

Independent Safeguarding Audits of Church of England

Chorister Annual Report 2025

Findings and recommendations from year 2
of the Independent Safeguarding Audit
Programme of the Church of England.

*For the purposes of this report, the term 'chorister'
refers to any choir member under the age of 18.*



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Introduction

This report sets out the Year 2 findings relating to chorister safeguarding arising from the Independent Safeguarding Audit Programme delivered by INEQE Safeguarding Group. It should be read alongside the Chorister Safeguarding Annual Report 2024, published at the end of Year 1, which established the baseline position and initial recommendations for improvement.

The Year 2 programme has provided an opportunity to test progress, consistency, and impact across a wider number of dioceses and cathedrals. It has also enabled the Audit to identify emerging themes that are now sufficiently well evidenced to inform national learning. Whilst this report focuses specifically on chorister safeguarding, many of the findings reflect wider cultural and organisational dynamics that sit within cathedral and school contexts.



Methodology

The findings in this report are drawn from the second year of the Independent Safeguarding Audit Programme. This included audits of 10 cathedrals operating a range of chorister models, including day and boarding choristers and mixed arrangements involving a singular or range of connected schools.

Evidence was gathered through a review of documentation, surveys, site visits, observations, focus groups, and discussions with 94 choristers and 56 chorister parents, as well as music staff and staff from connected schools.

Progress

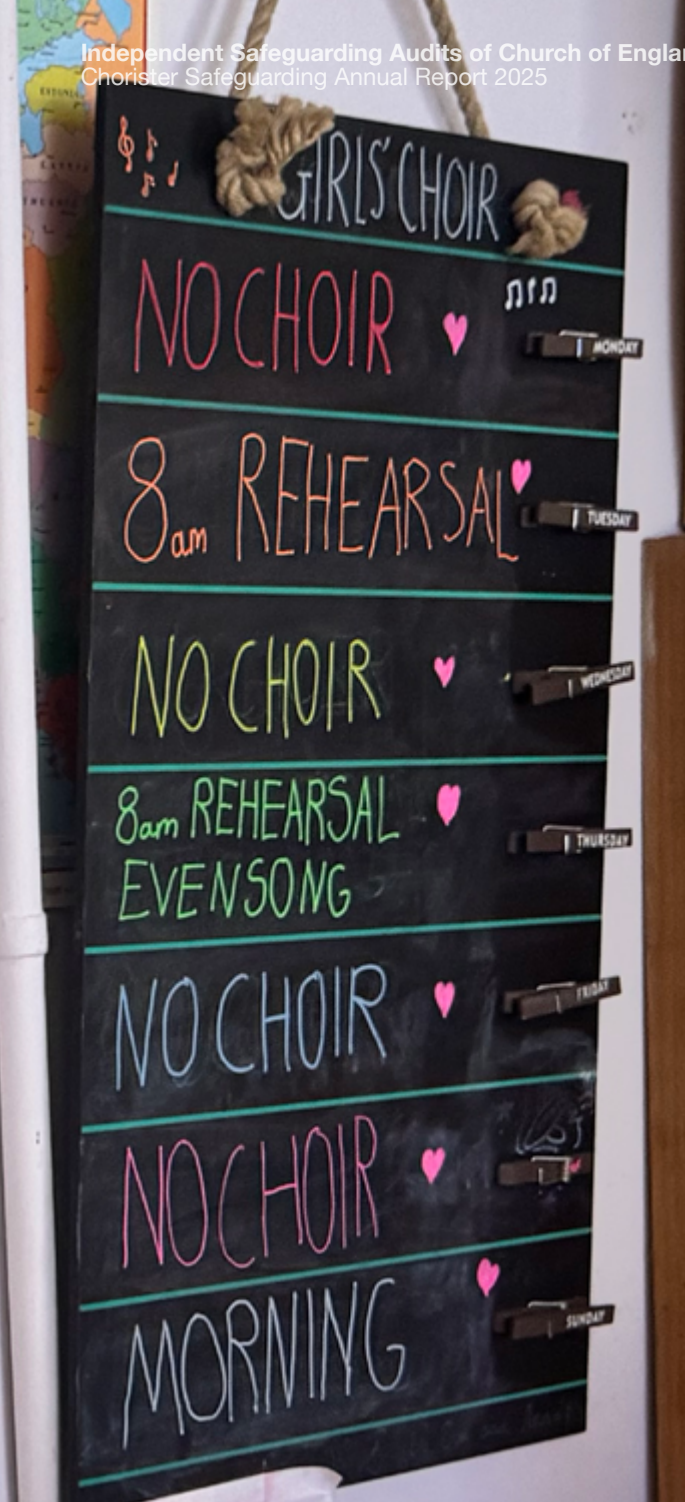
The 2024 Chorister Safeguarding Annual Report identified an overall strong commitment to safeguarding within cathedral choir environments, with some variability in how consistently good practice was documented, embedded, and overseen. Chorister safeguarding practice was found to vary across cathedral settings. A range of recommendations were made in Year 1 pertaining to chorister arrangements across multiple themes, including increasing physical safety and environment, scheduling and wellbeing, communication and information sharing, and the development of clearer, chorister-specific safeguarding principles to support greater consistency across settings.

