

3. Domestic Abuse

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This section sets out some general advice for Church Officers on how to identify and how to initially respond to domestic abuse. More detailed procedural Guidance on when and how to respond is available in [Responding to, assessing and managing safeguarding concerns or allegations against church officers](#); [Responding to safeguarding concerns or allegations that relate to children, young people and vulnerable adults](#), and [Responding Well to Victims and Survivors of Abuse](#).

3.1 Definition

The Government definition of domestic abuse is currently^[1]:

“Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members^[2] regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse:

- psychological
- physical
- sexual
- financial
- emotional

Controlling behaviour is: a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.

Coercive behaviour is: an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.'

The Government definition, which is not a legal definition, includes so called 'honour' based violence, female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced marriage, and is clear that victims are not confined to one gender or ethnic group.”^[3]

3.2 Context

3.2.1

Domestic abuse is a widescale problem, and the reporting of abuse has increased during the 2020 periods of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic^{[4],[5]}. There is a clear need in society for a cultural change with regard to the perception of domestic abuse, and it is important to embed this into every aspect of Church life. This includes the Church being a “safe space” for people to disclose. The Church should raise awareness through sermons and teach children and young people about healthy relationships.

3.2.2

Research^[6] carried out with 438 congregation members in Cumbria found that one in four (109 individuals) had experienced at least one abusive behaviour in their current relationship. More broadly, 42.2% of the whole sample had experienced at least one of the abusive behaviours in a current or previous relationship. More importantly, while 71.3% of the sample were aware of domestic abuse in their community, only 37.6% thought it was a problem in their church. The perception that domestic abuse is not as common within a church congregation as the community is a false one and can discourage victims/survivors from seeking help. The study reports:

“One in six men and one in four women who answered this question had sought support from a church. In just over half of cases, the response received was supportive, and primarily took the form of emotional support/a listening ear. However, there were also examples of dangerous practice and disclosures of domestic abuse being minimised or silenced”

There is therefore a wide variety of scenarios where Church Officers may need to deal with a disclosure of domestic abuse. This section highlights initial responses to each of these scenarios, the more detailed procedural Guidance on when and how to respond is available in [Responding to safeguarding concerns or allegations that relate to children, young people and vulnerable adults practice guidance 2018](#), [Responding to, assessing and managing safeguarding concerns or allegations against church officers](#) and [Responding Well to Victims and Survivors of Abuse](#)

3.2.3

Challenging inappropriate behaviours, being alert to the signs of possible abuse, and knowing what to do should such issues arise are the most important things the Church can do to keep people safe. It is good practice to have freely available information and phone numbers for local and national helplines, hostels and refuges.

3.3 How can Domestic Abuse be recognised?

Indications in a Church setting that someone may be a victim of domestic abuse could include: ^[7]

Productivity signs

- Change in the person's working patterns: for example, frequent absence, lateness or needing to leave work early;
- Reduced quality and quantity of work: missing deadlines, a drop in usual performance standards;
- Change in the use of the phone/email: for example, a large number of personal calls/texts, avoiding calls or a strong reaction to

calls/texts/emails;

- Spending an increased amount of hours at work for no reason.

Changes in behaviour or demeanour

- Conduct out of character with previous employment history or social engagement;
- Changes in behaviour: for example, becoming very quiet, anxious, frightened, tearful, aggressive, distracted, depressed;
- Isolating themselves from colleagues or friends;
- Obsession with timekeeping;
- Secretive regarding home life;
- Worried about leaving children at home.

Physical signs

- Visible bruising or single or repeated injury with unlikely explanations;
- Change in the pattern or amount of make-up used;
- Change in the manner of dress: for example, clothes that do not suit the climate which may be used to hide injuries;
- Substance use/misuse;
- Fatigue/sleep disorders.

Other signs

- Partner or ex-partner following employee in or around the workplace or Church setting or repeatedly turning up at the workplace or Church setting;
- Partner or ex-partner exerting unusual amount of control or demands over work schedule or social activities;
- Flowers/gifts sent to employee for no apparent reason;
- Isolation from family/friends.

3.4 Dealing with domestic abuse within the congregation

3.4.1

If domestic abuse is suspected, and it is safe and appropriate to do so, a general wellbeing question such as “How are things going?” can be asked. There may be no response forthcoming, as it may take a while for the individual to disclose. It is particularly the case that men and those in the LGBTQI+ community are more reluctant to disclose they are being abused^[8]. Therefore, it is important to have available information for confidential reporting lines such as www.mensadviceline.org.uk, Domestic Abuse – Galop and www.womensaid.org.uk.

