

Responses to Cumberlege Commission questions

I am John Hyder-Wilson, Chair of the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton CP Commission. I have held this position for just under 2 years. My professional background is originally as a Social Worker, then as a manager at various levels in Social Services, and more recently as a Social Care Consultant. I now have my own business which is involved in assisting performance improvement in Local Authorities (usually working as associates with companies such as Deloitte), writing independent consultancy reports on a range of topics, and also training. We currently hold the contract for all Early Years Child Protection training in West Sussex.

I must immediately be clear that the views represented here are my own and not necessarily those of the DAB CP Commission.

Question 1 – Has the implementation of Nolan worked?

This is a little difficult as I cannot claim to have a national overview. Looking at the recommendations and thinking about the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton (DAB), I would say that we have achieved many of the key Nolan recommendations. We certainly have “preventative policies and practices” (Rec2) operating across DAB and these are high profile and widely publicised. Parish Child Protection Representatives (Rec5) are in place and the Child Protection Officer maintains good links and communication with these individuals. We are also ensuring that suitable training (Rec3) is in place. The DAB Commission is active and committed to the continuing implementation of Nolan and to best practice in Child Protection matters. We have recently seen the local system work in a parish situation where alleged abuse was brought to light via a parish representative. This is most encouraging.

It is commitment like this at ground level that is the first and crucial stage in protecting children and I will comment on this further below. Child Protection must *never* be seen as something that only “experts” deal with. Such a position can exclude, marginalise and perhaps even alienate others in the church who then can quickly feel excluded from a professional and “expert” discourse. If this happens the cause may be lost.

Question 2 – Have the national and local processes struck the right balance?

Yes, broadly in my opinion. As Nolan makes absolutely clear, fully worked out and comprehensive local and national policies are vital to ensure the protection of children. All in the church need such a system to provide structure, coherence, consistency, fairness and clarity when dealing with matters of child protection.

I take the view that matters such as the devising and implementation of new policy and practice in organisations usually go through several stages before becoming accepted and embedded within the day to day working life and culture of an organisation. Such stages of gradual acceptance often involve denial, resistance and profound misunderstanding at first. There is probably some way to go before we reach the point where good CP practice is second nature to all and widely accepted by all individuals and groups within the church.

Question 3 – Establishment of COPCA, and role in the future

Ideally, one would wish to see a point where the role for COPCA diminishes over time and (a bit like the Soviet State) it “withers away” because its work is carried on effectively at a devolved local level. To take that analogy further, it didn’t happen before and is unlikely to now.

My view is that COPCA performs an extremely valuable, active and necessary role at present. It has raised the profile of CP matters within the church and has acted as a central co-ordinating body. The recent meeting of local Commission Chairs organised by COPCA was a good idea and should be continued on at least an annual basis. This will enable local Chairs to feed issues back to COPCA on a reasonably regular and structured basis and so assist two-way communication.

Having said that, I do have some concerns about the hiving off and “professionalisation” of CP issues for several reasons. My own background is in Social Work and I have seen the damage done by such a process. This can be manifold, and two examples may be helpful:

(a) There are real dangers that internal organisational units set up entirely for the purpose of dealing with a single issue (such as Child Protection) can become unbalanced and out of kilter with the rest of the organisation. This can then lead to conflict and a more extreme approach being taken which eventually results in a crisis and then (typically) marginalisation. COPCA must be aware of this. Such a scenario would not serve the interests of vulnerable children.

(b) A further danger is that all within the organisation not directly involved with CP issues feel that it is “not my problem” as it is in the hands of experts. This is obviously dangerous. The work done with the clergy and the establishment of a system of Parish Reps is vitally important in counteracting this possibility.

COPCA and all of us on local commissions have a huge responsibility to ensure that we are transparent, honest, inclusive and generous in all our dealings with others within the church, particularly those with doubts and misconceptions. If such people feel unable to raise their issues, or feel foolish when they do, or are excluded from the debate owing to a professional discourse that is closed to them, then we will all have failed.

Generally however, I think that the church has tried very hard to face up to its responsibilities post Nolan and should be given a lot of credit for progress so far.

Question 4 – New organisational structures

I think that I have probably made the comments I would wish to make under this section in my responses to Questions 1 and 2.

Final Comment

I hope the Cumberlege Commission members will not think it impertinent if I raise one further issue. I was at the launch of the Cumberlege Commission in London back in July. I was concerned that the remit of the Commission and its membership felt very safe and comfortable and drawn from the London establishment of the “great and the good”. I have thought hard before making this comment and hope that it will not be seen as a personal one as this is emphatically not the intention.

I very much hope that the Commission has the scope, radicalism and motivation to look behind the issues in some depth and detail and not to pitch all its conclusions in that “safe” area of territory that is simply the product of a consensus between respected experts in the CP field.

If new, controversial and radical suggestions and solutions are necessary I hope fervently that the Commission will seize the opportunity.

John Hyder-Wilson

Chair, Diocese of Arundel and Brighton Child Protection Commission

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