A few areas where recommendations are recurring are highlighted here to demonstrate progress made within each theme.

Child-friendly signage and posters in chorister spaces

Overall, the cathedrals reviewed are actively implementing or have completed the recommendations to improve chorister safeguarding signage, primarily by ensuring child-friendly safeguarding posters are clearly displayed in chorister areas like the Song School and updating them with key staff details and initiating a formal review. Some actions remain in progress with a focus on introducing new signage that includes photos of key staff and clear reminders of procedures, demonstrating a commitment across the board to enhance child friendly communication.





Recording and sharing of low-level concerns

It was recognised in Year 1 that many music departments within cathedrals had well-established low-level concerns logs. That said, this practice was inconsistent across cathedrals and as such recommendations were made to improve consistency of practice. Acceptance of such recommendations is generally positive. There was some pushback regarding the sharing of information with associated schools, with frequency and privacy restrictions being cited. Communication between cathedrals and connected schools has continued to evolve, particularly where regular formal and informal information sharing arrangements are in place.

Scheduling and wellbeing

Recommendations for chorister wellbeing across cathedrals have been fully accepted and completed. These actions include implementing a formal, scheduled routine of voice specialist visits for choristers, mitigating heat-related issues by installing a thermometer and adjusting the thermostat, and coordinating with schools to protect chorister free and rest time from being encroached upon by school catch-up work. This is a positive trend and welcome improvement. Safeguarding responsibilities within chorister contexts are more clearly articulated, chaperoning arrangements are better established, and there is greater confidence amongst staff in recognising safeguarding as integral to musical excellence rather than in tension with it.

Year 2 findings indicate measurable progress in several areas. Year 2 has also seen the emergence of more nuanced themes, including neurodiversity in choir environments, behaviour management training for staff, voice change transitions and the pressures associated with high achievement environments.

Supervision and Safeguarding Responsibilities

Themes

Across Year 2 audits, supervision arrangements for choristers were largely well understood by those working most closely with children. Clear distinctions were typically made between responsibility during school time and within cathedral settings, particularly where recruitment models involved boarding or closely connected schools.

A notable area of strength has been the introduction or strengthening of dedicated chaperone roles. In many cathedrals, these roles are now embedded within operational structures and recognised as integral to safeguarding oversight.

Choristers and parents consistently described chaperones as accessible, attentive, and focused on children's wellbeing. Children frequently articulated that adults were visibly present, responsive, and alert to their needs.

Good Practice

Particularly strong practice was observed where Memoranda of Understanding or equivalent agreements clearly set out supervision responsibilities, escalation routes, and handover arrangements between cathedral and school settings.

Where chaperones are clearly supervised through safeguarding structures, rather than solely through music departments, this provides an important layer of independence and oversight. This separation strengthens safeguarding authority and reduces the potential for musical hierarchy to influence safeguarding decision making.

