

Summary Evaluation Report

Who Cares for the Carers? Pastoral Support Package 2018 - 2024

1. Introduction

The purpose of this summary report is to give an overview of the operation of *Who Cares for the Carers?* initiative and to present an evaluation by a sample of those who used aspects of the pastoral support package during the first 7 years of its operation. This summary report opens with a brief background to the initiative, noting other comparable programmes in operation in Church of Ireland dioceses or across the church in its entirety during its lifetime to date. It describes the operation of the initiative from 2018 until 2024. It then presents an evaluation of the *Who Cares for the Carers?* initiative by 8 members of the Dublin & Glendalough clergy who utilised some of its supports. It concludes with a summary of key findings and makes some recommendations.

2. Background

In 2017, the Tanner Report (<https://dublin.anglican.org/resources/pastoral-resources-for-clergy>) was published. The *Who Cares for the Carers?* initiative emerged out of its recommendations. The package offers counselling (up to six funded sessions in a year), mediation, spiritual support and retreats, all provided confidentially by independent experts. The character of supports offered by the *Who Cares for the Carers?* initiative comes directly from the needs identified in the research and is spiritual and confidential in response to this identified need, professional counsellors with sensitivity to the spiritual issues with which the ordained deal in their workplace and in their everyday life. The service provided is based on immediacy and individuality of response in potential crisis situations.

At the time the initiative was launched, two other dioceses in the Church of Ireland were providing somewhat similar supports. The Diocese of Connor offers a pastoral support package for clergy and their spouses providing funded counselling, mediation and spiritual direction (<https://connor.anglican.org/downloads/Pastoral-Support-Leaflet-final.pdf>). The Diocese of Meath and Kildare also offered a pastoral support package (<https://dublin.anglican.org/cmsfiles/files/PastoralSupport/Appendix-4-Meath-and-Kildare-Care-Document.pdf>) which provided counselling, spiritual direction and personal coaching.

In 2021, the Church of Ireland launched the *Mind Matters* initiative (<https://www.churchofireland.org/news/11325/church-of-ireland-launches-clergy>) with a three-year support package for clergy funded by Benefact Trust which included: up to 6 face-to-face funded counselling sessions for clergy and up to 6 funded telephone counselling sessions for clergy / their immediate family members as well as telephone helplines for medical advice and critical incident management. The *Mind Matters* initiative is fundamentally different to the philosophy that underpins the *Who Cares for the Carers?* initiative – namely *Mind Matters* is secular in its focus and origins while *Who*

Cares for the Carers? is based in responding to the specific spiritual needs of the ordained.

3. Supports offered by *Who Cares for the Carers?*

The *Who Cares for the Carers?* supports are administered by the archbishop’s PA, Ms. Ruth Burleigh, who engages in total confidence with those clergy who make contact with her. She reports that the number of clergy availing of the resources has grown year on year since 2018. The resources availed of most are counselling and retreats. Face-to-face counselling supports are offered to clergy confidentially for up to 6 funded sessions per year. Supported counselling has been offered to 9 clergy in total to date:

- 2021 - 6 sessions (1 member of the clergy availed of the package) - €360
- 2022 – 12 sessions (2 members of the clergy availed of the package) - €540
- 2023 – 12 sessions (2 members of the clergy availed of the package) - €550
- 2024 – 18 sessions (3 members of the clergy availed of the package) – €1,440

Spiritual supports have also been utilised. Over the past number of years, Ms. Burleigh reports that funding to facilitate individual retreats for in excess of 15 clergy has been provided. Retreat costs for 2024 are €3,162. This included the Glendalough clergy retreat where funding support totalled €2,730 (this was half-funded by individual participants). One individual retreat was part-funded to the tune of €432.

Partial records for all spending on the *Who Cares for the Carers?* initiative are set out here:

Year	Budget	Spend
2019	5,300	0
2020	5,300	0
2021	5,300	540 (counselling + retreat)
2022	8,300	540 (counselling)
2023	8,300	550 (counselling)
2024	10,205 requested 8,200 allocated	3,732 to date

Some additional records can be accessed by the now retired Diocesan Secretary when she is available.

4. Evaluation of *Who Cares for the Carers?*

4.1 Rating the programme’s components

A short survey was issued to all who had availed of any of the supports provided by the package and they were offered an opportunity to make further comment. The responses were returned to the archbishop’s PA Ms. Ruth Burleigh and shared anonymously with the researcher. All respondents gave written permission for their evaluations and comments to be shared anonymously in an evaluation report. A total of 8 clergy who had

availed of some aspect of the package returned responses. Three respondents had utilised the counselling element. All three described it as excellent.

