

THE BISHOP'S COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON Thursday 23 November 2023
A hybrid meeting over Zoom and in person at St Mary's, Ely

Present: The Bishop of Huntingdon (in the Chair), Revd Canon Brian Atling, Revd Canon James Blandford-Baker, Canon Dr Felicity Cooke, Revd Canon Sarah Gower, Ven Richard Harlow, Ven Dr Alex Hughes, Canon Simon Kershaw, Revd Dr Robert Mackley, Canon Peter Maxwell Canon Rob Needle, Revd Iain Osborne, Mrs Sarah Robinson, Canon Tim Walters, Canon Lizzie Taylor, Mr Christopher Townsend

Attending via Zoom: Ms Lindsay Davies, Revd Becky Dyball, Mrs Elaine Levitt, Mr George Lynn, Canon Janet Perrett, Mr John Pigott

In attendance: Canon Paul Evans, Ms Rebecca Boswell, Mrs Sheena Bridgman, Ven Hugh McCurdy, Mrs Lorraine Orbell, Revd Jon Randall,

Dwelling in the Word was led by the Revd Iain Osborne

Apologies were received from Very Revd Mark Bonney, Canon Francis Burkitt, Revd Canon Dr Jessica Martin, Revd David Newton, Revd Canon Simon Talbott,

The **Minutes** of the Bishop's Council meeting held on 28 September 2023 were agreed and signed by the Bishop of Huntingdon, with the addition of one word. There were no **matters arising**.

Safeguarding Update from Rebecca Boswell, Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser. There are 221 referrals at the year to date, with 56 open concerns. There are 22 Church Safety Plans (formerly Safeguarding Agreements) in place which encompass less than five allegations against Church officers.

326 have undertaken face-to-face Leadership Trainings - there has been a new module in place since September which is receiving positive feedback. 1200 DBS checks have been carried out - the digital DBS checks can be carried out very swiftly and are now being offered across the Diocese. 78% of parishes have now signed up for the Parish Dashboard (a total of 249) with 76 parishes using the safeguarding hubs. Free training on how best to use the hubs is offered on 28 November 2023.

Five Safeguarding Standards were published with a soft launch on 16 October 2023. The Diocesan Safeguarding Panel will discuss how best to implement these standards across the Diocese within the next 3 years. No new information is included, they are more for clarification. A country wide safeguarding audit commences in late 2024, with Ely's audit (Diocese and Cathedral) taking place in February 2026.

The DSA advised that Professor Alexis Jay has commenced a review of safeguarding across the Church of England with a view to an outcome containing one of the following two models:

1. That all Diocesan Safeguarding Teams will be brought into an independent charity
2. That safeguarding in the Dioceses will continue in a manner similar to that at present with the addition of an independent ombudsman

The preparation for investigating these two models are placing unreasonable requests for data production and collection on all Diocesan safeguarding teams across England and there is considerable concern regarding the potential changes.

The Diocesan Secretary thanked Ms Boswell and her team

Changing Market Towns - review and update

The Changing Market Towns ministry is failing and in need of support. Revd Jon Randall's (JR) role as CMT Project Lead comes to an end in August 2024 with Ven Hugh McCurdy's role ending earlier in the year when the administration of the project is integrated with Mission and Ministry. Oversight of the CMT project, the workers and the Towns will be needed. Council will need to consider the governance of the Changing Market Towns Project and the Board.

John Truscott has been commissioned to write a second report regarding the implementation of the more recent changes to the project. This should be available towards the beginning of Q2 2024 and will contain lessons learnt, for use by the wider church.

JR requested approval from Council for the fees to be incurred in preparing and writing the review (approx. £4,000).

Agreed unanimously

JR then summarised the situation in the Market Towns the project has been working with: Wisbech, Ramsey, Whittlesey, Chatteris, Littleport, St Neots, Huntingdon and March. Several of the towns, despite in depth consultations, have deep-rooted problems and are not wanting to change, making it problematic for those appointed to give assistance, support and guidance. The centrally appointed Operations Managers meet resistance in their quarterly meetings in some towns and are greatly valued in others. If relationships are bad within the parishes or between the parishioners and their clergy, this blocks any systemic progress or change in culture. Relationship issues have prevented much more happening. Recruitment of clergy is difficult in Market Towns, and appointments of those who, following consultation, are agents for change are being stifled; JR felt that inexperienced priests would not be resilient to the attitudes of some prominent representatives from the Market Towns, and that a priest approaching retirement might choose to be ineffective.