Additional good practice includes pre-rehearsal safeguarding briefings between chaperones and music staff, clear recording and formal handover processes where children return to school or boarding provision and deliberate positioning of chaperones in public-facing areas to deter inappropriate behaviour or photography during services.

Communication and Information Sharing

Themes

Effective communication with parents continues to be a strength in many chorister settings. Dedicated communication channels, regular meetings, and in some cases parent representative groups contribute to trust and transparency. Parents frequently described feeling informed, listened to, and able to raise concerns.

Where low-level concerns logs are used consistently, they support the early identification of patterns of behaviour and provide a structured mechanism for sharing information with members of Cathedral staff and connected schools. In the strongest examples, logs are reviewed routinely and inform safeguarding meetings.

However, inconsistency remains across some settings. In a minority of cases, low-level concerns are recorded informally or retained within individual knowledge rather than formal systems. This reliance on memory or long-standing relationships introduces avoidable risk,

particularly where staffing changes occur or knowledge varies. Where formal agreements between cathedrals and schools are in place, boundaries of responsibility are clearer and staff demonstrate greater confidence in information sharing. In models where relationships are less formalised, clarity is again more dependent on professional relationships and individual judgement rather than documented frameworks.

Year 2 findings reinforce a consistent theme: information sharing is strongest where it is structured, recorded, and subject to oversight.



Good Practice

Good practice observed across Year 2 includes dedicated and monitored communication channels for parents and choristers, regular formal meetings between music departments, safeguarding leads, and connected schools and parent representative groups that provide structured opportunities for dialogue (explicitly including safeguarding).

Additionally, the consistent use of low-level concerns logs, with periodic review by senior staff. In the strongest examples, information sharing is proactive rather than reactive. It is used not only to respond to incidents, but to identify early indicators of stress, behavioural change, or emerging risk.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Cathedrals should ensure that low-level concerns relating to choristers are recorded consistently within a formal system, subject to routine review, and incorporated into safeguarding oversight structures.

Recommendation 2: Where not already in place, cathedrals operating chorister programmes in partnership with schools should formalise information sharing arrangements through written agreements that clearly define responsibilities, escalation routes, and review mechanisms.

Scheduling and Wellbeing

Themes

Balancing the demands of musical excellence with children's overall wellbeing remains one of the most significant safeguarding considerations within chorister programmes.

Year 2 audits identified clear evidence of movement away from historical models that prioritised musical performance above all else. In the majority of settings, there is now thoughtful, child-centred decision making, particularly during high-pressure periods such as Christmas and Easter. Scheduling discussions increasingly reflect consideration of academic workload, rest, and emotional wellbeing.

In a small number of cases, auditors identified parental hesitancy in raising concerns where a chorister's school place was linked to funding associated with the chorister programme. Whilst these instances were limited, they highlight an inherent power dynamic that requires conscious and active management. Where educational access is perceived to depend on continued musical participation, this can create a subtle but significant barrier to professional challenge.



Year 2 audits also identified voice change as a period requiring structured safeguarding oversight. Whilst most settings manage this transition sensitively in practice, arrangements are often informal and reliant on professional judgement rather than clearly articulated frameworks. This can create additional pressure and uncertainty, particularly where a pupil's place within the school is tied to their chorister role. Greater clarity, transparency, and consistency would reduce the risk of unintended harm during what is already a vulnerable stage of development.

For a boy whose identity has been closely bound to being a chorister for many years, the transition can carry significant emotional weight. Without clarity and support, this change can create instability and, in some cases, distress. Settings that have recognised this identity shift as a safeguarding matter, rather than solely a musical milestone, demonstrate the appropriate care for their young people.

Good Practice

Particularly strong practice was identified in settings that had developed clear transition pathways for choristers reaching the end of their formal period of service. This included arrangements that allowed children to remain within the school community on reduced fees, or opportunities to continue their musical development through alternative roles, such as junior choral scholar positions.

Good practice was observed where scheduling decisions were routinely discussed with school colleagues and boarding staff, reflecting a shared understanding that safeguarding responsibility extends beyond the music department. In these settings, staff demonstrated professional confidence in adjusting participation when children were fatigued, overwhelmed, or under academic pressure.

