



To:
The representors

Wendy Matthews
*Head of Mission, Pastoral
and Church Property*

*(and copied to the statutory interested parties for
information purposes only)*

Our ref: 15/228a/RA

By e-mail only

12 June 2024

Dear Mr and Mrs Atkinson

**Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011
Benefice of Kingskerswell, Abbotskerswell and Coffinswell
Proposed Pastoral Scheme**

1. The draft Scheme providing for the dissolution of the parish of Coffinswell, being one of the three parishes comprising the area of the benefice of benefice of Kingskerswell, Abbotskerswell and Coffinswell (the name of which shall be altered to “The Benefice of Kingskerswell with Coffinswell, and Abbotskerswell”), and the transfer of its area to the parish of Kingskerswell (to be renamed “The Parish of Kingskerswell with Coffinswell”); and the parish church of the parish of St Bartholomew, Coffinswell to be a chapel of ease in the enlarged and renamed parish of Kingskerswell with Coffinswell attracted a **single representation against the proposals** from you.

2. The Commissioners **have come to the decision that the Scheme affecting your benefice should proceed as drafted** notwithstanding your representation against it and the following statement indicates the reasons for their decision.

3. This letter sets out the reasons for the decision, and the factors they considered in their deliberation. The summary of your representation and the diocesan response is attached as Annex A.

Reasons for the Commissioners’ Decision

4. Overall, the Commissioners’ findings were that the Diocese had met the requirements of the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011, and the scheme had been brought forward for a proper purpose.

5. The Commissioners carefully considered your representation against the scheme, which suggested that the dwindling congregation numbers and people being unwilling to consider becoming churchwardens at Coffinswell was the result of a perceived lack of pastoral care from the current vicar; under a different incumbent, things could be different.

6. The Commissioners endorsed the diocesan policy of encouraging clergy and PCCs to be proactive about addressing governance concerns rather than waiting until a PCC became inquorate before taking action and noted that other small rural parishes in the Diocese faced similar issues. In this case they noted that concerns about the fragility of parish governance at Coffinswell had been raised by the previous incumbent and had been under discussion since 2018, some two years before the appointment of the present incumbent and they had been brought forward following the deaths of some PCC members. They also recognised that this would have affected the number of worshippers and that the fall in numbers had also begun before the current incumbency and may have been exacerbated by the COVID 19 pandemic.

7. They thought it significant that all the PCCs in the benefice supported these proposals and agreed that the incorporation of the area of Coffinswell into the Kingskerswell parish would avoid duplication of effort through the need to have two PCCs. They also noted that changing the status of St Bartholomew's church from a parish church to a chapel of ease in the enlarged Kingskerswell parish would remove the need for it to have its own churchwardens.

8. They further noted that there was no intention to reduce the service pattern at St Bartholomew's following any reorganisation, and that with regards the church and worship traditions, the Three Wells Mission Community saw itself as broad church with a welcoming attitude to a range of styles and traditions, while maintaining a core of traditional liturgy.

9. In terms of the financial impact of these proposals on parish share, the Commissioners noted that the basis on which parish share was calculated (participation averaged over three years and an "offset" of £2,000 per church building) meant that the parish share of the combined parish was unlikely to differ significantly from that paid by the current parishes given that St Bartholomew's would remain open and retain its pattern of services.

10. The Commissioners therefore shared the Bishop's hope that the simplification and shoring up of governance and administration would support the flourishing of the church within the community of Coffinswell and would also enhance the prospect of retaining St Bartholomew's church within the parochial system for the longer term.

11. They were satisfied that the statutory requirements of the consultation process had also been met; and noted that the Diocese had gone beyond what was required by holding two well-attended public meetings in Coffinswell during 2023. They also noted that these meetings had not led to anyone coming forward to join the PCC or take up parish offices.

Conclusion

12. In the light of these various points the Commissioners were satisfied that it would be right to allow the draft Scheme to proceed notwithstanding the

representation made against it. They thought it would further the mission of the Church and provide for the better cure of souls in the area.

13. They appreciate that their decision will disappoint you, but they hope that this statement will be helpful in indicating that their decision was reached only after careful consideration of all the relevant issues.

14. The Commissioners also considered all the other points made in your representation but felt that none of them was of sufficient weight to outweigh the points listed above.

15. I enclose a notice, as required by the Measure, about the right to apply for leave to appeal to His Majesty in Council against the draft Scheme or any of its provisions.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Wendy Matthews". The signature is written in dark ink on a light background.

