



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Work progressing on new Church protocols, safeguarding structure

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Expert groups will carry forward the work of creating a national system for handling complaints of sexual abuse and the establishment of a national office to oversee safeguarding within the Church.

At their plenary meeting this month, and in conversation with the leaders of religious institutes and other canonical stewards of Church ministries, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference reviewed progress on developing the National Response Protocol.

Conference president Archbishop Mark Coleridge said a “whole-of-Church” approach for handling complaints of sexual abuse and other misconduct will create the best outcomes for people bringing forward complaints and those responsible for responding to them.

“The bishops are grateful that, along with Catholic Religious Australia and the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons, there is a common purpose and a shared vision for a national framework,” he said.

“Existing methods of responding to allegations have their strengths, but the new National Response Protocol will create a nationally consistent process whether someone brings a complaint to a regional diocese, a religious institute or metropolitan archdiocese.”

Archbishop Coleridge said the protocol was drafted with input from many stakeholders, including survivors and their supporters. The new liaison group will undertake additional consultation.

The group comprises experts in professional standards, safeguarding, pastoral care, complaints management, civil and canon law, and ecclesiology.

The Bishops Conference also considered a report on the establishment of a national structure to incorporate the various tasks carried out by a number of organisations in the areas of safeguarding, child protection, complaints management and education.

“The Church – whether within dioceses, provinces, religious institutes or at the national level – has established many offices over the past three or four decades to respond to complaints of sexual abuse, and their work is critical,” Archbishop Coleridge said.

“What we know, though, is that there is duplication in some places, including some overlap with government agencies, and there are questions about the appropriate level of delivery: local, provincial, state or territory, or national.”

Archbishop Coleridge said that the report received earlier this month addresses many of those issues. It will help a new reference group focus its work, including ongoing discussion with existing offices and agencies, and lead to the establishment of a new body that will incorporate the functions of various other entities into a single national office.

The group brings together lay people, religious and priests with expertise in social service delivery, safeguarding, professional standards, governance, finance and canon and civil law.

Archbishop Coleridge expressed his gratitude to the groups that presented their reports on the two matters, saying “their high-quality work has set us on the path to a more effective approach for the benefit of the whole community”.