

GENERAL SYNOD

REDUCE PAROCHIAL FEES FOR MARRIAGES

1. This note provides the policy background on how parochial fees are set and an illustration of the potential financial implications if parochial fees were to be set at nil or at a minimal amount as stated in the motion from the Blackburn Diocesan Synod.

Background

2. The principles for setting the level of parochial fees were contained in GS 1813 and approved by the General Synod in 2011. In summary the principles are as follows:
 - Fees should be justifiable on the basis of some relationship to the actual costs incurred, taking account of real costs that cover most situations, for example training and paying clergy and maintaining church buildings.
 - There should be uniformity in the main fees specified so that people do not have to pay a different amount simply because their parish happens to be a particularly grand or costly building.
 - Extras charged by the parish should only apply where there is a genuine choice, for example music, bells flowers, additional printing, with all that is actually necessary for the service to take place being included in the statutory fee.
 - Whilst fees help offset the real costs of church buildings and authorised ministry, they need to be affordable and not set at a level that suggests the Church is trying to make money from its ministry. They should be a reasonable contribution towards the costs incurred and there should continue to be a right of waiver for those who cannot afford them.
3. The Ecclesiastical Fees Measure 1986 provides for the parochial fees payable to Diocesan Boards of Finance (DBFs) and Parochial Church Councils (PCCs) to be prescribed by a Parochial Fees Order for up to five years. Increases within the period covered by a Fees Order can be prescribed by reference to a published index of price or earnings increases.
4. The element of parochial fees payable to PCCs reflects the costs of maintaining the church and the secretarial / administrative work that is undertaken. The element of parochial fees payable to DBFs reflects the fact that the DBF is responsible for funding stipend and associated costs and housing costs of the clergy. So paragraph 8 of GS 2282A presents an incomplete picture of the impact of setting the fees relating to marriage at nil or a minimal level. Far from dioceses being able to help mitigate the position for those PCCs which saw reduced income, DBFs would need to aim to increase their income by raising parish share or by other means, reduce their expenditure or for a period draw on their reserves.

Current fee levels

5. The present level of parochial fees are determined by the Parochial Fees and Scheduled Matters Amending Order 2019 which was debated by the General Synod in February 2019¹. This Order prescribed the parochial fees payable for the period 1st January 2020 to 31st December 2024 in connection with marriages, funerals and burials and the erection of monuments in churchyards and in respect of other, miscellaneous matters. It is expected that a request will be made to the Business Committee for a debate on a new Fees Order in February 2024.
6. The parochial fee levels for 2022 are set out in a table on the Church of England website which is based on the 2020 levels set out in the 2019 Order, increased in line with CPI as also stipulated in the Order. The current fee for a marriage service in Church is £480: £262 of this is payable to the Parochial Church Council of the church in which the service takes place and the remaining £218 is payable to the Diocesan Board of Finance.
7. These fee levels are calculated to include the following:
 - a clergy element (derived from the Central Stipend Authority's 'cost of clergy calculation' and the Ministry Development Team's methodology for arriving at the cost of clergy training)
 - a church maintenance element (taken from the Data Team's figures derived from parish returns)
 - a secretarial rate (derived from publicly available information).

The potential impact of reducing marriage fees to nil or a minimal amount

8. Parochial fees are a significant source of income for all dioceses and many PCCs. In 2019 it is estimated² that income across the Church from parochial fees totalled £59.8m. £37.3m of this income was received by PCCs and £22.5m by DBFs recognising that DBFs are responsible for meeting the cost of stipends, pension contributions, employers' national insurance contributions and housing for stipendiary clergy. It is estimated that around a quarter of these fees related to marriages.
9. Taking account of the prescribed fee levels and the number of Life Events services reported in Statistics for Mission 2019 suggests that fees were waived for about 5% of such services (the Archbishops' Council's advice is that fees should only be waived in cases of clear financial hardship, but we do not know to what extent this is acted on). We have no data with which to estimate the balance between waiver for marriage services and funerals.

¹ See (GS 2116)

² Source: diocesan financial statements and Parish Finance Statistics 2019

10. If it is assumed that the number of marriage services remains at the 2019 level and that fees are waived for 5% of services then based on the 2022 fee levels the associated fees would be £15.7m: £9.2m would be payable to PCCs and £6.5m to DBFs. These figures would be 0.9% of the aggregate of 2019³ PCC incomes of £1,071m and 1.3% of aggregate 2019 DBF incomes of £495m.
11. If the marriage fee was reduced to nil it is possible that the net income lost to the Church would be less than the £15.7m identified above as some couples may choose to make a donation in lieu of the fee. Clearly if the fee was reduced to a 'minimal level' the income loss would be reduced. For example if the fee was reduced to £100, just over 20% of the current level, on the assumptions above the income loss to the Church is estimated at £12.4m: £7.2m for PCCs and £5.2m for DBFs.

The parochial fee for a marriage service in the context of total expenditure on weddings

12. It is suggested that a wholesale elimination or reduction of the fee would be a poorly targeted intervention as many couples can afford to pay the fee which represents a small proportion of the overall cost of their wedding. The income lost from setting the fee to nil or a nominal amount reduces the resource available to fund ministry, including in the poorest areas – at a time when many dioceses and PCCs are facing deficits.
13. Sources show a wide range of views on the average cost of a wedding in the UK. A Google search provides a range of figures of £17,300; £24,000 and £30,000. The source of the latter figure also provides figures described as 'lower range' (£6,275), median (£29,870) and 'upper range' (£67,600). One source also listed the top ten areas of expenditure - including venue hire, food, drink, honeymoon, rings, photography and video - all of which were at least double the cost of the marriage fee.
14. Whilst there is wide variation in the total cost of a wedding depending on a myriad of personal choices and financial circumstances, it is clear that in a large majority of cases the fee for the marriage service represents a small proportion of the total costs. Reducing the fee for a marriage service would benefit all those who would currently opt to have a marriage service in church, many of whom are able to afford the fee in the context of the total cost of their wedding.
15. The Ecclesiastical Fees Measure 1986 includes a provision for an incumbent / priest in charge (or where there is no such person, the rural dean) to waive or reduce the fee payable to the DBF "in a particular case." The Archbishops' Council recommends that in considering whether to waive or reduce the fee the incumbent / priest in charge should have regard to any diocesan guidelines on the matter. As stated in GS 2282A, in some cases this will mean seeking the Archdeacon's permission for the waiver.

³ 2019 aggregate income figures are used as 2020 was impacted by the pandemic and 2021 figures are not yet available

16. The incumbent/priest in charge (or where there is no such person, the rural dean⁴) also has a right, after consulting the churchwardens of the parish, to waive any fee payable to the PCC “in a particular case”. The Archbishops’ Council’s advice is that the power to waive fees should only be exercised in cases of clear financial hardship.

William Nye, Secretary General

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⁴ This includes area deans: the legislation uses the term rural dean.