

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 on Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> January 2026  
at the Old Deanery, Exeter at 10.00**

Introductory worship

The Bishop of Exeter in the chair

Attendance: The Right Revd Dr Mike Harrison, the Right Revd James Grier, the Right Revd. Moira Astin, the Ven. Verena Breed, the Ven. Jane Bakker, the Ven. Douglas Dettmer, the Ven Andrew Beane, Mrs Laura Ford, Mr Richard Buzzacott, Dr. Kerry Gilbert, the Revd Peter March, Dr. Lystra Hagley-Dickinson, the Revd. Tanya Hockley-Still, the Very Revd. Jonathan Greener, Mr. Bob Mills, Dr. Jennie Golding, the Revd. Andrew Thomas, Mr. Graham Dunn, , Mr. Nigel Price, Mr. Stephen Macey, Mr. Bob Mills, Mr. Mike Jefferies, the Revd. Preb. Rosie Austin and the Revd. Canon Dr. Benjamin Williams

I. Apologies and Notices

Apologies were received from the Revd. Preb. Mike Partridge, Mr. Giles Frampton, the Revd. Preb Samantha Stayte and the Revd. Deborah Leighton Plom

- The Revd Canon Dr. Benjamin Williams was welcomed to his first meeting as a Bishop's nominee. Also welcomed was Sarah Owen, who provides governance support to the Company Secretary, assisting Neil Williams with items 6 and 7.
- Farewell was bid in her absence to Mrs Annie Jefferies who has stepped back from her roles on Diocesan Synod and the BDC after many years of outstanding service, including more than two terms as Chair of the House of Laity. This creates a vacancy on the Council for a lay member of Diocesan Synod from the Plymouth archdeaconry and a casual election will be held at an opportune moment.
- In the absence of the Chair of the Diocesan Board of Finance, it was agreed that the Bishop of Exeter would remain in the chair throughout the meeting including for those items where the DBF Executive is the 'lead' body.
- The previous appointment by the Bishop's Council of Dr Ed Moffatt as the Diocesan Electoral Registration Officer under Church Representation Rule 27 was noted and reaffirmed for the forthcoming synodical electoral terms.
- A request was received to vary the order of business such that item 6 on the agenda (relating to the DBF risk register) be taken before item 5 (relating to the Cranbrook church building project). After consultation with members, this was agreed.

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

No such declarations of interest were made

3. To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 6<sup>th</sup> December 2025 **Paper BDC/01/26**

The minutes of the meeting held on 6<sup>th</sup> December 2025 were approved without amendment.

4. To consider the outcomes of the application to the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board for grant funding from the Diocesan Investment Programme and to make any necessary decisions arising **Paper BDC/02/26**

The Right Revd. James Grier, Bishop of Plymouth, confirmed that the application to the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board (SMMIB) in late 2025 had been successful; the diocesan rationale and strategy had been accepted and funding awarded in full. The funding was in two tranches of £10m over three years, subject to a review process at the end of year 3. In addition, time limited support funding had been allocated in the same way, leading to a total investment over 6 years of up to £24m. The grant funding was for agreed and specified missional initiatives that would support the delivery of the Diocese's 10-year vision and strategy now known as 'Pray, Grow, Serve 2035'. It was important to realise that the funding was neither for existing core expenditure and activities nor was it a fund to which applications could be made by parishes and mission communities.

As had previously been discussed at Bishops Council and Diocesan Synod, the application had sought resourcing for 5 areas of focussed activity that would support the 5 priorities articulated in the Diocesan strategy. Some of the actions would be applicable throughout the Diocese and others had been approved for implementation in identified locations. There would be a specific focus on Plymouth not least because the city was a particular priority for the funding body. Target outcomes for each of the areas of activity had been agreed and regular reporting was a core requirement of the grant.

In discussion members expressed their appreciation and thanks for the very substantial amount of work that had been done in order for the application to have been successful and tribute was paid to all those who had been closely involved in what had been a highly demanding process. It was noted that the process of applying for the grant had involved repeated intensive negotiation over what was permitted to be included and the activities that fitted the criteria for funding were closely constrained; it was not possible to apply for support for a wide range of activities that might be regarded as 'business as usual' and investment in capital projects (including in relation to church buildings) was heavily limited. This meant that a number of capacity issues as experienced by parochial clergy and lay officers could not be addressed directly through the application (whether by an across-the-board increase in the number of clergy in 'normal' parochial ministry, by providing assistance with local administration or by dealing with most buildings-related issues). The emphasis instead had to be on a cultural reorientation that through training and support would release energy for increased, and increasingly effective, missional activity. The Exeter Leadership Development Programme (ELDP) would have the twin objectives of supporting clergy well being and spiritual revitalisation along with improving missional effectiveness in ways appropriate to the local context.

