

Executive Summary

At the request of the Dicastery for Bishops a thorough investigation has been made into the events leading to the resignation of Bishop Robert Byrne from the office of Bishop of the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. Bishop Byrne resigned from office because he felt unable to carry out the duties of his office. During the course of the work, I have found no reason to disbelieve him.

I am not at liberty to put the full details of the investigation into the public domain as the report was not commissioned for publication. Instead, this overview is provided to answer some of the claims which have appeared in the media, and to set out key themes. I am grateful to all the priests, deacons, religious and laypeople who have commented on the issues that affected them during the time that Bishop Byrne was in office, including more than 2,000 who took the time to complete the survey. The survey results will be published in a separate document in due course; however, all the comments and outcomes have been considered in preparing the report.

There are four key issues identified in the report to the dicastery which had an impact on Bishop Robert's time as bishop, as follows:

- The covid pandemic
- The purchase of a new Bishop's House in August 2020
- The death by suicide of the Cathedral Dean, Canon Michael McCoy in April 2021
- Bishop Byrne's association with Fr Timothy Gardner OP.

There has been much commentary in mainstream and social media on events in the Diocese, which have been addressed during the report. Allegations that lewd parties took place at St Mary's Cathedral during the pandemic are simply untrue. What did happen is that following the sanitisation of the cathedral after permitted services the volunteers who carried this out were invited into the cathedral house for refreshments. On occasion after long days the volunteers were offered a take-away meal and a glass of wine. At the time, covid regulations were in force and a report was made to Northumbria Police, but no action was taken. Subsequently, as part of this investigation a further report has been made to the police, who once again decided to take no action. Bishop Byrne was not present at any of these gatherings.

The sale of Bishop's House at West Denton and the purchase of a replacement at Gosforth attracted publicity in the local, regional, and international media. Although the relocation realised a financial surplus it was considered by many priests, deacons, and people in the diocese to be an error of judgement. Gosforth is a middle-class area where property prices are high and out of reach for most people in the diocese. Bishop Byrne could have relocated to a property that served his and diocesan needs in a less conspicuous area at a lower cost. This would have been a sign of his willingness to come closer to his people.

The sad death by suicide of Canon Michael McCoy brought great sorrow to all those who knew him and had benefited from his many years of service to the diocese. During those years, there had been two occasions when Michael McCoy had been the subject of safeguarding plans regarding boundaries relevant to working with older teenagers. There had been no allegations of a sexual nature against Michael McCoy until April 2021. His death by suicide followed a visit by Northumbria Police saying that such an allegation had been made against him. In considering Michael McCoy's appointment to the Cathedral, Bishop Byrne had been notified from more than one source of the safeguarding issues. It was an error of judgement to then promote a priest with a safeguarding record to a high-profile position. Instead, Bishop Byrne could have paid greater heed to ensuring that Michael McCoy was appropriately managed given the safeguarding concerns which had been raised.

A further error of judgment occurred regarding Timothy Gardner, a member of the Dominican order, who is a convicted paedophile who Bishop Byrne has known for many years. They were seen associating together in public in Newcastle and it was known that Gardner was a frequent visitor at Bishop's House. Despite being advised by senior priests in the diocese that this was an inappropriate relationship Bishop Byrne insisted that it was a pastoral relationship and therefore appropriate and refused their advice. Bishop Byrne failed to understand the risks he was taking both for himself and the diocese.

During the investigation the issue of academisation of schools was brought to my attention. I am fully aware of the strongly held views on this topic, and the concerns that were raised during Bishop Byrne's tenure. Education is an important area of mission in this and all dioceses, and one which I will be looking into further in the coming months.

There are other matters that have emerged leading up to and following Bishop Byrne's resignation which are internal to the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle and are not directly of public interest. I do not propose to comment on these, save to say that there are no concerns in terms of governance or the operation of the Diocese.

The safeguarding review carried out by the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency is near completion and will be published in full in the next few weeks. I have been encouraged by the interim reports to date and am satisfied that safeguarding in the diocese is safe.

To conclude this summary, I emphasise that it was a succession of errors of judgement by Bishop Byrne that exacerbated the key issues above. In my view, he himself was unable to see a path forward, and his failure to see his part in these situations made clear his inability to cope with the demands of his role. Bishop Byrne's resignation was accepted by Pope Francis on 12 December 2022.

Archbishop Malcolm McMahon OP

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