

Whistleblower lambasts bishop after warnings about promoting a former Sunderland priest were 'ignored'

A bishop who took early retirement after allegations of a child abuse cover-up has been heavily criticised by a whistle-blower who says her warnings were ignored.

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Angie Richardson, former head of safeguarding for the Catholic Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, says Bishop Robert Byrne ignored concerns about Canon Michael McCoy, a former priest at St Joseph's, St Anne's, St Benet's and Our Lady Queen of Peace Churches in Sunderland.

A coroner said McCoy, 57, took his own life in April 2021, four days after police had informed him of historic allegations of sexual abuse being made against him. He had been promoted by Byrne to Dean of St Mary's Cathedral, Newcastle.

The Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency (CSSA) found that Byrne had put young people at risk by ignoring professional advice.

Ignoring this advice, Byrne also continued his years-long association with Father Tim Gardner, a convicted paedophile.

Bishop Byrne was appointed by the Pope in February 2019. He resigned in December 2022 shortly after Ms

Richardson contacted the Charity Commission and the UK's papal nuncio (Vatican official).

McCoy was at St Joseph's between 2010 and his promotion in 2019. He was ordained in 1989.

Ms Richardson told the BBC: "The police contacted us to tell us there was an allegation. I took all the appropriate steps to withdraw Canon McCoy from ministry – and he sadly took his own life.

"That then became a bone of contention between myself and Bishop Robert Byrne, because he had been advised not to place Canon McCoy into the cathedral.

"I had also met with the bishop and discussed Canon McCoy's history, whereby it would clearly not be appropriate to put him into that role.

"Bishop Robert Byrne then continued forward by saying he had no knowledge of the history of Canon McCoy; and attempted to say that he did not know that, and so therefore placed him in the cathedral.

"(He said) he didn't have the knowledge, but he absolutely did.

"He constantly undermined recommendations and,

towards the end of my time in the diocese, I actually raised the concern that I didn't think he was fit to hear any safeguarding recommendations. Because ultimately the final decision sits with the bishop, we could only make recommendations.

"I do believe that there are some issues that remain within the diocese. I think they ought to focus more on transparency and honesty.

"I think there's a lack of accountability and I think overall the diocese have continued to protect the organisation – and haven't put the rights of victims and survivors at the forefront."

The Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, which includes Sunderland and County Durham, is currently overseen by Archbishop Malcolm McMahon of Liverpool.

He said: "This independent report was commissioned because the diocese is deeply committed to the highest standards of safeguarding and takes a zero-tolerance approach to abuse.

"The diocese accepts all of the recommendations to

improve safeguarding practices and to provide pastoral care and support, safety and protection to survivors. Together, we are committed to a safer safeguarding practice.

“I would kindly request your prayers for everyone in the diocese, particularly those harmed by abuse, as we continue on this path towards healing and renewal.”