What distinguishes effective practice is transparency. Where expectations, timeframes, and potential outcomes are communicated early and clearly to both children and parents, anxiety is reduced and decision making feels fair.

Recommendations

Recommendation 3: Where chorister participation is linked to educational funding or school placement, cathedrals and partner schools should provide explicit written assurances that safeguarding concerns can be raised without adverse impact on educational access.

Recommendation 4: Cathedrals should develop a written framework outlining safeguarding considerations during voice change and transition, including pastoral support, communication with parents, supervision arrangements for vocal coaching, and pathways for continued inclusion where appropriate.

Physical Safety and Environment

Themes

Physical safety arrangements for choristers were generally robust across Year 2 audits. Controls around access to restricted areas were typically clear, supervision of movement between school and cathedral settings was well managed, and arrangements for visits and external performances were supported by proportionate risk assessments. In most settings, environmental safety was understood as a safeguarding priority.

Risk assessments reviewed during Year 2 were generally detailed and appropriately tailored to the context of cathedral environments, including events, public services, and touring. Year 2 findings also reinforced the complexity of managing public photography in high profile cathedral environments, however this was frequently thoughtfully managed.

Where boarding arrangements formed part of the model, handover, use of toilets and movement between settings were usually well coordinated. However, a recurring finding was the inconsistent visibility of age-appropriate safeguarding information in spaces regularly used by choristers, such as rehearsal rooms, robing areas, toilets and practice spaces. In conversation with an auditor about who they would go to if they had a concern, once chorister said: ***“I like the staff, but I’m shy and I don’t know how to speak to them.”***

This feedback highlights why this visibility matters. For some children, particularly those who are younger or less confident, accessible posters and clear visual reminders reduce reliance on initiating a direct conversation and make routes to support feel less intimidating.



Good Practice

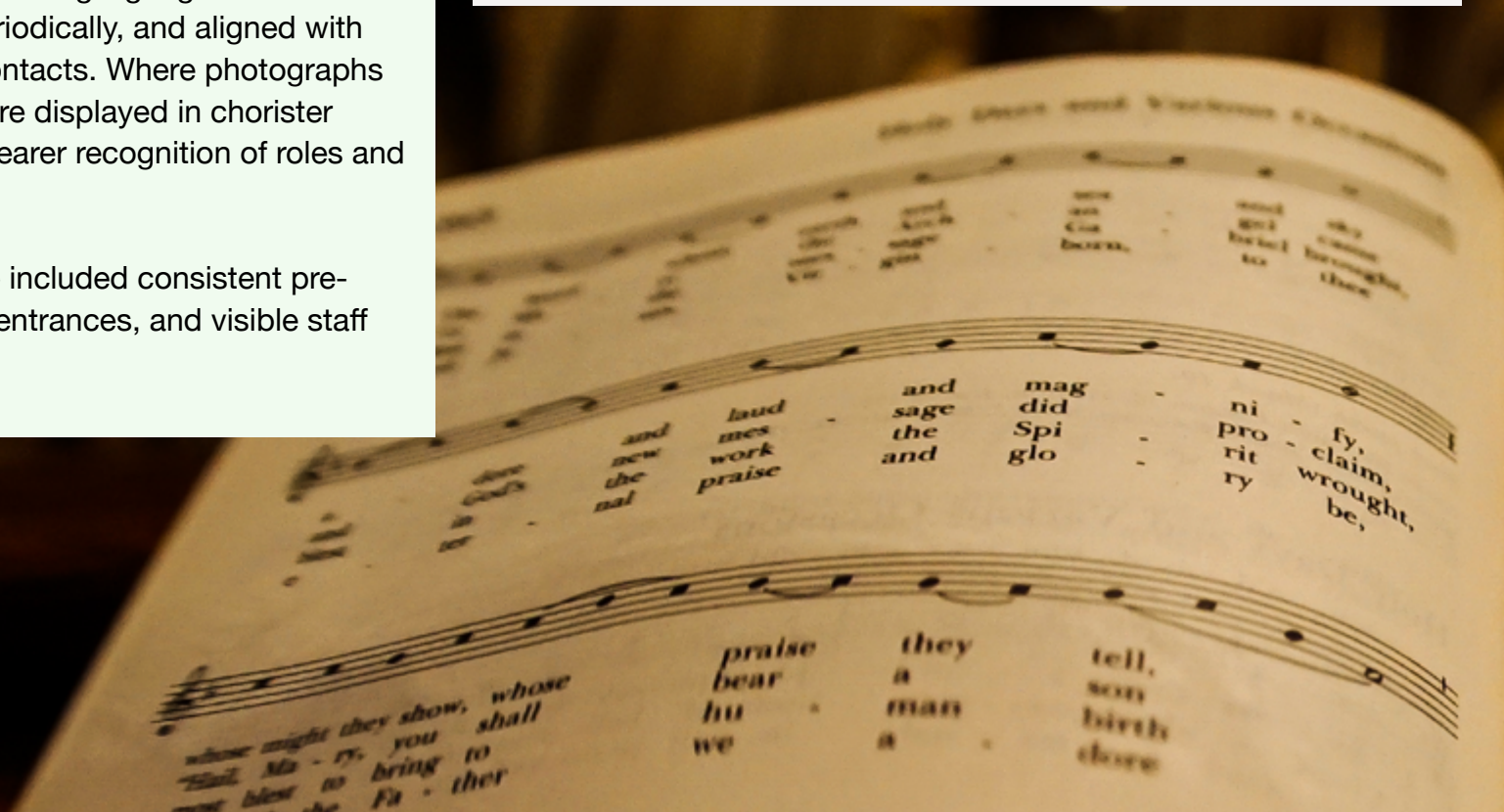
Particularly strong practice was identified where music departments actively involved choristers in developing safeguarding materials, including posters and reminder cards. This participatory approach strengthened understanding among choristers and reinforced the message that safeguarding is a shared responsibility rather than something done to children.

