

Good practice guide for church work with vulnerable adults

Message from the bishop

We the bishops, clergy and people of the Diocese are committed to the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of all the children and vulnerable adults in our care. Many children and vulnerable adults are involved in the life of the Church, in worship and in various activities, under the guidance of a dedicated group of leaders and helpers. These people give their time freely and generously so that our children can grow in the faith of Jesus Christ. Both children and adults need a safe and secure environment in which to work.

Who do we mean by vulnerable adults?

Any adult aged 18 or over who, by reason of mental or other disability, age, illness or other situation is permanently or for the time being unable to care of him or herself, or to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation.

Although everyone is vulnerable in some ways and at certain times, some people by reason of their physical or social circumstances have higher levels of vulnerability than others. Some of the factors which increase vulnerability are:

- A sensory or physical disability or impairment
- A learning disability
- A physical illness
- Mental ill health (including dementia), chronic or acute
- An addiction to alcohol or drugs
- The failing faculties in old age
- A permanent or temporary reduction in physical, mental or emotional capacity brought about by life events, for example bereavement or previous abuse or trauma.

Activities with adults who may be vulnerable

- These recommendations apply to all churches' activities with adults who may be vulnerable – for instance, during worship on Sunday mornings, on outings, in groups and when visiting at home
- They apply as much to church 'in house' activities for regular attendees as to activities which you run in and for the local community
- They are designed to protect the adults who may be vulnerable in your care, as well as your leaders.
- Activities set up specifically for adults known to be vulnerable will need planning and preparation of a kind not needed for activities open to all.

Active membership and inclusion

- Create an environment where all people, including those who are vulnerable, are encouraged to participate in and contribute to all aspects of church life.

Respect

Always respect the vulnerable adult and all his or her abilities:

- Ask about personal preferences, forms of address, how much help might be needed
- Ensure his or her individuality - e.g. always use their name
- Give the same respect as to others
- Respect differences – e.g. in appearance, ideas, personalities, ability
- Don't assume or withhold physical contact – ask first
- Have a proper conversation using appropriate language – e.g. ask about interests.

Choices

- Respect the choices vulnerable adults make, even if they may appear risky
- Consider whether the vulnerable adult has the capacity to make choices and whether safety might require intervention
- Give vulnerable adults the highest level of privacy and confidentiality possible in their circumstances
- Consult with the vulnerable adult about who he or she wishes to be included in decisions affecting his or her life
- Offer assistance in such a way as to maximise a person's independence
- Give vulnerable adults a choice about where they sit, and what activities they participate in, recognizing that some people find making choices stressful.
- Ensure that there is clear access to all areas which are available to members of the congregation, e.g. where coffee is served, the bookstall, where meetings are held.

What to do if a vulnerable adult appears to be at risk

- The church does not itself investigate situations of possible risk to vulnerable adults from others but church members are entitled to clarify whether they consider there may be such a risk.
- If you have reasonable grounds for suspecting that a vulnerable adult is being abused or neglected it may be appropriate to refer them to the local authority adult protection service.
- The consent of the person concerned is normally needed. However, if they are not able to give informed consent or are being intimidated, they can be referred without consent.
- If in doubt whether a referral is appropriate, consult the Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser or the local authority adult protection service.

Visiting adults who may be vulnerable in their homes (including residential and nursing homes)

- Always do an assessment of risk to both the vulnerable adult and other interested parties, including yourself, before visiting someone in their own home. If there are any concerns or risks known before the visit is undertaken, give careful consideration to whether the visit is absolutely necessary, or whether you should be accompanied by another adult. Don't take unnecessary risks.
- Always carry a mobile phone on a home visit, and ensure that someone knows where you are and when you are expected to return
- Don't call unannounced: call by arrangement, if appropriate telephoning the person just before you go

- If you are not known to the person you are visiting, carry identification with you, or a note of introduction from your church
- Always knock on the door before entering a room or home, respect the person's home and possessions
- As a general principle, do not give those you visit your home phone number or address. Instead, where possible leave information about a central contact point
- If you don't know the answer to a question or feel out of your depth, seek advice and if appropriate refer the person to another agency. Know where you can access information about other relevant services
- When referring someone on to another person or agency, talk this through with the vulnerable adult. Ask his or her permission before passing on personal information. Make the link with the new person or by yourself: if it is more appropriate for the vulnerable adult to do so themselves make sure they have all the information they need and that their contact will be expected
 - Be clear about your boundaries: keep to agreed limits on how much time you will spend with someone and how often you come. Don't take on extra responsibilities on a bit by bit basis. Be realistic about the amount of time you have; don't say yes to every request for help
 - Be clear about what behaviour is acceptable – and what is not – from the vulnerable adult.

Conflicts and disagreements

- Recognize that the church has duties of care to both perpetrators and victims or survivors if they are both parishioners.
- Bullying and harassment either by or of anyone in the church community is not acceptable.
- Recognize that vulnerable adults may be perpetrators as well as victims of abuse
- Be fair, sensitive and confidential
- Set a good example: challenge inappropriate behaviour but do so courteously.
- In some cases it may be appropriate for a different team or individual to support a perpetrator from that supporting a victim.
- In some cases it may be appropriate to consult a trained mediator. The Diocese has access to these.
- In exceptional cases it may be necessary to ask the perpetrator to move to a different church, This should then be carefully facilitated. The Archdeacon may need to be involved.

Needs of carers

- Remember the needs of carers – treat them as individuals, include them as appropriate, offer breaks and short times apart and practical assistance if feasible.
- Carers are entitled to an assessment of need from local authorities, but this does not carry a guarantee of services to meet the needs identified.

Adapted from *A Safe Church*, Diocese of Southwark 2008, with permission.