

Safeguarding of Children in Towers

The Church of England National Safeguarding office is circulating to Dioceses a summary of requirements for bell ringers in relation to their care of young people in towers. The summary has been under discussion for some time between the CCCBR and Church House during which time there have been changes both in the latter unit and with issue of new recruitment policies. A series of documents were issued under the Chairmanship of Paul Butler, Bishop of Durham and subsequently approved by the House of Bishops in Synod. The key document is entitled "Practice Guidance: Safer Recruitment" and relates to the mechanisms for appointing both paid and volunteer workers dealing with children and vulnerable adults.

The summary developed jointly by the National Safeguarding Team and CCCBR was issued in mid-January 2016 and the following note highlights some important elements. Firstly, it must be stressed that the provisions, which do not fundamentally change the responsibilities of ringers, are those required by the Church themselves and the edict from Westminster is that all Dioceses and Parishes will be expected to adhere to policy and guidance. In this context consistency across the country is a good thing and should prevent any unusual interpretations.

As far as requirement for DBS checks is concerned, the only change is that those engaged in teaching young people face to face will all require to be checked even where supervised. However, there is no change in the role of supporting ringers who man other bells during training and practise sessions. Visiting tutors or trainers whether by invitation or organised by the local Guild will need to be DBS checked even if supervised by the local tower captain. It should be added that Dioceses are progressively adopting electronic means for DBS applications with results and certificates being completed in days rather than weeks it took previously.

The promised portability of DBS certificates is still not as wide as some would wish. An existing certificate for work with children may be transferable within the same parish or benefice provided the level of contact and nature of work is similar. Where an individual seeks to use an existing DBS certificate issued in respect of another parish or from an outside body, for example teaching, then the requirements are that the following stages be fulfilled (1) complete a declaration form, (2) original DBS certificate be shown, (3) the nature and level of check required is the same, (4) the check (best confirmed electronically through the update service) is clear, (5) the identity of the individual is verified and (6) confirmation from the employing body for whom the certificate was issued that the nominee is currently still in post and that there are no disciplinary issues being pursued. From this it may be inferred that a new DBS application is in fact far simpler.

With regard to children attending ringing it is an expectation that parents will agree to arrangements for attendance and, by advance notice, of special outings, this is merely good practice. Parental agreement on how children reach the tower is also mentioned on the basis that their responsibility starts at the tower door. The keeping of an attendance register wherever children are present is also good practice if sometimes difficult but ensures evidential proof if ever complaints should arise. Similarly, there is an expectation that young people should only be shown the bells and other parts of the tower by Tower Captain or other suitably checked person. Whilst the Steeple Keeper may be the expert on

the mechanics, the presence of a DBS checked person in addition is a proper safeguard for all concerned.

Perhaps the biggest challenge comes from overall policies which are intended to be applied to all church workers dealing with children and vulnerable adults, whether paid or volunteers. The Church has firmly stated a policy that responsible posts involving substantial contact with children should have a Job Description prepared. Applicants will be expected to fill in a voluntary Confidential Declaration regarding their suitability for the work and any matters regarding past records. Anyone declining to make such a declaration will not be processed further. References may be sought by the employing parish and, where the post warrants, a DBS check sought. Finally, upon appointment, volunteers will be expected to undergo Safeguarding training and that they should attend updates every three years.

Clearly there are challenges for all concerned in meeting these new expectations whether individuals or those Parish officers charged with Safeguarding and the recruiting and appointment of volunteers and paid workers. The church intends to monitor adherence to these new processes and is a sign of the tightening up of the whole safeguarding culture. It is hoped that ringers will support the Church in its laudable aims.

Chris Mew, on behalf of Tower Stewardship Committee

January 2016