

# **The Role and Work of Retired Clergy Officers in the Dioceses of the Church of England**

Summary of a Report commissioned by  
the Retired Clergy Association of the Church of England  
September 2024

This report, the first of its kind, provides a snapshot of how dioceses provide for the care and support of their retired clergy and partners. It shows that improvements are needed in how care and support are organised and planned.

## **Retired clergy: a substantial resource and a significant responsibility for dioceses**

There are around twelve thousand retired clergy in the Church of England. They contribute a vital part of the church's ministry in parishes and other places and take an estimated 25% of regular church services. Over 7200 hold permission to officiate. Retired clergy form the largest single category of ministers in the Church of England.

It is estimated that around five thousand retired clergy are aged 80 years or more. In addition there are over 4000 clergy widows and widowers, most of whom are probably also over 80. A majority of retired clergy have spouses or partners, and some have caring responsibilities. Supporting this community is a substantial pastoral task in every diocese.

## **Provision of support and care for retired clergy and their partners is patchy**

Almost every diocese has several retired clergy officers (RCOs) who take the lead in support and care for retired clergy and their partners. The survey found that coverage was often patchy, with a significant number of gaps and vacancies in appointments.

## **The role of RCOs needs to be reconsidered**

The majority of RCOs have historic roles which are largely concerned with pastoral care of individuals and communication between retired clergy and the bishop and diocese.

About a quarter of RCOs have other responsibilities in promoting learning or improving administration around safeguarding or renewal of permission to officiate. A small number have a more strategic role in assisting deployment or working with diocesan initiatives .

Only a few have a role which is related to the vision of the diocese or reflects its values, or have a meaningful place in a diocesan team or synod to contribute to policy and strategy. Mostly their role is sidelined from wider diocesan work and structures.

## **Most dioceses are not clear about what their aims and responsibilities are**

Overall, most dioceses do not seem to have a clear purpose for their work with retired clergy or any sense of a service level which they seek to meet.

It appears that most dioceses have not progressed beyond an outmoded model of "keeping in touch with individuals", whereas the requirements of the current context have gone well beyond this, including the need to engage positively with those offering a voluntary ministry.

## **The working conditions of RCOs need improvement.**

Most RCOs have job descriptions which are out of date or do not correspond to the tasks required or to the aims and values of the diocese. About 25% have no job description.

Only three dioceses have a budget for expenses or to develop work with retired clergy.

Line management of RCOs is generally weak and inconsistent, which increases the sense of detachment and disengagement.

About a third of RCOs have served more than five years and have no agreement on a term of office. It is common for appointments to be delayed, which places strain on other colleagues.

## **Most RCOs seem detached and disengaged from a wider context**

In almost all cases, RCOs report that their work has little or no relationship to the Retired Clergy Association.

None of their job descriptions refers to liaison with Unite (Faithworkers branch) and a few only to liaison with the Pensions Board.

Regional groupings of RCOs vary in their effectiveness as places of support and learning.

Most RCOs seem quite isolated. There is now a voluntary WhatsApp group and the Pensions Board holds occasional gatherings for RCOs. There is no national RCO organising group and no definitive national list of RCOs which they and partner bodies can use for consulting or sharing information.

## **Five areas of work for dioceses to address in relation to RCOs**

- a. As a first step, to consider and clarify what they want to achieve with retired clergy.
- b. To improve the quality of RCO job descriptions and link them to wider diocesan aims,
- c. To improve the management of RCOs and their place in the diocesan structure
- d. To place funding of work with retired clergy on a clearer and more objective basis.
- e. To clarify arrangements for care of widows and widowers, and retired clergy in need

## **Four areas of work for other partners to address**

- a. Networking between RCOs regionally and nationally needs to be enhanced
- b. A definitive national list of RCOs needs to be established and kept up to date
- c. Further research on retired clergy and their activities and interests is needed
- d. The Retired Clergy Association should reflect on its current aims and purposes, and its proper role in the present changed context

If you would like to see the full report, it is available at. Xxxxxxxxx

If you have questions or comments about the report, please contact Yyyyyyy