The respondents acknowledged the increasing complexity of full-time ministry. One respondent captured the additional stresses and their impact on wellbeing:

‘These last number of years have been most strenuous as all will know and clergy have had to walk and wrestle with many new challenges that came very swiftly with unreasonable expectations.’

With regard to the quality of the counselling component, one respondent explained:

‘The counselling was invaluable. I arrived a sceptic in the exercise and left a believer. ...The counselling has given me the confidence and skills to come back to the duties of my office.’

6 of the respondents availed of retreats – 3 of those had undertaken individual retreats and 3 others took part in a supported group retreat. All 6 described their retreat experiences as excellent and vital.

One respondent who undertook an individual retreat evaluated the importance of this time of intentional withdrawal as follows:

‘Without intentional retreat time for solitude and prayer, we risk doing ministry in our own strength rather than from a healthy place of being a child of God’.

Another respondent who had experienced a group retreat evaluated the experience:

‘I have to say that I found the retreat really fantastic support - not only spiritually, allowing me time out with God, but also from the point of collegial contact.’

A further respondent said of the wellbeing impact of a group retreat:

‘The benefit of the retreat with other clergy on mental and emotional health and the encouragement received in one’s role is hard to measure and should not be underestimated.’

7 of the respondents had availed of one component only. 1 respondent used a number of aspects of the package. That respondent availed of counselling, mediation support and an individual retreat and assessed all three aspects as excellent.

Four themes emerged from the responses to open questions where people were invited to add anything extra about their experience of the *Who Cares for the Carers?* initiative. These are outlined in the four subsections below and they give a deeper insight into why each respondent was so positive in her or his evaluation of the various aspects of the support package.

4.2 Confidentiality

Respondents who had utilised the counselling supports in particular commented on the importance for them of the confidential nature of the process.

‘The counselling was administered by via the archbishop’s PA whose efficiency and utter confidentiality gave me great confidence that this scheme would be helpful. The independence of the scheme from Diocesan structures was invaluable - this ensured that I was not a subject of gossip when I was at my most vulnerable.’

Another said:

‘Privacy regarding the provision of support was extremely helpful for peace of mind and support’.

4.3 Financial supports

Financial supports were deemed an essential aspect of each evaluated component of the package. One respondent who utilised counselling noted:

‘I do not have private medical care and the HSE only provides psychotherapy in very limited circumstances and for very limited duration. ...the financial aid from *Who Cares for the Carers* did help to ease a burden and a concern at a very vulnerable time.... Without the financial support I suspect that I would have, in the practical sense, felt very much on my own with the issues I faced.... It gave some glimmer of care for the clergy.’

Another said:

‘Knowing that this package was available was an incredible relief especially as the only income earner with a family.’

A further respondent simply stated regarding the financially supported counselling:

‘I could not have financially afforded this lifeline for me.’

With regard to retreats, respondents noted how invaluable financial support was in order to access an individual retreat:

‘Having come to the end of a very busy time in ministry, I noticed that I was getting really tired and felt that a retreat might help. I was shocked to see the prices and thought that it wouldn’t possible. However, with the support of the Diocese I was able to get away for a few days’ rest and came back with much more energy and more importantly, perspective.’

Another respondent noted how hard it is to find funding support for individual retreats:

‘A colleague had directed me to the Clergy Support Trust, but they are unable to provide grants or services to households with small savings and who own property. That threshold seems very low and I imagine rules out most clergy. Therefore the support from the Diocese was invaluable.’

A further respondent commented on the value of financial supports towards a group retreat, again noting how challenging it can be to find financial support for such important activities:

‘Funding for such essential programmes is very hard to find. Funders often view trips away as ‘junkets’ where people gain little. In reality, these types of events are very important because they allow time away from the day-to-day and ... bring up collegial conversations over meals or walks.’

Even where funding might be available, the bureaucracy involved was deemed unhelpful:

‘As regard other financial support, maybe the Priority Fund might help with some of these supports but my experience of trying to get any grants, is that it is not an easy task at all, very longwinded and complicated.’

4.4 Spiritual supports

Retreats not only provide significant collegial support, but are also a source of essential spiritual nurture, a point re-iterated by several respondents. One explained:

‘As a priest, it’s vital for me to model the life and ministry of Jesus. Part of this modelling is ensuring I have regular diarised retreat time spent away to commune with God. ... Retreats are vital as leaders in God’s church where we make time for ourselves to be recharged in God’s presence and also replenish our spiritual batteries.’