Concern was expressed about the review requirement before the release of the second tranche of funding, not least because there was a limited amount that could realistically be achieved in terms of outcomes in what would be a relatively short period. It was acknowledged there was an element of risk associated with the review, that not all streams of activity would start immediately and that it would be important to limit the number and extent of liabilities that could potentially accrue. It was noted that the staged and contingent funding was one factor that could problematise recruitment to new posts (in a recruitment context that was already difficult for other reasons). Partly the recruitment challenge would need to be met by developing capacity internally (for example via the Exeter Ordination Pathway, increasing the discernment of vocations and expanding a wide range of lay ministries) but it was also hoped that the funding announcement would make the Diocese a more attractive destination for external candidates; indeed there was some emerging evidence that this was already having a positive reputational impact.<sup>1</sup>

The Ven. Douglas Dettmer, Archdeacon of Totnes, then introduced the proposed terms of reference of the Programme Board as a committee of the DBF Executive (the DBF being the body to which the funding was being made available). He noted that the creation of the Programme Board was required as a condition of the grant funding and that its function was accordingly limited to the oversight of policies and actions that had already been agreed. There would be significant compliance and reporting requirements (primarily to the funders) and relatively little latitude in how the work would have to be carried out. The Programme Board would involve some DBF directors and DBF staff, but the voting membership would be limited to the directors. Finally, he noted that the terms of reference included arrangements for voting and a quorum but that it was anticipated that this would rarely be required since its focus would be on the delivery of actions that had already been determined.

Mr. Dettmer then noted that written proposals for amendments to the terms of reference as circulated to members had been received in advance of the meeting. These related to the definition of voting members, the operation of a quorum, the arrangements for calling meetings of the Board and the arrangements for the Board to report to the Executive of the DBF. Having reviewed the amendments that had been submitted, he now proposed that changes be made to the text of the terms of reference such that they would read as follows:

*4.4. For the purposes of Article 68, members of the Board who are also Directors of the EDBF (members of the Bishop's Diocesan Council) are deemed 'Appointed Members'. All other members listed above are deemed 'Co-opted Members' and are non-voting members of the Board.*

*5. Meetings, Proceedings and Quorum*

*5.1. The Board shall meet at least quarterly, or more frequently as its business demands. Meetings will be called by the Chair or a group of three members giving five working days' notice to members.*

*5.2. The Chair may convene special meetings as required.*

*5.3. A quorum shall be 1/3 of voting members/directors (see 4.4 for definition of voting members)*

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<sup>1</sup> Members requested the provision of a verbatim rendering of this discussion for future reference. This was subsequently provided and although not part of the minutes it is retained separately as part of the full record of the meeting.

*7.2. The Board shall prepare an annual report on the DIP for the Executive to present to the Diocesan Synod, ensuring full transparency across the Diocese. In addition, a six-monthly update will be provided to the Executive and a standing item for exception reporting will be included in BDC agendas*

In discussion it was noted that the reporting from the Programme Board to the DBF Executive would include quantitative metrics as agreed with the SMMIB. It was also noted that the Programme Board would be in a position to create sub-committees as needed (with terms of reference as appropriate but yet to be developed), that would engage closely with particular areas of work within the programme and with more widely drawn memberships that could incorporate those with specialist knowledge as needed. Existing DBF staff will support the implementation of the programme and new staff appointments arising from the programme, including those deployed locally, will be employed by the DBF. A concern was raised about whether the existing indemnity insurance for DBF Directors was sufficient to cover this significant new range of activities; an assurance was given that this would be checked outside the meeting and remedial actions taken if needed. A further concern was raised about the proposed membership of the Programme Board, concentrating responsibility primarily in the hands of Bishops and Archdeacons. It was noted that a lay director of the DBF would also be a member of the Board, in addition to the Chair of EDBF, and that staff would also be present at its meetings as non-voting members. It was reiterated that the Programme Board would have a constrained remit (more akin to that of a fiduciary body than a trustee body) to oversee the implementation of the programme as agreed with the funders, and that its decision-making capacity (particularly in a strategic sense) would therefore be strictly limited.

