

Anglicans tighten rules to prevent sham marriages

by [Al Webb](#)

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LONDON (RNS) Couples suspected of using their wedding vows as a ruse to skirt immigration laws will be required to meet strict identity checks and face greater scrutiny under new Church of England guidelines to stop sham marriages.

The guidelines announced Tuesday (April 12) by the Church's House of Bishops target the practice of some vicars conspiring in fake weddings between British nationals and illegal immigrants as a means toward gaining legal residency.

The church directives place the onus on clergy and legal officers to help stop the scam that has resulted in 155 police arrests around the country.

In one case, one vicar was sentenced to four years in prison for his involvement in a sham marriage ring that helped hundreds of illegal immigrants remain in Britain.

The new guidelines advise clergy against offering to publish banns (in which a couple's marital intentions are read aloud on three consecutive Sundays), particularly for marriages involving non-European Economic Area nationals.

Instead, the couples will have to apply for a "common license," including swearing affidavits that give proof of identity and address, as well as agreeing to a visit from a vicar and attending marriage preparation classes.

The rules were coordinated with the UK Border Agency. The British government's immigration minister, Damian Green, warned would-be

fraudsters that "a marriage itself does not equal an automatic right to remain" in Britain.

Church leaders are clear, Bishop John Packer of Ripon and Leeds said, "that the office of holy matrimony must not be misused by those who have no intention of contracting a genuine marriage but merely a sham marriage."