

Peer review – why bother?

Renewal and Reform

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By the summer of 2017 35 dioceses had been through the peer review process. Alan Cruickshank from the Strategy and Development Unit at Church House explains the basics of how peer review works and why it is worthwhile.

Sorry, never heard of it – what’s a peer review?

Peer reviews are one-day meetings at which a group of three reviewers from outside the diocese and the bishop and senior staff talk through all aspects of their vision and work. The aim is to help the leadership team to reflect carefully on what is working and what might need to change. It also enables dioceses to learn from each other and work more closely together.

Almost all of our dioceses will have been through the peer review process by the end of 2017.

Peer review affirms where a diocese is doing well and offers appropriate suggestions on areas for development.

What does peer review achieve? Is it all hot air?

Peer review holds a mirror up to a diocese’s work. It brings an external perspective, which helps highlight both strengths and areas for development. The process creates an opportunity for a diocese to pause, step back and discern where it can sharpen focus on priorities and add momentum to existing work. Peer reviewers are asked to be supportive but objective, constructive but demanding.

‘By assessing what we do we can see how much good work goes on in the Diocese and this gives us confidence for a hopeful future.’

Like Ofsted for churches?

No. It is not an audit, inspection or approval process, but rather a learning exercise between the diocese and the reviewers.

The final report is confidential to the diocese to give maximum space for honest and open exchanges. It is about constructive challenge, learning from each other and a chance to review progress.

Who does the reviewing?

Dioceses nominated potential peer reviewers in early 2016 and the Archbishops’ Council selected around 50 people to take on the role. Many have experience of leadership in the

church, others have commercial and not-for-profit backgrounds. The Strategy and Development Unit supports dioceses and peer reviewers through the process.

Panels are selected to cover many areas of expertise. Each panel has at least one reviewer who is entirely independent of diocesan structures.

Reviewers are trained in the peer review process and are encouraged to listen carefully, and to reflect on what is said and what is not said.

How does it work in practice?

In preparation, the diocese completes a three or four page self-assessment on its strengths and areas for improvement in six areas:

- leadership
- spiritual and numerical growth
- transforming communities and serving individuals
- ministry
- culture and governance
- and finance and resources

The peer reviewers examine this assessment carefully alongside other background information provided by the diocese. The reviewers also speak to a selection of people in parishes or local leadership roles suggested by the senior leadership team to get another perspective on what is going on.

Much of the discussion is based around the responses to the self-assessment form.

Typical questions might include:

- Are there things you need to stop doing in order to achieve your priorities?
- What can other dioceses learn from you?
- What steps are you taking to develop your existing lay leaders?

The peer reviewers' questions are designed to open up a conversation about how the diocese's activities hang together, what they are grounded in, and how much progress is being made.

Soon after the meeting the reviewers provide the diocese with a summary report affirming areas of strength, and giving suggestions for them to consider further. The diocese is asked to complete the final section of the report with their response to the peer review.

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How do you know if it's working?

Dioceses give feedback after each review and this has been broadly positive. Every peer review so far has been able to put a finger on at least one significant issue – such as the alignment of resources to their strategy – for the diocese to consider.

Reflection - Sheffield Diocese

Sheffield Diocese had their peer review in 2016. The Rt Revd Peter Burrows, Bishop of Doncaster reflects on the process:

In 2016 we held up a mirror and asked some tricky questions about our Diocese. Seeing our strengths and weaknesses and identifying opportunities and threats has been a useful exercise for us and we are glad to support Renewal and Reform's goal to improve shared accountability across the Church.

But why bother? The aim of course is to strengthen mission and finances in the dioceses. But for us the exercise has given us reasons to celebrate our strengths and the vocations of our people who are committed to growing new disciples, transforming communities, Fresh Expressions of church of which there are 56 across the diocese, pioneer ministry, including experimenting with interim ministers, mission and work with children and young people and Mission Partnerships, to name but a few. By assessing what we do we can see how much good work goes on in the Diocese and this gives us confidence for a hopeful future.

But we are not complacent. There is much to do. Peer review has allowed us to see the wood from the trees – to define the areas that need more attention. We are aware that all of us are working at capacity and beyond. By defining our weaknesses we can better focus our limited resources. For us the priorities include improving progress of our Mission Partnership model and working on how to better fill vacancies in parishes (a problem that is difficult to shift).

How does peer review work? Well, it is a thorough exercise! We completed a self-assessment form exploring developments relating to growth, the common good, re-imagining ministry, strategic leadership, leadership culture and the use of resources. The consultation on the day of the review included members of the Bishop's Staff, the chair of the board of finance, lay and ordained chairs of synod. It also included telephone interviews with a number of lay and ordained people from across the diocese prior to this. A final report has been completed for us to use in conjunction with our Diocesan plans.

Was it worth it? Absolutely - it's given us a clear steer on practical outcomes for the next twelve months that have a sound theological rationale and which excite us about God's mission in the diocese.