

DIOCESES COMMISSION
ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2020

Membership and Staff

1. The Commission consists of a Chair and Vice-Chair appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the latter from among the members of the Houses of Clergy and Laity of the General Synod; four members elected by the Synod; and four members appointed by the Appointments Committee.

2. The membership and staff of the Commission are as follows:

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| Chair: | Vacant |
| Vice-Chair: | The Revd Paul Benfield (Blackburn) [Acting Chair] |
| Elected Members: | Canon Malcolm Halliday (Leeds) (to 15 January 2021) The Revd Canon Geoffrey Harbord (Sheffield) The Revd Dr Robert Munro (Chester) Mr Gavin Oldham (Oxford) |
| Appointed Members: | The Rt Revd Paul Williams, Bishop of Southwell & Nottingham (from March 2020) Ms Ruth Martin The Rt Revd Dame Sarah Mullally, Bishop of London (to June 2020) The Rt Revd Dr John Perumbalath, Bishop of Bradwell (from September 2020) Mrs Jacqueline Stamper (Blackburn) |
| Secretary: | Mr Jonathan Neil-Smith |

3. The Commission welcomed two new members in 2020. The Rt Revd Paul Williams (Bishop of Southwell & Nottingham), and the Rt Revd Dr John Perumbalath (Bishop of Bradwell) were appointed in succession to the Rt Revd Christopher Foster, Bishop of Portsmouth, and the Rt Revd Dame Sarah Mullally, Bishop of London. Both Bishop Christopher and Bishop Sarah had made significant contributions to the Commission – in Bishop Sarah’s case since joining it as a parish priest in 2008. The Commission is nevertheless glad to have the wisdom and experience of their successors at its disposal.
4. Canon Malcolm Halliday sadly died on 15 January 2021. He had been a valued member of the Commission since June 2016, having previously served as diocesan secretary in the former Diocese of Bradford. Condolences are offered to all those who knew him.

Duties and Powers of the Commission

5. The Commission’s duties and powers, laid down by the Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure 2007, are summarized with other information about the Commission and its work, in the Commission’s area of the Church of England web site: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/dioceses-commission>

6. The Commission is conscious that no major proposals for Reorganisation Schemes have formally been on the horizon since the formation of the Diocese of Leeds in 2014, although there has been much general discussion about the possibility of further schemes. At the end of 2019 it had initiated a facilitated review of its role and responsibilities, but this has been put on hold given the other reviews that have been initiated this year, notably the Governance Review (led by the Bishop of Leeds) and the Archbishops' Task Group on Episcopal Roles and Ministry (led by the Bishop of Ely). In September the Commission considered, and commended, a paper from its Secretary which had sought to capture lessons learned from the creation of the Diocese of Leeds, which had been prepared for the Governance Review and shared with the Bishop of Ely's Task Force.
7. The Commission has been very mindful of the financial pressures as a consequence of Covid-19 and has brought its members' skills and experience to bear on its work, not only in its scrutiny of suffragan sees, but also in discussions of the positive part it could play in on-going consideration within the Church about the cost effectiveness of diocesan administrative structures and the scope for radical changes. The Commission looks forward to engaging proactively with the various national review exercises in the course of 2021.

Suffragan Sees

8. The Commission continues to carry out its other responsibilities, notably its statutory role in respect of the filling of suffragan sees. It seeks to ensure that any proposal to fill suffragan sees should make sense in the current financial climate, be rooted in the diocese's mission strategy, cohere with the roles of others in the diocesan senior leadership team, and include roles that are inherently episcopal. In exercising its responsibilities under section 17 of the Dioceses and Pastoral Mission Measure 2007, the Commission considered, and agreed to, submissions for the filling of the following sees during the year:
 - Berwick (in the Diocese of Newcastle)
 - Dorchester (in the Diocese of Oxford)
 - Lynn (in the Diocese of Norwich)
 - Repton (in the Diocese of Derby)
 - Stockport (in the Diocese of Chester) – *reconsidered in the light of a revised role description and a fresh submission from the recently appointed diocesan*
9. At its June meeting the Commission considered a proposal to decouple the post of **Bishop of Ludlow** from that of Archdeacon of Ludlow (a unique arrangement that had been in place since 1994). Members were not unsympathetic in principle to the greater clarity of roles that would ensue, and noted the strong diocesan support for the proposal, but were not convinced that a sufficiently compelling strategic case has been made for the suffragan post alongside that of an archdeacon, particularly in the current financial climate. It engaged in dialogue with the Bishop of Hereford who, in the light of concerns raised by the Commission, decided not to fill the vacancy in the See of Ludlow. He decided instead to appoint a full-time Archdeacon of Ludlow. The diocese had issued a

press release on 31 July, which also referred to the Archbishop of Canterbury's support for the decision¹.

10. In September a sub-group from the Commission met with representatives from the Diocese of Oxford to consider the possibility of there being a suffragan **See of Milton Keynes**, in recognition of the huge growth of this New Town and consequent issues for mission and oversight. While not unsympathetic to these considerations, the Commission's representatives were sceptical as to the wisdom of creating a 4th suffragan see in the diocese at the present time (which would in any case entail the diocesan bishop gaining the consent of the General Synod). The Commission understands that consideration is being given to renaming the existing See of Buckingham; and looks forward to engaging further with the diocese.
11. In December the Commission received a submission to fill both the suffragan sees in the Diocese of Chester from the diocesan bishop. It was content that the See of Stockport (vacant since February 2019) should be filled, but sought more clarity about the case for the filling **the See of Birkenhead** as well, and formally referred the bishop's submission to the Archbishop of York for further consideration. The Archbishop decided that in all the circumstances that this appointment should proceed, and accordingly gave his consent for the See to be filled.
12. During the year the Commission undertook a review into the operation of the **See of Islington** (in the Diocese of London), following its agreement in 2015 to the then Bishop of London's proposal to revive the See to enable enhanced episcopal resource for church-planting, both within the diocese and more widely. The consultations revealed that Bishop Ric Thorpe's ministry had been hugely successful but that he had outgrown the original role description, which had been weighted towards ministry within the Diocese of London, into a ministry which was more national in scope. The Commission judged that the Archbishops and the House of Bishops, facilitated by its newly formed group led by the Bishop of Ely, should look further at the lessons learned for episcopal ministry from this innovative ministry and particularly how church-planting should be led and financed in future.

[On behalf of the Commission]
PAUL BENFIELD (Acting Chair) 16 March 2020

¹ <https://www.hereford.anglican.org/news/2020/07/23/decision-replacement-bishop-ludlow/>