

Safeguarding Commission Gozo Diocese Annual Report 2023

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FOREWORD

The Safeguarding Commission remains steadfast in its mission to foster and maintain safe environments within the Church in Gozo. This is achieved through the consistent implementation of preventive measures and safeguarding training, the provision of victim care and advocacy, and the promotion of the wellbeing of all individuals involved in safeguarding processes, including those who are the subjects of complaints. The Commission also bears the responsibility of receiving and handling complaints, conducting preliminary investigations and risk assessments, and ensuring that the needs and welfare of alleged victims, complainants, and subjects of complaint are treated with dignity, and respect.

Throughout 2023, the Safeguarding Commission continued to consolidate its structure and define clear roles and areas of responsibility. These include prevention and training, victim care and advocacy, the wellbeing of subjects of complaint, and the processes of investigation and assessment. This framework ensures that the Commission operates with clarity, transparency, and accountability in all its functions.

The Commission receives general enquiries and formal referrals concerning safeguarding concerns. Each referral is processed following the issuance of a formal decree by Bishop Anton Teuma. Preliminary investigations are then undertaken by professionals within the Investigation and Assessment Team, who compile comprehensive reports for consideration by the Safeguarding Board. Following review and deliberation, the Board's conclusions and recommendations are submitted to the Bishop of the Diocese of Gozo, who determines any necessary actions in relation to clerics or laypersons involved. The Bishop may also refer cases to the Holy See for further evaluation.

In addition to its investigative and advisory work, the Safeguarding Commission continues to promote a culture of safeguarding and awareness across the Church community. This is achieved through training sessions offered to Church personnel, as well as through awareness material via online platforms. To this effect, 2023 also saw the launch of the role of the Designated Safeguarding Officers.

In 2023, 6 applications covering 365 individuals were submitted for clearance under the Protection of Minors (Registration) Act (POMA). The Commission received 2 general enquiries and 5 new referrals, concluded 5 cases, and had 1 case still in progress at year's end. As the Safeguarding Commission continues to evolve, it remains deeply committed to ensuring that the Church is a place where every individual - especially minors and vulnerable persons - can feel safe, respected, and protected.

Ms Loraine Borg
Head of Safeguarding

PROPOSED SAFEGUARDING POLICY

Multiple meetings were held throughout 2023 between the Head of Safeguarding and the Head of Safeguarding of the Diocese of Malta with the aim of developing a common safeguarding policy that can be applied by the Church in Malta and Gozo. This policy is to reflect the principal guidelines of responsibility, accountability, transparency and integrity. The proposed changes include the new organisational structure of the Safeguarding Commission that better defines each person's role, responsibilities, as well as establishing separation of powers within the Commission.

DESIGNATED SAFEGUARDING OFFICERS

Following several years of providing safeguarding training, particularly to individuals who have direct contact with minors, parish priests were invited to appoint one or more members from their communities to serve as Designated Safeguarding Officers (DSOs). These individuals were selected from among those who had already completed safeguarding training, ensuring they possessed the necessary awareness and understanding of safeguarding principles and practices.

A Designated Safeguarding Officer is an individual appointed by a Church entity to serve as the primary point of contact for safeguarding within that entity. Acting as a liaison between their respective community and the Safeguarding Commission, the DSO's responsibilities include the collection and management of data relating to employees and volunteers, both religious and lay, who have direct contact with minors. This role supports the clearance process through the Protection of Minors Act (POMA) and ensures that safeguarding standards are maintained at a local level. Furthermore, DSOs are entrusted with promoting and nurturing a culture of safeguarding within their communities, acting as on-the-ground representatives of the Commission's mission and values.

A meeting was convened with all appointed DSOs, during which their roles and responsibilities were explained in detail. Guidance was provided on maintaining effective communication with the Safeguarding Commission and on the procedures to be followed in the performance of their duties. The officers were encouraged to actively foster a culture of safeguarding within their respective communities and to exemplify the principles of vigilance, accountability, and care in their everyday interactions.

THE SAFEGUARDING OFFICE

In 2023, the Safeguarding Board met on a regular basis to discuss the preliminary investigations and risk assessments. The conclusions and recommendations of all the cases were presented to the Head of Safeguarding.

This year, the Safeguarding Commission was composed as follows:

Name and Surname:	Profession:	Role:
Ms Loraine Borg	Senior Social Worker	Head of Commission
Dr Michael Galea	Clinical Psychologist	Board Member
Ms Pauline Grech	Head of School	Board Member
Ms Marie-Claude Xerri	Teacher	Board Member
Ms Francine Farrugia Magrin	Senior Social Worker	Investigation and Assessment
Mr Noel Cini Pisani	Social Worker	Investigation and Assessment
Dr Stanley Joe Portelli	Lawyer	Legal Assistance
Dr Marlene Cauchi	Counselling Psychologist	Victim Care and Advocacy
Rev Dr John Vella	Psychotherapist	Therapeutic Support
Rev Alexander Refalo	Priest responsible for the Office of the Clergy	Wellbeing of Subject of Complaint
Rev Joseph Farrugia	Clinical Psychologist	Prevention and Training

GENERAL ENQUIRIES ADDRESSED IN 2023

The Safeguarding Commission handled several queries relating to safeguarding matters such as procedural issues, referrals to external entities and other concerns by entities within or outside the Church.

