



To:
The representors

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

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

Our ref: 3/86/RA

By e-mail only

12 June 2024

Dear Representors

**Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011
Benefice of Croston, Bretherton and Mawdesley with Bispham
Proposed Pastoral Scheme**

1. The draft Scheme providing for uniting the parish of Croston, the parish of Bretherton and the parish of Mawdesley, being the three constituent parishes of the benefice of Croston, Bretherton and Mawdesley with Bispham to create a new parish with the same name as the benefice, originally attracted **six representations against and two in favour**; one of the representations against, from Mr Alan Southworth, was subsequently withdrawn. A leaflet circulating in the Mawdesley area that the Bishop's proposals would in time lead to the closure of the Mawdesley parish church was also provided to the Commissioners by the diocesan staff during the consultation process.

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

3. This letter sets out the decision reached by the Commissioners and the reasons for the decision, and the factors they considered in their deliberation. The summary of the representations and the Bishop's 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 the representations received. Those against appeared to all come from Mawdesley, and centred around: (i) the origin of

the proposals; (ii) inadequacy of the consultation process; (iii) potential adverse effects on the mission and ministry at Mawdesley; (iv) increased likelihood of proposals for the closure of the Mawdesley parish church; (v) lack of sufficient ministry provision at Mawdesley and the delay in appointing a new incumbent; and (vi) more consideration being given to other options, including only uniting Croston and Bretherton; of making Mawdesley a stand-alone single parish benefice; or of linking it with parishes in another benefice.

6. Those in favour saw the proposals as the right way forward, with one of the representors adding that it was a sensible arrangement which would enable the incoming incumbent more time for parish and pastoral work and would also make the post more attractive.

7. The Commissioners noted the Bishop of Blackburn's explanation that the Diocese had a strong and well-developed strategy, which was supportive of uniting parishes where appropriate, as it was a mission structure which could be beneficial for growth.

8. They noted that these proposals had originated from early informal discussions in 2022 between the benefice's then incumbent, the Reverend Michael Woods, and the Archdeacon of Blackburn about the challenges faced by the benefice after Covid, including declining attendance, finances and meeting their governance requirements. They also noted that the motivation for the Scheme had been a desire to see each congregation and their local communities flourish, and to give the parishes adequate time to prepare for Mr Wood's retirement (which took place in November 2023) and the recruitment of his successor.

9. The Commissioners considered the representors' alternative suggestions for the benefice structure, but accepted the Bishop's arguments that Mawdesley was not viable as a single-parish benefice, and that there was no neighbouring benefice which would be a more suitable fit for the parish. Allowing Mawdesley to continue as a distinct parish would undermine the benefits that could be gained from streamlining the governance and administration across all three parishes, which would benefit local volunteers.

10. The Commissioners were satisfied that the formal requirements of the consultation process had been met. They noted that the formal consultations had been preceded by extensive informal discussions with the three PCCs which had explored alternative options to a union of the three parishes such as a Joint Council or a Local Ecumenical Partnership. They attached weight to the fact that a union of parishes had been the PCCs' preferred option and the Bishop's assurance that it would not have been brought forward without their agreement.

11. They were satisfied that the proposal was unlikely to lead to the adverse consequences for mission and ministry at Mawdesley identified by the representors. There was nothing to suggest that the proposed union of parishes would have a detrimental impact on the individual parishes' traditions, needs and characteristics.

12. They were reassured by the Bishop's expectation that the number of services on offer at Mawdesley would return to the pre-November 2023 position on the appointment of the new incumbent. They therefore felt it unlikely that Mawdesley parishioners would be expected to worship at Croston or Bretherton as a result of the

Scheme and that there would therefore not be any detrimental effect on older or disabled parishioners.

13. The Commissioners did not think the union of parishes would increase the likelihood that the church at Mawdesley would close, given a new incumbent would be appointed.

14. They also supported the Bishop's approach to the recruitment of the new incumbent. The Bishop had delayed appointing until the outcome of the decision on this scheme was known, so that applicants would know if they were applying for a role in a benefice with three parishes or with a single parish.

15. The Commissioners noted that there had been a self-supporting minister providing support to all three parishes until 2022. The Bishop had confirmed that there was no obvious successor who could continue that particular ministry at this time, but they would be open to appointing someone if a suitable minister expressed an interest in the area at a later date.

16. As regards parish finances, they noted that all three existing parishes had some arrears of parish share contributions and that Croston and Bretherton had made commitments to meet the current shortfall on this year's contribution. They welcomed the PCCs' commitment to providing mutual support in the future and noted that each parish would have lay members on the PCC of the new parish, to ensure fair representation in shared decision making.

Conclusion

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

18. They appreciate that their decision will disappoint those who had made representations against the draft Scheme, 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.

