

QUESTION TIME

1. *The Revd Neil Robbie (General Synod) has asked:*

Given that PCCs are independent charitable bodies with a duty under law to *make sure that money is only spent on what is allowed by the charity's governing document and policies*.¹ and those governing documents include the Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure 1956, by which PCCs retain

'Power to frame an annual budget of moneys required for the maintenance of the work of the Church in the parish and otherwise and to take such steps as they think necessary for the raising, collecting and allocating of such' moneys' (7(i))

and

'Power jointly with the minister to determine the objects to which all moneys to be given or collected in church shall be allocated.' (7(iv)).

and given that the DBF can (at least theoretically) offer services to PCCs which may not be allowed by the governing documents of PCCs or thought necessary by the PCC for the work of the church in the parish or otherwise.

What steps are being taken by the DBF to re-frame the DBF budget to offer practical means by which PCCs can satisfy their charitable responsibilities as established in the 1956 measure and/or the conditions of the Charities Act (2011).

1. Managing charity finances. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/managing-charity-finances> (accessed 10.9.25)

2.. *The Revd Tim Vasby-Burnie (Shrewsbury and Wrekin) has asked:*

Governing Boards of schools are obliged to source services from various providers, in accordance with best value practices. PCCs, like school boards, also need to source various services from parachurch organisations, according to local context and needs. Given that PCCs operate in a mixed economy and are responsible for sourcing best value services to support the work of the parish, will Lichfield Diocese consider a future in which PCCs may subscribe to the equivalent of Service Level Agreements with the DBF according to best value practice?

The Diocesan Secretary has replied:

These first 2 questions ask almost the same thing so will be dealt with together.

Thank you for your interesting and challenging questions. Squaring the circle between Anglican ecclesiology, the legal framework of governance in the Church of England and charity law is a complex task. There are a couple of ways of addressing this question, a more technical response and with a more theological reflection.

Firstly, your questions raise important points about the legal duties of PCCs and their relationship with the wider diocesan family. The question correctly identifies that PCCs are independent charities and that their members, as trustees, have a duty to ensure funds are

spent in line with their governing documents. The primary governing document in this respect is the Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure 1956.

The questions' premise, however, rests on a partial reading of that Measure. While the Measure does grant a PCC powers to frame a budget for its own parochial work, it also confers a crucial function upon the PCC: "making known and putting into effect any provision made by the diocesan synod" (Section 2(2)(c)). The diocesan budget, and the Common Fund system which funds it, is precisely such a "provision made by the diocesan synod." Therefore, fulfilling this statutory function is a primary way in which a PCC satisfies its legal responsibilities.

Furthermore, the core charitable object of a PCC is "promoting in the parish the whole mission of the Church". The key phrase here is "the whole mission of the Church." While the PCC's promotional activity is focused in the parish, the mission it serves is not confined to the parish boundaries; it is the shared, interdependent mission of the entire diocese and the wider Church. The Common Fund system is the mechanism, agreed by this Synod, that enables this "whole mission" to flourish in every parish, not just the wealthy ones. Contributing to it is therefore a direct fulfilment of a PCC's charitable object. It is not legally relevant whether a PCC considers every aspect of the synodically-agreed budget to be 'necessary' for its own parish; the budget is for the common good.

The first question asks specifically what steps the DBF is taking to re-frame its budget. It is important to clarify that the DBF does not set the budget in isolation. The DBF is the "financial executive of the Diocesan Synod". It prepares a draft budget which is then scrutinised, debated, amended, and ultimately approved by this Diocesan Synod. Under the Church Representation Rules, every parish has the right to elect representatives to participate in this process via its Deanery Synod. This synodical process is the proper and lawful channel for parishes to influence the shape and priorities of the diocesan budget.

Therefore, in direct answer to the first question, the DBF is not taking steps to "re-frame" the budget in the manner suggested, because the current process and the resulting budget already provide the means for PCCs to satisfy their charitable and ecclesiastical duties. The budget is framed to support the whole mission of the Church as agreed by this Synod. The DBF encourages any parish with views on the budget to engage fully with the democratic synodical structures that are the hallmark of our life together in the Church of England.

With regard to the second question regarding 'best value', it is worth noting that a system in which parishes and schools might opt into various services already exists in some discrete areas of the work of the DBF. For example, much of the work of the Board of Education is funded by SLAs with schools, delivered by the Christian Distinctiveness Advisers. Parishes can opt in to Treasurer Support provided by our Finance Team. There may be further areas in the future where additional services might be provided and where the cost of administering the service does not outweigh the value of the service provided (the cost of administering SLA's can be significant). For the most part, however, advice and support from all areas of the diocesan team is offered free at the point of demand by people already fully occupied in providing the basic support that is needed to ensure that the diocese runs as well as we are able to achieve. There will be more work done in the coming year to ensure that this support is valued by parishes and is cost effective but the indication from our recent consultations is that, in general, parishes want more help and advice and not less.

