

## OXFORD DIOCESAN SYNOD

### **Response to Woodstock proposal for benefice administrative support**

#### **Purpose of This Paper**

This paper provides a structured response to the Woodstock deanery motion, informed by the findings of the Diocese's Parish Administration Project, conducted over the past year. It is divided into:

- A. A summary of the Parish Administration Project findings and recommendations
- B. A specific response to the Woodstock proposal
- C. Concluding recommendations

**An amendment will be moved by the Archdeacon of Dorchester to seek to amend the motion in line with this paper.**

#### **A. Parish Administration Project**

##### **Background**

Administration is a fundamental part of the success of any organisation and the running of parishes is no different. Good administration is affirmed in scripture as assisting good ministry, not least in Acts 6 and being listed as a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:28 (ESV)). Parishes unable to competently plan, manage, allocate resources and make decisions, will negatively impact the functioning of the church and its ability to serve its parishioners. This work is typically carried out by the incumbent with the support of parish volunteers. However, the dual pressures of declining volunteer numbers and increasing organisational demands have led to heavier workloads being shouldered by fewer individuals.

In response to growing concerns about the impact of this administrative burden on clergy and parish officers—particularly in rural areas—the Diocese initiated about a year ago a small-scale project to explore practical, low-cost solutions to reduce this pressure. The project involved interviews with ten ministers and parish officers across a range of contexts, focusing on current practices and potential improvements.

##### **Key Findings**

###### **1. Volume Rather Than Specific Tasks**

The challenge lies not in individual tasks but in the cumulative volume of administration, driven by compliance requirements and the complexity of managing parish life.

###### **2. Highly Contextual Burden**

Administrative load varies significantly depending on the incumbent's skills, tenure, existing support, and the number of parishes. While multi-parish benefices often face greater volume, other factors are equally influential.

### 3. **Limited Use of Technology**

Many parishes rely largely on manual processes. Those using software (e.g., ChurchSuite, iKnowChurch) reported significant benefits, but it was noted those not using them had low awareness of these tools.

### 4. **Reluctance to Share Resources**

Attempts to share administrative support across benefices or deaneries sometimes face resistance by parishes unless this arises through collective necessity, due to concerns including equitable time allocation.

### 5. **Need for Accessible Expert Support**

Interviewees expressed a desire for clearer guidance, preferably the ability to speak to someone with experience of the role, and practical resources such as templates and video tutorials. There is also a misconception that PDAs focus solely on ministry, not administration and hence there was a reluctance to seek support on these matters.

## **Recommendations**

### • **Consider Automation**

Raising awareness, training and providing incentives to encourage parishes to adopt appropriate software solutions that are currently available in the market, could reduce the time incumbents and parish officers spend on administrative matters. Packages are available that help manage communications, reminders, service planning, rota planning and document management and so could help reduce this aspect of administration work, whilst also reducing overdue reliance on any one individual.

Our Parish Development Advisors (PDAs) have recently been trained on the two most common software packages, so are now able to inform and support parishes with these specific options. The Diocese is currently exploring the possibility of negotiating discounts with software providers and potentially subsidies to support uptake. This option could then be more widely publicised by the Diocese with the offer of training and support.

### • **Promote Collaborative Models**

Each parish, as an independent organisation, creates its own administration. If much needed administrative support cannot be afforded by parishes, collaboration with other parishes should be strongly encouraged by the Diocese, especially PDAs and archdeacons, as has previously occurred with parishes facing a reduction in ministerial provision. The Diocese should encourage benefices to explore shared administrative structures, ranging from shared benefice administrators to joint councils to full pastoral reorganisation and rationalisation of parishes. The Diocese should provide clear guidance on available models for PDAs and Archdeacons to use in parish consultations and training. The Human Resources department should continue to provide support around recruiting and employing administrators. Like any organisation, if a parish cannot handle its existing administrative work within its existing resources, reprioritisation of its resources or structural changes are needed.

