

Policy and Guidance for the Church of England in the care of the spouses and partners of divorced and separated clergy

Policy summary

This policy sets out the responsibilities of bishops for the provision of Bishops Visitors to the spouses and partners of divorced and separated clergy. It provides a role description and person spec for Bishops Visitors and an outline of their duties. Finally, it provides guidance in terms of the provision of accommodation for spouses/partners.

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Introduction

The vocation to public ministry as an ordained minister of the Church is a high calling. It demands much of those who serve in its public representative ministry as deacons, priests and bishops. The nature of this calling is reflected in the ordination liturgy when candidates are asked if they will promise ‘to fashion their life and that of their household according to the way of Christ that they may be a pattern and example to Christ’s people’. Thus, for those who are married or in a civil partnership, this has significant implications for spouses, partners and children.

There is no single experience of this, but for most spouses and partners there is a mix that is both joyful and demanding. On the one hand, spouses and partners may be welcomed and integrated into a community with a sense of belonging and sharing with their partner in a common purpose at the heart of a community, living the joys and sorrows of its people. On the other hand, especially for those living in a church-provided house, the public life of the minister will impact on family life, for example as a lack of privacy or understanding of appropriate boundaries.

Clergy and their families are of course human, with fragilities, and not immune from the troubles and challenges of life and relationships. With the joys and the demands of ministry, it is of no surprise that sometimes clergy marriages and civil partnerships come under pressure and strain.

Given the demands of ministry, it is of course right that the Church, and its bishops, as its Chief Pastors, bear a responsibility to support clergy families. This support is witnessed through the bishops’ and their senior colleagues’ individual and personal ministry, the provision of support structures such as the many diocesan counselling services and the recent Covenant for Clergy Wellbeing. Notwithstanding this support, sometimes clergy marriages and civil partnerships will irrevocably break down and lead to separation.

The purpose of this policy and guidance is to set out for the bishops and the dioceses of the Church of England a framework for this task and to set out the responsibilities that the various parties involved bear, notably bishops and Diocesan Boards of Finance. It will also be important that the spouses and partners of divorced and separated clergy can be clear as to the pastoral, practical and spiritual support they can expect of the Church, and that there should be a parity of expectation and experience across all dioceses.

This is especially so for those who live in Church-provided accommodation for whom, while there is no duty in law to support, there is a pastoral imperative that care and assistance will be given, taking special account of the needs of dependent children bearing in mind that living in tied housing means that the spouse/partner is not subject to the usual rights under housing laws. The underlying aim here should be to provide practical support at what will inevitably be a time of some trauma and transition. This may include, where appropriate immediate financial support, over an appropriate period of time. The aim of this will be to help the spouse/partner in establishing a new safe, and appropriate home in line with the recommendations of the Archbishops’ commission on Housing, being careful not to encourage dependence but rather facilitate a transition to independence and the freedom that will bring.

Bishops will also have a particular need to exercise their responsibility to ensure the highest standards of safeguarding, especially in responding appropriately to any disclosure of domestic abuse.

The following guidance is therefore offered:

- The responsibilities of the diocesan bishop including the appointment and deployment of bishop's visitors to the spouses and partners of divorced and separated clergy
- A job description and person specification for Bishop's Visitors including details of required safeguarding training
- Guidance for diocesan secretaries and Diocesan Boards of Finance in exercising their care for the housing needs of spouses/partners of divorced and separated clergy

Lastly it is important to recognise that there will be occasions when there are also matters of clergy discipline that the Bishop will be considering. Such processes should be viewed separately from this policy and guidance as they should properly follow their own processes, but it should be recognised the impact such processes may have on spouses/partners and children.

We hope that in implementing this policy and guidance the spouses/partners of divorced and separated clergy can be confident in the care and support that can be expected and that the Church will demonstrate its proper responsibility to those who serve within its ministry and to their families in difficult times.

+Robert Tewkesbury
Lead Bishop for Bishop's Visitors

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to set out clear responsibilities for bishops and Bishops Visitors in terms of the care of the spouses and partners of divorced and separated clergy.