That is the technical answer. But if I may, I ask for Synod's indulgence in reflecting theologically on this question for a moment. One of the most enriching periods of my work in the church was the time spent alongside a bishop who was born and raised in Africa. He taught me that the notion of 'the individual' which is so prevalent in the western European and American church is unusual in the wider Anglican communion. In other places, much closer to the culture from which the Gospel arose, the defining identity of 'family' or 'community' is much more normal. 'I am because we are'. We are the body of Christ, branches on a single vine, sheep in a single flock. There is no such thing as an individual Christian or even an individual church, there is one Body, one Church, one Spirit, one Saviour, one Lord. DBF staff and Trustees play their part alongside other members of the one Body, the Church, in making Christ known and seeking his Kingdom in the best way we know how for the benefit of the Church today and in the future, and in a way which honours the Church which has been.

That is what the budget today tries to do: listens to all the voices including that of the Holy Spirit, weighs the needs of the Church and the world today, and looks to the future, investing in what might be and that which we hope, in God's mercy, will be. I have no doubt that sometimes we will get it wrong because we are fallible. We also won't please all the people all the time because we are human and not always very good at living as one Body.

I hope that each PCC will see that we are trying our best to manage the money and resources which we steward on behalf of the whole Church for the benefit of the Body of Christ and for the furtherance of the Gospel.

3. Mrs Beryl Metcalf (Stafford) has asked:

Could you please explain to parishes the pros and cons of investment accounts vis a vis deposit accounts noting that some deposit accounts do not pay any interest?

The Finance Director has replied:

Whilst interest rates are higher than inflation then there is sometimes the temptation to use Deposit funds as part of an investment portfolio. Equally if funds are required in the short term, this definition varies between 3 and 5 years, then it is often a safer place to retain funds to avoid any movements in the Global Markets at the time funds are required to be withdrawn. Most deposit funds should offer interest, and if you are struggling to find a fund then the CCLA do offer an instant access deposit account at around the same as the base rate. The downside to cash investments is when inflation is higher than inflation, as the capital will lose value, as there is no capital growth. So, for investing deposit funds may have a place as part of a diverse portfolio but are not seen as a standalone long term investment option.

There are different types of investment accounts, but assume the question is looking at either Common Fund Units or a specific portfolio made up of equities and gilts. The aim and benefit of these investments is capital growth over a period of time, so the fund does not lose value against inflation. Returns are normally between 2.5% and 3.5% depending on the make-up of the investment, although property funds may exceed 5% yields.

The downside is that stock markets can be volatile and as a result the capital value can fall as well as rise.

The other element to consider is whether the fund is unrestricted or restricted, or whether it is an Endowments. With Endowments as the capital is unlikely to be able to be spent, then investments are often seen as the sensible option to generate income for the future and allow capital growth, so the fund retains a value that is reflective of today's real terms.

If there are funds to invest then please contact the Diocesan office as whilst we cannot give financial advice, we do have access to give parishes the advice that they need.

4. The Revd David Sims (Walsall) has asked:

In April 2025, the Bible society shared some exciting data- church attendance has risen by 50% over the last 6 years, One in three would go to church if invited, and one in four would accept a Bible. In May, the Evangelical Alliance did similar research showing that, since Covid, the average church saw their Sunday attendance increase by 13% and churches are seeing twice as many people making first-time commitments to following Jesus than in 2021.

God is on the move! One of our diocesan aims (linked to Feeding our Faith) is to understand that we are all responsible for evangelism and growth in the light of this, are there any plans to engage with this research from the central diocesan team, to look at what trends and patterns we might be able to learn from what the Lord is up to across the UK, and to respond?

The Whole Life Discipleship Officer has replied:

The Mission and Strengthening Communities team are indeed very excited by this particular set of data and engage extensively with the range of published research to inform their work. They have been attending webinars and conferences to keep up to date, whilst reading the latest developments - the team apply the findings as appropriate across the breadth of expression in Lichfield Diocese.

For example, in the light of Eido research published in Jan 2025 Discipleship research - CCX which emphasises the importance of the 'role of community, bible engagement and time spent with God' in growth amongst 18-35 year olds, as the new Whole Life Discipleship Officer I am focusing on small groups provision in our churches - and indeed any spaces created for meaningful interaction and mentoring. I have been developing relationships with deaneries to gather data, offering resource recommendations and sharing innovative practice.