Another wrote that group retreats enable priests to: ‘engage in spiritual connectedness with God and one another’.

One of the respondents who had utilised the counselling component praised the counsellor because of her/his spiritual understanding which helped in the healing process: ‘the counsellor knew church jargon and was well equipped to understand my needs.’

4.5 A Sense of the Carers being Cared for

While the supports given by the *Who Cares for the Carers?* initiative are modest, none-the-less, the responses all indicated real appreciation of what that support signified. One of the respondents concluded their response by saying:

‘The blessing with this package being available is that it clarifies that the church does care for the carer. The package models the Jesus way in which we can wholeheartedly say the church models what it says it offers for everyone (or should).’

Another noted the value of such supports and the goodwill generated by it:

‘I was happy to pay some of the cost of the [group] retreat myself as the value of the few days away was tremendous for me personally but I do feel that clergy felt that the financial assistance we received indicated that the diocese in general cares for their clergy and wants to assist them in their caring role, which has a ripple effect to parishioners and the wider community.’

5. **Concluding Comments and Recommendations**

It was striking that all 8 respondents were highly positive and supportive in their evaluations of the package and their comments about their experiences. Their responses indicate that the availability of the package is important both for their morale and either for restoration to wellbeing or maintenance of their wellbeing. Respondents appreciated the provision of any funding support from the diocese for the various components of the package and noted that it was challenging to access funding from other sources. The budget data shown in Section 3 indicates that this is a low-cost support. The budget sought per year has been between €5,000 and €10,000 and the spend has been very carefully managed and has always come in below budget. An arrangement agreed with a professional counselling company has enabled an agreed discounted price for each set of 6 sessions with an expert, carefully selected counsellor.

The provision of supports, even relatively limited ones, meant that they felt in a very practical way that the church and the diocese ‘cared for the carers’. This has been very important for the morale and healing of those who have availed of the supports but also for the wider clergy cohort in the United Dioceses. One respondent explained: ‘Too often people say they care, but with no action... With this package, the support from within and outside the church was very much part of the healing process’.

There are many similarities between the *Who Cares for the Carers?* initiative and the pastoral supports provided by other dioceses and through the *Mind Matters* initiative. Counselling was common across all initiatives. One thing stood out in the Dublin & Glendalough diocesan provision and that was the availability of financial support for individual and group retreats. Another component was the rapid provision of spiritual support for people caught in difficulties caused within their pace of work resulting in significant damage to them both personally and professionally. This points to the ongoing and potentially increasing need for spiritually-based support. A core part of clergy welfare is rooted in spiritual wellbeing and it was clear from the comments made by respondents that the support for individual or group retreats was very much appreciated and difficult to access elsewhere. It was also clear from their comments that support of group retreats was both spiritually and collegially valuable while individual retreats were described as spiritually and emotionally restorative.

The list of supports offered by the *Mind Matters* initiative are clearly valuable in themselves from their own perspective, rooted as they are in a secular provision model. It is not however, interchangeable with the now-established provisions of the *Who Cares for the Carers?* initiative which clergy in Dublin & Glendalough have come to expect and know are there for them from an essentially Godly perspective. However, the absence of retreat and other spiritual support provision from that list is a worry and highlights its insufficiency to meet the needs of clergy for ongoing spiritual support as expressed in their own words, which are at the heart of this report. Ongoing provision of such spiritual support remains a pressing priority. Similarly, the provision of counselling by counsellors who understand church life, church as institution and the nature of vocation was deemed very important by respondents to this evaluation.

Recommendations:

- Any changes to the *Who Cares for the Carers?* pastoral care package should be based on an evaluation both by those who have confidentially utilised the supports and by the full cohort of clergy in Dublin & Glendalough
- Both the spiritual supports and the spiritual underpinning of the care package should be maintained and strengthened given that this is a support initiative for clergy living out their response to God's calling in their lives through their ministry. The introduction of a range of supports from central Church should not undermine the spiritual foundation of *Who Cares for the Carers?*
- Structures to maintain confidentiality and privacy particularly for individual retreats and counselling continue to be carefully and strictly maintained and written protocols be agreed and put in place and assured in any parallel provisions made

As a final comment on the *Who Cares for the Carers?* pastoral care package it is worthwhile to conclude with a statement from one of the respondents who said:

'This scheme is not an optional extra for clergy. It is a vital part of the architecture of care under which clergy can shelter. It must remain in place.'

Anne Lodge
December 2024

This evaluation work was undertaken as part of my Self-Supporting Ministry and there was no cost to the United Dioceses.