



Creating connections: review of 2016-20 Strategic Plan

In December 2015, the Diocesan Synod adopted Creating connections – with God, each other and our communities – as a statement of identity and purpose; and the priorities of making disciples, growing leaders, engaging younger generations to be promoted across the Diocese and as a basis for plans.

Creating connections resulted from work with Diocesan Synod, workshops with leaders across the Diocese and online engagement through 2013 and 2014. It was informed by analysis of the internal and external context, leading to further consultation with Deanery and Diocesan Synods in 2015. The invitation to all parts of the Diocese was to respond to the vision and priorities with their own plans.

The Strategic Plan 2016-20 was the diocesan level response to Creating connections. It focused diocesan level activity and resources and the support given to ministers, churches and schools. The Strategic Plan was significantly informed by:

1. The conclusion from the engagement to focus, rather than continue to spread more thinly, ministry and mission resources in intentionally missional ways to be fruitful for the wider Diocese;
2. The financial situation that emerged in late 2015;
3. The Church of England's Renewal & Reform Programme;
4. The government's drive to academisation in schools.

The Strategic Plan had a set of objectives for the DBF: to resource and multiply effective mission; to optimise ministry and leadership; to enhance financial resources. It specifically identified six strategic initiatives as new or enhanced areas of work that would require focus to implement and would add to existing work.

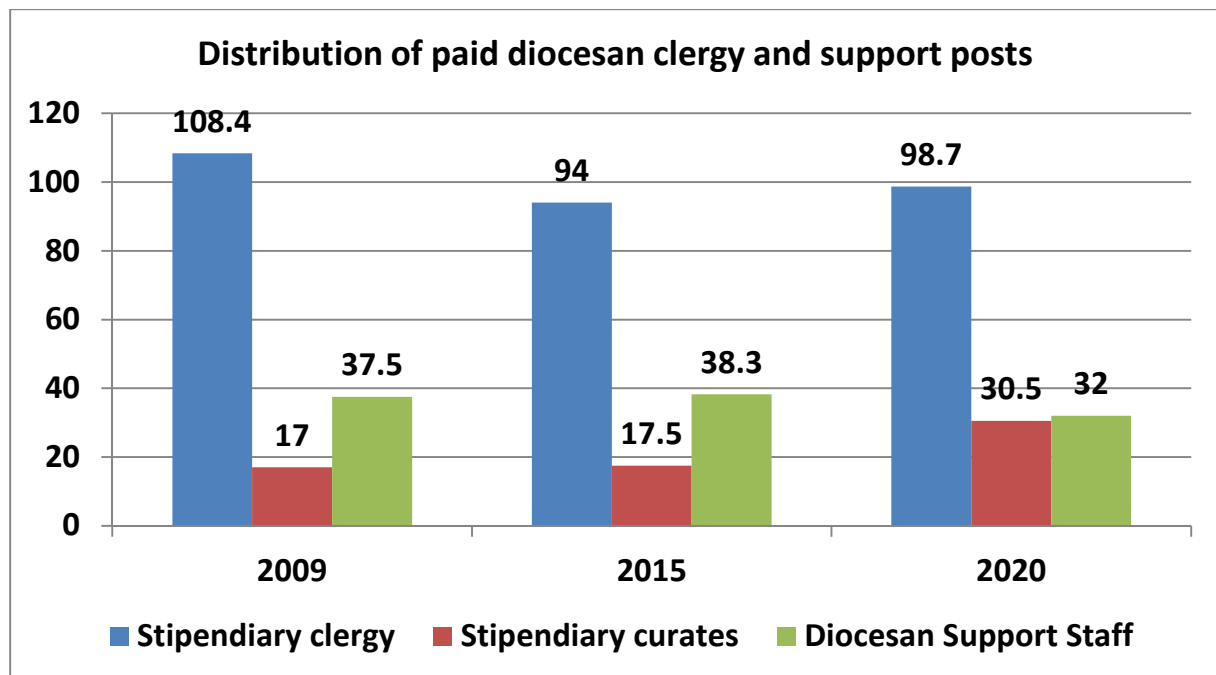
These initiatives were in addition to the existing, ongoing and vast majority of the ministry and support provided across the Diocese which is the primary contribution to the objectives. These were supported by operational plans which are not reported on here.

The Bishop's Council, which was responsible for developing, ensuring implementation of, and evaluating the plan, has received regular reports on each of the strategic initiatives. At the end of the period, and with COVID19 disrupting some of the 2020 activity and indicators, this report is a high level summary to the Diocesan Synod on the degree to which the strategic initiatives were implemented as planned, the outcomes, impact and learning for the future. This learning will inform the vision and strategy development process over the coming year.

