

DIOCESE OF EXETER

BISHOP'S DIOCESAN COUNCIL

comprising

**The Bishop's Council and Standing Committee
The Executive of the Exeter Diocesan Board of Finance Ltd.
The Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee**

**Draft minutes of the meeting held at the Old Deanery, Exeter
on Wednesday 14th May 2025 at 18.00**

Attendance: The Right Revd James Grier, The Ven. Andrew Beane, The Ven. Douglas Dettmer, The Ven. Verena Breed, The Ven. Jane Bakker, Mr Giles Frampton, Dr. Kerry Gilbert, the Revd Dr. Mike Williams, Mrs Laura Ford, the Revd. Preb. Samantha Stayte, Mr Richard Buzzacott, the Revd. Deborah Leighton Plom, Dr. Jennie Golding, the Revd Peter March, Sir James Burnell-Nugent, the Revd. Preb. Rosie Austin, Mr. Graham Dunn and Mrs Annie Jefferies.

Introductory Worship

The Bishop of Plymouth in the chair

I. Apologies and Notices

Apologies were received from the Right Revd. Dr. Mike Harrison, the Very Revd. Jonathan Greener, the Revd. Preb. Mike Partridge, Mr. Bob Mills, Dr Lystra Hagley-Dickinson, Mr. Stephen Macey, Mr. Mike Jefferies, the Revd. Preb Samantha Stayte and Mr. Nigel Price

A new lay member representing the Barnstaple Archdeaconry, Mr. Graham Dunn, was welcomed to his first meeting. Also welcomed were Mr. Steve White (independent chair of the Diocesan Safeguarding Advisory Panel) and Mr. Costa Nasarris (Diocesan Safeguarding Officer) for the item on the INEQE safeguarding audit. The Chair indicated that in a change to the published agenda, the review of the recommendations of the safeguarding audit would be taken at item 4.

Members noted with sadness the passing of Bishop Hewlett Thompson, former Bishop of Exeter.

2. Declaration of any actual or potential conflict of interest arising from the agenda or accompanying papers

No declarations of actual or potential conflicts of interest arising from the agenda were made.

3. To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 12th March 2025 **Paper BDC/19/25**

The minutes of the meeting held on 12th March 2025 were approved without amendment.

4. To review the recommendations of the INEQE safeguarding audit **Paper BDC/25/25**

The Right Revd. James Grier, Bishop of Plymouth, speaking as the episcopal member of the Diocesan Safeguarding Advisory Panel, reminded members of the importance for DBF trustees to be mindful of their safeguarding duties at all meetings (especially in the light of the recent

correspondence with the Charity Commission). Receiving the recommendations arising from the INEQE safeguarding audit, deciding what to do about them (either directly or by ensuring that they are being taken forward by others as appropriate) and then monitoring their implementation was to be understood as part of the process of discharging that general responsibility for safeguarding.

Mr. Costa Nassaris, the Diocesan Safeguarding Officer, then introduced the Diocesan Safeguarding Action Plan, which was based on the recommendations of the INEQE safeguarding audit. He noted that about a quarter of Church of England dioceses had been externally audited to date and that a formal follow up was anticipated in which INEQE would require information about the implementation (or otherwise, giving reasons for the decisions taken) of their recommendations. The recommendations were wide ranging and multiple parties (including some external to the Diocese) would be involved in decision making, resourcing and implementation; it was important to be clear where responsibility for each recommendation lay. For example, some of the recommendations were operational in nature and the ownership of these might best be held by the Diocesan Safeguarding Advisory Panel. That said, there was also an over-arching responsibility at trustee level to ensure good process and appropriate scrutiny across the board, including of the actions of its employed staff. There were also a small number of recommendations that pertained directly to diocesan governance functions and decisions would be needed about whether and how they were to be implemented.

