



THE DIOCESE OF SHEFFIELD

Managing a Vacancy

A GUIDE FOR CHURCHWARDENS AND PCCs

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1. Introduction

1.1 Vacancies in the Diocese of Sheffield

A vacancy brings challenges and uncertainty, but it is also a time of opportunities: to explore the ministry of each member in the life of the church; to discern prayerfully God's particular call to the parish at this time; and to reflect on the kind of person the parish needs to provide the leadership and support required for the church to fulfil its mission and ministry. A vacancy can be a valuable and fruitful time for new imagination and strategic thinking about opportunities for growth and development.

In recent years the Diocese of Sheffield has been responding to the need to reshape its patterns of ministry and deployment of a reduced number of stipendiary clergy. Parishes now belong to Mission Areas; each Mission Area has been allocated a number of stipendiary clergy deployed as Oversight Ministers. Your previous incumbent may have been an Oversight Minister, in which case you will have some experience of this, or it may be that this will be the first time that you will be looking for an Oversight Minister. In any event, as you think about the needs of your parish during the vacancy and beyond, you are encouraged to bear in mind too, the perspective of the Mission Area to which your parish belongs.

The aim of this booklet is to help you, your parish and the other parishes of the Mission Area to understand and navigate your way through this process. There are also people who can answer questions and provide support during the process, including your Area Dean, Archdeacon, Associate Archdeacon-Transition Enabler (AA-TE), and the Bishop's Chaplain.

The Diocesan Mission remains as follows:

The Diocese of Sheffield is called to grow a sustainable network of Christ-like, lively and diverse Christian communities in every place which are effective in making disciples and in seeking to transform our society and God's world.

We seek to do this via the Diocesan strategy, summarised as

Renewed, Released, Rejuvenated

Renewed – maintaining as a first priority a real reliance on the Spirit of God in prayer and worship and in the consecration of our lives, as individuals and communities.

Released – where they have become burdensome, from the constraints of administration, compliance, inherited structures and buildings; and liberating the untapped potential of individual disciples and whole congregations, so that the whole people of God are mobilised for the whole mission of God.

Rejuvenated – growing the church younger, and planting new congregations.

1.2 A note on terminology

Your previous minister may have been a Vicar or a Rector (an incumbent), or a priest-in-charge. In this guide, the term ‘Oversight Minister’ is used to cover all such leadership roles (which are usually, though not always, stipendiary).

2. Managing the Vacancy

2.1 Getting going

An outgoing minister usually gives three months’ notice of relinquishing their office (maybe more, for example in the case of retirement). When moving to another parish, a priest remains technically licensed to their previous office until they are licensed or inducted into their new benefice. Once your outgoing minister has announced they are moving on, you will want to work with them during the period prior to their departure to ensure a smooth handover (see paragraph 2.2.1). You (and they) might like to look at a resource such as ‘Growing through Vacancy’ which gives practical help for the vacancy period and works best if the outgoing minister speaks to it in one of the final remaining PCC meetings (it can be purchased here: <https://www.cpas.org.uk/browse-everything/growing-through-vacancy-handbook>)

However, in practical terms, realistic preparation for the vacancy begins once the Vicarage (or equivalent) has been vacated.

Arranging cover for Sunday services can begin as soon as the outgoing minister announces their forthcoming departure.

As soon as possible after the outgoing minister’s departure, the Archdeacon (or AA-TE) and/or Area Dean will arrange to meet your PCC to outline the tasks and opportunities of the vacancy. In preparation for the vacancy, the parish should begin to make arrangements for covering responsibilities during it.