Wendy Matthews
Head of Mission, Pastoral and Church Property

Summary of the Representation against

1. Michael and Maggie Atkinson say that prior to the arrival some four years ago of the present incumbent, St Bartholomew's church had a congregation of around 25-30 people which has now dwindled to around ten. They say this is partly due to the approach of the incumbent, and that people would be willing to consider becoming churchwardens under a different incumbent.
2. They say that giving from the parish has increased as a result of a public meeting at which a churchwarden made a passionate appeal. They say this demonstrates parishioners' willingness to support the church and prevent St Bartholomew's closing but that the incumbent, who was present, failed to follow up their interest by later contact.

Summary of the Bishop of Crediton's views

3. The Bishop of Crediton, acting with appropriate delegated episcopal authority to undertake such pastoral reorganisation matters during the vacancy in the See of Exeter, explains that the Diocese encourages clergy and PCCs to be proactive about addressing governance concerns rather than wait until a PCC falls inoperative before taking action. Where there is a risk of this, there are two broad options: revival of the PCC or pastoral reorganisation, with the parish church either being closed or remaining open.
4. Here, discussions about the fragility of parish governance at Coffinswell have been ongoing since 2018, well before the appointment of the current incumbent (in February 2020); they commenced prior to the retirement of the former incumbent who had been in post for almost 30 years.
5. The COVID pandemic hampered progress, but in December 2022 the new incumbent wrote to the Archdeacon explaining that due to the recent and unexpected deaths of several key members of the Coffinswell PCC, it had become clear to him and the churchwardens that to seek joint governance with Kingskerswell would offer the best hope of a sustainable future for the Coffinswell church. The incumbent had advised the Archdeacon that at its previous meeting Kingskerswell PCC had agreed unanimously to support Coffinswell parish in this way.
6. The option of whether to unite the two parishes or dissolve Coffinswell and have its area absorbed into Kingskerswell were considered by both PCCs, and it was felt that the latter approach would be the preferred option for administrative simplicity; this was ratified by both PCCs in September 2023. The future status of the St Bartholomew's church was also considered as part of the process, together with exploring a full-transfer joint council (with the two PCCs going into abeyance, but each parish retaining two churchwardens, deanery synod representatives and lay representation on the joint council) but the option that the PCCs ratified was as provided for in the draft Scheme.
7. The Bishop wants to make it clear that there is currently no intention to close St Bartholomew's church for regular public worship but that, rather, it is the hope that the simplification and shoring up of governance and administration will support the

flourishing of this church within the community of Coffinswell. Changing its status to a chapel of ease will mean that it will not need its own churchwardens.

8. She reiterates that the motivation for the proposals is to seek to strengthen and support St Bartholomew's church rather than to intensify its decline, and indeed there are similar examples in the diocese where such options have been and are being explored. As an example, the parish of Teigngrace, located some six miles from Coffinswell, was dissolved and its area incorporated into the adjacent parish, where its former parish church continues to flourish as a chapel of ease.

9. With regards the church and worship traditions, the Three Wells Mission Community sees itself as broad church with a welcoming attitude to a range of styles and traditions, while maintaining a core of traditional liturgy. The churches cooperate in their pattern of worship to provide a range of services across the Mission Community. It is felt that these services complement each other well: for example, those seeking a Eucharistic service rather than Family Worship on the first Sunday might attend Coffinswell Church rather than Kingskerswell Church; and vice versa.

10. There is no intention to reduce the service pattern at St Bartholomew's following any reorganisation, although it is possible that some of the Eucharistic services will have to be "said" due to the recent retirement of the organist and the difficulty of finding a replacement.

11. She gives details of the consultation process which commenced in 2018, and included two public meetings held in Coffinswell during 2023, which were well-publicised in the village, with around 90 people attending. She understands that the proposals under discussion were not contentious, with both PCCs on board.

12. She says that both current parishes are in arrears with their parish share but the proposals would not substantially affect the enlarged parish's call as this is calculated primarily on the basis of participant numbers averaged over three years. Each parish receives an "offset" of £2,000 per church building within it, so the resultant £4,000 offset here would not see any material difference in the overall request.

13. The Bishop says that pastoral concerns raised by the representors are important, but do not detract from the view of the Totnes Archidiaconal Mission and Pastoral Committee that the proposed structural changes would better support the mutual flourishing of the churches in Kingskerswell and Coffinswell. Fragility of governance is present in a high proportion of the rural and semi-rural parishes in the Diocese and has been exacerbated in many cases by the pandemic, with reductions across the board in both participation numbers and PCC membership.