Mr. Nassaris noted that work had already commenced in many areas, where it had been possible to initiate the action internally. Some recommendations were waiting on the action of external third parties and could not be progressed at present. It was notable that the actions that were within the scope of the Diocese and that were currently not being progressed were mostly to do with the recommendations to employ additional staff but there was no budget available in the current year to make appointments (in respect of a safeguarding trainer and an additional DBS administrator). If not dealt with exceptionally in-year (as had been the case with the employment of an additional Assistant Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser), the resources allocated through the budget for 2026 would determine whether the recommendation was to be implemented or not, and it would be important to record the justification for the decision if it was decided not to proceed. Finally, the creation of a Safeguarding Risk Register (arising from one of the recommendations) was noted; it would sit alongside the Diocesan Risk Register with oversight from the Assets Group and, ultimately, the DBF's trustees.

In discussion concerns were expressed about the high number of vacancies for Parish Safeguarding Representatives, the reasons behind the vacancies and the associated implications. It was noted that it was important for trustees to recognise the limits of their legal responsibilities (with arrangements in parishes being the responsibility of the incumbent and the PCC) but nevertheless there was a legitimate concern around the impact of the vacancies on the efficiency and effectiveness of the diocesan safeguarding functions and the potential for wider reputational risk. It was noted that the need to drive wider culture change in the Diocese sometimes sat uneasily with the narrower legal responsibilities of each charitable body; collectively driving towards the same wider goal risked overlap, duplication and 'mission creep', all of which might create confusion, anxiety and inefficiency. In all likelihood this basic situation was not open to being resolved but would need to be managed as best as possible.

Mr. Steve White, independent Chair of the Diocesan Safeguarding Advisory Panel, explained that from the Panel's perspective, it was intending to give close consideration to the recommendations at its next two meetings in June and September. It would prioritise driving forward on those actions, often operational, that were within its scope. The Panel's advisory nature meant that it did not often have direct control and decision-making powers, but it would be seeking to use its influence to ensure that others acted in a timely fashion. As it brought a

constructive challenge, it understood that it could be challenged constructively in return, all in order to drive up standards of delivery across the board. One possibility to be considered was that of a joint working group on the implementation of the recommendations.

At the same time, the Panel would give consideration as to how best re-structure itself in order to enhance its scrutiny capabilities; a series of options were being drafted that would seek to ensure that the Panel added value at each stage of its engagement, was sustainable and would contribute towards the process of driving wider culture change. INEQE's recommendations in this regard were not prescriptive as to the form this should take, in order the better to respond to the specific circumstances of the local context.

In discussion clarification was sought on how the INEQE recommendations would be integrated with the formative work arising from the recent decision by the General Synod on the future of safeguarding in the Church of England (commonly referred to as 'model 3' and including an independent national scrutiny function). It was noted that a series of meetings had been scheduled at which the chairs of Diocesan Safeguarding Advisory Panels would engage with the emerging proposals for the implementation of 'model 3'. The outcomes of the process were as yet uncertain but nevertheless there remained an imperative not to delay as a consequence the implementation of the INEQE recommendations.

5. To consider the 2026 Budget Strategy

Paper BDC/20/25

Mr. Giles Frampton, the Chair of the Diocesan Board of Finance, introduced the draft budget strategy and noted that it was set in the context of three very significant unknown factors, each of which could have a material impact in 2026 and beyond: the outcome of the national Diocesan Finances Review, the outcome of a funding application to the national Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board (of which the outcome would be known only after the approval of the Diocesan Budget at the October 2025 meeting of the Diocesan Synod) and the outcome of a debate at the General Synod in July 2025 on revising the national financial settlement for dioceses. The budget strategy could not assume any particular outcomes but there was necessarily a level of provisionality in the key budget assumptions and it was possible that a supplementary budget could, in due course, be needed. It was hoped that the wider financial context would become more certain in subsequent years.

