

Dioceses Commission
Annual Report for 2024

1. The Dioceses Commission is required to report annually to the General Synod.

Membership and staff

2. The Commission consists of a Chair and Vice-Chair appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, four members elected by the General Synod, and four members appointed by the Appointments Committee.

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

Chair:	Dame Caroline Spelman
Vice Chair:	The Ven. Luke Irvine Capel (Chichester)
Elected Members:	The Ven. Stewart Fyfe (Carlisle) Canon Robert Hammond (Chelmsford) Mr Clive Scowen (London) <i>Until June 2024: The Revd Neil Patterson (Hereford)</i> <i>From October 2024: Dr Felicity Cooke (Ely)</i>
Appointed Members:	The Ven. Karen Best (Manchester) Mrs Sue Slater (Lincoln) The Rt Revd Paul Williams, Bishop of Southwell & Nottingham <i>Until June 2024: Mrs Ruth Martin, formerly Diocesan Secretary for Southwark</i> <i>From October 2024: Mr Jonathan Wood, Diocesan Secretary for Leeds</i>
Secretary:	Ms Jenny Axtell

Role of the Commission

4. Information about the Commission and its work can be found on the Commission's pages of the Church of England web site:
<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/dioceses-commission>
5. As a summary, the Commission's main duties and responsibilities are laid down by the Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure 2007. Its principal duties and powers relate to:
 - the provincial and diocesan structure of the Church of England,
 - good practice in diocesan administration, and
 - the creation and filling of suffragan sees.
6. The Commission's primary duty is to keep under review the provincial and diocesan structure of the Church of England and in particular:
 - the size, boundaries, and the number of provinces.
 - the size, boundaries and number of dioceses and their distribution between the provinces.

- the number and distribution of bishops and the arrangements for episcopal oversight.

Business undertaken

7. A prime focus for the Dioceses Commission this year has been the encouragement of increased collaboration between dioceses and between dioceses and the National Church Institutions (NCIs). As noted in the 2023 Annual Report, following the second phase of the 'Bishops and their ministries' consultation and feedback received the Commission decided that there would be no wide-scale, centrally-led approach to merging dioceses. However it recognised that change is still necessary and so it is actively seeking increased collaboration across dioceses. It is hoped that more collaboration between dioceses and with the NCIs will increase efficiency and resilience in diocesan operations, widen the pool of resources and personnel available to dioceses and – crucially - provide enhanced and efficient services to parishes and worshipping communities as they serve the mission and ministry of the Church.
8. The Commission is working together with the Lead Bishop for Transforming Effectiveness, the Chair of the Archbishops' Council Finance Committee, and the Executive Chair of the Diocesan Secretaries Network to explore how best to encourage and facilitate collaboration. Conversations have been ongoing throughout the year. In March 2024 the Commission and the Lead Bishop for Transforming Effectiveness (the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich) hosted a workshop to bring together some Diocesan Secretaries already running collaboration initiatives and NCI representatives as experts to learn from their experience and to consider together how best to progress the work. The Commission has noted that for safeguarding, racial justice, net zero and back office services, different models of collaboration have been developed. Case studies of initiatives have also been commissioned, and the Secretary to the Commission has documented examples of collaboration already happening between dioceses across the country. The Commission, the Chair of the Archbishops' Council Finance Committee and the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich also hosted a Synod Fringe event on the subject at the July 2024 Sessions of General Synod. The Commission continues to work with various stakeholders to find ways that dioceses can be enabled to explore and implement further collaboration. The Commission has heard of the challenges involved in driving collaboration and the argument that the benefits may not outweigh the costs in the short term, but nonetheless experience from other sectors is that there are benefits both in terms of efficiency and service resilience and quality.
9. The Commission has also actively sought to deepen its relationship with a number of other key bodies. The Chair of the Standing Commission for the House of Bishops Declaration on the Five Guiding Principles joined the Diocese Commission's meeting in March 2024. The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Dioceses Commission presented the Commission's observations regarding the role of suffragan bishops arising out of the 'Bishops and their ministries' consultation to the Ministry Council in February 2024. The link with the Archbishops' Advisors for Appointments and Vocations and the central members of the Crown

Nominations Commission (CNC) has been deepened. The Commission now regularly shares its observations on dioceses with the Archbishops' and Prime Minister's Appointments Secretaries (owing to the rich information it receives from various conversations including from diocesan bishops presenting their suffragan see proposals). The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Commission also had a virtual meeting with some of the central members of the CNC in October 2024 to share observations and to discuss diocesan collaboration.