Finally, it was noted that the draft terms of reference of the Programme Board had already been checked with the SMMIB and that any amendments to the draft would be subject to their agreement. Given the nature of the proposed amendments, it was unlikely that this would prove problematic.

The creation of the Programme Board as a committee of the Diocesan Board of Finance, as set out in the paper and subject to the agreed amendments specified above was put to the vote and approved nem con.

5. To review the DBF Risk Register

**Paper BDC/04/26**

Mr. Neil Williams, the Diocesan Director of Finance, noted that the DBF's risk register was a live document, reviewed regularly in full form by Heads of Department and the Assets Group, and annually by Directors with particular attention to those risks that are of greatest concern. At this point the Register for review by Directors related to the situation before confirmation of the grant funding to be received from the Diocesan Investment Programme and it could immediately be seen that the award would have a material impact in respect of some of the risks and mitigations identified. In particular, although the main element of the funding related to new and additional work (which itself would carry their own risks), the award also included some time limited support funding, that would help in the transition towards long term sustainability and would alleviate to some degree some of the more immediate financial risks. The budget for 2026 (agreed by Diocesan Synod in October 2025) would be able to be implemented, including in respect of the decision to hold back from reducing stipendiary parochial posts and DBF posts. Additionally, the projected annual deficit would be reduced

(albeit other transfers of resources would still be needed, for example from sale of surplus assets, the use of Unapplied Total Return and increased Lowest Income Community Funding). The overall risk would need to be reassessed in light of the funding award but in all likelihood would remain significant.

In respect of other areas of risk, it was noted that Safeguarding now had a separate section within the overall DBF Risk Register, as recommended by the recent external audit of safeguarding practice, and additionally was monitored closely by the Diocesan Safeguarding Officer. In respect of church buildings, it remained a major concern that the number of buildings that could be required to be transferred to DBF ownership could rise significantly and uncontrollably with substantial consequential financial impacts. The lead indicators of such situations were very low levels of participation and weakened governance arrangements; anecdotal evidence was that such circumstances were increasingly common.

In discussion, members sought clarity on a number of risks that were included within the full register but did not feature in the highest risks presented in the paper. These included security risks (including cybersecurity, data extraction and AI), climate change and a potential lack of incumbent status clergy. In respect of church buildings, it was noted that the two fixed term Church Building Support Officer posts that were supported by national grant funding streams, had had a significant beneficial impact in a number of parishes. It was noted that continuation funding had already been applied for but this was not guaranteed in full or in part and a loss of even just one of the posts would lead to a diminution of the valuable service being offered.

Concerns were raised that the structural budget deficit remained unresolved and that capital assets were being used in the short term to balance the books; this could only be justified if it enabled a transition to a more sustainable position in the longer term. In the meantime, it would remain important to control costs wherever possible. There was also a need to evaluate the risks and benefits of making energy efficiency improvements to housing (both that occupied by clergy and that rented out over shorter and longer periods); it was noted that legislative change was anticipated, including in the Renters' Rights Bill and this could have an impact on an important income stream. It was also noted that no houses were being sold that would or could be needed for clergy occupation in the foreseeable future.

6. To approve funding arrangements for a new church building in Cranbrook **Paper BDC/03/26**

The Right Revd. Moira Astin, Bishop of Crediton, noted that the proposed funding arrangements for a new church building in Cranbrook had been scrutinised by the Assets Group and came with its recommendation to approve. She then reminded members of the history of long term and intensive engagement with the planning for and development of the new town and noted that the ecumenical church community, which was vibrant and growing, was at the heart of the town's social fabric. There was good joint working with the neighbouring Church of England primary school, which hosted church services on Sundays, but there was a clear need (in a community with a shortage of community facilities) for a church building that could be in use at all times of day and throughout the week. A suitable site had been provided through the planning agreement for the town but the opportunity that it presented needed to be embraced soon before the site was reallocated. It was clear that the approval of significant capital expenditure involved both a prioritisation of resources and an acceptance of risk; yet there was also a series of risks associated with inaction and these needed to be weighed in the balance, especially in the context of the long-term diocesan vision and strategy. It was significant and

indicative of the importance of the project and the town, that exceptionally national funding from the Diocesan Investment Programme had been allocated to this capital project.