3.4.2

If a disclosure is made that someone is a victim of domestic abuse, there are some key factors to remember in addition to those set out in Responding Well to Victims and Survivors

Do:

- Call 999 if the person or any children are in, or appear to be in, immediate danger, or if there are any concerns about their safety.
- Listen and accept what is being said, no matter who the allegation is being about or by whom it is being made.
- Encourage the person disclosing to seek help themselves, and offer support to help them with that. This could be via their GP, or one of the organisations listed above.
- Confirm that the abuse is not their fault, no matter what they have been told by their abuser and, if necessary, assure them the marriage covenant is broken by the abuse, not the reporting of it.
- Make a note of what was said^[9], record any visible injuries and pass this information onto the PSO or DSA/CSA as soon as possible.

Do not:

- Put yourself at risk – call 999 if this is required.
- Engage in any way with the person who is the alleged abuser, and specifically do not tell them the location of the victim.
- Offer any form of counselling or mediation, or encourage reconciliation.
- Allow religion to be used to excuse violent behaviour.
- Offer them emergency accommodation (assuming appropriate emergency accommodation is available) without informing the police and receiving assurance that it is safe to do so.

3.5 Ongoing pastoral issues

3.5.1

Once the immediate situation has been resolved, Church Officers will need to look at the longer-term support of the individuals involved. Where both individuals wish to continue to attend church, consideration will need to be given to ensuring they can attend different services. It may be the case that one individual will need to be accommodated at another church. Both individuals will need support, noting that one person cannot support both parties, and input from others may be required. This may require the sharing of information, and this needs to be made clear to all parties. Anyone supporting a victim/survivor or a perpetrator should have undergone the Church of England domestic abuse training.

3.5.2

If Church Officers are aware of any formal restrictions around alleged abusers (such as safeguarding agreements or restraining orders) they should ensure that their behaviour supports rather than undermines those restrictions. This may come from information being shared by other agencies, or by prior personal engagement.

3.5.3

Where the issue has not met the level of requiring a statutory intervention, there is a need for those with knowledge of the situation to remain vigilant, to remain open to offering support and to ensure that information on relevant support services is placed in locations where they can be easily accessed without generating attention. The DSA/CSA will be able to advise on the best way to support both parties in these scenarios. This may involve the use of a Domestic Abuse Specialist where one is available, and will require information to be appropriately shared.

3.6 Employees and volunteers who are alleged perpetrators

If a Church employee or volunteer is accused of being abusive towards their partner, ex-partner or family member, the immediate process to be followed is set out in the [Responding to, assessing and managing safeguarding concerns or allegations against church officers](#).

Once the immediate risk has been dealt with, there remain important considerations to be made. Neither employees nor volunteers should be treated any differently to other alleged perpetrators. However, employees will need to be dealt with under the relevant HR provisions regarding committing offences, and HR advice must be sought at the earliest opportunity, and agreement reached as to who will be leading the case.

Volunteers will need to be dealt with according to the terms of their Volunteer Agreement. There is a duty to refer individuals to the DBS in certain circumstances, for more information refer to the [Safer Recruitment and People Management Guidance](#).

3.7 Employees and volunteers who are victims

These should be treated in the same way as anyone else reporting domestic abuse, but in addition, the Church has specific responsibilities as an employer, and the Church of England has developed a [toolkit](#) to assist with this.

3.8 Clergy and clergy spouses/partners

Clergy marriages/civil partnerships are not free from abuse, and clergy and their spouses can be both victims and perpetrators. Each of these situations may require a slightly different response. Every Diocesan Bishop is required to offer a Bishop's Visitor to the spouse/partner when a clergy marriage/partnership breaks down and there is separation for any reason, not just in the case of domestic abuse. Clergy and clergy spouses/partners should expect to be taken seriously and treated with respect by their Bishop when disclosing abuse and should be supported by the Bishop should they wish to separate or divorce. Clergy and clergy spouses/partners are entitled to at least the same level of treatment and support as any other person disclosing abuse, given the often public nature of their relationship.