2.2 Key actions and general advice about the vacancy

- 2.2.1 The Churchwardens should sort out some practical details with the outgoing minister before they leave. They should meet with them to ensure that the parish files, registers and documents are all in the Parish Office, Vestry or church safe (not in the empty vicarage or inadvertently transported to the outgoing minister's new parish!). There are often key contacts and other written material that may be useful in the vacancy or when a new Oversight Minister arrives, so a proper handover is essential. If they have written records or are able and willing to leave written guidance, this can be invaluable.
- 2.2.2 A vacancy can provide the space and opportunity for more of a church's lay members to discern God's particular call to them and how they can play a greater part in sustaining its life and ministry. Part of the diocesan vision is to see the whole people of God involved in the whole mission of God, and many churches are exploring and adopting the model of discerning and calling Focal Ministers from within their numbers as the public faces of the church in their communities. Whilst Churchwardens have legal responsibilities during a vacancy for the church, **it is expected that they will be supported by the whole church in carrying them out. It is NOT expected that Churchwardens should do everything!** Do encourage people to be prepared to play their part, large or small.
- 2.2.3 If the parish has a Curate in their title post, it is important to remember that they are still engaged in their training and formation. They are not the Oversight Minister! During the vacancy, it is the Churchwardens who remain legally responsible, with the support of the Area Dean and the Archdeacon/AA-TE. Many able Curates will be able to accept some additional responsibilities during a vacancy; what these might be should be discussed and agreed. The Diocese is experimenting in some vacancies with authorising a **Curate in Charge** – this is usually when it is considered that there could be a 'good fit' for that person to become the Oversight Minister at the end of their curacy, and is most often a secondment from their title parish until that point. Where such an arrangement is in place, the Curate will be expected to provide leadership in mission, ministry, worship and pastoral care – **but they are not the incumbent, and legal responsibility remains the same as in all vacancies.**
- 2.2.4 Be realistic as to what is and is not possible during the vacancy. Work with the PCC and the wider church to decide if anything needs to be put

on hold, especially in relation to taking significant decisions. Aim to do the essential things well, rather than feeling a need to maintain everything, and be open to a prayerful discernment about God's calling to the parish where it is now rather than what it has been in the past. Be aware that things may well change under the leadership of a new Oversight Minister.

- 2.2.5 Whilst the ongoing mission and ministry of the church should definitely not be 'put on hold', it is advisable that the PCC avoid making any major changes to parish policies during a vacancy (for example, relating to baptism practice, admission of children to communion etc). You are encouraged to explore opportunities for mission and growth, and to make a note of key areas to be explored with your new Oversight Minister.
- 2.2.6 If your parish is under extended episcopal oversight, the PCC will be asked to take the opportunity to review its current position and either to affirm it (with a theological rationale), or to amend it. Your Archdeacon will be able to help you with this.

2.3 Finances and buildings

- 2.3.1 **Sequestration** – Churchwardens assume 'sequestration' duties during a vacancy (i.e. financial/legal responsibility). In reality, most things carry on as normal, as the Treasurer and PCC continue to oversee the business and finances of the parish. If you need advice or support, don't be afraid to ask! There are many possible sources of help – for example another Oversight Minister in the Mission Area; other local Churchwardens; the Area Dean; the Archdeacon; and the Mission Area Support Team.
- 2.3.2 **Vicarage** – please ensure that an eye is kept on the parsonage house. Many are rented out during vacancies. If this applies to you, please alert the Diocesan Property Manager immediately if you have any concerns, such as suspecting tenant irresponsibility, vandalism, intruders, squatters etc. *See section 2.6 below for more information on caring for the parsonage house during a vacancy.*
- 2.3.3 **Fees** – Ensure that the full up-to-date list of fees is displayed in your Vestry and if possible on a church porch notice board.

For a wedding or funeral, your Treasurer should receive cheques to cover the Diocesan Board of Finance (DBF) fee, and also the PCC fee. The

policy of the Diocese of Sheffield is currently that any retired or self-supporting minister may claim 66% of the DBF fee. The PCC Treasurer should ensure that this is offered to them, duly receipted and accounted. The balance of the DBF fee is to be remitted to the DBF. If for any reason the officiant does not wish to claim the 66%, the full DBF fee should be remitted to the DBF. The PCC retains the PCC fee in full.

Irrespective of any fee entitlement, any officiant at a wedding or funeral should be offered travel expenses in connection with a service they have conducted. This will include reimbursement at the standard mileage rate for journeys to visit the bereaved, as well as to the church, crematorium, cemetery etc.

Retired and self-supporting ministers are allowed to claim a fixed amount from the DBF for conducting Sunday worship during a vacancy – this is claimed **directly from the DBF** rather than from the parish. They may not claim this fee in respect of a service held in the parish where they habitually worship.

- 2.3.4 **Resettlement Grant** – the DBF pays for removal expenses, and in addition contributes a resettlement grant and a modest redecoration allowance to incoming clergy. An additional sum can be claimed by a clergyperson taking up their first incumbency post. These are all claimed directly by the clergyperson from the DBF.

If you have any queries about finances or buildings, please don't hesitate to seek help by contacting your Area Dean or the Mission Area Support Team (via the AA-TE).

