

Conducting Risk Assessments: Parish stories

24 August 2021



We asked some of our parishes to share their experiences of conducting risk assessments for local events and programs and what they've learned from the process. We asked each of them to share:

- What group/program/event was the risk assessment was conducted for?
- How did you identify the risks and what controls did you implement?
- What words of advice can you offer parishes embarking on risk assessments for their own program/events?

Jacinta Bibby

Ringwood North Parish

Program: Winter Shelter for Men

Jacinta Bibby is the Pastoral Associate at Ringwood North Parish, where she has been for three years. She is also the Child Safety Coordinator, a position which involves ensuring that the parish is up to date and following the child safe standards of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne (CAM) and the Government.

The program that their parish conducted a risk assessment for was their men's only Winter Shelter where they provide shelter, food, mobile showers and entertainment (board games) to the homeless on Friday nights. As part of the program, the parish communicated to volunteers and the homeless their behavioural and health and safety expectations, e.g. no smoking inside, no fighting, no drugs and no alcohol.

The parish sought input from parishioners to help them identify potential risks of the Winter Shelter. The responses they received helped identify risks that the safeguarding committee hadn't initially considered and what new controls could be implemented. For example, there were concerns over left over cigarettes on the ground that a child could potentially ingest or touch. This led to the parish establishing a practice of volunteers performing a sweep for cigarette butts every morning after the Winter Shelter. Another consideration was whether children could be identified through pictures and artwork displayed in the facility where the parish held the Winter Shelter.

To manage this risk, the parish will now remove the pictures and artworks before the Winter Shelter begins and place them back up afterwards.

Jacinta advises other parishes to provide as much information and care to the community as possible. 'They can alert you to issues that you may not have thought of. Transparency is key. Don't think you'll get it right the first time. The safeguarding committee has gone through five (5) different iterations of the Winter Shelter risk assessment.'

Carmel McGrath

Mornington Parish

Event: Outdoor Christmas Mass 2020

Carmel McGrath is the Safeguarding Officer for the Mornington Parish where she has been involved in the safeguarding committee for more than a year. She says she hadn't had much experience with risk assessment but the materials provided by the Archdiocese have helped. 'We used materials promoted by the Professional Standards Unit (PSU) for risk assessments for our activities. We began with the matrix template – Fr Geoff provided to the Safeguarding Committee what he had previously used.'

In the lead up to Christmas 2020, the parish conducted a risk assessment for the provision of outdoor Mass. Carmel says the focus of the Safeguarding Committee was on the physical layout and location proposed for the Mass. The parish had to consider how it would use the outdoor area – how many people it could accommodate, how people would enter and leave, and the toilet facilities (there is only one toilet block). The parish ensured their COVID plan was in place and identified the need for first aid.

'There was even a live animal of a donkey as part of the Christmas re-enactment. Risks around this also had to be considered,' says Carmel. 'The other thing concerning us was it being holiday time and a lot of families we didn't know attending Mass.' The parish was also aware that some children and youth might be attending individually without parental supervision. 'Because we're a holiday town, we were concerned with people loitering in places they shouldn't have been as there were crowds.'

see overleaf>>

Because of the nature of the event – a Mass – the parish was keen not to come across as too authoritarian or to deter attendees. The parish placed invitations on the website and specified in the invitation to parents/families that all children had to have their parents with them or needed to be supervised by guardian.

The parish also organised supervisors for the Mass and ensured each supervisor had an up to date Working with Children Check (WWCC). ‘We formed a committee for the outdoor Mass and the safeguarding team were part of this committee and were very active.’

The parish also hired toilets and placed male and female supervisors who wore hi-vis vests to ensure they were identifiable to visitors. Specific entry points to the outdoor space were identified, with supervisors at each and parishioners checked off using a Trybooking registration list. ‘Using this system was very worthwhile,’ says Carmel. The parish also ensured that the first aid kit was visible and that all supervisors knew its location. Other considerations included checking that the sound system was clear enough for all gathered to hear any announcements, especially if there needed to be an evacuation. The parish also notified its neighbours of the event and the increase in local traffic.

Since the Christmas Mass, the parish has installed CCTV cameras onsite for security and added a defibrillator to its first aid kit.

Carmel says the experience of going through the risk assessment for the Christmas Mass has given the team the confidence to implement it for other programs and events. ‘We’re working a risk assessment template for the youth group.’ Conducting the risk assessments provided ‘good discussion about all of the “what ifs”,’ says Carmel. She says another positive has been the opportunity to share this risk assessment and experience with other parishes in the Peninsula Deanery. ‘We’re happy to share what we have done. The more you talk about it and see other examples, the more confident you become.’

Catherine Graham

Hoppers Crossing Parish

Ministry Group: Parish Counters

Catherine Graham is the Child Safety Officer at St Peter Apostle Mission Parish in Hoppers Crossing, where she has been working with the various parish ministry groups to complete risk assessments, including one for the counters of the offerings at Mass.

Catherine says the risk assessment process began with a consultation meeting with the counter supervisor to understand the ministry and identify risks. She says the interview helped clarify how the counting occurred. ‘This interview was conducted after broadly considering the two possible risks: child safety and fraud. The questions related to where the offerings were collected from (and if any children were present during this time), where the counting took place, who counted the money, who banked the money and if the volunteers were aware of child safety and had up to date WWCCs, signed code of conduct declarations and role descriptions.

Once the risks were identified, Catherine then reviewed the materials and requirements outlined by the Archdiocese and began exploring mitigation controls. One of the risks was a lack of awareness of child safety, and this risk required an assessment of how many volunteers were informed, how they were informed (e.g. parish website) and if they individually had a WWCC. This led to ensuring that all gaps relating to child safety documentation and screening were filled, and all volunteers received a role description, had their WWCC checked and signed a code of conduct declaration.

The consultation with the counter supervisor showed clearly that the risk to children was fully effective due to the location of the counting away from children at all steps in the process. These controls just required documentation. In terms of the potential for fraud, Catherine’s consultation showed that measures had been implemented in the past to ensure that the risk of fraud was minimised.

Once the risk assessment was complete it was sent for review by the parish priest and the counter supervisor, with the date of the next review scheduled. One question remains around when police checks are required and further consultation will be done with PSU.

Catherine suggests that parishes conduct their consultations with lead counters to find out what they do. ‘View the process through a child safety and a fraud lens and also check if there are any other risks, e.g. location of where counting takes place – is it a safe place for volunteers? Review the risks and ask how do you stop these happening – what gaps do you have? Work with the leader/ministry members to “fill the gaps” and then review your draft with the leader and others e.g. priest/child safety committee to see if you have missed anything.’

Catherine also encourages parishes undertaking risk assessments for the first time to use the resources available. ‘Don’t be afraid to train. The [CAM e-learning module](#) was invaluable.’

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