

The House of Bishops met for a scheduled two-day meeting on Monday 14 and Tuesday 15 December 2020 via Zoom

The two-day meeting is customary for the House at year end, with the House approving items to feature on the agenda for February Synod.

Amongst the key issues covered were discussion and updates on the Emerging Church workstreams, Safeguarding (particularly independent oversight), updates from Ministry and further developments related to the reform of the Clergy Disciplinary Measure (CDM).

The Bishop of London gave an update to the House regarding the on-going situation with regards to COVID-19 in her role as Chair of the Recovery Group. In her update, she addressed the impact of COVID-19 in preparation for the Christmas season and the possibility of future restrictions over the coming months. She noted that every effort has been made to ensure that Christmas church services are held safely and in compliance with the law and that churchgoers can be assured of this. The House was reminded that throughout the pandemic, churches have worked with other faith communities, local groups and volunteers to support their communities and local health providers. The Bishop of London confirmed that this work will continue as the nation recovers from the pandemic but noted that we are not yet through the crisis and urged caution and care to all in the community.

The House was updated by the Bishop of Manchester in his capacity as Chair of the Coordinating group of the Emerging Church Workstreams. This was followed by discussion of a Perspectives paper outlining how dioceses individually, and the Church as whole, are responding in the short and medium terms to the challenges of COVID-19. The paper reviewed the impact of the pandemic and the changes dioceses are making to their mission and ministry plans, as regards finances, people and buildings. The house broke into groups to discuss the issues raised in the paper.

The conversation continued in the second day, when breakout groups reported on their discussions. The focus of the feedback and the discussions was how resources should be directed to where they will have the most impact, how national strategies should relate to diocesan strategies and where resources should be maximised for longer term transformation. The House also reviewed how bishops can work collaboratively to respond to the changing picture at ground level.

The Bishop of Leeds addressed the House in this capacity as Chair of the Governance Review Group and was joined by the Bishop of Willesden, who is a member of the group. A progress report was presented the House in line with the Group's terms of reference which tasks the Group with reviewing the effectiveness of the existing governance structures and process across the national functions of the Church of England. The House noted the report and agreed to the direction of travel for phase two of the Group's work. The Governance Review Group plan to publish a consultation document which will suggest a number of options for future governance models and will consult widely on them with all relevant stakeholders.

The Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich then spoke to the House regarding the work of the Transforming Effectiveness workstream, whose purpose is to make the operations of the National Church Institutions more effective to enable the Church of England to better serve God's mission.

The Bishop of Huddersfield (Lead Bishop for Safeguarding) introduced Melissa Caslake, Director of Safeguarding to speak to the House with contributions also from Meg Munn, the Secretary General and the Chair of the Independent Safeguarding Panel. In addition to a progress update on the interim support scheme following the recent ICSA report and recommendations and last month's Synod debate, the House agreed in principle to interim arrangements to provide for independent oversight and scrutiny in the immediate future.

The Bishop of Huddersfield thanked Melissa Caslake for her contribution over the last 18 months prior to her forthcoming departure in January next year. He gave his personal thanks for her support and leadership within the National Safeguarding Team (NST) and National Safeguarding Steering Group. During her tenure, Melissa led and worked with colleagues towards the creation of new independent structures for the oversight of safeguarding and has helped the Church to become a safer and healthier place for all.

The Bishop at Lambeth updated the House on the progress to date on Clergy Disciplinary Measure (CDM) reform. The House noted the direction of travel of CDM reform, which will also take into account recent ICSA recommendations. Feedback was given by the House on three proposals with further discussion to form part of a wider consultation process, prior to proposals being put forward to General Synod.

The Bishop of Chester gave a short presentation to the House on the Revised Formation Framework for Ordained Ministry. The Ministry Council has overseen this process on behalf of the House which began in September 2019, with the purpose of renewing the Formation Framework which is used to assess the suitability of ordinands to be ordained and to assess the suitability of curates to be moved to a new post. The House gave its blessings to the work of Ministry Council on the framework and noted the protocol which has been devised to enable good practice in withdrawing ordinands from training.

The House also engaged in a discussion regarding Brexit. The House considered the current situation and the impact of the various future scenarios on churches and communities across the country. The Bishops in the House of Lords will continue to contribute to discussions in the House of Lords on this matter.

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