Effective settings also ensured that safeguarding signage was positioned at child eye level, refreshed periodically, and aligned with wider school or cathedral safeguarding contacts. Where photographs of safeguarding leads and chaperones were displayed in chorister specific spaces, children demonstrated clearer recognition of roles and routes to support.

In relation to photography, strong practice included consistent pre-service announcements, clear signage at entrances, and visible staff presence during high footfall events.

Recommendations

Recommendation 5: Cathedrals should engage young people in the development of age-appropriate safeguarding signage and ensure that information is consistently displayed in all chorister specific spaces, including chorister toilets, rehearsal rooms, robing areas, and is reviewed regularly for visibility and relevance.



Policies and Risk Management

Themes

Online safety also emerged as an area requiring clearer structure. In a small number of cathedral settings, online issues had arisen during rehearsals, trips and tours, including the misuse of images or older choristers inadvertently exposing younger to age-inappropriate content.

Approaches to device use within choir settings varied considerably. Some settings prohibited mobile phones during rehearsals, trips, or tours. Others permitted older children to retain devices whilst restricting access for younger choristers. In a small number of settings, devices were allowed with minimal restriction where few previous issues had arisen.

Given the extent to which the online world is embedded within children's daily lives, inconsistent or reactive approaches increase risk. Where phones are permitted, staff require sufficient understanding of online harm and escalation routes to act as a protective layer if concerns arise. Chorister settings are often perceived by children as an extension of school and as a consistent source of adult support. As such, safeguarding responsibilities must evolve in parallel with those within educational settings, including awareness of digital risk.

