

# Spiritual Direction: A Question of Accreditation?

## Report of Key Consultation Findings

In the summer of 2017 a new project was launched exploring a possible voluntary accreditation pathway for spiritual directors in England, Scotland and Wales. This brought together Elizabeth White's interests in how practice develops following training, accountability, stewarding the gifts of the Spirit, and in the ways people find a suitable spiritual director, with Lynette Harborne's doctoral research into spiritual direction, supervision and best practice; both are spiritual directors, trainers and supervisors in Edinburgh and Buckinghamshire respectively.

A consultation followed, and included an online survey which ran from 1 December 2017 to 31 March 2018. This was circulated to as many regional groups, network coordinators, training centres and denominational spiritual direction contacts as we could find, as well as individuals known to us personally; people forwarded information to others, and word spread this way. The survey was anonymous and open to both those giving, and receiving, Spiritual Direction/Accompaniment. Over 500 people replied and this report now outlines the key findings.

### Roles of those who responded to the survey

NB Responses to this question may reflect more than one role

74% were spiritual directors 70% were spiritual directors who also receive spiritual direction

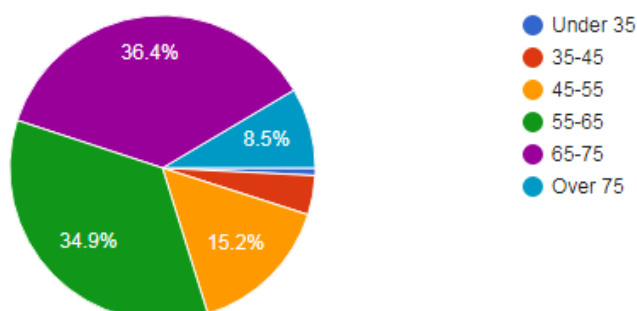
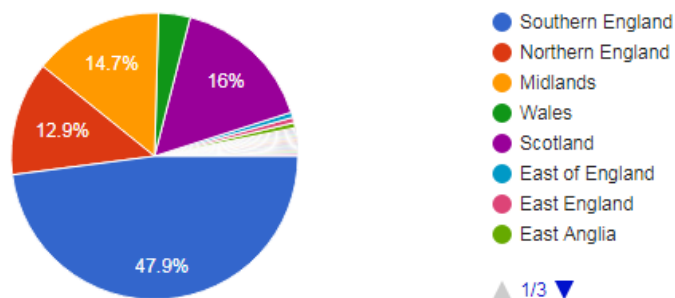
23% were supervisors 10% were directees

16% were trainers 7% were regional/group coordinators

Examples of other responders: those in training, a psychotherapist, diocesan adviser etc

### Regional spread of respondents

Nearly half of people lived in Southern England, followed by Scotland, the Midlands and Northern England. Others included those from Wales, Eastern England, Northern and Southern Ireland etc.



### Age profile of respondents

5% in total were under 45 years; 15% were 45 to 55 years; 71% in total were between 55 and 75, and 8.5% over 75 years.

## Spiritual direction training

42% of responders had received training in an Ecumenical Christian tradition, 37% in the Ignatian tradition, with 'Other' responses given such as Benedictine, Franciscan, training within a religious order, Interfaith or no formal training.

## Reasons to support, or not support, an accreditation pathway

Thoughts on supporting, or not supporting, an accreditation pathway (Questions 13 and 14 of the survey) were not intended to be a yes/no poll but rather information gathering to ascertain the factors that are important in peoples' experience and thinking around this issue. Many expanded on their responses with requests for more information about what accreditation may involve.

Those who gave thoughts on the *positive* value of an accreditation pathway (Question 13) chose one or more of the following as their top three responses, from the options given in the survey:

- To help raise standards of practice
- As a way to be good stewards of the gifts of spiritual direction
- As a benchmark, or as additional information to help people find a director

Those who would rather *not* see a pathway (Question 14) most often gave these responses from the list of options in the survey:

- None of the above
- I would not want the extra work of meeting any requirements e.g. log hours, CPD etc
- Direction is the work of the Spirit and not to be regulated or professionalised

If people were *unsure* about accreditation (Question 15), the main reasons chosen were

- Who would do the accrediting?
- How the essence of good direction might or might not be captured in an accreditation process?
- What applying for accreditation would actually involve practically?

## Themes from optional questions 13 – 16

### **QUESTION 13: If you have views on the positive value of a voluntary accreditation pathway please give your thoughts.** *(Text in italics is quoted from responses)*

The key themes that emerged from the responses to this question, in no particular order, were:

1. **ACCREDITATION IN SOCIETY:** Many respondents expressed their surprise at the current lack of any system of accreditation especially *'in today's accountability-conscious world', 'it seems normal to me', 'I was surprised to find there was no accreditation scheme', 'Let's have our own regulation in place before it's imposed on us'*.
2. **PROFESSIONALISM:** In responses to this particular question the development of 'professionalism' was seen as a positive. *'It creates a context in the market place of specialisms that are professional, accountable and approved', 'It would encourage the ministry of spiritual direction to be recognised as more professional', 'Spiritual Direction should be appropriately professional'*.