OVERALL CONTEXT

The 2016-20 Strategic Plan marked a departure from the two previous diocesan strategies (2004-10, 2010-15). These, alongside the Growth Programme, were largely related to structural and ministerial deployment interventions and changes. Alongside a promotion of licensed lay and self-supporting ordained ministries, stipendiary parochial ministry numbers reduced by over 25% between 2004 and 2015.

Although there were some localised changes to deployment to complete proposals from previous deployment plans, the current Strategic Plan sought to stabilise parochial ministry and reinvest for current and future growth, especially through curacies. Staffing for diocesan support was aligned to the strategic plan and Church of England priorities. The table below shows the changes to staffing levels across the Diocese.



During the Strategic Plan period, there has been significant change in the Diocese's senior leadership. Vacancies and subsequent appointments the following roles have been made in the second half of the period: Diocesan Bishop, Dean, two Archdeacons, Director of Ministry Development and Director of Education. The period of further prayerful reflection during the episcopal vacancy and Archbishop's Charge to Bishop Viv also introduced new priorities. Major commitments have been made in relation to the environment and racial justice in the last year as a result.

The Church of England's Renewal and Reform programme has also developed. Aspects of the Strategic Plan anticipated streams of Renewal and Reform, but others, such as Setting God's People Free/Everyday Faith and Growing Faith came later. The diocesan priorities aligned with these streams and aspects of the plan were evolved to integrate them further.

Finally, the COVID19 pandemic has had a huge impact on our society and the life of the Diocese as a whole. Progress and learning up until the early part of 2020 must be seen in the light of subsequent events, the Church's response and ongoing learning from what is anticipated to be a prolonged season of disruption.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

- All the initiatives were implemented broadly as planned. This has involved substantial activity in addition to the usual resourcing, operations and support. It has developed and demonstrated new capabilities, drawn in new funding, generated learning and expanded confidence to embark on future initiatives.
- We have seen a large amount of fruit of different kinds across the initiatives. Although tracking direct impact is difficult, focus, effort and targeted diocesan resource in specific areas have had a positive impact on local church activity and fruitfulness.
- Surveying and monitoring has been constructive in identifying needs, adapting support and providing tailored advice to churches and schools. All the indicators pointed to a healthier and more resilient Church prior to COVID19.
- The changes in diocesan leadership did not affect the implementation timetable but are likely to have had an impact on levels of engagement at different points (e.g. Resourcing church launches, Parish Share for 2018 and 2019).
- Throughout the period, the Diocese had low communications capacity. It was therefore limited in its ability and effectiveness in sharing the story of the Church's work in the region, internally and externally. Given the complex network of organisational and pastoral relationships, engagement and communication remains one of the biggest challenges for diocesan level vision and strategy
- The diocesan level financial initiatives have been hardest to achieve, both having a material impact on income. The early increase in Parish Share has not continued to grow despite the encouraging, continued increase in parish giving income. The delays to some major property sales meant that more recent sales have served to manage cash deficits rather than generate anticipated income.

1. "Making disciples in your parish"

Select, establish and spread quickly six key practices or projects that help parishes make disciples, grow leaders, engage younger generations through diocesan training, communications, guidance.

The initiative developed into the "Making disciples in your parish – six ways to make disciples" initiative. It was not clearly defined in 2016 and therefore tested and trailed at the Connected conference in April 2017, and formally launched with material in April 2018. Its ongoing development and implementation ended in April 2020 with the advent of COVID19. The "Making disciples in your parish" resources and materials remain available to churches.

Implementation summary

- The initiative was led by Chris Priddy, Head of Parish & External Relations.
- Explained by a simple, concise, explanatory booklet, distributed to all parishes, supported by single page 'ideas, resources and question sheets' for each of the key practices.
- Expressed by sharing examples across the Diocese at Connected Conferences, in the Connections newsletter and online.
- Supported by a range of projects and resources: 'Journey of Invitation' resource (2019); 'Creative family focused expressions of church made simple', Messy Church self review toolkit; 'Your SHAPE for God's service' 3 session resource; Thy Kingdom Come; Talking Jesus; LICC Whole-life discipleship for churches.
- An annual survey and report to monitor, share and celebrate progress and examples; individualised feedback and resource links given to all parishes that completed.

