

Diocese of St Albans

Actions and recommendations in response to the Scolding Review

11 December 2024

1 Introduction

1.1 The publication in September 2024 of the *Independent Review into Soul Survivor* by Fiona Scolding KC and Ben Fullbrook has stimulated deep and serious reflection about safeguarding, oversight and governance in our diocese. The Review has been discussed by our Diocesan Safeguarding Team, by the Bishop's Senior Staff, by the Bishop's Council, and by the Diocesan Board of Finance (whose members are trustees of the diocesan charity). Questions in relation to issues raised in the Scolding Review were tabled and responded to at Diocesan Synod in October 2024. This consultation has reinforced our support for victims and survivors, and our commitment to implement more robust processes of oversight and to continue to nurture a safer culture for all.

1.2 In this formal response to the Review, and building on our preliminary response (26 September 2024), we expand on these commitments. We set out the actions we are taking in response to those recommendations that are specific to the Diocese of St Albans. In doing so we recognise that although we had systems in place to prevent abuse happening in our churches, in this instance, those systems were not sufficient to prevent harm from taking place or allowing it to come to light sooner. For that, we are truly sorry.

2 Support for survivors and affected individuals

2.1 In our preliminary response, we expressed deep regret for the harm caused by Mike Pilavachi's abusive behaviour. Today, we take this opportunity to repeat our support for all those who were damaged by his actions and reiterate our apology to all survivors and victims. Since the safeguarding processes began, the Diocese has offered support to victims and survivors through counselling services and pastoral care. It was only through the courage of those who came forward that the full picture of Mike Pilavachi's unacceptable and abusive behaviour became known.

2.2 The Diocese is committed to walking alongside those individuals whose faith was nurtured at Soul Survivor Watford (SSW) and who struggle to reconcile their experiences. We recognise that, for many, SSW played a formative role in their spiritual journey. We honour their integrity and continue to be available to help them navigate the complex feelings that this situation may have stirred.

3 Oversight

3.1 SSW was, and remains, an independent legal charity, with trustees who are responsible for its oversight and governance. We recognise the criticism in the Scolding Review that SSW had been allowed to maintain an 'informal' relationship with the Church of England before 2014.

3.2 When mission initiatives in the Church of England are endorsed by a BMO it is often as part of their launch as a new project. SSW is an existing charity, established in 1993 that was subsequently 'adopted' by a BMO. It is up to an individual diocese to decide if and when to endorse an existing organisation in such a way. In terms of ecclesiastical legislation, SSW antedated the invention of BMOs by many years.

3.3 The relationship started to change with the appointment of the Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith as Bishop of St Albans in 2009. Early in 2010, at the initiative of Dr Smith, an approach was made to SSW with a view to regularising its position. The process was overseen on behalf of the Diocese by the Rt Revd Paul Bayes, the newly appointed Bishop of Hertford. Under the BMO guidelines, consultations were

undertaken with SSW, with the Watford Deanery and with ecumenical partners by the then Diocesan Director of Mission, acting as “Bishop’s Officer”. Negotiations were protracted because Mike Pilavachi was initially resistant to the proposal. As a result, it was not until 2014 that agreement was finally reached, and SSW was formally recognised through a Bishop’s Mission Order (BMO) and brought within the diocesan fold as a mission initiative of the Church of England.

3.4 Under the provisions of a BMO, the Bishop appoints a Visitor. There have been two Visitors since 2014 each of whom has visited SSW not less than twice a year. These visits were more than pastoral. Although the Code of Practice that accompanies a BMO provides no structure or format for an annual review of a BMO (see below 3.8), since 2016 it was shaped by a rigorous and comprehensive set of questions drawn up by the current Visitor, the Revd Canon Dr Tim Lomax, in conjunction with the then Bishop of Hertford, the Rt Revd Dr Michael Beasley. Since 2016, the review included questions to its leaders about values, relationships within the organisation and congregation, and safeguarding. The final question in the review was specifically open-ended: ‘Are there any problems you need to tell me about or issues you would like to raise?’