3. **CURRENT RISKS:** Responses pointed to potential and actual damage that some directees experience as a result of poor practice. The necessity to safeguard the interests of the directee and protect the vulnerable were mentioned, *'someone could be damaged by poor direction', 'the ministry of SD [needs to] address the potential for this'*. An example was given, *'the Director abused the person. It was ruinous to mental health'. 'I feel there has been, often unintentionally, poor standards of practice and sometimes spiritual abuse and therefore... vital to have some degree of monitoring and accountability which accreditation would offer'*. Related to this were issues of competence, *'It would set a level of competence'*.
4. **ACCOUNTABILITY:** The current lack of accountability in most areas was seen as detrimental to good practice and was linked to a lack of standardisation. *'I see accreditation as a healthy way of maintaining some kind of consistency in standards and expectations', 'Accreditation invites us into accountability', 'essential in a culture of increased accountability'*.
5. **FINDING A DIRECTOR:** Accreditation was seen in this section as helpful to directees looking for a spiritual director as this could give an indication of training and experience. *'Anyone can claim to be a spiritual director but may have no reflective practice background', 'It would help people seeking direction', 'a resource... for both director and directee'*.
6. **THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NETWORK OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS:** Accreditation would help to develop a sense of community and would provide opportunities for sharing resources and wisdom, as well as *'a sense of a body ministering together', 'community holding one another in good practice and relationship'. 'It would help directors talk to each other' and '[provide] contact with the wider community of directors'*.
7. **ISSUES OF SUPERVISION:** The requirement for, and practice of, supervision was considered to be currently unreliable, *'initial training is not sufficient, supervision can be patchy if not regulated more'*. Accreditation was seen as a way of ensuring supervision and continuing formation for those who might choose to apply for accreditation, *'... regular supervision essential.'*
8. **ONGOING FORMATION:** Accreditation was also seen as supportive of a director's development, *'I think it really helps raise standards and helps us seek to deepen our work', 'enable [SD] to stand as an equal partner alongside the spectrum of what may be broadly termed personal development modalities'*.

Overall, responses received to Question 13 indicated that the introduction of some form of voluntary accreditation was seen as making a positive contribution to various factors in good practice, as well as helping those seeking a director to make an informed choice.

#### **QUESTION 14: If you would NOT want to see a national accreditation pathway, please say more.**

The key themes that emerged from the responses to this question, in no particular order, were:

1. **PROFESSIONALISM:** Responses in this section, reflected that accreditation might at times *'quench the spirit'*, that spirit-led direction could be *'driven underground'*. *'I would not want it to be professionalised...'*, *'this is ministry not a profession'*. Professionalism was also linked in many responses to bureaucracy, *'If accreditation leads to bureaucracy... and having to adhere to lots of codes of practice, it will be a bad thing'*.

2. *WHO WOULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ACCREDITATION?* Many participants expressed concern about both the identity of individuals and the ethos of any group that might be involved in the accreditation process. *'I worry about who would do the accrediting', 'Who will the scheme be accountable to?', 'Who would be offering accreditation, their credentials to do so?'* The possibility of an element of *'empire building'* was mentioned, and the feasibility of a national scheme was raised, *'I find it difficult to see how an ecumenical national scheme could ever be agreed.'*
3. *REQUIREMENTS FOR ACCREDITATION:* The difficulty in evaluating the practice of individual spiritual directors was stressed by many respondents. This included the practical difficulties, including administration and time, as well as a concern for those who may be gifted but not have formal training *'if it excludes those who are gifted but are unable to train'*. As above, many stated they would not want anything that might become *'excessively bureaucratic or over regulated'*, a *'box ticking process'*, with the possibility of the introduction of continuing professional development or more formalised supervision requirements. Rules, regulations, and codes of practice were described as *'inhibiting and burdening'* for spiritual directors.
4. *FINANCIAL ISSUES:* The expense of accreditation for individual directors was a concern. Whilst it was recognised by responders that there would be costs involved in maintaining an accreditation system it was suggested that, if accreditation were to cost money, more spiritual directors would consider charging which was seen as a negative development by some respondents to this question who feel payment is incompatible with spiritual direction: *'The thought of paying for spiritual guidance is foreign to me', 'I wouldn't like to see people excluded because of cost'*.
5. *FINDING A DIRECTOR:* Some respondents in this section stressed that they prefer directees to find directors through word of mouth rather than from a list of accredited practitioners, and that this already works well for many people, *'a person in a particular geographical area knows the good directors nearby'*.
6. *DUAL or TWO TIER SYSTEM:* The potential for this was generally seen as undesirable, and concern was expressed *'not to divide SD into those who are and those who are not accredited'* and a wish that *'effort is being put into ensuring that those who do NOT undertake the process are not made to feel like second-class citizens'*.
7. *COURSES OR INDIVIDUALS?* Although the project has referred only to the possibility of accreditation of individuals and *not* of courses, several respondents either queried which of these it would be, or expressed a view that *'it's courses that should be accredited, not people'*, or were concerned that training would become *'too academic'*.