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

20. 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



Wendy Matthews
Head of Mission, Pastoral and Church Property

Against

1. Grahame Green - parishioner of Mawdesley
2. Elaine Marsh – a churchwarden at Mawdesley
3. Mawdesley Mother's Union
4. Paul Robinson
5. Alan Southworth – sidesperson at St Peter's, Mawdesley – [representation withdrawn 21/5/2024](#)
6. John Willis

A leaflet circulating in the Mawdesley area

For

1. Joyce Gibson – member of St Michael's church, Croston
2. David Rawcliffe - a churchwarden at Mawdesley

Summary of Representations against the draft Scheme

1. There are five main themes in the representations against, namely:
 - (i) Where the proposal for the union of these three parishes originated;
 - (ii) Concerns over the consultation process;
 - (iii) Likely adverse effects of the draft Scheme on mission and ministry in Mawdesley;
 - (iv) Particular concern that uniting the parishes might lead to the closure of St Peter's church, Mawdesley;
 - (v) Concern about existing lack of sufficient ministry provision in Mawdesley and the delay in appointing a new incumbent.

Origin of the proposals

2. One representor suggests that the proposed union of parishes came from the benefice's last incumbent, who then took early retirement towards the end of 2023, leaving the parishes to face the consequences. Others say that they originated from the Diocese and have been put forward by people with little or no knowledge of rural parts of the Diocese and these parishes.

Concerns over the consultation process

3. Two representors express concerns over the consultation process. One regards the proposals as a *fait accompli*, which has been brought forward in secrecy and without proper and meaningful consultation. He says that there has been no effort by the PCC to inform parishioners: no pew sheets, nothing on the benefice website and no phone calls to people like himself who have been recently housebound. He says the (*Civil*) Parish Council should have been informed and a public meeting held. Another agrees that the PCC has not sought the views of other parishioners and that a public meeting should be held.

Likely adverse effects of the draft Scheme on mission and ministry in Mawdesley and parish finances

4. Most of the representors expect the creation of a united parish to lead to a reduction in the number of church services in Mawdesley, which one says has already reduced significantly since the union of benefices. They say this will mean parishioners having to travel to Croston and Bretherton to attend services which will not be possible for those who do not drive because of the distance and lack of public transport. They say this will result in fewer people attending and a reduction in giving. One adds that Croston has inadequate parking, and that additional travel is environmentally harmful.

5. They say the benefice has worked well while the Incumbent was supported by a self-supporting minister (SSM) in Mawdesley but now the SSM is no longer available the incumbent will not be able to give sufficient time to Mawdesley. They are concerned that there will be fewer special services, such as Christingle, and that the incumbent will not have time for visiting the sick or conducting funerals and will not be able sufficiently involved with the local schools or with young people and families. Members of the Mothers Union are concerned that they will have less contact with parishioners and will find it more difficult to identify and contact those who would benefit from its support in a larger parish.

6. Representors say that Mawdesley has very capable people who are perfectly able to run the parish's own affairs without 'interference' from others, particularly the Diocese. This is particularly relevant given its recent and envisaged population growth as a result, in the main, of some new, expensive, housing development which will also bring in young families. Several say that it should remain a distinct parish and some that it should have its own incumbent. Others say it would be better joined, but continuing as a distinct parish, with parishes closer to it than Croston and Bretherton.

7. Some are also concerned about the effect on parish finances. They say Mawdesley is in a better financial position than the other two parishes and, unlike them, pays its parish share in full. Any cash flow problems are not of the Mawdesley parish's making and they are concerned that in a united parish the cost of repairs to Croston church would be largely met by Mawdesley.

The proposed union leading to the closure of St Peter's church, Mawdesley

8. There is a particular concern that in a united parish worship will become concentrated at Croston in the main, followed by Bretherton, and that this, in time, will lead to a drop in contributions to St Peter's, and could result in the other two churches in the proposed parish putting this church forward as a candidate for closure. That is something that those at Mawdesley would be very much opposed to, as that would result in their parish being subsumed by Croston, with its larger population and reverting to what was in place prior to their church being built in 1840.

Concern about existing lack of sufficient ministry provision in Mawdesley and the delay in appointing a new incumbent

9. Some refer to the lack of any Palm Sunday or Holy week services as an example of the already inadequate provision of church services at Mawdesley and one says that this will be made worse by what he has been told will be a long delay before a new incumbent is appointed.

10. The leaflet, which the diocese staff say is believed to have been produced and circulating widely in the Mawdesley area, has added fuel to these concerns.

Summary of the Representations in favour

11. Joyce Gibson says that the proposed union of parishes is a sensible arrangement which will enable the incoming incumbent more time for parish and pastoral work and would also make the post more attractive. Their last incumbent took early retirement, probably as a result of the great workload he had to deal with. They were managing at the moment by employing retired clergy and assistance from their lay minister.