Outcomes

An annual survey was carried out relating to 2016 to 2019 to see how parishes engaged with the aspects of 'Creating connections' and the 'Making disciples in your parish' initiative. On average, 73% of parishes were represented each year.

60% of parishes increased the number of key practices with which they engage actively over the four year period. 26% of parishes are now engaged with five or six practices, up from 5% in 2016. Although it is hard to attribute causation, all of the indicators saw growth and most met or exceeded the expected outcomes.

- Providing Thy Kingdom Come resources to parishes saw a marked increase in engagement with a **foundation of prayer** and a 10% increase in the number of parishes running a regular prayer gathering.
- Following the 'Journey of Invitation' in 2019, 2 in 5 parishes now rate their **culture of invitation** as 'good' or 'excellent'. Year on year improvement is observed, up from 1 in 5 in 2016.
- 85% of parishes now run a **Creative family-focused expression of church**. Whilst this has remained largely static, various supportive resources have been developed and attendance has grown with almost 5,000 people now attending these fresh expressions.
- Half of parishes now run an **evangelistic course**, up 10% on 2016 levels. Attendance at these courses has more than doubled in the period to 1,000 in 2019. 46 copies of Talking Jesus were requested by parishes to support this.
- Almost all parishes now provide **small groups**, with 4 in 10 worshippers attending a group, up from 3 in 10 in 2016.
- An increase in the number of parishes actively investing in **developing the gifts of God's people** means that over half are now doing so.

2. Ordained vocations

Resource recruitment and development programme to increase quality, quantity and diversity of new ordained ministers.

The Diocese of Bristol committed to increase the levels of vocation to ordained ministry by 50%. This was in line with a national Church of England initiative in the light of the gap between ordinations and retirements. A 50% increase would largely meet overall stipendiary clergy deployment plans nationwide.

The Diocese of Bristol wanted to increase the diversity of those pursuing a vocation to ordained ministry, in terms of ethnicity, age and social background. The diocesan discernment process, the nationally administered Bishop's Advisory Panel and system of training for ordained ministry (IME Phase 1) were considered to ensure quality control.

This work was led by the Diocesan Director of Ordinands (DDO), supported by a team of clergy who acted as Assistant DDOs. The appointment of a paid half-time Assistant DDO post in September 2018 enhanced the capacity to manage the increase in candidates. However, staff turnover meant there were three DDO post holders over the period and two vacancies amounting to over nine months.

Baselines, goals and outcomes

Baseline figures have been set by the average numbers sponsored by the Diocese of Bristol beginning training in IME Phase 1 between 2013 and 2015, an average of 7.33 candidates. No adequate indicator for baselining and tracking diversity of social background was developed. With a 50% increase in all areas, this is how outcomes compare with goals:

	Baseline	Target (50% increase)	Actual (ave) 2016-20	Actual (ave) 2017-20	Years not achieved
Total Number of Ordinands	7.33	11	12.75	13.75	2016
Incumbent Status (IS) Ordinands	5.33	8	8.4	9.25	2016
Young (<32) Vocations	1.66	2.5	2	2	2016, 2017, 2019, 2020
BAME candidates	0	1	1.4	1.75	2016, 2020

The discernment process normally takes one to two years and it is therefore perhaps not surprising that the 2016 outcomes were in fact below the baseline. However, from 2017 onwards, most goals have been met or exceeded each year.

Placing vocations clearly within the strategic vision of the Diocese, as part of a national goal and campaign and resourced adequately has enabled a good deal of attention to the area, which has in turn been a major source of this growth.

The growth in Incumbent Status Ordinands reflects the work of successive DDOs and their vocations team who understand the system and can point people in the appropriate direction.

The BAME candidates outcomes have been very encouraging, if from a baseline of zero. That seven ordinands (almost 20% of IS since 2017) have been supported over the period of the strategic plan is long over-due progress. Although no candidates from a BAME background were sponsored for ordination in 2020, a number are in the discernment process currently.

However, across the period of the strategic plan target for Young Vocations has not been met other than in 2018 (4 candidates) and the proportion has in fact fallen from 30% of IS to 20%. The current DDO and her team are attending to this ongoing challenge.

3. Mission Areas and Resourcing Churches

Establish and develop six to eight Mission Areas and/or resourcing churches in a range of areas of mission potential and need that provide a replicable model for growth and ministerial development.

