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**Author: the Rev Sue Jones**

Parish share review group:   
Feedback from the first questionnaire

# Group membership

* Chair – Revd Sue Jones (Petersfield)
* Stephen Smart, Parish Operations Manager Gosport North (Gosport)
* Steve Lazell, Treasurer, Crofton (Fareham)
* Ven Steve Daughtery, Archdeacon of the Isle of Wight (Isle of Wight)
* Philip Poulter, Diocesan Secretary
* Elaine Coe, Financial Controller
* Canon Nick Ralph, Head of Mission and Social Transformation
* Chris Parker, Stewardship Adviser
* Others as required

*The PSRG is a voluntary body, and all members give their time freely. The diocese has incurred no costs in compiling, or analysing responses to, the questionnaires.*

# Introduction to the 2023/24 review

The Church of England receives no money from the government to finance its mission and ministry. Our diocese does receive money from investments, a small amount of funding from Church Commissioners, and rental income from houses that we temporarily don’t need to house clergy. So, the voluntary contributions from our parishes, which we call **Parish Share**, makes up more than half our income as a diocese.

It’s thanks to your generosity that we can afford to provide clergy and others on the frontline and maintain a significant presence for the Church in people’s daily lives. You raise an amazing £4.4m each year to allow us to do this. As a diocese, we spent a total of £6.9m in 2022 from our unrestricted funds, of which £4.3m was used to provide stipendiary clergy to serve in parishes, and to support all our clergy and lay ministers.

The underlying principles of the current Parish Share system have been in existence in Portsmouth Diocese for several decades. We act as a diocesan family, with parishes supporting each other. The level of voluntary contributions reflects the relative wealth of each parish and the number of regular worshippers.

The way that these contributions are split between parishes is called the apportionment system. The most recent review of this took place in 2014. The changes were agreed by Bishop’s Council and Diocesan Synod in 2015 and implemented over three years from 2016 to 2018.

Since 2023, and in accordance with our Terms of Reference (approved by Bishop’s Council in May 2023) this group has been conducting a review of this apportionment system.

Our stated aims are:

* To review the historic effectiveness of the current Parish Share apportionment principles and system.
* To identify and consider relevant evidence of other principles and systems in use across the Church of England in terms of rates of contribution but also, as far as is possible, as to the culture of giving and generosity in the diocese.
* To consider all existing diocesan policies in relation to Parish Share, including the treatment of unpaid parish share from prior years.
* To assess how any future system could apply fairly and effectively to church plants and fresh expressions of church.
* To produce findings and recommendations for future apportionment arrangements for the Bishop’s Staff Team to consider, so that it may bring agreed recommendations to the Bishop’s Council and then to Diocesan Synod in time for any changes to be implemented in 2025.

It is a key aim of the Parish Share Review Group to consult widely with all interested parties across the diocese with a view to:

* 1. building confidence and trust in Christ’s sufficiency and in each other;
  2. paying close attention to all views and concerns expressed; and
  3. encouraging the growth at parish, deanery, and diocesan level, of a shared sense of ‘ownership’ over the Parish Share system.

As part of this desire to consult widely, the group created an online Parish Share questionnaire. On 14 March 2024, a letter containing the link to the questionnaire was sent directly to every PCC in the diocese. It was also made available on the diocesan website on the same day, to encourage responses from those who wished to respond individually.

The aim was to invite PCCs and all other interested parties to share their views of the current system for allocating the parish share, and to offer their ideas as to other ways of doing this. The closing date for responses was 15 April 2024.

# Response rate to questionnaire

There were 54 responses received ‘on behalf of’ PCCs but as this included three identical responses from the same PCC, only 51 have been counted.

PCCs that did submit a return noted that they had either managed to meet to discuss the questionnaire in person or had agreed a collective view through online communication. Others who sent in individual responses commented that there had been insufficient time for their PCC to meet to agree a collective response. This will be taken into account for future consultations.

A total of 104 responses were received from individuals, almost all of whom currently hold (or have recently held) offices such as clergy, PCC Chair, Deanery or PCC Treasurer, or Churchwarden.

The table below shows responses by deanery. The left-hand column is the number of responses from PCCs. The right-hand column shows the number of individual responses received.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Deanery** | **Number of PCC responses** | **Number of individual responses** |
| BISHOP'S WALTHAM | 8 | 22 |
| FAREHAM | 7 | 12 |
| GOSPORT | 7 | 3 |
| HAVANT | 7 | 12 |
| ISLE OF WIGHT | 11 | 25 |
| PETERSFIELD | 7 | 15 |
| PORTSMOUTH | 4 | 15 |
| **TOTAL** | **51** | **104** |

This summary focusses mainly (but not exclusively) on the responses submitted on behalf of PCCs, which represent around 40 per cent of the parishes in Portsmouth diocese.

