

Children's Services

Matt Dunkley
Director of Children's Services

Private and Confidential

Dr Rowan Williams
The Most Reverend and
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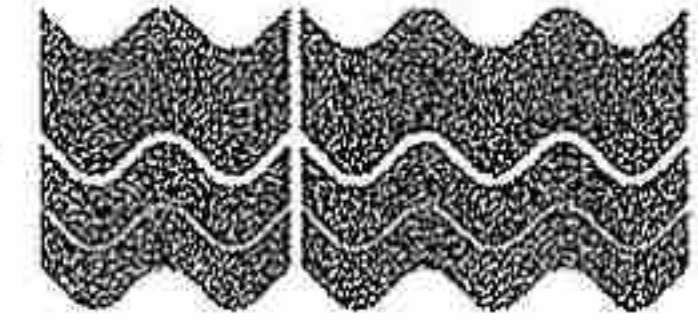
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DPA

East Sussex
County Council



Date 16 May 2012

when responding please contact

Matt Dunkley

DPA

our ref

your ref

Dear Lord Archbishop

Re: Diocese of Chichester- Management of Children's Safeguarding Concerns

Following our earlier correspondence on this matter and our meeting on 9th May with Bishop John Gladwin and Chancellor Rupert Bursell along with the Director of Children's Services for Brighton & Hove and the Independent Chair of the Brighton & Hove Safeguarding Children's Board, we feel compelled to write once again to express our deep and continuing concern about the processes and timescales that are being followed. We do not believe current arrangements within the Diocese can assure the safety of children.

Bishop Gladwin and Chancellor Bursell explained the terms of reference for their Visitation and whilst we understand the process we remain convinced that insufficient attention is being paid to the ongoing and immediate safeguarding of children in Sussex.

We understand that Bishop Wallace Benn has given a witness statement to Sussex Police as part of the ongoing investigation into numerous and serious allegations of sexual abuse against Canon Gordon Rideout and that it is probable in the future that Bishop Benn will be called to give evidence in open court. At that point it will be evident that Bishop Benn has been aware of these allegations for some time and has not acted appropriately.

As we write, we are aware that yet more allegations of historic abuse in the Diocese are currently surfacing involving new charges, as well as further allegations in relation to existing ones. These allegations further call into question Bishop Benn's handling of safeguarding allegations in the past.

This must serve to further reinforce the widespread misgivings about Bishop Benn's suitability to continue to carry out his duties in Sussex and we have specific concerns about the fact that he continues to be involved in appointment panels for local clergy and to visit local schools. Both of these activities seem wholly inappropriate to us at this time given the context. Were Bishop Benn to be employed by any of the statutory organisations charged with safeguarding children or vulnerable adults, the serious questions raised about his judgement and behaviour in relation to Canon Rideout would have resulted in his immediate suspension as a neutral act whilst the investigation was pursued and concluded. We fail to understand why the Church of England is either unable or unwilling to take this action as an immediate next step and it does

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not reassure us that sufficient weight is being given to the very pressing concerns from the statutory safeguarding agencies in Sussex. We would be grateful for your prompt response on this point.

Bishop Gladwin and Chancellor Bursell indicated that your own procedures mean that you are unable or unwilling to take the sensible step of suspending Bishop Benn while this investigation takes place, even though your own Safeguarding Committee has asked for this to happen. If that is the case, difficult though it is to believe or understand, we seek your explicit and unequivocal reassurance that Bishop Benn will not play any part in the appointment of any school governors, in the selection of the Education Officer for the Diocese nor in any other role that has a connection to safeguarding children. This would include being involved in the recruitment of any staff to the Diocese.

Bishop Gladwin and Chancellor Bursell also explained to us at the meeting that although they hope to produce an interim report by the end of June, they have no firm timescale at the moment for completion of the full report. Nor could they guarantee that either the interim or the final report will be published since the decision on this rests with you and your office. This seems to us to be extraordinary and we firmly believe that such apparent secrecy will do little to reassure either the community in Sussex or the professional system that the Church of England is being transparent and taking seriously its wish to resolve the current situation. We request, therefore, an urgent commitment from you that as a minimum both the Director of Children's Services and the Chair of the LSCB in East Sussex will have sight of any report that is produced and that reports will be expedited and will be as full as possible.

In summary we have no confidence in the judgement and conduct of Bishop Benn, in relation to dealing with safeguarding issues, and believe it is appalling that the Church seems reluctant to take decisive and immediate action. We further believe that this would be the stance taken by the public were they aware of the current situation.

Your own investigation has revealed a systematic failure by the Diocese of Chichester to protect children from sexual abuse by predatory adults in a position of authority, on a scale similar to that which engulfed the Catholic Church in recent years. Bishop Benn faces serious questions of, at best, his competence to ensure children are protected, and at worst, his gross negligence in the face of serious allegations against staff he was responsible for. His position as Bishop is plainly untenable until these matters are fully investigated, and his continuing in office undermines the faith of statutory safeguarding agencies that the Church is taking this matter seriously.

At any point should we be called upon to respond to any queries from the press about this matter we would feel obliged to outline our contact with your office. We would also be grateful for your reassurance on the specific matters we have raised in this letter and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you personally as a matter of urgency to discuss our concerns about this situation.

Yours Sincerely

DPA

DPA

Cathie Pattison
Independent Chair, East Sussex LSCB