3.5 The Scolding Review questions the extent to which Mike Pilavachi was actively engaged in the regular reviews conducted by the Visitor. Indeed, this was a concern of the Visitor at one stage which necessitated the intervention of the then Bishop of Hertford, Dr Michael Beasley. In spite of Mike Pilavachi’s extensive programme of national and international speaking commitments, Dr Beasley insisted that he attend in person the Visitor’s review at least every other year. With hindsight, his ambivalence to scrutiny was a warning sign. It may have contributed to a culture in the organisation without sufficient accountability that in turn allowed for destructive behaviour to go unchecked. We are committed to a wider range of voices being heard as the Visitor carries out reviews and annual governance health checks.

3.6 The Scolding Review refers to the expectation in the Code of Practice that a BMO will be accompanied by ‘appropriate support in terms of training and development’. Mike Pilavachi made no request for additional support. As far as Mike Pilavachi was concerned, his ongoing support and training took place in the context of his Initial Ministerial Education Phase 2 (IME2), which was completed satisfactorily (see below 6.3). Along with all other clergy he was also invited to diocesan conferences and training events. Where our support was lacking was in terms of ongoing mentoring and peer review once he had completed his IME2, for which we apologise.

3.7 Having checked all files, emails and other records, as far as we can ascertain, no one at any point either independently or in the context of the reviews conducted by the Visitor, raised any concerns with the Diocese about Mike Pilavachi’s behaviour until the National Safeguarding Team had a meeting with the Bishop of St Albans on 6 December 2022, following receipt of a complaint. We recognise that Mike Pilavachi’s behaviour only came to light as the result of complaints made by individuals directly affected by that behaviour. In the light of the Scolding Review, we accept the need to do more to ensure that everyone is aware that the Diocese and its Safeguarding Team are equipped and ready to help with all types of safeguarding concern, including the emotional and spiritual abuse described in the Scolding Review. We remain open to hearing from anyone who believed that their concerns were shared with the Diocese.

3.8 Going forward, we commit to strengthening diocesan oversight structures. We are currently consulting on a new BMO for SSW which includes mandatory reviews for the Lead and Associate Pastors, with input from individuals familiar with their work. It also provides for diocesan oversight by three members of the Bishop’s Senior Staff so that it will not be the case that one single individual is responsible for all three of the key oversight areas of governance, mission accompaniment and pastoral care. We believe that these checks and balances will forge more effective oversight as well as providing good pastoral care.

3.9 We hope that the observations of the Scolding Review will better inform the current conversation in the Church of England about the effectiveness of BMOs and the importance of embodying a stronger mandatory supervisory framework in their Code of Practice. We also think it important to provide Visitors with guidance on how best to conduct reviews of BMOs so that diocesan oversight is more effective. It is especially important that the legal framework of a BMO and its Code of Practice are able to embrace both large, established mission initiatives and small experimental projects.

4 Governance

4.1 The Review explored the relationship between the Trustees of SSW (which as an organisation is accountable to the Charity Commission) and the Visitor. The Church of England has yet to take a view about whether it would be appropriate for the Visitor to also be a trustee in such a situation. As the Review points out, this may require a change in legislation (section 81 of the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011). As a diocese, we are concerned that such a change could compromise the Visitor's independence, but we welcome the recommendation that the Visitor should have the right to attend and speak at any meeting of the Trustees. This will be built into SSW's new BMO. Regular attendance at Trustee meetings will give the Visitor an insight into the workings of the Trust without compromising their independence. In combination with the changes in oversight detailed above, we believe that this will enable us as a diocese to better 'walk alongside' SSW in the future.

5 Complaints and reporting mechanisms

5.1 In alignment with the Review's recommendation for transparent and accessible complaint processes, we have, in collaboration with SSW, established clear protocols that allow individuals to report concerns to the Diocesan Safeguarding Team, the Visitor, or through SSW's revised complaints process. We believe that a multiplicity of avenues for voicing concerns will create a better safety net and foster a culture of openness and accountability.

It has further been agreed that there will be annual governance health checks as recommended by the Review.

6 Mike Pilavachi's ordination

6.1 The Scolding Review offers a series of observations on Mike Pilavachi's journey to ordination, the accompanying discernment process and post-ordination training.