2.4 Worship during the vacancy

- 2.4.1 **Sunday service cover** – Sunday worship is the focus of the life of the parish; the sign to the world that the Church is alive and well as the Body of Christ. Plan well in advance, seeking priests to provide cover for services of Holy Communion and baptisms. Aim to prepare up to six months in advance. Responsibility for this lies with the Churchwardens, supported by the Area Dean. If you have a parish ministry team (including any self-supporting ministers, lay worship leaders etc), they will prove invaluable in ensuring that the diary of services is maintained.

Whilst drawing up your rota, remember that the Bishops, Archdeacons, the Bishop's Chaplain and the AA-TE would welcome an invitation and

will do their best to be available; the more notice they can be given, the better! Other parishes in the Mission Area may be able to provide support, especially if they have a second or third-year Curate (request for help and cover from Curates should always be made via their Training Incumbents rather than directly).

The names and contact details of local retired and other self-supporting clergy available to provide cover in your Deanery can be supplied by your Area Dean and/or Bishop's Chaplain. Once a rota has been drawn up, please ensure that someone from the Church contacts any visiting clergy at least a couple of weeks before they come with the following information:

- The time of the service
- The type of service and the liturgy to be used
- Will there be children present – and if so, for the whole or part of the service?
- Are they asked to preach, preside or both?
- The usual number of readings and what they are expected to be.
- Will the Parish provide readers and/or an intercessor?
- Who chooses the hymns?
- The form of musical accompaniment (if any – e.g. organ, music group, CD...)
- Who else will be involved in leading the service
- What robes/vestments are usually worn

On the day, ensure that visiting clergy are welcomed and introduced to the congregation. If possible, reserve a parking space for them. Retired and self-supporting clergy should be offered travel expenses.

2.4.2 Midweek services – you may need to reassess with the PCC what can be offered during a vacancy relating to midweek communions, saints' days, school services, services in residential homes etc. It may be helpful to seek support from other parishes in the Mission Area about what midweek provision can be made.

It is not permitted generally for reserved sacrament to be used as a matter of course for regular Church services. Further enquiries or questions about this should be addressed to the Diocesan Bishop.

2.4.3 Occasional offices (baptisms, weddings, funerals) – you will need to ensure that you have a system in place for dealing with enquiries for these. It may be that your parish holds a 'Vicar's Hour' or 'Vestry Hour'

when people can enquire in person about baptisms and weddings. Or you may have a Parish Administrator who acts as the first point of contact. Whatever system you have, please make sure that it is clearly notified via the parish notice board and through any other communication channels that you have, such as on your website or in your parish magazine.

2.4.3.1 Baptisms – those enquiring about baptism will need to be informed about the arrangements for baptism preparation, and to undergo preparation before the baptism is carried out. Those dealing with enquiries must understand what is required (e.g. that godparents must themselves be baptised) and be able to explain the arrangements for preparation and for the baptism itself. Preparation can be carried out by your own trained lay team – or you may wish to team up with others in the Mission Area for this.

Whether your practice is for baptisms to be held in your main Sunday service or in a separate service, please ensure that clergy cover is agreed well in advance. In most cases it is often fairly straightforward for a visiting clergyperson to stay on after a Sunday morning service to carry out baptisms in a separate service immediately afterwards, although it is always preferable for baptisms to take place when the general worshipping community are also present.

2.4.3.2 Weddings – if there are banns to be called (and the banns register signed) or banns certificates to be issued on a Sunday, please ensure that you let the visiting clergyperson know.

You will need to arrange clergy to take any weddings that have been arranged for during the vacancy. As weddings are governed by secular as well as church law, it is important that the legalities are observed. As well as ensuring that the legal preliminaries have been observed (e.g. the calling of banns, or the obtaining of a common or special licence), there should be someone in the parish to prepare the Wedding Document that is sent to the Registry and the parish's own Wedding Service Register. If you need any advice or support about this, please contact the Area Dean or Archdeacon.

2.5.5.3 Funerals – It is important to ensure that details of who to contact about taking a funeral are agreed with the Area Dean and clearly

communicated to local funeral directors. At present, funerals can be taken by clergy or by Licensed Lay Ministers (formerly Readers) trained and willing to do so.

2.5 Mission, outreach and pastoral work

Traditionally, incumbents have been involved in a wide range of mission, outreach and pastoral work. This might have included visiting, counselling, school assemblies and related work, management committees, civic occasions, chaplaincies, running preparation for baptism and confirmation, enquirers groups, etc. Not all of this work has been visible to the congregation! As clergy become Oversight Ministers, one of their primary responsibilities is to enable and equip others in the parish to identify and step into their callings, rather than doing all these tasks themselves. A vacancy is a good time for the church to identify its missional calling and priorities, and to think about how it will work in partnership with and under the leadership of its Oversight Minister to further them. You may already have Focal Ministers engaged in these activities and leading others in them too. If not, you are encouraged to start thinking about what Focal Ministry might look like in your parish. Do think about contacting the Director of Focal Ministry, who will provide support, encouragement and information about this.