Throughout 2023, the Safeguarding Commission addressed 1 general inquiry that involved referral and case discussions with external entities where internal investigation was to be carried out by the organisation concerned, and 1 consultation with Church management on establishing whether a particular situation related to safeguarding and it was concluded that it was not a safeguarding concern.

General Enquiries in 2023	
Referral and case discussions with external entities	1
Consultation with Church management on query safeguarding matter	1
Total General Enquiries	2

REFERRALS RECEIVED IN 2023

In 2023, the Safeguarding Commission received a total of 5 referrals, of which, 3 cases involved a victim under the age of 18 at the time of the alleged abuse, 1 case involving a vulnerable adult as a victim and 1 case warranted a risk assessment.

2 case out of the 3 received in 2023, referred to allegations that were received by the Safeguarding Commission 10 years or more, after the alleged abuse took place. In both cases, the alleged victim was a minor when the alleged abuse took place and allegedly involved a Diocesan Priest and a Religious Priest respectively.

The remaining 3 referrals involved 1 minor and 1 lay person, 1 vulnerable adult and 2 laypersons, and 1 risk assessment relating to breakage of imposed restrictions by 1 layperson.

Referrals Received in 2023			
Minors	3	Diocesan Priests	1
		Religious Priest	1
		Lay Person	1
Vulnerable Adults	1	Laypersons	2
Risk Assessment	1	Laypersons	1
Total Referrals Received	3		

COMPLAINTS CONCLUDED IN 2023

All the 5 cases referred to the Safeguarding Commission in 2023, were concluded.

The case involving a vulnerable adult and 2 lay persons was found to be substantiated and the case requiring a risk assessment regarding a lay person was also found to be substantiated.

The historical case involving a minor as the alleged victim and a Diocesan Priest as the alleged subject of complaint, was found to be unsubstantiated due to lack of communication by the alleged victim following initial contact.

The historical case involving a minor as the alleged victim and a Religious Priest as the alleged subject of complaint, and the other case involving a minor and a lay person as the alleged subject of complaint, were referred to the relevant organisations who claimed to investigate the cases internally.

REFERRALS			
	Minors	Vulnerable Adults	Risk Assessments
Total assessments	3	1	1
OUTCOMES			
	Minors	Vulnerable Adults	Risk Assessments
Substantiated	0	1	1
Unsubstantiated	1	0	0
Investigated internally by the organisation	2	0	0

SUBSTANTIATED CASES IN 2023

Substantiated Cases	Vulnerable Adult	Risk Assessment
Role of Subject of Complaint	2 Laypersons	1 Layperson
Allegation	Physical Violence	Breakage of imposed restrictions
Recommended a Restriction	Yes	Yes
Civil Authorities were Involved	Yes	No

CONCLUSION OF INVOLVEMENT IN 2023

General Enquiries	2
Substantiated	2
Unsubstantiated	1
Investigated internally by organisation	2
Ongoing cases	1 (case referred in 2022, awaiting civil proceedings)
Total:	7

GLOSSARY

Safeguarding Commission	
<i>Term</i>	<i>Description</i>
Head of Safeguarding	The person within the Safeguarding Commission who oversees and coordinates the work of the Commission within the established parameters of the policies.
Safeguarding Advisory Board	A board within the Safeguarding Commission consisting of professionals who meet regularly to discuss and advise the Head of Safeguarding on Church safeguarding policies, prevention and training, victim care and advocacy, preliminary investigations and risk assessments, and the wellbeing of Subjects of Complaint. The board is also responsible to approve or otherwise the conclusions and recommendations of the report which is to be presented to the Ordinary following a preliminary investigation or risk assessment.
Safeguarding Commission	The entity founded by the Maltese Episcopal Conference and the Conference of Major Religious Superiors responsible for promoting safe environments in the Church mainly through preventive practices and training, victim care and advocacy, handling of complaints, preliminary investigations and risk assessments, and follow up on the wellbeing of the Subjects of Complaint.
Safeguarding Office	An office within the Safeguarding Commission, consisting of professionals employed by the Church to offer day-to-day service within the Safeguarding Teams responsible for Prevention and Training, Victim Care and Advocacy, and Investigation and Assessment.