### • **Enhance Support**

- Encourage the establishment of mentoring networks by connecting new clergy with experienced incumbents, as well as encourage peer support groups (e.g., via WhatsApp)

at training or other gatherings. New clergy which had this type of support found it to be invaluable.

- Raise awareness that Parish Development Advisers (PDAs) offer support across all aspects of clergy responsibilities by highlighting this in relevant training sessions. PDAs to place greater emphasis during their meetings with new incumbents on how they are managing administrative responsibilities, to ensure clergy benefit from the support available.
- Improve access to guidance and training materials via a dedicated webpage or ultimately an online portal e.g. such as the Diocese's HR toolkit or the Diocese of Liverpool's branded guidance of "Making it Easier".
- The Diocese is currently reviewing its training programmes, both for new and in-post clergy, and churchwardens, to increase coverage on administrative best practices. It has already updated the guidance material that is issued to new clergy to include more sources of administrative guidance.
- Increase transparency of diocesan staff roles by updating the contact directory with descriptions of support offered to parishes.

## **B. Response to the Woodstock Proposal**

While the proposal reflects a genuine concern, the findings of the Parish Administration Project suggest that a blanket funding approach for multi-parish benefices may be problematic:

- **Needs Vary Widely**  
Some single- or dual-parish benefices (including House for Duty) also face significant administrative challenges due to lack of volunteers or for other reasons. Funding only multi-parish benefices risks excluding others with equal (or greater) need.
- **Risk of Inefficiency**  
Subsidising structures that may be unsustainable could delay necessary reforms such as streamlining or consolidation. Efficiency gains are more likely through automation and collaboration.
- **Limited Impact Without Leadership**  
Hiring administrators does not guarantee reduced workload. Effective delegation requires incumbents to have systems in place and the ability to manage staff to make good use of an administrator (which often relies on the line manager being an effective administrator themselves). Recruitment challenges also persist due to part-time hours and low pay.
- **Existing Support Already in Place**  
Of the 41 qualifying benefices, we believe that over a third of these already have some form of administrative support. A funding scheme could disincentivise self-sufficiency and place unnecessary strain on diocesan resources.. Additionally, it should be noted that the diocese's parish share methodology already targets some additional financial support (through the Community Support Allowance) to benefices with 3 or more churches.

- **Financial Implications**

Assuming a minimum of 10 hours per week at the level of the real living wage across 41 qualifying benefices, the estimated annual cost exceeds £300,000. This would require an increase in parish share of approximately 1.5% above what is in current forecasts, to be borne collectively by all parishes. The cost of full-time roles and a higher level of pay would be significantly higher – potentially over £1m p.a., an extra increase to parish share of about 5% p.a. Given budget constraints faced by parishes, this level of expenditure is not feasible, and it is highly unlikely that other parishes would agree to subsidise the cost—particularly those already funding a paid administrator or those not eligible for the benefit, despite having similar administrative needs.

### **C. Conclusion**

Incumbents are under increasing pressure to manage administrative responsibilities alongside their pastoral duties. There is no sign of volunteer support improving, or the procedural requirements of parish duties set by either trustee responsibilities nationally, or by the Church of England, reducing substantially (though we will keep trying to influence these). Currently, where a parish or benefice has insufficient resource to fulfil the necessary administrative tasks, the incumbent must step in. For the wellbeing of overwhelmed incumbents and parish officers, changes are needed to reduce this burden.

While the Woodstock proposal highlights a real issue, direct funding for administrative support offers only a partial and unaffordable solution.

Instead, we propose that the Diocese should focus on:

- Support and training to encourage parishes to adopt technology and collaborative models
- Providing accessible training and expert guidance
- Facilitating peer support among clergy and key officers
- Continue to ensure requests for information are only made of parishes where the data is essential and cannot be obtained from any other source

These measures offer a more sustainable and equitable approach to reducing the administrative burden across all benefices, which is recognised as a serious issue of concern.

Mark Humphriss

Diocesan Secretary

[on behalf of Bishop's Council, which has agreed this response]

October 2025