# Headline outcomes of questionnaire

**The consultative approach adopted was generally, although not unanimously, well-received.**

Many respondents expressed themselves glad to have the opportunity to put forward their views. However, a significant number expressed the concern that the consultation was no more than ‘window-dressing’ and that the diocese had already made its mind up about how the parish share should be calculated.

The words and phrases which appeared most frequently in freeform responses were the need for:

* Communication
* Listening
* Local Ministry
* Proportionality
* Trust
* Transparency

It is clear from several strongly worded responses that **there is a need to heal hurt and to re-build trust** between parishes and the diocesan structures. Open and honest consultation on the parish share system, and full disclosure of the results of this consultation will, we hope, form part of this healing and re-building process.

Some respondents were passionate in their criticism of funding or other decisions taken by the Church Commissioners, and/or other matters of wider Church governance. However, the diocese has no direct control over such matters, and they lie outside the remit of this group.

Numerous PCC and individual responses suggested that recent printed and online diocesan communications about parish share have not yet reached a wide readership. A link to this information was provided at the beginning of the questionnaire, and a summary was also published in the Spring 2024 edition of our @CofEPortsmouth magazine. However, many respondents asked questions or referred to misconceptions which the recent communications had sought to address. This highlights the need for more effective communication.

Several respondents referred to the diocese still having a substantial number of parochial clergy vacancies and seemed unaware of recent appointments, despite regular announcements on the diocesan website, in weekly online mailings, and through printed media. It is possible that where various misconceptions are expressed in parish and deanery contexts, they are not effectively challenged by those with access to the full facts.

# Key findings from the first questionnaire

1. There is **broad agreement** across the diocese that the **principles** underpinning our parish share allocation system should be:

* **Generosity** (based on gracious giving and mutual support)
* **Proportionality** (reflecting ability to pay)
* **Transparency** (fair and seen to be fair)
* **Simplicity** (straightforward to calculate and easy to communicate).

PCCs voiced several concerns in their comments on this question:

* the **financial strain** experienced by some parishes due to declining attendance and income, and the cost of building maintenance and repairs.
* Concerns were raised about **proportionality** in the distribution of parish share obligations – that is, that the ability of parishes to pay was not being adequately taken into account
* The need for greater **transparency** in communicating how the parish share is apportioned and how the funds are spent by the diocese.
* Opinions vary on the concept of **mutual support** within the parish share system. Some PCCs called for a more targeted approach to support, focusing on genuine needs and opportunities for mission rather than “propping up unsustainable practices”. Some PCCs feel the current parish share system is preventing their churches from investing in their own facilities and ministries.

1. There is **little appetite for a radical change** in the way the diocese calculates parish share:

* The option of allocating parish share totals to deaneries and allowing them to sub-allocate was not popular, despite anxieties about diocesan centralisation.
* The cost-based model (where a parish’s share reflects the costs of its own ministry) gained little support.
* Opinions were more evenly split between those who favoured sticking to our current “mutual support model” (in which total ministry costs are apportioned across parishes without reference to their own direct ministry costs) and a “hybrid model” (which would take into account direct ministry costs but would be adjusted in accordance with ability to pay/support).

1. There is **broad acceptance that parish share allocation should take relative wealth of parishes into account**. However, there is no clear consensus as to how relative wealth should be measured.
2. There is **broad acceptance that church attendance should be a factor in the calculation of parish share** but no clear consensus on how church attendance should be measured. Numerous respondents expressed the view that a nine-year rolling average of Average Weekly Attendance is no longer suitable and suggested a maximum of 3-5 year rolling average instead.
3. There is **broad agreement that the parish share allocation should also be subject to an ‘ability to pay’ test**. There was no clear consensus on how this should be measured.
4. There was no consensus on how **unpaid parish share** from prior years should be treated.

* Some called for them to be written off, especially as a new system is being introduced (The ‘Jubilee year” approach).
* Others are keen for what they see as ‘accountability,’ which entails what they see as ‘unsustainable’ parishes being restructured.
* In the middle ground, there is general support for a more nuanced approach in which arrears might be written off over a period in which (for example) a parish consistently paid its share.

# Next steps

The Parish Share Review Group has undertaken and reviewed a variety of financial modelling exercises to assess the likely impact of the various adjustments above, to our share apportionment methodology.

The group is now compiling a second online questionnaire, which delves more deeply into PCCs’ views on the issues raised above. We expect to issue this second questionnaire to PCCs in **early July.** The deadline for responses will be set in **September** in order to allow all PCCs the opportunity to meet and discuss their collective responses.

The PRSG is working towards making recommendations to the Bishop’s Staff Team in **October**, so that any proposed changes to parish share apportionment may be considered at diocesan synod in **November**, for implementation in **January 2025**.  Of course, the group will have to balance a number of conflicting requirements in making this recommendation and are therefore unlikely to satisfy the concerns of all.

However, you can be assured that the group will strive for the model that most closely matches the four principles of generosity, proportionality, transparency and simplicity, and for a process that aims to be clear and easy to understand.