



NEWSLETTER



SAFEGUARDING REFUGEES

It is estimated that over seventeen thousand refugees have arrived in Ireland from Ukraine. Many more are expected and Irish people have responded with great generosity with offers of assistance and accommodation, including from many parishes in the Archdiocese of Dublin. The Child Safeguarding and Protection Service is available to offer parishes advice and assistance in providing safe care for refugees.

There has been some criticism that the same outpouring of concern and generosity we have seen towards the people of Ukraine was not shown to others in the past. There is some justification to this, but it is also true that Ireland has welcomed refugees, including refugee children, in the recent past. It is important for us to learn from the experience of caring for such refugee children so that the mistakes of the past are not repeated. It is also important that we recognise, and take pride in, the significant contribution made by Crosscare, the diocesan social care agency, to the care of such children.

In the early 2000s unaccompanied asylum-seeking children began to arrive in Ireland in significant numbers. These were young people arriving here alone or with other young people, but without an adult guardian. Existing services for children were unprepared and not equipped to provide for them. Many of these refugee children were well looked after

but not all of them were. Some were accommodated in large premises, typically staffed by domestic and security staff, but with no care workers. The young people were given the opportunity to attend school, where many excelled. However, when not attending school there were no responsible adults to look after them. These children came from one unsafe situation to another one. Some are known to have been exploited in a variety of ways, including sexually.



Crosscare was part of a coalition of statutory and voluntary organisations that came together to provide a proper response to the needs of these children. Crosscare provided a team of five social care workers to each of three units accommodating approximately 30 young people each, and a smaller unit accommodating young mothers and their babies. Over the following 12 months they worked with these young people to move them to more appropriate living arrangements. Many were enabled to continue their education and find work.

Over time, services to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have improved. Forty-one came to Ireland in 2017 from 'The Jungle'. This was the unauthorised encampment of Syrian and other refugees in Calais made up of people wishing to cross from France to the UK, which was subsequently dismantled by the French authorities. The unaccompanied children in the Jungle were incredibly vulnerable and unprotected. Those that came to Ireland were cared for by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and were provided with education, therapy, medical screening and placement with families. Some were placed with family members already living in Ireland, others were placed with foster families. A report by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) at the end of 2018

found that the standard of care provided to these children was generally of a high standard, as compared with that provided by other member states of the European Union. Tusla operated an 'equity of care' principle. They provided services of the same standard as that provided to Irish children.

Unaccompanied children arriving from the Ukraine will be cared for by Tusla. Tusla will place them with families, either with members of their own families already living here or with foster families. In accordance with the principle of equity of care, these foster families will be assessed for their suitability to care for the children from Ukraine with the same rigour as applies to families being assessed for fostering Irish children.

Parishes may find themselves accommodating women and children [most men of fighting age are not permitted to leave Ukraine]. These women and children will require a lot of assistance and support.

Unfortunately, unscrupulous people may seek to take advantage of them. It is also possible that people with good intentions may inadvertently offer assistance that is inappropriate. Therefore, without in any way undermining the good work of the many, we have to minimise the risk posed by the few. As in all our safeguarding work, transparency and accountability are key. Whatever we do for the refugees should be done in plain sight where it can be seen by others. In a similar way, if we cannot give a clear and coherent account of what we are doing, we probably should not be doing it.

Policies, procedures and proper services are the basic building blocks of our response to the needs of refugees. However, it is in the human interaction that our concern becomes effective. Reflecting on the experience with the unaccompanied asylum seeking children, Gordon Hill of Crosscare observed: "Basic kindness made the difference".

UPDATE FROM GARRY KEHOE, TRAINING & COMPLIANCE MANAGER

Garry has just completed a round of meetings with over one hundred parish safeguarding representatives that were organised in the various deaneries of the Diocese. Garry and those attending the meetings found them useful and it is planned to repeat them on an annual basis. A number of issues arose in the course of the meetings.

Many parishes are still living under the shadow of the Covid pandemic. Despite the easing of restrictions on activities and social contacts, there is not the same level of activity in parishes as there was before Covid reached Ireland. The rate of infection remains high and there is a certain nervousness, perhaps especially among older people, and a fear of becoming infected. Many have found that accessing Mass on the radio, television or over the internet works for them. The decline in the overall numbers of people attending Mass, already a well-established long-term trend, may have been accelerated by the pandemic. Whatever about the overall level of activity, there is little, if anything, happening with children. Altar servers have not returned, nor have the children's choirs.

The children that were active in their parishes two years ago are older now and may not wish to resume their former activities. Garry detected a strong sense within the parishes that normality has not returned and may not do so for another year or more. In addition, the 'new normal' may not be quite the same as the 'old normal'.

Despite the limitations imposed by the refusal of Covid to release us from its grip, parishes are looking towards the future. Garry has received invitations to talk about safeguarding at Sunday masses in some parishes. Training over Zoom was happening in 2021, but in-person training has resumed, albeit with smaller numbers, and of shorter duration. The National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland has devised a refresher training programme which can be done in half a day and this is the programme that is currently being delivered. This is more easily done in current circumstances as there is not the same requirement to provide refreshments and lunch.

In March, Garry distributed the parish safeguarding audit form for completion by the end of June. Garry simplified the form in order to make it easier to complete. Interestingly, some have already been completed and returned. Some parishes have asked for Garry to assist them in completing their audit and Garry has been happy to respond to these requests.

The response to receipt of the audit form has, so far, been positive. The folks in the parishes see it as an opportunity to take stock and work out what needs to be done as they prepare for the challenges that lie ahead. Safeguarding audits were never intended to be merely a way of checking up on parishes, but rather an aid to them. It is encouraging to see that this is how they are now understood.

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MICHAEL LYNCH

MEMBER OF THE DIOCESAN SAFEGUARDING COMMITTEE

Michael is one of the newer members of the diocesan Safeguarding Committee, having joined in May 2021. CSPS has had a long association with Michael from his previous role as Detective Inspector with the Garda National Protective Services Bureau. He was our liaison person in relation to the management of cases for many years and always went the extra mile to assist us in our work.

Michael recently set up his own company, Michael Lynch Safeguarding, providing safeguarding training, advice, policy development and review, and consultation. Michael was Scouting Ireland's Safeguarding Manager from 2020 to 2022. Prior to that Michael led three national Garda units – the Sexual Crime Management Unit, the Online Child Exploitation Unit, and the Garda National Child Protection Unit. For 15 years he successfully conducted and supervised serious crime investigations and the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults.

Michael has developed safeguarding policy with Tusla, the HSE and the Departments of Justice & Equality, Health, and Children & Youth Affairs as well as having been Ireland's National Expert to Interpol and Europol on child safeguarding. He has been a safeguarding consultant to the United Nations, European Commission, Scouting Ireland and the Council of Europe and a safeguarding lecturer for the European Academy of Law and UCD.

The Diocese is very fortunate to have someone of Michael's calibre on our Safeguarding Committee. Michael has always been most generous with his time and expertise.