Mike Pilavachi went through a process of discernment for ordination, which involved a significant number of interviews, with a variety of people. He was interviewed by the Bishop on several occasions, by two Diocesan Directors of Ordinands (DDO), an Assistant Director of Ordinands, and had at least two interviews with an independent psychotherapist. Enquiries were sought from several people who either had been or were working with him. No concerns were raised about the appropriateness of his ordination at any point in the discernment process.

6.2 Every ordinand is required to undertake a period of training and formation as discerned by the Bishop in consultation with the DDO. Some ordinands undertake full-time residential training, others part-time non-residential training, and others have an agreed bespoke training pathway that builds on their experience and addresses gaps in their formation. Mike Pilavachi was placed in this third category. During his theological training he received positive written reports from his tutors and was also interviewed by the Archdeacon and again by the Bishop. He gave positive assurances that he was ordering his personal life according to the teaching of the Church of England. No concerns were noted or raised by any of those who interviewed him.

6.3 The authors of the Scolding Review were unable to verify the details of Mike Pilavachi's discernment process or read assessments of his training because, as they rightly state, they were unable to consult his Personnel/HR File (the 'Blue File'). This is because we did not have a legal basis

under data protection law to share this. For the avoidance of doubt, we wish to take this opportunity to confirm that Mike Pilavachi fulfilled all the requirements of his bespoke training and, following his ordination, the agreed requirements of his Initial Ministerial Education Phase 2 (IME2) pathway. To repeat: at no point were any concerns raised about his behaviour or conduct by any individual, assessor or training institution.

7 Commitment to wellbeing

7.1 The Review underscores the importance of prioritising wellbeing, reminding Trustees of SSW and all those in governance—including bishops, archdeacons and rural/area deans—to take proactive steps in preventing church leaders from becoming overstretched. When leaders are tired and overburdened, the risk of lapses in judgement increases. In shaping the new BMO for SSW, we have taken particular care not only to ensure better accountability of leaders, but also to ensure better pastoral care for those leaders by providing different members of diocesan staff to provide accountability and pastoral care.

7.2 As a diocese, we strive to create a culture that genuinely nurtures the wellbeing of those called to lead within the Church, with practical support available through services such as counselling, spiritual direction, and tailored wellbeing programmes. We give active encouragement to clergy and lay leaders to take adequate time off. These themes will feature strongly in our ‘Year of Spiritual Renewal and Wellbeing’ to be launched in January 2025.

8 Future directions and broader impact

8.1 We are grateful to Fiona Scolding and Ben Fullbrook for their work. Their Review has shed light on what can go wrong under controlling and abusive individual leadership. Inevitably, no review can offer a complete account of a situation or be the final word on the events which led to the Review, but it is an important step on the safeguarding journey. We offer our response to its recommendations as a contribution to the current national safeguarding conversation and as part of our commitment to building a safer Church. Since the safeguarding investigation, the Diocese and SSW have worked in close partnership to ensure that lessons are learned, the necessary change in culture gets embedded, and that we move forward positively together. Much of this will be captured in the new BMO but much is also supported by open and transparent engagement between all parties.

8.2 In conclusion, we repeat our sincere apology to all those who have been damaged by Mike Pilavachi’s behaviour. As a diocese, we commit to putting survivors and victims at the forefront of our concern. In our safeguarding, we commit to being vigilant and to fostering a culture of transparency, integrity and care across all we do. Our mission is for our churches and congregations, whatever form in law they may take, to be safe spaces where people can encounter and worship God, build community, and thrive.

Senior Staff Team, Diocese of St Albans

Bishop of St Albans: The Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith

Bishop of Bedford: The Rt Revd Richard Atkinson

Bishop of Hertford: The Rt Revd Dr Jane Mainwaring

Dean of St Albans: The Very Revd Jo Kelly-Moore

Archdeacon of Hertford: The Venerable Janet Mackenzie

Archdeacon of Bedford: The Venerable Dave Middlebrook

Archdeacon of St Albans: The Venerable Charles Hudson

Diocesan Director of Mission and Ministry: The Revd Canon Dr Tim Lomax

Diocesan Secretary: David White

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