

GENERAL SYNOD

Code of Conduct

Summary

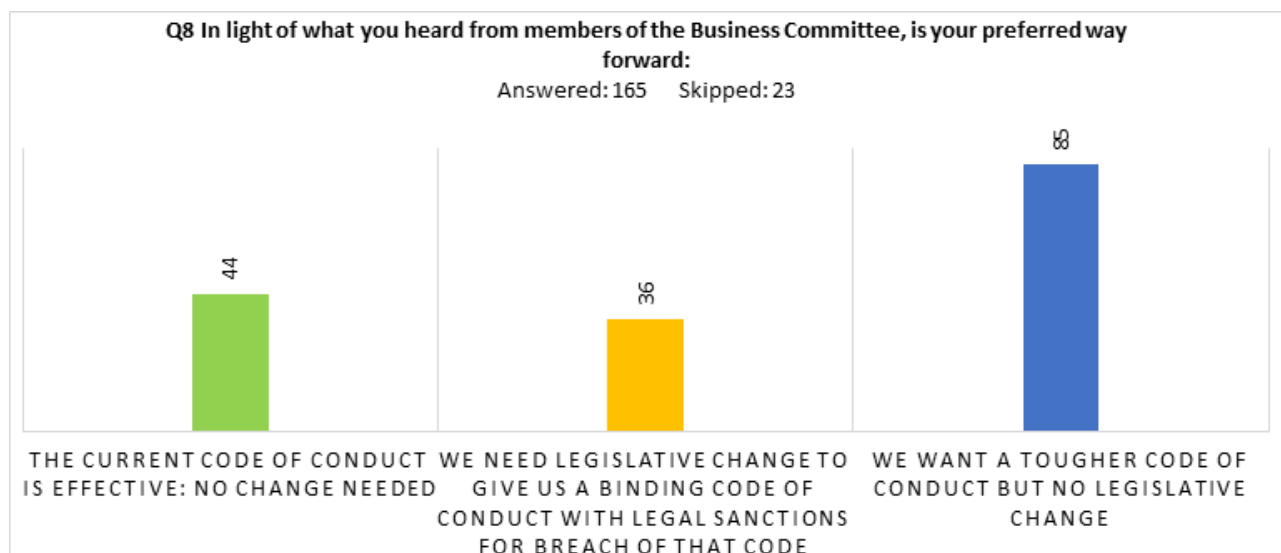
This paper reports back to the General Synod on the work the Business Committee has undertaken on the Code of Conduct since the General Synod in July 2023.

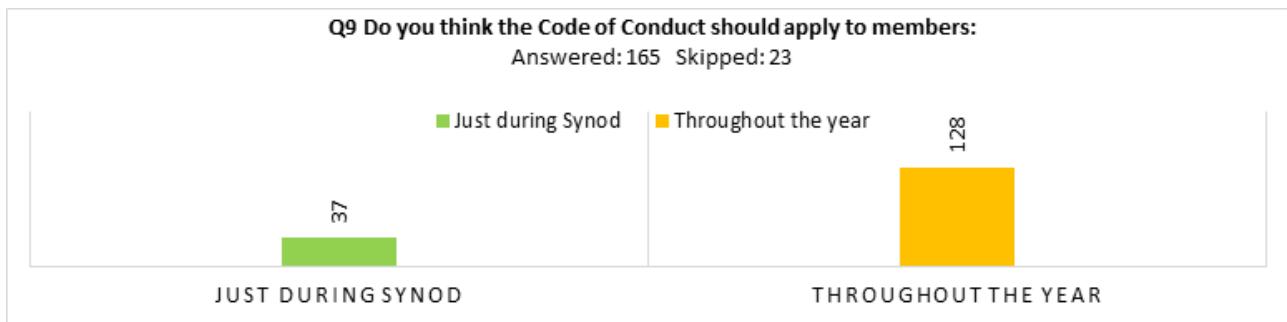
Background

1. The Business Committee of the General Synod is required to keep under review the code of conduct for members and the associated complaints process. In July 2023 the General Synod had a (brief and curtailed) discussion on the Synod complaints process. Three members of the Business Committee led this debate. Fr Paul Cartwright briefed the Synod on the issues that had been raised with the Business Committee and noted that the Business Committee itself was not of one mind on this topic, and accordingly wanted to test the mind of Synod. Canon Alison Coulter made the case for a legally binding code of conduct. The Ven Mark Ireland made the case against such a code of conduct. The Business Committee also gathered feedback through a fringe event.
2. This work continues. In the debate on the Business Committee Report in November 2023 the Chair drew the Synod’s attention to action he had taken since July.
3. As part of the post-Synod survey the Synod support team gathered the views of Synod members on the way forward. This paper reports on the results of that survey and the Business Committee’s views on the way forward.
4. It is worth acknowledging at the outset the connections between this item on the General Synod agenda and the Diocesan Synod Motion from Chelmsford on a code of conduct for Parochial Church Councils and the Private Members’ Motion on bullying by lay officers. All are connected with how we as Christians behave with one another.