Policy

1. Responsibilities of The Diocesan Bishop

The Diocesan Bishop¹ must

- 1.1 Appoint at least two (and more in larger dioceses) Bishop's Visitors to the Spouses and Partners of Divorced and Separated Clergy (Bishop's Visitors). These are ideally lay appointments demonstrating a diversity of backgrounds, a balance of gender and a good geographical spread across the diocese.
- 1.2 Ensure that in discharging their responsibilities, bishops are mindful of the need to manage any conflicts of interest, and the Bishop's Visitor must always place the safety of any children first, and the spouse/partner if appropriate.
- 1.2 Ensure the Bishop's Visitors meet the requirements of the person specification in Sections 2 and 3. They should not be senior members of the clergy nor the spouses or partners of senior clergy of the diocese (bishop, dean, archdeacon or senior diocesan officer).
- 1.3 Inform the Hon Secretary to the Bishop's Visitors of the names and contact details of the Bishop's Visitors when an appointment is made.
- 1.4 Ensure Bishop's Visitors have access to and have completed the necessary Safeguarding Training and DBS checks.
- 1.5 Provide the Bishop's Visitor with a named supervisor who is a member of DBF staff² and who has the necessary pastoral skills to offer support.
- 1.6 Ensure that every clergy spouse or partner who has separated from or been divorced from their partner, or is in the process of separation or divorce, is offered the support of a named Bishop's Visitor and provided with their contact details. A record should be kept (in line with Data Protection principles) of any support offered, whether it was accepted or not.
- 1.7 With the agreement of the spouse or partner, pass their contact details to the Bishop's Visitors so they can be in touch directly.
- 1.8 Provide, via the diocesan website, details for a spouse/partner who is in process of divorcing or separating who wants to contact a Bishop's Visitor without the bishop's knowledge. Ensure that all spouses and partners are made aware of what support is available to them when they arrive in the diocese.

¹ Or Area/Suffragan Bishops where this has been delegated

² Supervision should be undertaken by an appropriately skilled and preferable senior cleric, for example Bishops Chaplain or equivalent. The term "supervision" is used here not to refer to any line management or accountability, but more as a pastoral support to the Bishops Visitor if they need it. Should it be felt the Bishop's Visitor will need professional support in terms of counselling, this should be provided.

- 1.9 Be available to the Bishop's Visitor should there be matters which the spouse/partner and Bishop's Visitor agree need to be brought to their attention.

2. Role Description for Bishop's Visitors

The role of the Bishop's Visitor is to support clergy spouse/partners in the event of a clergy marriage facing difficulties or coming to an end for any reason. The role is to support, help identify needs and provide signposting to ensure those needs are met. The role is not to provide advice. It must be recognised that "one size does not fit all", and that clergy spouses/partners will have very different needs according to their own situation, and these needs may change during the course of the engagement.

If appropriate, the Bishop's Visitor should encourage any spouse or partner who has not advised the bishop of their circumstances of their marriage to do so, but they must not themselves disclose this to the bishop unless agreed in writing.

Role Description:

- 2.1 Support the spouse/partner at the time of the breakdown of the marriage.
- 2.2 Identify with the spouse/partner any additional pastoral needs or other needs they have, eg housing, spiritual, independent financial advice, therapeutic and signpost them to a person (or service) qualified to provide this.
- 2.3 Meet with the spouse/partner as often as the spouse/partner wants in the short term, and agree a plan with them for immediate and medium term actions. In some circumstances, this will include identifying what income is expected, where they will live, and providing help to access financial support from charities or applying for benefits.
- 2.4 Inform the spouse/partner of their rights, including that of attending public worship. In certain circumstances, the clergy spouse/partner may be subject to a Safeguarding Agreement, and this will place restrictions on their worship in order to keep themselves, their former spouse/partner and others safe. Where this does not apply, every effort should be made to ensure the spouse/partner can continue to worship within a supportive community, according to their wishes.
- 2.5 Be alert to risk of any nature to the spouse/partner and any children in the immediate aftermath of exiting an abusive relationship.
- 2.6 Report to the DSA/CSA immediately any concerns for the safety of the spouse/partner and any children. If the spouse/partner or child(ren) is/are at immediate risk, report to the police.
- 2.7 Maintain contact with the appointed supervisor (see 1.5) especially when involved in actively supporting a spouse or partner.

- 2.8 Attend all mandated [safeguarding training](#) and at all times follow the [safeguarding practice guidance](#) mandated by the House of Bishops.
- 2.9 Make an annual return to the Hon Secretary to the Bishops Visitors detailing the number only of new contacts and the total number of those being supported.
- 2.10 Plan, together with the spouse/partner, a strategy for the reduction and ceasing of active support, including where further support is available for medium and longer term needs.
- 2.11 Be aware of, and at all times operate within, Data Protection and Information Sharing requirements.

3. Person Specification for Bishop's Visitors

- 3.1 Willingness and aptitude to undertake the role, attend the relevant training and undertake their own development in the field of safeguarding.
- 3.2 Ability to respect boundaries and offer unbiased support without offering specialist advice.
- 3.3 Understanding confidentiality in respect of safeguarding issues, when it is appropriate to contact statutory services and when and how information can be shared.
- 3.4 Ability to actively listen and to recognise trauma.
- 3.5 Experience of working with individuals and families who have experienced trauma, or working with individuals and families to resolve difficult situations and conflict.
- 3.6 Knowledge of local statutory and third sector services an advantage.
- 3.7 Understanding of Church of England structures generally, and the local diocese specifically.
- 3.8 Ability to work alongside Senior Leaders in an independent capacity, ensuring the voice of the spouse/partner is heard.
- 3.9 Ability to be mobile within the diocese at short notice and to be available at unsociable hours if required.