12. David Rawcliffe, a churchwarden at Mawdsley, gives his approval to the draft Scheme.

Summary of the Bishop's views

13. The Bishop of Blackburn explains that the diocese has a strong and well-developed strategy for helping churches grow and create new disciples for Jesus. This strategy is set out in their Vision 2026 Implementation Plan, which includes, where it is appropriate and beneficial for growth, the diocese being supportive of uniting parishes.

14. Here, with three parishes in the benefice, both its then incumbent and the parishioners of Croston, Bretherton and Mawdesley had become overburdened with the governance required to serve their parishes safely and effectively.

15. With this background, these proposals originated from early informal discussions in 2022 between the benefice's then incumbent, the Reverend Michael Woods, and the Archdeacon of Blackburn about the challenges faced by the benefice after Covid, such as declining attendance, finances and meeting their governance requirements, with a desire to see each congregation and their local communities flourish again.

16. Mr Woods had shared his intention to retire within a few years and was keen for the parishes to have adequate time to prepare for a vacancy, as multi-parish benefices are generally not attractive to potential candidates as the duplicated governance they create takes time and energy away from mission and pastoral care within the parish. Mr Woods retired in November 2023.

17. A union of parishes was presented to the PCCs as one of the options by the Archdeacon, but it has always been made clear that the diocese would only proceed once all three PCCs wished to do so. The proposal to unite these parishes evolved through joint meetings with the PCCs, prayerful consideration within the PCCs over 18 months and then the formal consultation on a Pastoral Scheme, once the PCCs voted unanimously to proceed.

18. The Bishop details the consultation process which commenced in April 2022 with an informal meeting between Mr Woods and the Archdeacon, followed in September 2022 by a joint meeting of the PCCs with the Archdeacon, and then a meeting in February 2024 of the PCCs and the Area Dean of Chorley which ended positively with the proposed union considered to be opportunity for a fresh start for everyone; the agreement for the PCCs to explore uniting the parishes evolved over time.

19. The Archdeacon had shared a union of parish proposal and a joint council as potential options, but it has always been made clear that the decision to proceed with either of these solutions lay with the parishes, hence the long periods for prayerful consideration between April 2022 to October 2023. All the joint meetings have ended with a general agreement across the three PCCs to continue with the proposal.

20. There are no separate district church councils planned and all accounts would be merged to protect the reduced governance workload. These have always been the terms of the proposal. Joint councils were discussed at the 7th September 2022 meeting, but the PCCs preferred a union of parish proposal.

21. All three parishes have experienced financial challenges since 2020. Mawdesley has paid its parish share in full for the last two years, whereas Croston and Bretherton have not, but all three remain in arrears. Croston and Bretherton have positively engaged with the diocese to address their parish share situation and an agreement was reached in early 2024 to resolve it.

22. In light of the concerns raised regarding control of finances, clause 5 of the draft Scheme regarding representation of laity on the PCC was added to reassure everyone that their worshipping congregation would have representation on the PCC.

23. The proposal was not formally shared with the congregations prior to the public consultation, but the PCCs have been open and answered questions from them about the future of the parish, particularly in light of the vacancy. The Public Notice *[in connection with the published draft Scheme]* was shared on the Mawdesley St Peter Facebook page from 19th February 2024, on the pew sheets throughout the notice period, as well as the statutory church door notices and being read out in the services. *[the diocese published the draft Scheme on 14 February 2024, with the notice period expiring on 20 March 2024]*

24. The Bishop says that there are no plans to alter the service pattern. Once the incumbent vacancy is filled, the ministry provision will be the same as at November 2023. As provision is shared equally across the three parishes in the benefice, it would positively impact all three congregations equally as they seek to attract the highest calibre of candidate who will help them fulfil their vision for growth and mutual flourishing.

25. A Good Friday service was held at Mawdesley St Peter by the Archdeacon. Neither the draft Scheme nor the vacancy were the reason that there was no service on Easter Sunday at St Peter's; the Archdeacon offered to take a service there in addition to the joint service at Croston St Michael, but this was declined as Easter Sunday fell on the regular occurrence of the benefice joint service.

26. Historically, the benefice had been served by an incumbent (until Nov 2023), supported by Ms Janet Maggs (a Licensed Lay Minister, with Permission to Officiate) and the Reverend David Reynolds, who has PTO within Chorley Deanery [*he had been the two benefice's incumbent prior to their union in 2015, and lives in Bispham*].

27. On the SSM the Reverend Janet Taylor's retirement in retirement in the middle of 2022, the PCCs requested a replacement, but no suitable candidate has come forward.