Mr. Neil Williams, the Diocesan Director of Finance, set out the iterative process by which the budget strategy was developed and consulted on. He then set out principal assumptions on which the strategy would be based, for example in relation to participation levels, the Common Fund, clergy numbers, central costs and the use of funds released by the adoption of a 'total return' approach to asset management. He reminded members of the decisions taken for 2025 in respect of these factors and then asked a series of questions about whether (and how) they should be amended in respect of the strategy for 2026.

Members were then invited to work in small groups on a number of the 'key questions' underlying the formation of the budget strategy. Written feedback was provided for further consideration after the meeting.

In discussion clarification was sought on the impact of the 'total return' approach on liquidity and cashflow. It was noted that the Assets Group had been working extensively on an Asset Management Strategy and that much depended on the class(es) of asset to which the approach was being applied. Some assets would take longer than others to dispose of, particularly if as at present, there remained an intention to secure the highest achievable return on their disposal. It was also noted that the 'total return' approach was not in itself a permanent solution for a

structural deficit; rather it created a window of time during which a sustainable solution could be developed and implemented.

Summary plenary feedback from the small groups was, in the main, supportive of the direction of travel set out in the strategy. It was thought necessary that the same assumptions were used in the budget strategy as were included in the SMMIB application. There was some support for revising the Common Fund shortfall assumption to 6% and wide support for holding steady the number of clergy stipends for an interim year. A variety of views were expressed in respect of central costs with a minority of members seeking further reductions in unspecified areas. It was also suggested that the budget strategy should contain a statement of priorities to guide the allocation of resources. Finally, it was noted that the draft budget strategy was implicitly rowing back on commitments made by the Diocesan Synod in respect of resourcing work towards achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2030 (although it was possible that national funding streams to support this work would finally be activated during the coming triennium).

Mr. Williams then invited members to submit any further comments and responses to questions in writing within a week and these would be taken into account in preparing the relevant documentation to be considered at the meeting of the Diocesan Synod in June.

6. To consult the DMPC on an appointment to the Church Buildings Strategy Committee

Paper BDC/21/25

Mrs. Laura Ford, Chair of the Church Buildings Strategy Committee, noted that the Committee was in the process of increasing its number of non-officer members and simultaneously seeking to expand the range of professional expertise represented within its membership. The Diocesan Bishop had indicated a willingness to appoint Mr. Simon Timms to the Committee and particularly commended the importance of his substantial experience in the fields of fundraising and heritage policy.

In the absence of any discussion, it was agreed to support the proposal for the Bishop of Exeter to appoint Mr. Simon Timms to the Church Buildings Strategy Committee.

7. To approve revised terms of reference for the Church Buildings Strategy Committee

Paper BDC/22/25

Mrs. Laura Ford, Chair of the Church Buildings Strategy Committee, introduced the Committee's proposed revised terms of reference, and reminded members of the Committee's broad functions (as a subcommittee of the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee) as set out in the Mission and Pastoral Measure. In particular, the Committee was seeking to structure its work such that it could give full attention to both its strategic / oversight functions as well as to casework. In due course this renewed emphasis on the strategic aspects of the Committee's work was intended to lead to the development of a Diocesan Church Buildings Strategy with the intention of assisting and supporting PCCs as they considered the future of their church buildings. The Strategy itself would require DMPC approval.

In discussion it was noted that PCCs and incumbents could already access central support and advice on issues relating to extended usage, sustainable governance, friends' groups, grant funding and the process leading to the closure of a buildings for public worship. The capacity of the Church Buildings Team (which also supported the work of the Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches) had been increased as a result of a successful application for external grant funding and this was making a significant difference to the capacity of the team to engage and offer bespoke local support. It was hoped that this enhanced level of

support might continue to be made available in the medium term, subject to the outcome of the national Triennial Funding Review.

The revised Terms of Reference for the Church Buildings Strategy Committee were approved.