Mr. Neil Williams, the Diocesan Director of Finance, noted that the Assets Group had repeatedly engaged with the emerging proposals over an extended period. The Group was persuaded of the need to make the financial commitment at this moment in time and for the Diocesan Board of Finance to underwrite the funding of the building to enable the project to be progressed for planning permission. The sources of internal funding included the Diocesan Pastoral Account, a restricted fund whose purposes included the provision of new church buildings, and the sale of surplus housing. Contributions were also expected from grant funding applications, ecumenical partners and the local church, which together would reduce the DBF's exposure below the maximum allocation.

In discussion members noted that major capital expenditure represented an opportunity cost and that as trustees they needed to be convinced that this was the best use of the limited funding available. Capital drawn from a restricted fund was less of an issue in this regard than the proceeds of the sale of other assets that could and were being put to a wider range of uses. It was noted that although this was the first opportunity for a new church building in a new town in Devon, it would not be the last; there was a need to deliver the first project successfully as proof of concept and also to plan strategically for a sustainable programme over the coming years. It was noted in this context and more widely that for the local community and church to feel ownership of the building, there needed to be a substantive local contribution to its construction.

Members also noted that the building would benefit from having a clearly articulated theology of place and while maximising its functionality, also to be a place of beauty. If possible it should also aspire to be sustainable and to demonstrate a commitment to the local and wider environment in its design and usage. It was also noted that in the allocation of resources for charity trustees there was a balance to be struck; on the one hand to be prudent and careful with the charity's assets and on the other not to retain reserves (especially restricted reserves) unnecessarily when they could be deployed to deliver the charity's objects. It was suggested that this was just such an occasion and opportunity to enhance missional outreach and service to a new town and its rapidly growing population.

The approval for the funding of a new church building in Cranbrook, as set out in the paper, was put to the vote and approved (with two abstentions).

7. To receive new requirements concerning identity verification for company directors

**Paper BDC/05/26**

Mr. Neil Williams, the Diocesan Director of Finance, and Sarah Owen explained the legal context for the changed requirements for company directors to have their identities verified. It was noted that this was not optional and applied to both existing and new directors, with a deadline falling in August 2026. It was intended make assistance available to all concerned and to complete the process well ahead of the deadline.

Members were also reminded that it was a requirement to complete the annual declaration of interests and that this should be done as soon as possible.

In discussion it was noted that for one person who had already been through the process, it had been somewhat convoluted but it had been able to be completed and submitted at the first attempt.

8. To receive a report on the implementation of the Diocesan Racial Justice Strategy

**Paper BDC/06/26**

The Revd. Tanya Hockley-Still, the Diocesan Racial Justice Adviser, reminded members that the Racial Justice Strategy had been approved by Diocesan Synod in 2023, since which time a great deal of work had been undertaken, particularly within the Education Team. Consideration was being given to applying for funding from the national Church to support a diocesan audit and this would in turn enable a further application for funding to assist in delivering the actions identified in the strategy.

In the absence of any discussion the report was received.

9. To consider a diocesan code of conduct for elections

**Paper BDC/07/26**

Dr. Kerry Gilbert, Chair of the House of Laity, introduced the draft diocesan code of conduct for elections and noted that the need for a code had arisen out of a number of incidents that had occurred during recent elections, particularly those to the General Synod. The aim of the code was to help candidates and electors have a positive experience of the electoral process even though differences of opinion were sometimes strongly felt and expressed. The intention was to request that Diocesan Synod approve and 'own' the code, which would help to set a positive tone and culture for the forthcoming elections.

Having reflected and consulted with some of the Diocese's representatives on the General Synod, who had both helped to shape and then subsequently reviewed the draft, and also having considered alternative models (such as the Nolan principles and the General Synod's own code of conduct) it had felt appropriate to structure the diocesan code around the diocese's growth values, which were themselves based on the 'fruits of the Spirit'. Even so, the draft code was something of a compromise, a middle path between competing perspectives. This was most keenly felt in the area of disclosure of information / privacy and self-determination; it would ultimately be for the Synod to decide whether an appropriate balance had been struck.

In discussion support was expressed for the provision of the code, which would sit alongside rather than supersede the national electoral regulations to be implemented by the Presiding Officer and the Electoral Registration Officer. It was suggested that the document could focus more tightly on conduct and should avoid trespassing into issues around content and process. Some adjustments to the section setting out 'further considerations' were suggested, although different views were expressed as to whether this section should be sustained in its current form. Concern was also expressed about whether and how hustings should be held and it was noted that the Presiding Officer would consult the Bishop's Council on this point in due course.