Synod survey

5. The post-Synod survey asked two questions. First, in light of the debate, did Synod members prefer no change, legislative change to give us a binding code of conduct, or a tougher code of conduct with no legal change. Second, should it apply to members just during Synod or throughout the year. In addition a free text box was provided to collect qualitative feedback. 165 replies were received, representing just over a third of members (and in line with other post-Synod surveys). Results are set out below:





6. In the free text boxes the following themes emerged

a) Corporate Representation and Behaviour: Many respondents emphasised that Synod members are part of a corporate body and should represent that body well. This includes maintaining a positive public image and reflecting the values upheld by the Synod. Several comments addressed behaviour within the group of sessions, including the use of inappropriate language, personal attacks, and the need to maintain respectful communication. There needs to be some educating of Synod members about appropriate conduct, reminding them of expectations, and promoting respectful behaviour.

b) Social Media Conduct: There was a strong focus on the behaviour of Synod members on social media platforms with an expectation that even personal social media accounts should align with the values of the Synod. It highlighted the importance of respectful engagement, avoiding derogatory comments, and promoting positive interactions. It was noted that social media can amplify tensions and negative behaviour. There is a need for guidelines on social media behaviour and accountability for online conduct.

c) Code of Conduct: Many comments expressed support for a code of conduct that outlines expected behaviour and provides clarity on acceptable and unacceptable conduct. Concerns were raised about the enforceability of such a code and the potential for it to be used for political purposes. The importance of clear sanctions for breaches of conduct was raised.

Next steps

7. The Business Committee is grateful for this feedback and has discussed it in detail. It is clear that there is no consensus within the General Synod on the way forward, but that neither making no change nor moving to a fully enforceable legal code of conduct command a majority. It discussed whether the Code of Conduct was sufficiently visible to new members and wondered whether it could form part of the commissioning of members at the start of a new quinquennium with all those standing for election required to commit to upholding it. It reflected on the pros and cons of action on social media, noting that this was a consistent theme of many respondents.

8. In terms of next steps the Business Committee is minded to proceed in the direction suggested by Synod members – namely towards a tougher code of conduct, but without legislative force. Accordingly the Synod will be asked to agree to the Business Committee overseeing work to revise the Code of Conduct in this way with a view to bringing more detailed proposals to Synod in July. The Business Committee will consider ways of enabling the Synod to participate in that work. This may include a further survey of members to gather more detailed feedback.

9. In doing this the Business Committee would like to draw Synod members' attention to the following points:
- a) The General Synod has adopted a Code of Conduct that applies to all members equally. It is available [here](#). As paragraph 4 says, "this is a voluntary code, but all members of the General Synod and members of its committees and commissions are encouraged to make themselves aware of this Code and to make every effort to follow it."
 - b) If a member thinks there has been a break of the Code of Conduct, paragraph 28 sets out a procedure for dealing with this. "If any member believes that another member has acted in a way that conflicts with this Code of Conduct, they are encouraged in the first instance to speak directly to their brother or sister in Christ. If a member continues to act in such a manner, this should be reported to the Business Committee. If circumstances render this inappropriate, members should report the matter to the Clerk to the Synod or the Secretary General." Paragraph 29 provides that "The Chair of the Business Committee may choose to write to members if they consider that they have breached the Code, with a request (which may be made public) that they cease to do so in future";
 - c) The General synod is not unusual in having a non-statutory Code of Conduct – most UK legislatures (such as the Houses of Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, most local authorities) have such codes. Some professions have codes of conduct where those seeking to work must sign up to the code of conduct (there are examples in the health sector, for example). It is therefore open to the General Synod to reframe or rewrite sections of the Code of Conduct as it wishes. The Code of Conduct was last updated in 2018;
 - d) Clearly some sanctions can be achieved without legislation. There is no statutory basis for the Chair of the Business Committee's powers under paragraph 29 of the Code of Conduct. At a Group of Sessions Standing Order 18 requires the Chair to call a member to order and direct a member to stop speaking for (amongst other things) "unbecoming language" or disregard of the authority of the Chair. However, depending on the precise proposal it is unlikely that stronger sanctions on members could be introduced without legislation. For example there is no power in existing legislation that allows for the suspension or expulsion of members from the General Synod for poor behaviour.
10. Synod members who wish to provide more detailed feedback and input are invited to send to simon.gallagher@churchofengland.org
11. In the meantime the Business Committee draws the attention of members to the sections of the existing Code of Conduct that "members are urged to express themselves responsibly, being aware of how their views may be received by others" and "urges members to use the same level of consideration when commenting on social media on Synod business or on members or their speeches". This is as a means to "good disagreement, better Synodical process and furthering the mission of the Church".

Paul Cartwright
On behalf of the Business Committee of the General Synod
February 2024