The Mission Areas and Resourcing churches initiative was developed in response to a key principle coming out of the consultation on the strategy in 2014: to focus some ministry resources in intentionally missional ways that connected churches in order to be fruitful not only in that context but for the wider Diocese. The Mission Areas were adapted from learning in Bristol and other dioceses and Resourcing churches from examples elsewhere. As a core and additional part of the Diocese's strategic approach, this initiative was eligible for, and the focus of, the Diocese's applications for Strategic Development Funding (SDF).

Implementation summary

- Project plans and SDF applications for Mission Areas (MA) were submitted in November 2016, Bristol Resourcing Church in November 2017 and Swindon Resourcing Church (RC) in May 2018.
- Avonside (MA) launched in October 2017, Yate & Fromeside (MA) in January 2018, St Nicholas, Bristol (RC) in September 2018, Pattern Church, Swindon (RC) in December 2018 and North Wiltshire (RC) in July 2019.
- The Diocese developed a good structure of accountability, support and challenge through the Programme Board model. However, the kind of enhanced training, consultancy and learning envisaged has been less consistently provided or drawn on. The appointment of a nationally funded Interim, and then a substantive, Programme Manager, with consultancy from the CofE's Strategy Development Unit, have proved beneficial.
- Three **Mission Areas** are now established in varying contexts: Avonside a suburban and outer estate mix, 75% of which in the most deprived 20% of parishes; Yate & Fromeside, large town and commuter rural mix; North Wiltshire: dispersed rural mix.
- Visions, covenants and plans are in place and being implemented, supported by supplemented staffing. However, initiation and the development of plans took longer than planned generally and particularly in North Wiltshire.
- Challenges in recruiting to the Associate roles contributed in some part to delays in initiation as they were a limiting factor in capacity either for the Lead Incumbent or the broader work of the Mission Area. The resignation of the Vicar of Malmesbury and delays to the start of his successor delayed the North Wiltshire Mission Area.
- Mission Areas have been used as a learning and training environment for curates and those on the Church of England Ministerial Experience Scheme.
- Collaborative working between parishes in each Mission Area has become more embedded while remaining varied. Various mission focused initiatives have started across the Mission Areas which have also enabled more local mission. In North Wiltshire, COVID19 has accelerated and increased collaborative working and shared initiatives.
- Two **Resourcing Churches** were launched according to plan. Leadership was put in place, buildings acquired despite major obstacles, building projects completed within budget and plans for growing their worshipping communities implemented.
- Timing and nature of employed staffing and planting curate resourcing has differed slightly from the plans but have remained aligned to purpose and under budget.
- Although it was anticipated one church plant would have been resourced from St Nicholas in 2020, this is unlikely until 2021.
- The Diocese has not been in a position to plan for establishing the one to three additional Mission Areas or Resourcing churches stated as part of the initiative.

Outcomes and impact

Mission Areas (2019 data, half way point of overall project)

- Overall attendance in the Mission Areas has increased by 5%. This follows a continuation of decline in 2017, flattening in 2018 and then increasing in 2019. Although this is below the goal at this stage, this compares to a diocesan average of 7% decline.
- Small group participation has not significantly increased and Baptisms and Confirmations have reduced, neither achieving the goal.
- Giving income increases have exceeded the goal (other than in North Wiltshire) which has been reflected in Parish Share giving.

- These show early stages of spiritual and numerical growth
- There is evidence of notable culture change with increasing: alignment of parish and mission area strategies; focus on outreach and mission; sharing of resources; trusting, supportive relationships amongst clergy, regardless of churchmanship.

Resourcing churches (early 2020 data)

- Prior to COVID19, both Resourcing churches were meeting their attendance targets numerically and in terms of proportion of under 30/40s. Swindon had a higher proportion of unchurched and dechurched attendees than anticipated and Bristol slightly lower, offset by a higher proportion joining having moved to the city for the first time.
- St Nicholas has met and Pattern Church exceeded targets related to small group participation, giving regularly, serving on team.
- Both churches have found it harder to track participation during lockdown and surveying is currently being done. Both have reported significant growth in new members and high attendance at online Alpha. A third of Pattern Church attendees joined during lockdown. Over 100 people will have attended online Alpha at each church since lockdown.
- A significant increase in provision for and participation by students and young adults in Bristol through St Nicholas and young families at Pattern Church.
- Effective engagement with social action has increased in 2020: St Nicholas acting as a food hub in partnership with other churches and partnering with local sheltered housing for young people; Pattern Church has partnered with TLG and Safe Families.

4. Education

Ensure DBAT has staffing and financial capacity, credibility and relationship with the DBE/F to grow Christian influence in Church Schools and increase number of new schools and converted DBAT academies.