8. To approve revised terms of reference for the Assets Group Paper BDC/23/25

Mr. Neil Williams, Director of Finance, introduced the triennial revision of the terms of reference of the Assets Group. On this occasion only relatively minor changes were being proposed, principally in relation to the new legal status of the Diocesan Board of Education (as a formal sub-committee of the Diocesan Board of Finance). Other amendments included clarification of provisions relating to auditing and membership. Mr Williams noted that the Group was close to a full complement of members, although there remained the possibility of a small number of new appointments if people with appropriate and complementary expertise could be identified.

The revised terms of reference for the Assets Group were approved.

9. To receive the revised DBF Risk Register Paper BDC/24/25

Mr. Neil Williams, the Diocesan Director of Finance, introduced the annual revision of the Risk Register of the Diocesan Board of Finance, of which the Board's trustees and directors were required to have oversight. The agreed approach was for the Board's Executive to receive a list of the most significant risks and mitigations proposed and already undertaken. He noted that detailed consideration of the full register was undertaken twice a year by the Assets Group. This year a separate section in the Register had been included in relation to safeguarding (arising from one of the recommendations of the INEQE audit), in order to promote particular scrutiny in this area. Finally, it was noted that all members could request sight of the full Risk Register if they felt that this would help them to fulfil their functions as trustees and directors.

In discussion a request was made for a change to the format of the Register, such that the identified risks were related to organisational priorities and that the mitigations could be expressed in terms of those priorities. Clarification was also sought concerning risks that appeared to be the primary concern and responsibility of another legal entity (such as a church school's governing body or a PCC) and it was thought necessary to avoid the risk of over-reach in risk identification and mitigation. It was noted that in respect of education, the Diocesan Board of Education (and therefore by extension the Diocesan Board of Finance) had statutory duties to fulfil in relation to church schools; furthermore there were wider considerations around reputational risk given that the wider public would not perceive a distinction between different but related 'church' entities in the event of a risk being realised.

It was also thought important in relation to some of the bigger, more generalised risks (such as a fall in the number of participants) not to appear to retro-determine a single 'cause' from a proposed mitigation. Participation levels might be influenced by any number of issues and circumstances, acting in a wide variety of directions (even contradictorily so in relation to a series of decisions taken by unknown individuals) and the implied attribution of a single reason for any such complex change was likely to be a misleading over-simplification.

10. To agree items for inclusion of the agenda of the next meeting of the Diocesan Synod

Mr. Stephen Hancock, the Diocesan Secretary, proposed the following items for inclusion on the agenda of Diocesan Synod at its next meeting on 21st June 2025:

- Minutes of the meeting of 22nd March 2025

- Presidential address
- 2026 Budget Strategy
- ‘Living in Love and Faith’ consultation
- Questions

He noted that the Proclamation of Vacancy in See Committee Regulations 2025 as an Act of Synod would be added to the agenda if the necessary confirmation from the Church of England’s Legal Office was received in time.

Mr. Hancock noted that the intention was to hold the meeting in two halves with the Budget Strategy and questions before the lunch break and the ‘Living in Love and Faith’ item in the afternoon. The latter would be run with the nationally produced consultation materials and according to the format that has been provided.

Deemed Items

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| 11. | To receive reports from the Archidiaconal Mission and Pastoral Committees | Paper BDC/26/25 |
| 12. | To receive a report from the Assets Group | Paper BDC/27/25 |
| 13. | To receive a report from the DBF Standing Committee | Paper BDC/28/25 |
| 14. | To receive the Common Fund out-turn for 2024 and an update for 2025 | Paper BDC/29/25 |

Remaining meeting dates for BDC and Diocesan Synod in 2025

Synod	Saturday 21 st June, 10.00 – 16.00	Cullompton Community Centre
BDC	Wednesday 9 th July, 18.00 – 21.00	The Old Deanery
BDC	Tuesday 16 th September, 18.00 – 21.00	The Old Deanery
Synod	Saturday 11 th October, 10.00 – 16.00	County Hall, Exeter
BDC	Saturday 6 th December, 10.00 – 13.00	The Old Deanery