The Towns have been RAG rated (Red / Amber / Green). Ramsey, Huntingdon and Littleport are in the green zone, Chatteris is amber verging on red and the remainder are in the red zone.

Budgets are under control, and there will be a small surplus to be used on specific areas (to be agreed with London). Further detailed proposals will be made to Bishop's Council in the early part of 2024.

Most of the Towns, despite discussions at the outset of the Project, are not going to be in a position to fund the CMT posts which have, to date, been paid for partly by the Diocese and partly by SDF funding. Financial constraints and the payments of Ministry Share will be too much of a challenge for some Towns.

The Changing Market Towns Project is to be folded in to Mission and Ministry and this process has started. JR anticipates that the project will continue past its end of funding from the National Church, although any underspends will be used selectively to support the more positive projects.

The Bishop of Huntingdon thanked JR for his candour.

Bishop's Business: The Bishop of Huntingdon updated Council about the progress of the Vacancy in See Committee and the process for electing the next Bishop of Ely. She reported on the three-day Bishop's Staff Residential at Douai Abbey earlier in November. Bishop Stephen was enthroned as Bishop of Lincoln on 11 November 2023. Living in Love and Faith is likely to be on the agenda at the House of Bishops meeting on 29 November 2023 following mixed responses. A letter of reassurance has been sent by her to members of the clergy.

She advised members of Council that the Diocesan Director for Education, Mission and Ministry (Canon Andrew Read) had resigned his role at the end of November to take up other opportunities. Sarah Conant (currently Deputy Director of Education) would become Acting Director of Education for one term, while Revd Peter Leech would become interim Director of Mission and Ministry.

Bishop Dagmar paid tribute to the considerable contribution AR made to the Diocese's work over the last seven years.

Several members raised questions about this development and some members raised significant concerns. Following discussion, it was agreed that there would be an independent HR review with Terms of Reference to be drawn up in consultation with Bishop Dagmar and Tim Walters. It has been subsequently agreed that Canon Dr Felicity Cooke will head this review supported by Christopher Townsend and a retired Diocesan Secretary. They will report findings to Bishop's Council in January and fully in March.

Report from Diocesan Synod : Bishop Dagmar's video *in absentia* was well received and much appreciated. The 2024 Budget and allocation of Ministry Share were accepted. Further questions relating to Living in Love and Faith were accepted and raised under SO86. A presentation about Net Zero Carbon was made, further presentations will take place over the next period. The proposal which had been put forward to Diocesan Synod by Bishop's Council regarding the Ely Diocesan Board of Patronage was approved following an update on Vacancy in See.

Business of Ely Diocesan Board of Finance: Canon Tim Walters (TW), EDBF Chair, advised members that the EDBF Reserves Policy is being reviewed in light of guidance from the Charities Commission. This will be presented to Bishop's Council at its next meeting. Ministry Share is currently 3% lower than at this date in 2022. Three parishes were currently withholding their payments (of which two are paying funds into the Ephesian Fund for onward transfer). The third (a BMO) will pay their dues, which are more than the direct costs, in February 2024 when they leave the Church of England to join AMiE.

The management accounts were currently showing a deficit of £106k against a budgeted £117k, this resulting from investment and letting incomes received being higher than expected. There had also been some small savings on clergy costs due to vacancies. The position is not expected to worsen before the end of 2023. Budgets for Misson and Ministry are being reviewed on an activity-by-activity basis.

The budget document for 2024 is to be circulated to all parishes together with a one-page flyer which can be printed off for noticeboards or sharing.

Relocation Board: Canon Tim Walters as Chair of the Board reported that the programme status is currently green, and progress is impressive. A number of staff joined a Hard Hat Tour of the site earlier in November and all were impressed with the spacious feel. The construction element of the project is on target for completion in mid February 2024, after which 8 weeks will be spent on snagging and fitting out. It is expected that a grand opening will take place after Easter 2024.

Clergy Complaints Handling Policy: The Archdeacon of Huntingdon and Wisbech put forward a paper with a suggested Clergy Complaints Handling Policy, explaining how lower level complaints (i.e. complaints at a lower level than falling under the Clergy Disciplinary Measure) might be handled in a fair, timely and documented way that would help both complainants and clergy. The Policy is in use in other dioceses. The Archdeacon commended the paper for discussion and invited comments to be directed to him in advance of the next meeting of Council at which it is hoped the policy may be approved. It would then become public policy published on the Diocesan website.

The meeting closed with prayer at 9.10pm