This initiative responded to the government's drive for academisation and seeking to maintain and grow the Church of England's contribution to distinctively Christian education. As a result, the Strategic Plan determined to maintain a strong link with the Diocese of Bristol Academies Trust (DBAT). This was to be through shared leadership and enabling grants from Educational Foundations to be used to seed fund central costs.

Implementation summary

- Reorganisation and additional grant funding for DBAT central team and structure from 2016 to increase capacity.
- New school bids are not possible at the moment due to changes in criteria.
- DBAT CEO and DBE DDE posts separated in 2019 to avoid conflicts of interest and create successful working partnerships. Schools requiring support have moved into DBAT with now 15 schools.
- Change in government policy on academisation has led to a new DBE Growth and Sustainability policy. This followed consultation with school staff and governors to encourage schools to explore and enter strong partnerships with diverse models of leadership. The Diocese is now academisation 'neutral' but enabling mixed MATs of CE and non CE schools to be possible.

Outcomes and impact

- Over the period, DBAT has been awarded the opportunity to open four new schools in Swindon. Two have opened, including the secondary Deanery CE Academy, and two will open in the coming years.
- DBAT has taken on inadequate schools and enabled improvement but does not yet attract many Good schools and no Outstanding schools.
- SIAMS inspections focus on the impact of a Church school's Christian vision on pupils and adults. All DBAT's schools that have been inspected are Good or Outstanding except one which was inspected prior to inspection.
- Relationship with Cathedral Schools Trust (CST) developed to include strong diocesan representation with the Diocesan Bishop and the Dean as members.
- Cathedral Primary School, part of CST, is also due to now become CE designated (i.e. a church school).
- As a result of this growth, there will be over 2,500 new church school places as a result of this growth.

5. Parish Share and encouraging generosity

Establish new Parish Share approach and resource engagement with and support to parishes that enable them to raise income to meet Parish Share expectations.

In December 2015, the Diocesan Synod called for the Parish Share approach to be reviewed and replaced with new proposals by May 2016. This was a response to an increased budget deficit for 2016 and the recognition that Parish Share in the Diocese of Bristol had decreased to some of the lowest levels relative to parish income in the Church of England.

The proposals, centred around a request based on the principles of taking responsibility, being generous and having faith, were agreed. They were to be supported by a range of interventions to encourage stewardship. Together, these contributed to an additional priority for the Diocese of encouraging generosity. The Strategic Plan aimed to:

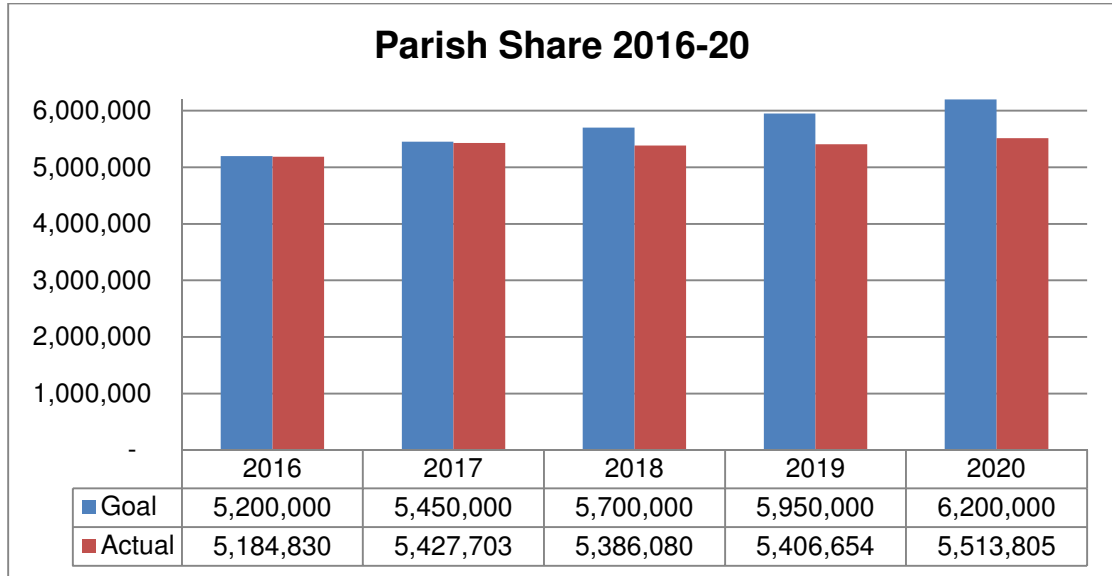
- Increase Parish Share by £1m to £6.2 million, from £5.2m to £6.2m
- Increase parish income from giving by £1.4 million, from £9.4 million to £10.8 million.