We are here to support churches to equip all disciples to share their faith on their 'front line' in the whole of life - in whatever way is appropriate to their context.

Our Strengthening Communities Enabler is looking at how evangelism intersects with that work and team leader Simon Foster has been looking at pilgrimage as a means of mission, and the potential which new housing developments have for outreach.

When Richard Barrett attended the 2024 National statistics for mission gathering, the 2024 returns showed little concrete uplift in numbers but did hear much positive anecdotal evidence. Once we have the 2025 stats for mission, we can look at the culture in Lichfield to further inform our work.

5. The Revd David Sims (Walsall) has asked:

Our first goal in the strategic framework is growth in the overall worshipping community of 34,000 new disciples. How often will this be measured- are we monitoring annual returns in regard to child and adult baptisms, and confirmations, or is there another way we aim to measure?

The Diocesan Secretary has replied:

Thank you for your question. We are currently working on the next level of definition of the projects and workstreams which together will comprise our 'Seeking the Kingdom' strategy. The detailed projects, workstreams and outcomes will be agreed by the Bishop's Council in its role as the Programme Board for Seeking the Kingdom and then shared with Synod in the early part of next year.

Seeking the Kingdom is all about growth: growing churches - both established churches and new worshipping communities, growing disciples, growing and deepening faith, growing our confidence in the Gospel, growing our outreach and service to our communities. We will do our best to choose the best outcomes to measure as we think about all the dimensions along which we want to grow. We will have to balance the extra work of measuring outcomes with the usefulness of the information - obviously we don't want to add to the administrative burden for parishes and new worshipping communities (most of whom will grow out of parishes with the administrative burden therefore falling on the PCC) if we don't need to. But at this stage we recognise the importance of baptism and confirmation as important milestones in discipleship, and we will be thinking carefully about how and when to measure this.

6. The Revd Paul Kingman (Stone) has asked:

We have an increasing reliance on our websites and presence on social media, which requires 'up-skilling' in a vital area of communication. Can the Diocese provide funds for media training by approved providers so that clergy and lay leaders can further their local parish church ministry?

The Diocesan Secretary has replied:

Thank you for your question. Synod members will be aware that we have been undertaking diocesan-wide consultations on how we spend the additional funding which has been made available to us from the national church. The use of digital media generally has come up many times as an area in which parishes would welcome investment: website design and use, online worship resources, digital communications and information-sharing as well as the use of social media. We are proposing that there will be a specific project within the Seeking the Kingdom programme which looks at the whole of this increasingly important area to understand where we can make the best investment to help parishes and ministers. In the meantime, parishes and ministers might

like to look at the national church's 'Digital Labs' work

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/church-england-digital-labs> There are a wide range of resources, videos and webinars to be accessed here to enable all to take advantage of the Digital Revolution.

7. The Revd Preb Brian Leathers (Uttoxeter) has asked:

Please provide a table showing the number of all House for Duty and part time (and their size - 0.2; 0.5 etc) posts by archdeaconry.

The Finance Director has replied:

The following table does not include part time posts that are linked to other part time posts to advertise and search for a combined full-time post. The table also takes into consideration planned changes.

	HfD	50.00%	60.00%	70.00%
Lichfield	4.00	4.00		
Walsall	2.00	5.00		1.00
Salop	4.00	4.00	1.00	
Stoke	8.00	9.00		

8. The Revd Steve Nicholson (Oswestry) has asked:

Please may you update us on progress in improving support for clergy wellbeing? Two of our 2025 milestones under our 'Seeking the Kingdom' strategy document are:

- MDR process reviewed and revised
- work with external partners on developing the ministerial wellbeing programme underway

Are there any plans to ask or survey clergy on their wellbeing or to invite feedback on the support they receive or on MDR? Do you plan to ask clergy again for their views after implementing any changes?

The Bishop of Stafford has replied:

The wellbeing of the clergy is a vital part of our responsibility as a Diocese, and it is important that it is built into the thinking about the strategy. The timing of this question is unfortunate in that a meeting has been convened for Monday 3rd November to progress these very issues. We will be able to report back to the next Synod. However, I am glad to note the request for consultation regarding the future of Ministry Development Reviews, and this will be given full consideration when we meet on the 3rd.

9. Mr Chris Gill (General Synod) has asked:

The presentation at the Diocesan Budget Consultation stressed that "we cannot afford to keep drawing from reserves - this figure must come down soon". However, the 10-year financial forecast which accompanies the budget papers, draws on circa £15m of general reserves over this period, together with £2.4m of other reserves. Even with that approach

the forecast annual deficit continues to increase and in 2035 increases to £2.85m per annum.