4. Housing for Spouses and Partners in Church-provided Accommodation

The bishop has a pastoral responsibility to the spouse/partner and dependants of clergy in his or her diocese. In the event of a clergy marriage/partnership breakdown where the spouse or partner was living in church-provided property, this will mean a responsibility to ensure that the spouse/partner and dependants have a safe, appropriate home to live in, as described in the Archbishop's Commission on Housing, at least in the short and medium term. The long-term aim would be to work to independent housing, either by buying their own property or through housing association provision.

Being required by the church to live in tied housing leaves the spouse/partner in a difficult legal position regarding housing following a relationship breakdown; unlike a normal tenancy, the spouses cannot simply agree that one will take it. Local authorities will usually advise people who need housing, especially those with dependent children and where there is no risk, to stay where they are. It is important for all concerned to understand that moving out of accommodation, even that tied to their spouse/partner's employment, voluntarily, will result in a local authority determining that the person had made themselves voluntarily homeless, thus compromising the statutory support to which the spouse/partner might otherwise have been entitled. Clergy housing is provided to clergy "for the better performance of their duties", hence it may not always be possible for the member of clergy to leave, other than for a temporary period with the permission of the Diocesan Bishop. Help with securing alternative accommodation might be necessary if the spouse/partner is willing, forced or required as a result of a court order to leave the house.

Although the numbers of clergy spouses/partners and families needing support with housing when a marriage or partnership breaks down are not large, in cases involving safeguarding concerns or allegations of domestic abuse there is often a need to respond quickly, especially where children are involved.

Circumstances vary widely. The assistance required by a family consisting of a cleric with a non-earning spouse/partner and several young children will be different from that needed by a couple in their 60s with no dependent children, both earning, and owning a house of their own. It is important not to make assumptions about the different needs of clergy spouses/partners and to recognise even where a clergy spouse/partner may have shared ownership of alternative housing, such houses may be either rented out, in the wrong location for work/schools or not immediately available, and short-term help may still be necessary.

Each diocese will need to make its own arrangements, depending on its own resources and the circumstances of each particular case, with the Bishop's Visitor acting as a point of contact between the spouse/partner and the DBF to provide advice and pastoral support. The main form of assistance is advisory, including helping the spouse/partner to access specialist help, for example, legal, housing, etc.

In relation to housing, the following support could be provided depending on the circumstances of the clergy spouse /partner:

1. In cases of allegations of domestic abuse, the aim is to provide information and support to the clergy spouse/partner to enable them to identify a temporary place of safety or access 'refuge' accommodation. If there is a suggestion of any safeguarding concerns, including domestic abuse, then the Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser must be advised and be part of the discussion about the steps that should be taken in the specific case.
2. Assist the clergy spouse/partner to find and secure affordable private rented accommodation which meets the Archbishops' Commission on Housing criteria of being safe, stable, satisfying, sociable and sustainable. This may involve:-
 - a. Support from the Diocesan Surveyor and or Property Department in undertaking a property search and support with property viewing and tenancy arrangements.
 - b. Providing a grant to cover rent deposit.
 - c. The DBF acting as rent guarantor for an initial 6 to 12 month period for an assured shorthold tenancy.
3. Should there be a suitable DBF property available, offer a let on an assured shorthold tenancy at market rent or Universal Credit housing allowance cap level. Care will be needed in drawing up the tenancy to ensure that the house can be used if it is needed for the better performance of the duties of a clergy office holder or if the circumstances of the clergy spouse or partner change.
4. Assist the clergy spouse/partner to find and secure a property to purchase. This may involve:-
 - a. Support from the Diocesan Surveyor and or Property Department in undertaking a property search and support with property viewing, advising on suitability and market value or appropriate level of offer.
 - b. The Diocesan Surveyor undertaking a house purchasers survey.
 - c. Providing information on conveyancing firms.

It might also be possible for a DBF to provide an interest-free transitional loan while the spouse/partner is waiting for Universal Credit.

Approval and review

Approved by	House of Bishops
Policy owner	Bishop of Tewkesbury
Policy author	Bishop of Tewkesbury
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Review date	10.2024

Revision history

Version no.	Revision date	Previous revision date	Summary of changes
1	15.10.21	N/A	First Approval

Related policies and procedures

This policy works in conjunction with and is supported by a number of other policies and documents including those shown below:

- All House of Bishops Safeguarding Guidance
- All Information Sharing/Data Protection Guidance and agreements