Implementation and outcomes

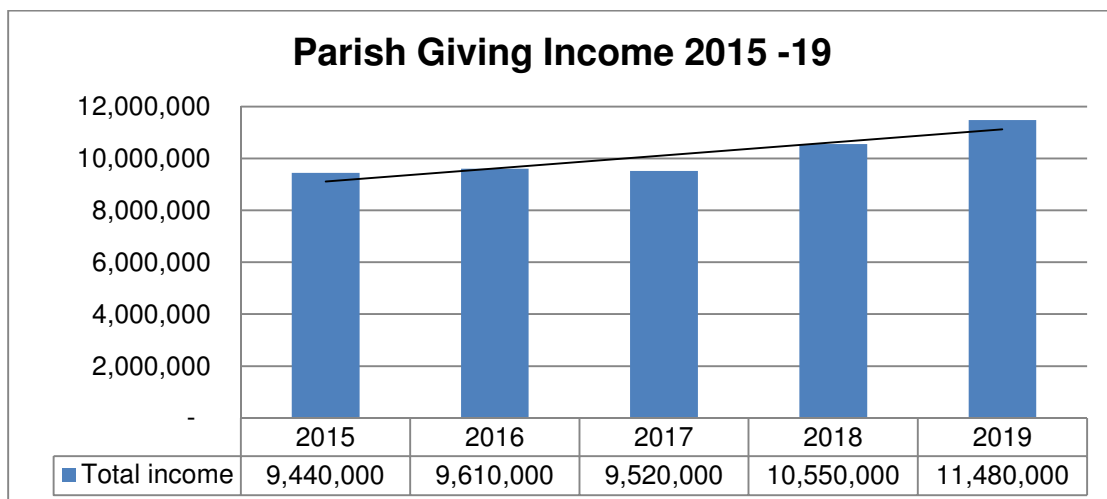
- The Parish Share approach was reviewed at pace, establishing a sense of urgency and importance. It was launched effectively with high levels of broad and individual parish engagement by diocesan officers and senior clergy and lay volunteers. This produced immediate outcomes: a £243k increase in 2017, close to the £250k annual increase required to stay on the trajectory towards the 2020 target.
- However, this level of aggregated annual increase was not sustained. The actual receipts in both 2018 and 2019 were below the amount received in 2017. Although the majority of parishes do increase their commitments each year, these are outweighed by a minority of significant decreases, all with specific reasons for those decisions. The parishes that make these reductions vary from year to year and are from across the spectrum. This pattern, temporarily halted in 2015 and 2017, is a legacy of the previous Parish Share approach.
- The Parish Share approach still received general support prior to the COVID19 pandemic and, combined with sustained individual engagement and the inclusion of

the two resourcing churches for the first time, helped the original commitments for 2020 increase by more than £100k over the 2019 receipts.

- In 2020, the Parish Share commitments amounted to £5.514 million and so the £6.2m goal was missed by £686k. This was before the Covid-19 pandemic, which has widened that gap further – at the time of writing, commitments for 2020 have reduced by £235k.
- The most demonstrable result of our failure to meet the Parish Share goal is the fact that the budget deficit in 2020 amounted to £658k. In other words, the 2020 Budget would effectively have balanced if the Parish Share goal had been met.



- The primary investment in the “encouraging generosity” priority was appointment of Giving & Resources Adviser posts and membership of the Parish Giving Scheme (PGS) in 2017.
- 72 parishes (44%) are now registered with the PGS (the target is 50% of parishes by the end of 2020 and 70% by the end of 2022). 1,307 donors are currently registered and the average monthly gift is currently £110 (including gift aid) with the amount remitted broadly on target.
- Feedback has been extremely positive with the scheme reducing administrative burdens on treasurers, leading to increased giving when launched with a parish stewardship campaign.
- According to the latest data (draft for 2019) on parish income, parish income from giving has grown by £2.04 million between 2015 and 2019, exceeding the goal set.



- However, this increase did not sufficiently translate into Parish Share, as hoped.
- While it is difficult to prove a precise causal link with the upward trend in parish income, clearly the dedicated support given to parishes on such topics as stewardship, contactless giving, legacies, grant applications, as well as the PGS is likely to have made a positive contribution.