3.8.1 Members of clergy who are victims

As with all allegations of abuse, priority must be given to the safety of the victim and any children, and ensuring they have alternative accommodation provided for them. This may mean moving them temporarily from the property where they, as a member of clergy, have a right to live. The priority then becomes planning for the alleged perpetrator to be removed from the property, in order that the member of clergy (and any children) can return safely. As well as the safety and support for all parties involved, this is a complex situation and advice must be sought from the Diocesan Secretary and/or Registrar at the earliest opportunity, as well as potentially other agencies. This will require information to be appropriately shared, and the victim must be made aware of this.

3.8.2 Clergy spouses/partners who are victims/survivors

As with all allegations of abuse, priority must be given to the safety of the victim and any children, and ensuring they have alternative accommodation provided for them. There is growing awareness that this is an under reported type of abuse[\[10\]](#), which can happen anywhere in any denomination. This group has historically experienced a refusal to believe their disclosures, or to appreciate their particular circumstances. This includes the power imbalance in the relationship which makes it more difficult for the spouse to seek help. In addition to the general principles of responding well to allegations, there are specific issues which must be considered in these circumstances.

Aside from any immediate risk to their safety or that of their children, clergy spouses/partners can find themselves homeless, in considerable financial distress and separated from their regular worshipping community when having to leave an abusive relationship. The Church needs to

ensure it helps a clergy spouse/partner find suitable accommodation to allow them to leave an abusive relationship. This may include a period of “exit planning” with statutory agencies, requiring the sharing of information. As far as possible, and if that is what they wish, the clergy spouse/partner should be supported in maintaining their existing support network, and risks may need to be managed to facilitate this. The Bishop’s Visitor should be able to provide advice and signposting where this is required.

Clergy spouses/partners are particularly vulnerable to spiritual abuse. Section 4.2 sets out how to respond well to spiritual abuse, and the Bishop’s Visitor will need to take a lead role in supporting the spouse/partner to reintegrate them back into the congregation, or even into a new one. It is also likely that there may be an imbalance of power in a clergy relationship which makes it more difficult for the victim to come forward, and indeed they may not be able to do so until they have left the relationship.

3.8.3 Members of clergy who are perpetrators

Those members of clergy who are alleged to have carried out domestic abuse will be subject to the processes set out in [Responding to, assessing and managing safeguarding concerns or allegations against church officers](#).

3.9 Role of the Bishop’s Visitor

Specifically in the event of a clergy marriage/partnership ending due to domestic abuse, the safeguarding role of a Bishop’s Visitor^[11] is to:

- Support the victim/survivor of abuse who is a clergy spouse or partner.
- Identify with the victim/survivor any additional pastoral needs or other needs they have, and take advice as to how these may be best met.
- Meet with the victim/survivor as often as the victim/survivor wishes in the short term, and support the victim/survivor to plan their next steps.
- Be alert to risk of any nature to the victim/survivor and any children in the immediate aftermath of exiting the abusive relationship.
- Report to the DSA/CSA immediately any concerns for the safety of the victim/survivor and any children.

The Bishop’s Visitor should be seen as an addition to, not a replacement for, the Support Person, who should also be offered where required.

See Responding Well to Victims and Survivors of Abuse for further information.

^[1] At time of writing, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 has been passed, but much is not yet in force. The Act can be found at [Domestic Abuse Act 2021 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#). This will create a statutory definition of domestic abuse, emphasising that domestic abuse is not just physical violence, but can also be emotional, coercive or controlling, and economic abuse. This guidance will be updated as relevant sections are brought into

force.

[2] [Family members are: mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister & grandparents; directly-related, in-laws or step-family.](#)

[3] [Information for Local Areas on the change to the Definition of Domestic Violence and Abuse \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

[4] [UK lockdown: Calls to domestic abuse helpline jump by half - BBC News](#)

[5] [Covid 19: Increase in parents abused by children in lockdown - BBC News](#)

[6] [churches_web.pdf \(contentfiles.net\)](#)

[7] https://www.freefromfear.wales/sites/www.freefromfear.wales/files/responding_to_colleagues_experiencing_domestic_abuse.pdf

[8] [Afraid to Come Forward: Why Men Don't Report Domestic Violence - Break The Silence Against Domestic Violence](#)

[\(breakthesilencedv.org\)](#)

[9] Keep this note factual, as it may be disclosed to the individual as part of a Subject Access Request. For more information on receiving a disclosure, see Responding Well to Victims and Survivors.

[10] [Raped, tracked, humiliated: Clergy wives speak out about domestic violence - ABC News \(Australian Broadcasting Corporation\)](#)

[11] For further information on Bishops Visitors, please see the [revised Guidance](#)

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