28. The Bishop is keen to explain that the diocese is committed to keeping church buildings open and utilising them to reach and serve local communities. In this context, he details the two roles created in the diocese to assist the parishes as they seek to maintain and develop their buildings.

29. There have been only five church closures in Blackburn diocese in the last ten years. Any church closure would require a Pastoral Scheme, which includes a public consultation and a public meeting, so there is no danger of any new PCC here acting independently to close a church without following due process.

30. The appointment process to this benefice was underway as Blackburn diocese aims to fill incumbent vacancies within nine months, which they are still within. The latest draft of the parish profile was received from the parishes on 4th April and an interview date of 12th July is being held. However, the process is currently on hold while they await the outcome of the draft Scheme, as future candidates will require clarity regarding the structure of the benefice

31. A single parish benefice is proven to be a much more attractive post to potential candidates than a multi-parish benefice. Not only is it more sustainable to serve one parish rather than three, but candidates are more attracted to a parish with a shared vision, who are seeking mutual flourishing within their distinct villages.

32. As the vacancy has run in parallel to the consultation, it was acknowledged that it would also demonstrate a shared vision and cohesive approach across the benefice to a potential new incumbent and help to attract the highest calibre of candidate. Uniting only two of the three parishes would not achieve the same outcome.

33. Also, a single-parish benefice of Mawdesley is not sustainable, as it could not support a full or half-time post independently. The alternative to a half-time priest might be a House for Duty priest, but as there is no such house available in the parish, this is not a valid consideration either. Additionally, there are no other parishes local to Mawdesley that would be suitable for creating a beneficial multi-parish benefice.

34. Croston, Bretherton and Mawdesley have been identified as a candidate for the Blackburn Diocese Parish Renewal Programme. As part of Vision 2026, the programme works with the incumbent and lay leaders to understand the key principles for growth, then supports them as apply those principles to their own context.

35. It is fully funded, so there is no cost to the participants. Parishes in the programme, including newly united parishes, have seen numerical and spiritual growth, and both incumbents and lay leaders have grown in missional confidence. This is the diocese's aspiration for these parishes, but it can only be achieved if they have the local resource available to implement it, which will be extremely difficult whilst operating as three separate parishes.

Summary of the Representors' supplementary views

36. Supplementary comments were received from Elaine Marsh, Alan Southworth and John Willis. Also received were comments from Keith Mitchell, a Mawdesley parishioner who had not made a representation to the Commissioners at the appropriate time, so his views cannot be formally taken into account.

37. Mrs Marsh and Mr Southworth are still opposed to any union of the parishes as they feel it would result in a parish that would be completely unmanageable for one priest, both in terms of population and area. It would also be difficult to attract candidates to take on this role.

38. Both feel that the pooling of finances would be a disaster, as each church should be allowed to deal with its own finances.

39. They are very disappointed at no services being held at St Peter's during Easter, and say that the joint benefice monthly service attracts very few people from other parishes, mainly to do with distance and transport, which affects the elderly disproportionately.

40. Both have concerns on the diocese creating two full-time building officer posts whilst at the same time asking parishes to cut back on their use of resources.

41. They ask that Mawdesley be allowed to continue distinct, and it would be able to have its own house again had proper financial provision been made by the diocese when it disposed on its previous parsonage. .

42. Mr Southworth also says Covid must not be blamed for the decline in church attendance and that there are other contributory factors, like the Church not attracting the young; there is no proper vision for growth here despite what the Bishop says. He also questions whether the Mawdesley parish ever benefitted from the provision of any SSM.

43. He has continued concerns on the adequacy of the consultation process, particularly for the many elderly who do not have access to social media.

44. He feels that these proposals, if implemented, would lead to the closure of one or two churches unless the burden is reduced on each parish with regards simplified laws on matters like governance.

45. He says the Vision 2026 may seem like a good idea in principle to the diocese but, in reality, it will be too expensive to operate and again parishes will be expected to contribute to it.

46. Mr Willis adds that the Archdeacon has contradicted himself here from what he has said in his book quoting from “Anecdote to Evidence” indicating a clear link between an increase in the number of churches looked after by a priest and the decline in church attendance across the benefice as a whole.

47. This is true of Mawdesley when during the period of the union of benefice the congregations went down and their average age went up. Irregular services are one of the consequences of having a single priest and this drives any, but the most regular attenders, to seek churches with regular worship, including, for non-car drivers, the local Methodists.

48. The Bishop states that all monies, including those raised for church improvements will be put in a single account. As Croston will have the greater voice on any new PCC and the most need, he fears that would mean that Mawdesley will not be able to make any improvements, even the ones spelt out when the Bishop last visited.

Summary of the Bishop’s supplementary views

49. The Bishop says that as no new points have been raised in the supplementary comments, he does not wish to comment further.