6. Surplus assets

Assess and redeploy surplus assets, glebe and property in light of deployment plan.

In order to invest in new initiatives without drawing on existing reserves or income, this initiative focused on maximising the DBF's balance sheet. The changes in deployment and in expectations of clergy housing between 2004 and 2015 had led to some properties no longer being needed or appropriate for functional purposes. In addition, although the Bristol DBF has relatively low levels of glebe land, it anticipated opportunities to realise some land. The plans for disposal also meant that the DBF would be able to reinvest proceeds for additional investment income, contributing to the overall income and a balanced budget.

As a result, the DBF aimed to:

- Realise £6 million of gains;
- Deploy £4 million of capital funds (additional housing for clergy and resourcing church development);
- Reinvest £2m in equities for income.

Implementation and outcomes

- 15 properties (including three due to complete by the end of the year) and one significant land holding will have been sold in the period. The net proceeds of these sales amount to £9.25m (£6.95m realised gains).
- All bar one property originally identified has been sold.
- £5.05m have been redeployed in capital funds to buying additional housing for clergy and resourcing church development.
- Owing to the delay to some sales, the cash deficits sustained by the DBF in 2018 and 2019 and anticipated in 2020 and 2021, the DBF has not been able to reinvest in equities. In fact, sold £0.5m in investments and secured a revolving credit facility of £2m in 2019 to manage cashflow without further sales.
- The success of the initiative has been the redeployment of the DBF's balance sheet towards functional, missional purposes while also increasing its overall value.
- The difficulties in implementation have been in the timings of sales, most of which occurred from mid-2018 onwards, after the DBF had needed to redeploy much of the capital.
- The challenges in selling property have varied. A number of properties earmarked for sale were complicated owing to factors such as demolition, planning issues or parishes expressing an interest to purchase. In response to these situations, innovative ideas were proposed by various parties which prolonged the route to sale. In most cases, none of these ideas proved feasible and a simple, if delayed, sale has been executed. COVID19 has had minimal impact on these transactions.

LEARNING

Learning has been a continual activity in relation to each of the initiatives. This ongoing learning has been critical to evolving the approach to each initiative and has also been applied across initiatives and to other areas of diocesan work.

A number of general learning points from across the Strategic Plan are described below.

Closing the “implementation gap”

Strategies in the Church of England are known for promising more than they deliver, first, in terms of failure actually to implement as stated and then, consequently, in terms of outcomes. The “implementation gap” was closed in this strategic plan with all initiatives being implemented during the period.

The two initiatives that were not implemented to the extent originally envisaged were establishing five, rather than six to eight, Mission Areas and Resourcing churches and the change in relationship with the Diocese of Bristol Academies Trust resulting from the change in policy with respect to academisation.

Doing what you say you will should not be seen as “success” in its own right, whatever the institutional context. However, that the initiatives were implemented as additional to the existing and primary diocesan level activity, in a context of reduced overall central staffing, with significant leadership change at the mid-point of the implementation period, is an achievement. Major external obstacles were presented to some initiatives (securing buildings for the resourcing churches, executing sales of some surplus assets) but overcome.

Effective implementation was secured by strong accountability from the newly configured Bishop’s Council that had clear ownership of the Strategic Plan, seeing its role as establishing, evolving, enabling, empowering, ensuring and evaluating the plan. Reporting was regular, difficult decisions made and people resources were put in place where required (e.g. DDO, Giving & Resources Advisers) and difficult decisions made.

This was supported in turn by clarity of expectations, responsibility, scope and budget. This kind of management rigour developed over the period. Where there was less clarity at the outset in these areas (e.g. Making disciples in your parish, Mission Areas) initiation was slower.

Although most initiatives were fully implemented, the delay to the schedule of certain aspects has had a material impact. Most tangibly this relates to delays to property sales which led to a £2m revolving credit facility (RCF) in order to bridge the gap between the deployment of capital and the sale of these properties and the inability to reinvest gains for investment income. Slower progress in Mission Areas has meant the Diocese is not yet in a position to consider expanding the approach to other areas.

Focus, effort and resource made a difference

Effective implementation is redundant if it does not contribute to the impact it is intended to achieve. It is difficult to make any definitive statements as to the overall impact of these initiatives on outcomes. In some cases, there may be a “lag” in terms of the impact. In others, the positive impact may not be sustained or be offset by indirect impact. Neither should positive correlation be equated with causation. However, at this stage, the decision to focus in specific areas has largely correlated with positive outcomes in those areas.