Good Practice

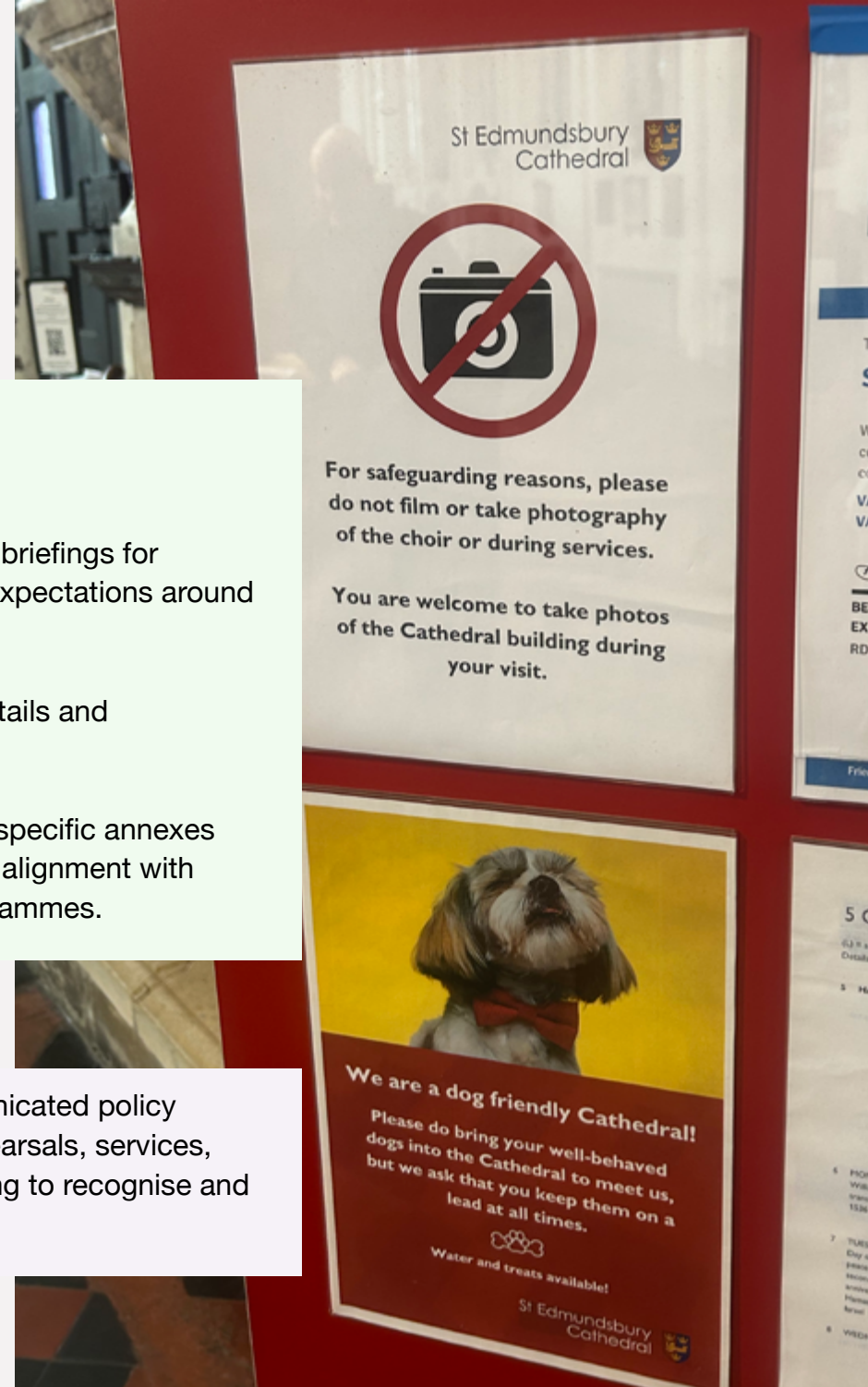
On trips and tours, effective settings implemented clear device agreements, pre tour briefings for choristers and parents, and designated supervision arrangements during free time. Expectations around image sharing and online conduct were discussed explicitly prior to departure.

The provision of lanyards or laminated safeguarding cards containing key contact details and behavioural expectations was highlighted as good practice.

Stronger policy frameworks were evident where cathedrals had developed chorister specific annexes or supplementary guidance to existing safeguarding policies. This approach ensures alignment with national policy whilst recognising the distinctive risks associated with chorister programmes.

Recommendations

Recommendation 6: Cathedrals should implement a clear and consistently communicated policy regarding mobile phone and device use during travel to and from the Cathedral, rehearsals, services, trips, and tours. Where devices are permitted, staff should receive appropriate training to recognise and respond to online safeguarding concerns.



