. Quite simply, previous Boards were completely out of touch with what was happening within the safeguarding structure. Serious cases did not receive the attention or response that they deserved. It is gratifying to see that this lesson has been learned. This is not likely to reoccur in this new structure.

### **Current Safeguarding Workload:**

An important element of effective safeguarding is ensuring that your organisation has good communication channels open with the key statutory agencies. Having colleagues at the end of a phone available to you, is vital. It is pleasing to hear that Scouting Ireland has liaison meetings in place both with the Gardai, PSNI, Tusla, and Gateway in Northern Ireland. Any significant issues are shared early, and advice sought. The workload is not excessive but can come in bursts. There was a remarkably busy time just prior to the end of the year, but this was coped with well.

All the safeguarding staff receive supervision and support for their practice. The team meets weekly to discuss and agree actions needed in respect of the cases held. Actions are recorded within case files that are securely stored in large, fireproof cabinets.

### **Review of Cases:**

Although the helpline remains open for anyone to make a report of past abuse, these have significantly dropped off. New concerns emerge on a regular basis, but these are responded to quickly. There is a growing confidence that any concerns that do come to light will be professionally managed in line with the expectations of the organisation. There are a small number of pending legal cases relating to historic abuse that are being carried by the safeguarding staff.

### **Safeguarding Training Programmes and Materials:**

The safeguarding manager contributes to the online training events that have been introduced by Scouting Ireland, to ensure a wider distribution and understanding of policies and procedures. Webinars are held regularly and are generally very well attended. The safeguarding team have revised much of the material that is posted on their website, such as the Code of Behaviour.

Whereas previously, the safeguarding training was struggling to gain attention amongst the volunteers, it would appear to be much more popular and vibrant. Again, this is good evidence of safeguarding changing the way in which it is perceived in the organisation.

### **Victims' Policy and Support:**

The revelations of previous bad practice that were described in the Learning Review, led to the adoption of a Victims' Policy for Scouting Ireland. Those that had been hurt in the past through being involved with scouting, have been acknowledged, apologized to, and offered support. There are a

number who have sought to avail of that service. Counselling is provided and the situations of each of these people is not lost sight of by the safeguarding team.

I have previously mentioned the fact that the website needs to be corrected to ensure that the policy for victims is obtainable and can be downloaded by anyone who seeks that information.

**Assessment:**

The Review has been completed remotely and has relied upon those directly involved in safeguarding in Scouting Ireland, to provide the information to be included. However, it is apparent that significant progress has been made in addressing the implementation of the recommendations arising from the **Learning Review**. The impression gained through the interviews and in looking at the material, is of a professionally run service, offering a high-quality response to any concerns that are brought to its attention. The physical surroundings that the team are now enjoying are excellent. They offer privacy and security of records. There is also commitment to develop further the skill levels and competence of all involved. It is gratifying to see that such progress has been made and it is a tribute to all involved.

In recent times, Scouting Ireland received significant media attention and some of that interest gave rise to fears and anxieties that the bad practice of previous years was still around today. I welcome the opportunity to state without equivocation, that I have no sense that this is the case. There is now strong, committed leadership in place who actively manage the organisation. Professional managers are in place and ensure that the expectations of all who wish to see Scouting Ireland thrive, are adhered to. Misconduct is addressed and those who are found to have been guilty of it, are held to account.

In looking forward, I see no reason why any parent should be concerned or anxious about their child being involved in scouting. The progress that has been made will continue under the management of the present staff, and the services that are offered now, will continue to improve to be even better than they are now.

Signed:



Independent Safeguarding Consultant

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1<sup>st</sup> February 2021