In two, effectively “new” initiatives, surplus assets and Resourcing churches, the outcomes are relatively clear – if these things had not been done, we would not have seen these outcomes. By naming them as objectives, action was taken, obstacles overcome and outcomes achieved where perhaps in the past this would not have happened (e.g. properties that had been in an informal list that had been earmarked for sale or development were followed through).

However, there is also clear correlation between additional focus, effort and resource put into ordained vocations, encouraging generosity, Making disciples in your parish and Mission Areas and outcomes. In all of these except Mission Areas, there was also a national Church of England dimension that enhanced awareness and perhaps led to greater ownership at a local level. Aligning diocesan initiatives with national Church of England resources (Messy Church, Thy Kingdom Come, Parish Giving Scheme) and goals proved more effective than more bespoke, home-grown resources.

The challenge of communication and ownership

The Strategic Plan was the diocesan level response to the diocesan vision and priorities, which included elements that involved varying degrees of collaboration with and impact on other parts of the Diocese. As such, some elements (e.g. Parish Share) had a more widespread impact than others (e.g. surplus assets). However, it was not intended as the strategy for the whole diocese. The “diocesan strategy” was effectively to invite, encourage and support parishes and other communities of faith to respond by aligning their own plans and activities in their own context.

The vision and priorities were launched and promoted widely and the Strategic Plan was shared transparently and openly. However, feedback suggests that the distinction between the two was not made strongly enough to be widely understood.

This appears to have distracted attention for some from the invitation to respond to the vision and priorities. In particular, layering the Making disciples in your parish initiative on top of the vision and priorities, quite some time after they were launched, was too complicated. A simpler initiative should have been launched with the Making disciples priority at the outset.

In addition, the need to develop wide ownership for more targeted initiatives was underestimated. Mission Areas and Resourcing churches are the obvious example of this. Engagement was focused with parishes where it was anticipated there might be direct local impact. However, as this was the initiative for which most additional, external funding was secured, and given wider perceptions around Strategic Development Funding and “resource churches” in particular, senior clergy needed to communicate the aims and benefits for the wider diocese more broadly.

Ownership levels did not always match outcomes. High levels of engagement and ownership of the Parish Share challenge, principles and method were reported but ultimately outcomes fell well short. This was despite the increase in parish income from giving. This is perhaps unsurprising given the fact that Parish Share may be experienced as a cost to local mission.

Meanwhile outcomes associated with the Making disciples in your parish initiative, where wide ownership was less evident, were surprisingly positive. This and the success of the encouraging generosity work indicate that diocesan initiatives to support areas of ministry where parishes want to take action for the benefit of their local mission can bear fruit.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This report summarises the implementation, current outcomes and learning coming out of the 2016-20 Strategic Plan, the diocesan level response to the Creating connection vision and priorities. At this stage, it is only possible to report on the initial impact and it is hard to gauge some of the wider effects of these initiatives. All of the progress described here must now be seen in the light of the impact of COVID19, which we cannot yet quantify.

The activity described here also represents one level of contribution to what, together as a diocese, we hoped would result from our prayer, activity and trust in God over this period. The primary activity was in the life of local churches and communities of faith, in their worship, outreach and service. Each church is encouraged to review their plans and activities, what resulted and what they learnt.

Looking across the life of the church over this period, there are many encouraging signs. Churches reported an increase in gathering for prayer and participation in small groups for whole life discipleship; their culture of invitation and attention to developing the gifts of all God's people. As a result more people attended family focused expressions of church and courses to explore the Christian faith. And giving levels increased by 20%. These are all signs of a healthier, more resilient Church, better able to reach out to their communities.

Local churches maintained their levels of social action between 2017 and 2019. Churches in the Diocese ran 250 social action projects and were involved in 400 more.

However, the numbers of people participating in the worshipping life of the church did not match the hopes we had. Despite many examples of local growth, rather than a 10% growth, the Diocese experienced a 10% decline between 2015 and 2019. Although adult baptisms and confirmations held steady, infant and child baptisms reduced by over a third. The numerical decline did level off in terms of attendance in 2019, with a growth in worshipping community numbers. The number of under 16s bounced back to 2016 levels. The trajectory may have started to turn back more generally in 2020, but the disruption from COVID19 means that is now unlikely to be the case.

As we move into a decade affected by the ongoing COVID19 experience and a range of other social, political, technological, economic and cultural changes, how we work together to share our resources and enhance our spiritual and social impact will be critical if we are to be able to fulfil our calling to be a church for everyone – all people and places in each generation.