

Identification of clergy as key workers during the corona virus pandemic

23 March 2020

Briefing for Clergy in the Diocese of Exeter

Context

Schools and childcare providers have been asked by the Government to continue to provide care for a limited number of children, including those whose parents are critical to the Covid-19 response and cannot be cared for safely at home. The list includes vulnerable children who are supported by social care, those with safeguarding and welfare needs, including child in need plans, on child protection plans, 'looked after' children, young carers, disabled children and those with education, health and care (EHC) plans.

On 19th March 2020, the Government published a list of categories of workers whose children will be prioritised. It includes "religious staff" (within the category of key public services) – such as parish clergy and chaplains whose work is critical to the Covid-19 response, not least in terms of funeral provision. The term is ambiguous, but designed to include other faiths. The full text of the announcement is below: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>

Current situation

School leaders are collaborating across Multi-Academy Trusts, Federations and geographic areas to combine their resources, where possible, to provide this care and educational provision during the Government imposed 'shut down' of normal school opening. CofE schools are active in these discussions and will ensure that every child of a key worker, whose parent requests it, will have a space allocated to them. The coordination of this is being managed by Local Authorities as they carry the statutory safeguarding responsibilities. The Diocesan Education Team will support schools in collaborating in order to minimise the impact on any individual school.

It is likely that over the coming months, an increasing number of demands will fall to local clergy. The Government's guidance on social distancing and self-isolation, especially for those over 70 or with underlying health conditions, and on the avoidance of unnecessary travel, will reduce the pool of those clergy able to minister pastorally and to officiate at funerals. Younger clergy (being less at risk) may well be best placed to add capacity within a deanery and archdeaconry. Some of these clergy will have school-age children. It will be important for local continuity of provision to be assured throughout the Diocese.

The Government Guidance specifies: 'If workers think they fall within the critical categories above, they should confirm with their employer that, based on their business continuity arrangements, their specific role is necessary for the continuation of this essential public service.' As clergy are office-holders rather than employees, an analogous procedure will be used. Following national guidance, it will be the responsibility of the bishops to authorise such clergy.

Accordingly, parish clergy who require continuous childcare and education provision for their child(ren) and thus need to be designated as 'key workers' should email their Suffragan Bishop, acting in place of an 'employer' under the Guidance. Bishop Nick or Bishop Jackie will then need to confirm that the role of the member of clergy concerned is necessary for the continuation of the service provided by the Church of England in the Diocese. (Sector chaplains working under a contract of employment in schools, hospitals, etc. should seek confirmation directly from their employer.)

Looking ahead

We have been advised that the designation should be used wisely and sparingly. We are also conscious that local circumstances will change and we are confident that school places will be found for clergy seeking this provision at a later date. The Diocesan Education Team are available to support local discussions if necessary, but in the opinion of John Searson, the Diocesan Director of Education, schools will be very willing to show their support for the important work that the clergy are undertaking at this time of crisis. Over the next few months, we will be keeping the designation 'key worker' under review to maximise flexibility because Government guidance is constantly changing. Our view, as advised by the Education Team, is that members of the clergy, with school-age children, who cannot otherwise be cared for appropriately at home by the other parent or another suitable adult, should be able to request this designation with confidence.

+ Robert Exon