Types of Safeguarding Concerns	
<i>Term</i>	<i>Description</i>
Breach of Boundaries	When Church personnel crosses an emotional or physical line that must be maintained in order to ensure order, safety, transparency, and predictability within the Church.
Bullying	When Church personnel repeatedly threatens or undermines a minor and/or vulnerable adult through various forms of verbal or physical behaviour, including but not limited to, spreading rumours, name calling, purposeful exclusion, making threats, and physical or verbal attacks.
Emotional	When Church personnel emotionally or psychologically mistreats a minor and/or vulnerable adult through deliberate acts of humiliation, scare tactics, threats, ignoring, isolating, or other similar actions.
Exploitation	When Church personnel takes advantage of an imbalance of power to control, coerce, manipulate, deceive, or simply take advantage of a minor and/or vulnerable adult.
Grooming	When Church personnel forms a connection, builds trust, and establishes an emotional bond with a minor and/or vulnerable adult with the intention of manipulating, exploiting, or abusing them, even if that abuse, in whatever form intended, does not actually take place.
Harassment	When Church personnel engages in a course of conduct which can be reasonably be deemed as unwelcoming behaviour, which makes a minor and/or vulnerable adult feel offended, humiliated, degraded, or intimidated.
Neglect	When Church personnel repeatedly fails to meet the physical and emotional needs of a minor and/or a vulnerable adult under one's care and responsibility
Physical	When Church personnel physically maltreats in any way a minor and/ or

	vulnerable adult.
Poor Practice	When Church personnel does not meet the expected behaviour set out in this Safeguarding Policy and/or the particular policies of Church entities.
Sexual	<p>When Church personnel leads, persuades, coerces or intimidates a minor and/or a vulnerable adult into engaging in a sexual activity that involves non-physical, physical non-penetrative and/or physical penetrative contact.</p> <p>Non-physical contact includes but is not limited to: sexual conversations; inducing or forcing a minor and/or vulnerable adult to act out sexually; the immoral acquisition, possession, exhibition, or distribution, in any way or by any means, of pornographic images of minors and/or vulnerable adults; or the recruitment or inducement of a minor and/or vulnerable adult to pose in a pornographic manner or to participate in real or simulated pornographic exhibitions.</p> <p>Physical non-penetrative contact includes but is not limited to over-clothing touching, rubbing, kissing, or masturbation.</p> <p>Physical penetrative contact refers to sexual penetration of any part of the body, with or without force, by a sex organ, by any other part of the body, or by a foreign object.</p>
Spiritual	When Church personnel engages in a systematic pattern of coercive, harmful, or controlling behaviour in a spiritual or religious context. This may include but is not limited to manipulation and exploitation, superiority or elitism, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teachings, isolation as a means of punishment, or the requirement of obedience to or by that Church personnel, suggesting that the Church personnel has some kind of 'divine' authority.

Conclusion of a Complaint	
<i>Term</i>	<i>Description</i>
Investigated internally by the organisation	When a safeguarding concern is investigated by the HR unit of the organisation or through a formal disciplinary procedure.
No Further Action	The case does not require further action or recommendations by the Safeguarding Advisory Board after the case is presented to them.
Not a Safeguarding Concern	When the case presented to the Advisory Board is deemed as not falling within the remit of the Safeguarding Commission.
Partially Substantiated	Evidence was able to prove that one or more of the alleged incidents did take place, but other allegations cannot be established.
Refer to 3 rd Party	Complaints that do not relate to safeguarding concerns but still need to be dealt with by other entities, both within and outside of the Church.
Substantiated	Evidence was able to prove that the allegation did take place.
Unfounded	Evidence was able to establish that the allegation was false.
Unsubstantiated	It cannot be proven if the alleged incident did or did not take place.

Other Definitions	
<i>Term</i>	<i>Description</i>
Church Personnel	Any member or members of the clergy (bishops, priests, deacons), of consecrated life or of an equivalent status, of societies of apostolic life, of the faithful who enjoy a dignity or perform an office or function within the

	Church, including lay people duly appointed or commissioned to work in the areas of administration, pastoral ministry and care, employees and volunteers engaged in all the various activities within Church entities, staff members engaged with a Church entity through another entity, or seminarians and Religious students in formation.
Historical Cases	Cases that involve allegations which took place more than 10 years ago.
Minor	Any person under the age of 18. Equivalent to a minor is any person who has the developmental age of a child or habitually lacks the use of reason.
Pastoral Activity	Any activity that involves the Catholic Church or its mission.
Protection of Minors Act (POMA) Court Application	A request from the Voluntary Jurisdiction Section of the Civil Court (First Hall) for information which may be registered in the Register in respect of any applicant, or person who is employed, or holds any position with the same institution, establishment or organisation whether such employment or position is against payment or otherwise. This is regulated by the Protection of Minors (Registration) Act of the Laws of Malta Chapter 518.
Restriction from Pastoral Ministry	A temporary or permanent recommendation to suspend personnel from some or all pastoral activity.
Safeguarding Training	Training to raise awareness of the responsibility of Church personnel to identify signs of abuse and report concerns. The training also gives tools to personnel to create a safe environment for minors and vulnerable adults.
Subject of Complaint	A person against whom a safeguarding concern has been raised.
Vulnerable Adult	Any person in a state of infirmity, physical or mental deficiency, or deprivation of personal liberty which, in fact, even occasionally limits their ability to understand or to want or otherwise to resist the offence.
Witness	A person who may provide additional inculpatory or exculpatory evidence to a preliminary investigation or risk assessment.