2.6 Parsonage and garden

The parish and the DBF's Property Department will collaborate in ensuring that the property is looked after. The policy is that vacant properties should be let rather than left unoccupied for any significant length of time. For more information, speak to the Area Dean, Archdeacon or Property Manager. Points to bear in mind are:

- Take final readings of utilities meters with the outgoing incumbent before they leave
- Put existing telephone accounts into the name of the parish rather than disconnecting (as reconnection can be long-winded and difficult). Ensure that there is a message directing any enquirers to someone who can help them.
- Seek advice from the Property Department regarding central heating status and utility connections
- Ensure the intruder alarm is set if the building is unoccupied
- Keep a note of parsonage key holders, with arrangements for holiday cover

- Arrange for someone to look round regularly if the property is empty (e.g. checking for mail and clearing away junk mail), or discreetly check its external appearance if it is tenanted.
- Notify the Property Department in confidence if you have any concerns or think something is amiss
- Notify insurers about the status of the property at the start of the vacancy, and observe any instructions they may have
- Ensure that the outgoing incumbent has organised mail redirection for at least six months
- If the property is vacant, keep lawns mowed and hedges trimmed during the growing season
- Prior to a new Oversight Minister moving in, once repairs and redecoration have been completed, arrange a small work party to clean the house and (if necessary) do up the garden
- If possible, offer to pay for the decoration of an additional room over and above what the DBF covers
- It is a kind and thoughtful gesture (and will help greatly in establishing good relations) to put a 'Welcome' card along with a 'goody box' of useful groceries for a new Oversight Minister to find when they move in

3. Welcoming the new Oversight Minister

3.1 Moving in – The DBF Property Manager will oversee arrangements for repairs and redecoration of the Vicarage. The parish (or parishes) is asked to help the incoming priest and their family as best they can to offer a warm welcome e.g. by facilitating access to the property, sprucing up the garden, if possible offering to cover the costs of redecorating a room. Expect and encourage the new Oversight Minister to take a good fortnight to move, unpack and be ready for the Licensing Service. This removal and resettlement period is considered work time and does not form part of the Oversight Minister's annual leave.

3.2 Licensing Service – the Institution (for an Incumbent) or Licensing (for a Priest in Charge) will be arranged by the Area Dean in collaboration with the parish. The date is set according to the Bishop's diary and will be notified well in advance by the Bishop's Chaplain. The Area Dean will advise on publicity and other arrangements, as well as arranging a rehearsal for the service shortly before the actual date.

3.3 Getting started – a parish can do much to welcome its new Oversight Minister and help them to settle into their role. They will need quickly to build good relationships, establish contacts and learn a multitude of names and places in the parishes which they are overseeing.

Think about the kinds of social occasions you can arrange to help this as well as the services and other ministry occasions which the Oversight Minister will attend. These kinds of events (often around food) really help to build relationships as the Oversight Minister and church members get to know each other, reflecting the way that Jesus conducted much of his ministry according to the Gospels.

If at all possible, provide your Oversight Minister with basic parish information as soon as possible – parish boundary maps; Electoral roll and other contact lists; regular parish events which you think are priorities for the Oversight Minister etc. They will need to know what is already happening as they get to know their parish(es). Please don't assume anything – every parish is different, with different traditions and different key events.

The Oversight Minister will also be offered various opportunities to familiarise themselves with the wider Mission Area, Deanery, Archdeaconry and Diocese. In particular they will be invited to meet key people and offered an induction to the Diocese which usually takes place at Church House. Please encourage and support your Oversight Minister in taking up these opportunities.

4. And finally...

Remember that the role of Oversight Minister is not the same as that of a Vicar. Your Oversight Minister has come to enable the whole people of God in your parish(es) for the whole mission of God. They will expect to work collaboratively with lay people, helping them to discern and develop their gifts, rather than expecting to take over ministries which are already being exercised by them.

Remember too that your new Oversight Minister will be different from your previous incumbent/Oversight Minister! No two people have the same set of skills and gifts. Be prepared to get to know your Oversight Minister as you work together prayerfully to discern the direction of mission and ministry in your parish.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever. (Ephesians 3.20-21)