Overall, responses to Question 14 were around practicalities of cost and time, whether an accreditation pathway would be *'excluding'* or a move away from the Spirit; also the bureaucracy of box ticking and whether it would be *'a false security offering little real protection'*.

Alongside this many expressed the view that they could not answer this question clearly until they had more information about how accreditation might be implemented, indicating acceptance in principle but subject to more detailed information. Several people who contributed to this question were *also* supportive of accreditation; at least one individual was already accredited by the current scheme in Eire.

**QUESTION 15: What is the most important thing you would like to say to us as we explore ‘the question of accreditation’?**

Many of the responses to this question overlapped with the ‘positive value’ themes of Question 13. *‘Voluntary accreditation would help in moving an age old practice into contemporary society’*. Some other points were also made which are summarised below:

Further specific questions were asked about how any accreditation process might be implemented, with warnings about the time, travel for training and costs that would be involved.

There was further reference in this section to whether it would be courses or individuals who would be accredited, and concern was expressed about a possible emphasis on skill or knowledge-based training rather than the formation of the director and the gifts of the Spirit, *‘How can accreditation take into account those who have no training but are clearly called by the Spirit?’*. Others stated *‘make it serve the work of spirit not dominate’* and *‘it may clarify the purpose, theological basis and ethics of Spiritual Direction’*.

There were several responders who were clear they would not wish to see a national pathway, although were already part of a Diocesan system of accountability, *‘fully vetted and supported’* and *‘required to provide references, be interviewed... a DBS certificate... safeguarding training. Supervision is also mandated’*.

There was also further reference to standards of practice *‘I have been concerned for a while at the vast differences in quality of work and standards that exist in SD. Some practices I have come across have frankly left me disturbed’, ‘others have come to me to quietly to share their difficult experience... their sad stories’*.

The issue of making spiritual direction more widely known and available was also raised.

Other responses included *‘go for it!’*, *‘persevere’*, *‘aim for maximum agreement of interested parties’*, *‘encouraged that an appropriate professionalism in SD is being seriously considered’*, *‘create an atmosphere where this is normal good practice not something to be feared. This is not a weeding out process but encouraging and supportive’*, *‘voluntary accreditation would raise standards...’*, *‘why wouldn’t we want to be the best we can in cooperation with the Holy Spirit’*.

**QUESTION 16: requested details of any local criteria and/or relevant experience known to responders**

Thank you to all those who completed this question, particularly to those who offered to help in developing an accreditation project further. However, we would like to reiterate that, as the survey was completely anonymous, unless individuals included contact details in their responses, we do not have the information necessary to get back to you!

Brief information or names of the following groups were given by responders:

A group in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire

All Ireland Spiritual Guidance Association (AISGA)

Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire SpiDir Network

Association of Christian Counsellors

Association for Promoting Retreats

Spiritual Directors Forum, West Midlands  
 The Epiphany Group, Scotland  
 London Centre for Spiritual Direction  
 Board of Healthcare Chaplaincy

Lombard Street, London  
 Ignatian Spirituality Centre, Glasgow  
 Whirlow Spirituality Centre  
 BACP and COSCA

The names of a number of Anglican and Roman Catholic dioceses were also given:

Clifton	Portsmouth	Coventry	Salisbury
Guildford	Sheffield	Leeds	Yorkshire
Liverpool	Bristol		

## Report Summary

Having considered the findings from the survey, we know that some of those who contributed to it clearly feel strongly against any proposal to introduce a form of national accreditation under any circumstances. There are also those whose uncertainty is based on questions about the 'who, how and what' of such a proposal. However in summary - and particularly with reference to the interests of quality of provision and accountability - the survey produced more interest, feedback and direct encouragement around some form of voluntary national accreditation than direct objection.

## A Next Step

We therefore propose that specific work is now needed to look at 'what and how', in order to establish the practical feasibility of introducing such a scheme, prior to a possible national pathway. Any introduction will seek to serve *both* directors and directees; supporting best practice within the vocation of spiritual direction.

A team of suitably equipped volunteers will be needed to form a task group to consider the next steps towards a pathway. We are therefore now beginning to identify what skills, background and experience would be necessary to form an effective task group, along with the time commitment involved in looking at these next questions. We will circulate more information about a task group during October and ask those of you who might be interested in becoming part of this team to contact us at that point. We will also be considering ways of funding the expenses which would be involved in this step, along with other financial implications that need to be addressed at this time.

## Conclusion

We would like to thank all of you for contributing to this research and for the obvious care and attention you have given to your responses in the survey. We ask that you pray for those involved in the next steps that they may be guided at all times by the Spirit.

Elizabeth White and Lynette Harborne  
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For further background information about this project please visit our web page, where you can also sign up to our mailing list for future news [www.reflectivespaces.org.uk/consultation](http://www.reflectivespaces.org.uk/consultation)