Staff Training

Themes

It is important to note that a high proportion of chorister staff have undertaken Church of England safeguarding training and demonstrate commitment to safeguarding responsibilities. However, some staff reported that generic safeguarding training did not always feel directly relevant to the specific realities of chorister environments. Feedback indicated that more bespoke or context specific training would have been beneficial, particularly in relation to behaviour management, professional boundaries within close knit musical teams, online risks, and supporting neurodiverse children within high expectation settings.

Audits across Years 1 and 2 found behaviour management to be a consistent area of focus within chorister settings. In most settings, music staff are drawn primarily from professional musical backgrounds. Few have undertaken formal educational or safeguarding training outside of Church contexts. These staff become integral figures in choristers' lives, often acting not only as musical leaders but also as educators, caregivers, and pastoral supports. Junior members of staff, including organ scholars, gap students, and assistants, typically follow the direction and example set by senior music staff in how behaviour is managed and how pastoral challenges are addressed.

Whilst many individual staff demonstrate instinctive skill and commitment, Year 2 audits identified variability in approach. In some settings, behaviour management practices were largely shaped by the discretion of the most senior member of staff, with limited written guidance or shared framework. Feedback from choristers, parents and junior members of staff sometimes indicated that responses to behaviour were not always aligned with established educational best practice, particularly in relation to consistency, restorative approaches, and proportionality.

Neurodiversity is a recurring theme across choir environments. Chorister groups often include children with a range of additional needs, including ADHD, autism spectrum, dyslexia and other specific learning challenges. In a number of settings, the Audit identified that whilst staff were committed and well intentioned, there was limited formal understanding of neurodiversity and how this may present within high expectation musical environments. Where understanding is limited, there is a risk that behaviours may be misinterpreted as defiance or lack of effort, rather than as communication linked to unmet needs.

Good Practice

Strong practice was observed where behaviour expectations were clearly articulated, consistent across staff, and aligned with connected school policies. In these settings, choristers understood both the standards expected and the rationale behind them. Staff were able to explain how responses to behaviour were proportionate and rooted in safeguarding rather than solely in discipline.

Good practice in relation to neurodiversity was evident where staff demonstrated curiosity, flexibility, and willingness to adapt rehearsal structures or communication styles. In the strongest examples, adjustments were discussed proactively with schools and parents.

Recommendations

Recommendation 7: The National Safeguarding Team should consider developing or commissioning structured safeguarding and behaviour management training tailored specifically for chorister staff, including music directors, organ scholars, gap students, chaperones and assistants. This training should address pastoral response, educational good practice, and professional boundaries. This should form part of induction for new staff and ongoing development for existing staff.

Recommendation 8: The National Safeguarding Team should provide guidance and training to support the embedding of neurodiversity aware strategies within chorister environments. This should form part of induction for new staff and ongoing development for existing staff.

Recommendation 9: Cathedrals should develop or formalise a written behaviour framework for chorister settings, aligned where appropriate with connected school policies, to promote consistency, proportionality, and safeguarding oversight.

Conclusion

Year 2 findings demonstrate measurable progress across chorister safeguarding arrangements. There is clear evidence that many of the themes identified in the Year 1 Annual Report have been taken seriously at local level. Supervision structures are stronger, communication with schools is more formalised in many settings, and there is increasing confidence in recognising that safeguarding and musical excellence are not competing priorities but mutually reinforcing responsibilities. Where gaps exist, they are more often the result of structural inconsistency, limited contextual training, or reliance on informal practice rather than a lack of intent.

Year 2 also reinforces the importance of the national recommendations outlined in the 2024 Chorister Safeguarding Annual Report. Greater clarity through nationally articulated chorister specific safeguarding principles would provide stability and consistency across diverse cathedral contexts. Structured, contextually relevant training developed or commissioned by the National Safeguarding Team would alleviate pressure on music departments who are navigating complex pastoral, behavioural, and online safeguarding issues without always having access to specialist guidance tailored to their environment.



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