

# OXFORD DIOCESAN SYNOD

21 March 2015

## FIRST NOTICE PAPER

### QUESTIONS UNDER STANDING ORDER 70

1. **Chris Sugden (016)** to ask –

In view of reports of inappropriate comments from Ofsted inspectors on collective worship and PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) in Church of England schools, could the Chair of the Diocesan Board of Education tell Synod whether there have been any instances of inappropriate comments on Church schools in this Diocese, and whether the Board has made any representations to Ofsted on this aspect of the inspection regime?

The **Bishop of Buckingham**, as Chair of the Board of Education, to reply –

The Board is supportive of the framework that underpins the work of Ofsted, and has confidence in the judgements of Ofsted inspectors and is broadly satisfied with their findings. In this context Synod members may be interested to know that the Board has two serving Ofsted inspectors on its advisory team, and that the Director of Schools for our multi-academy trust (ODST) is a lead inspector. The Board works alongside other stakeholders to prepare schools for inspection, and frequently engages with inspectors directly to ensure that the high quality aspects of schools' provision in respect of worship and PSHE are taken into account. At this time, the Board has not found it necessary to make representations to Ofsted on this or any other aspect of the inspection regime.

Although it is not easy to extricate statistical information on this subject as neither collective worship nor PSHE is judged discretely by Ofsted, the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) aspects of schools are commented on, as is a school's ability to uphold what the government term 'British values'. Many of our recent inspections have commented very favourably on schools' SMSC provision, and it is common for provision in this area to be assessed positively, even when other areas in a school (e.g. achievement data and/or quality of teaching) are judged as "requiring improvement".

The key principle at the heart of our work is that Church schools should serve their communities. Through Church schools we have a unique opportunity to show the love of God to thousands of pupils and their families, and we are pleased that 84% of our schools are currently rated good or better by Ofsted.

2. **Jeff West (040)** to ask –

What proportion of the electorate in this diocese voted in the 2010 election for the House of Laity of the General Synod?

The **Diocesan Registrar**, in his capacity as Presiding Officer for elections from the Diocese to the General Synod, to reply –

In 2010, 45.7% of those entitled to vote cast a valid vote (543 out of 1187 potential voters), and there were 9 spoiled votes.

3. **Jeff West (040)** to ask –

Is there any legal reason why, following the precedent set in other dioceses, this diocese should not use information technology to allow electors in the 2015 elections to the General Synod to ask questions of candidates and candidates to give replies, perhaps in writing rather than orally, but otherwise as they would at a physical hustings?

The **Diocesan Registrar** to reply –

As presiding officer, I am bound to ensure that there is a 'level playing field' for all candidates in the elections. As I reminded the Synod last year, this is why there is a longstanding constraint during the election period (from the issue of nomination papers to close of voting) on official publication by dioceses and deaneries of material which might prejudice the elections. I mention this again, by way of reminder especially to area deans and lay chairs of deanery synods, who must themselves ensure that nothing that might prejudice a fair election is distributed at synod meetings or published in any official circulation. However, candidates will of course be free, as they have always been, to express their views quite separately from any official publication, and I expect that some will do so this year using their own blogging sites. Those who do so will then be able to be asked their views directly by voters.

Meanwhile, I have been in discussion with the General Synod office during the years since 2010 about how electronic media might be best used to ensure fair coverage of candidates' views, and I am glad to find that in the guidance that is being issued for this year's elections, it will be mandatory for presiding officers in all dioceses to see that candidates' election addresses are all posted on the diocesan website. As to the use of information technology to increase participation in the elections in this diocese, a special section will be created on the diocesan website giving information about the 2015 elections to the General Synod. Furthermore, it is envisaged that all candidates (both lay and clergy) will be invited to make a short video pitch, to be produced by the DCH communications team and posted online, and that a blog or other appropriate digital

forum will be used to enable voters to question candidates and candidates to respond. This would be done in such a way as to avoid unfairness to individual candidates, as well as the risk of cyber-bullying and other mischiefs to which electronic media are prone.

4. **Mark Bennet (065)** to ask –

In the context of rural multi-parish benefices, what steps are being taken to lighten the burden of administration, to allow for effective representation of benefices and to reflect emerging priorities on the ground, in particular: 1) to enable statistical returns to be made at benefice rather than parish level, in cases where this makes more sense; 2) to facilitate sharing of officers such as churchwardens across a benefice; and 3) to enable Deanery Synod representation to be organised at benefice level?

The **Bishop of Dorchester**, as Acting Chair of the Board of Mission, to reply –

There is now widespread recognition that there are aspects of the Church of England's legislative framework which present genuine barriers to mission and growth. In the case of rural multi-parish benefices this is recognised to be particularly so in the area of governance, and this is one of the seven components of the work of the diocesan Rural Strategy Steering Group. On Saturday 28 February, more than 100 people attended a morning in Bicester entitled 'Lightening the Load', when creative examples of alternative models of governance were discussed, including unions involving multiple parishes to streamline administration by reducing numbers of meetings as well as the number of churchwardens and other lay officers required. The Rural Strategy Steering Group is now considering how best to take its work forward in this area, and it is highly likely that a follow-up event will be held. Moreover, our Archdeacons and Parish Development Advisers are always available for discussions with benefices and parishes to help them consider what might be done to remove constraints to mission and ministry posed by statutory requirements around governance and administration, whether by formal reorganisation or more informally.

A concern with legislative constraints to mission and growth has also been the driver for the work at national level of the Simplification Task Group, whose first report covering a series of detailed proposals for amendments to the legislation concerning common tenure, pastoral reorganisation, use of church buildings and Bishop's Mission Orders was debated and approved by the General Synod in February 2015. The Task Group has been asked to continue its work, and a further area to which it would be expected to turn its attention is parish and benefice governance. Another might be the legislation governing the synodical structures of the Church of England, which would need

fundamental reform in order for the issue around deanery synod representation highlighted in the question to be addressed. As to the submission of national statistical returns at benefice level, since this would necessitate changes to the national system used to collect this data, the Diocese has raised the issue with the Research & Statistics team at Church House Westminster, whose response is awaited.

5. **Mark Burton (167)** to ask –

Could Synod have a written statement detailing how the deanery share rebate is applied?

The **Chair of the Board of Finance** to reply –

Under the new share scheme, the rebate system is dealt with as follows:

- A rebate of 1% is given each year to deaneries paying 20% of their deanery share allocation by 31 March and 50% of their allocation by 30 June.
- A rebate of 2% is given when 100% of the deanery allocation is paid by 30 November, except where parishes make payments by direct debit, in which case the amount to be received by the Diocese in December is treated as having been received in November for the purposes of calculating the rebate.

Apart from the change in respect of share contributions made by direct debit, there have been no other changes to previous practice.