10. The Commission has agreed that one of its four meetings in the year should be outside of London and the first of these took place in the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham. Members were grateful for the hospitality of the Bishop's team and valued the opportunity to hear an update from staff on the mission and ministry of the diocese, and to see first-hand the life of both the Bishop's Office and the Diocesan Office. The Commission will look forward to visiting more dioceses across the country in future.

Suffragan sees

11. The Commission continues to carry out its 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 as well as furthering the Church of England's Vision and Strategy, cohere with the roles of others in the diocesan senior leadership team, and include roles that are inherently episcopal. Members have been particularly keen to ensure that a suffragan bishop will have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, whether geographic or portfolio or both, and have also taken the opportunity to discuss with the bishops presenting how their diocese is collaborating with other dioceses.
12. Members have been grateful for high quality submissions which have given considerable thought to the needs of the Church at a diocesan, regional and national level. The Commission would like to thank the bishops and their representatives who have taken the time to present their proposals and has enjoyed meeting them to discuss at its meetings. It looks forward to more conversations in 2025.
13. In exercising its responsibilities under section 17 of the *Dioceses and Pastoral Mission Measure 2007*, the Commission considered, and agreed with, proposals to fill the following suffragan sees during the year:
- Selby (Diocese of York)
 - Whitby (Diocese of York)
 - Southampton (Diocese of Winchester)
 - Reading (Diocese of Oxford)
 - Buckingham (Diocese of Oxford)
 - Aston (Diocese of Birmingham)
 - Wakefield (Diocese of Leeds)
 - Crediton (Diocese of Exeter)
 - Doncaster (Diocese of Sheffield)
 - Dunwich (Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich)

14. The Commission also considered a proposal by the Bishop of Portsmouth to fill the currently dormant See of the Isle of Wight but decided that the proposal 'requires further consideration'¹. The Commission was sympathetic to the bishop's desire for an episcopal colleague and commended him for the way in which he supports and ministers to his clergy. However, members did not feel that there was a sufficient case for creating a new suffragan bishop for the diocese of Portsmouth. Members recognised a case for some additional capacity, but did not feel that this necessarily needs to be in the form of additional episcopal ministry.
15. Dioceses Commission members have observed that some bishops presenting proposals have said that the needs of the diocese require that the new suffragan bishop be able to ordain women. The Commission will of course recognise the needs of the diocese and the wisdom of the presenting bishop, however it needs also – as part of its duty to keep under review 'the number and distribution of episcopal offices and the arrangements for episcopal oversight'² – to have a mind for the breadth of tradition represented among the Church of England's suffragan bishops and the upholding of the Five Guiding Principles.
16. When preparing a submission the Commission would encourage diocesan bishops to engage in conversation within their diocese regarding the Five Guiding Principles, including with those who represent the traditional catholic and complementarian traditions, and to ensure that these constituencies are appropriately represented in the considerations to shape a suffragan episcopal role.
17. The Commission particularly encourages those larger dioceses with several suffragan bishops - and so a greater opportunity to demonstrate breadth within the diocesan episcopal college – to be open to a wide range of candidates. Members feel that this will help to ensure that the episcopal leadership continues to represent the breadth of background and tradition of the Church of England and the communities that are at the centre of its mission and ministry.

On behalf of the Dioceses Commission:
Dame Caroline Spelman, Chair
Jenny Axtell, Secretary
January 2025

¹ Dioceses, Mission and Pastoral Measure 2007, S.17(4),(6),(7),

² Dioceses, Mission and Pastoral Measure 2007, S.3