It was agreed that once members' comments had been considered, the draft code of conduct as amended would proceed to the next meeting of the Diocesan Synod for approval.

10. To receive information relating to formal warnings issued by the Charity Commission for England and Wales to two Diocesan Boards of Finance **Paper BDC/15/26**

The Right Revd. Dr. Mike Harrison, Bishop of Exeter, noted that this item had been introduced late on to the agenda by the Chair of the Diocesan Board of Finance in recognition of the need to ensure members were suitably and immediately informed but not because action was immediately required. The formal warnings issued by the Charity Commission (which were published after the agenda for this meeting had been agreed and shortly before its first circulation) appeared to represent a significant shift in the regulatory landscape for all DBFs particularly in respect of the extent of the information that trustees were required to receive about safeguarding cases in order to be able to discharge their legal responsibilities (including with reference to serious incident reporting to the Commission). Hitherto it had been understood that functions could be delegated suitably qualified professionals (for example within Diocesan Safeguarding Teams) with only high-level reporting to trustees. Both this, and also the categories of incidents that were required to be reported to the Commission (with a broader definition being applied than had hitherto been understood to be appropriate), would make a significant difference to the exercise of trustee oversight and associated procedures.

It was noted that the situation was, for the time being, somewhat fluid, with conversations about the implications of the warnings taking place with the Commission at national level. For the time being therefore, no proposals for structural change were being brought forward for approval. However, it was expected that fuller consideration and potentially the approval of new arrangements, would need to be on the agenda of the next meeting in May 2026. In the meantime, and to provide reassurance to trustees and external stakeholders that the situation was being taken seriously, the Diocesan Safeguarding Officer and the Chair of the DBF had agreed to the appointment of an interim Trustee Safeguarding Lead. This trustee would be briefed in confidence by the Diocesan Safeguarding Officer on cases that were thought to meet the Commission's criteria, to hold the information on behalf of the trustee body and to take a view on actions arising from a trustee perspective. This would temporarily enhance trustee engagement without compromising case integrity while national conversations were concluded and the resulting new diocesan arrangements agreed.

In discussion, clarity was sought on whether the Commission's warnings, although addressed specifically to two Diocesan Boards of Finance, could have knock-on implications for PCCs (which were themselves trustee bodies). This was acknowledged to be a possibility (since the cases dealt with by diocesan safeguarding teams normally occurred within a parish context) but it was not yet possible to enumerate what those implications might be. Concern was also expressed at the implications of the change in scope and associated statutory definition of safeguarding beyond its impact on trustee bodies; the resourcing requirements arising from the change could be very significant.

11. To agree items for inclusion on the agenda of Diocesan Synod in March 2026

Mr. Stephen Hancock, the Diocesan Secretary, proposed the following items for inclusion on the agenda of Diocesan Synod at its next meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2026:

- Minutes of the previous meeting

- Presidential address
- To receive information relating to Pray Grow Serve 2035
- To approve a Diocesan Code of Conduct for Elections
- To receive a report from General Synod
- To receive meeting dates for Diocesan Synod and the Bishop’s Diocesan Council for 2027
- To receive the annual report of the Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches
- To receive the annual report of the Diocesan Board of Education Committee
- To receive the annual report on the implementation of the Diocesan Racial Justice Strategy
- Questions

In discussion it was suggested that the Synod would be interested to hear more about the latest developments at Cranbrook, whether within the context of Pray Grow Serve 2035 or in some other way.

#### Deemed Items

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| 12. | To receive a report from the Assets Group  | <b>Paper BDC/08/26</b> |
| 13. | To receive the annual report of the Environment Working Group                                      | <b>Paper BDC/09/26</b> |
| 14. | To receive a report of the financial situation at the end of December 2025                         | <b>Paper BDC/10/26</b> |
| 15. | To approve draft meeting dates for 2027 for the Diocesan Synod and BDC                             | <b>Paper BDC/11/26</b> |
| 16. | To note documents sealed by the Diocesan Board of Finance  | <b>Paper BDC/12/26</b> |
| 17. | To note Trusts and funds for investment accepted by, or wound up by, the Diocesan Board of Finance | <b>Paper BDC/13/26</b> |
| 18. | To receive the annual report of the Diocesan Church Planting and Revitalisation Group              | <b>Paper BDC/14/26</b> |