If part of the increasing deficits is the reduction in the vacancy rate over the coming years and also the increase in curate numbers, then what plans are there to address the increasing deficit, and will these be impacted further if the forecast increase in Common Fund contributions does not materialise?

The Finance Director has replied:

As explained in the Budget document and at other meetings, the forecast is based on what we know at this present time, and the size of the challenge faced in the coming years. Given the time frame from General Synod approving the Finance Review in July and Council on 1st October there was only limited time to consult and listen to the views of parishes and incorporate them with the Budget. The one area we did not want to do at this stage was make rash decisions that proved to be the wrong thing to do in 12 months' time. At this stage would rather look at a realistic problem rather than a forecast that simply tried to mask the position.

The forecast does include a planned and hopeful reduction in the vacancy rate and an increase in curate numbers, but that does not mean either will happen in line with the time frame incorporated within the forecast. The forecast indicates the financial impacts and will help as we look at a Finance Plan and Capital/ (Reserve) Plan over the coming 12 months. Again, we will want to consult widely on both of these plans and will be linked to a People Plan. Naturally we want to aim to get an affordable and sustainable budget and forecast in the future, and there will be a lot of different elements that we will look at in more detail over the forthcoming year.

The Common Fund will be a crucial element as it is the largest form of income but cannot be simply inflated to make the deficit reduce or disappear, it must be realistic. Within the forecast the aim to increase receipts by 3% is deemed reasonable, although should be noted stipends increase by nearly 4% each year.

10. Mrs Josephine Locke (Newcastle) has asked:

Please can Diocesan Synod receive annual reports from all SDF/ SMMIB funded officers with reference to their Key Performance Indicators.

The Diocesan Secretary has replied:

As indicated in question 5 above, we are currently defining how and what we report to Bishop's Council and to Synod over the next few years as our Seeking the Kingdom programme is implemented. The framework for report will be defined by Bishops Council (who act as the Standing Committee of Synod and the Programme Board for Seeking the Kingdom) and then come to Synod itself. We will need to be thoughtful about the volume of information which is going to be generated and communicated over the coming years – whilst the SMMIB projects are important, they are only one small aspect of the wide-ranging aspects of the strategy we will be undertaking together. There will be much more on this topic in the New Year, and we thank Synod for its patience as we do the next level of work on the wider strategy programme. In the meantime, however, Synod may like to

note the progress of Telford Minster which is the SDF project which is furthest along in its delivery (see appendix).

11. The Revd Peter Hubbard (Shrewsbury and Wrekin) has asked:

The diocese ran a day on multi parish benefices in September this year to encourage hard pressed clergy and laity, especially in rural settings, and to envision raising up new lay leaders; and linked to that the diocesan strategy is aiming towards reimagining our approach to lay ministry: how in practical terms is Lichfield diocese going to encourage a new vocation strategy for both lay and ordained vocations and who is going to monitor that growth and development?

The Whole Life Discipleship Officer has replied:

The Revd Canon Nick Smeeton will respond verbally to this question at Synod as he is on leave during the week leading up to Synod. However, in the meantime, the following observations may be of interest:

- Implementation of the new learning platform will increase accessibility and visibility to everyone in our diocese – enabling engagement in discernment and training to be closely monitored by the Ministry and Mission Team.
- The Chad Foundation course for those wishing to deepen their discipleship journey and which acts as a precursor to Lay Reader training currently has the largest cohort so far (40) and has been recently revamped and restructured.
- A Pilot scheme in partnership with St Peter's Saltley Trust will be run in 2026 to develop a 'discipleship enablers' community of practice. This will equip laity who have a particular passion for walking alongside others in their discipleship journey. This will be developed by our Whole Life Discipleship Officer.

12. Mrs Amanda Robbie (General Synod) has asked:

The Minutes of the Diocesan Synod of 12th November 2022, Item 6, on the proposed Deanery Synod Formula has an agreed amendment to the motion that 'The need for a review of representation, in the light of both Shaping for Mission and the issues raised by Lilas Rawling, has been noted. We will carry out detailed work in the next triennium to be as helpful as possible to parishes and to the wider scheme of representation.' This has not happened, and we once again have a Deanery Synod Formula that has not been looked at for a very long time, despite a changing situation in parishes and deanery. Please can we have a paper outlining the system by which decisions made by Synod are monitored and carried out, presented at the next meeting of Synod in March. Can Synod be kept updated on the progress of all work that has been agreed at previous synod in a paper given to each meeting of Bishops Council and Synod?

The Diocesan Secretary has replied:

Thank you for this question. The task of monitoring and reviewing the work of Synod belongs to the Agenda Planning Committee on behalf of Synod. The Committee will review their processes in this area and will report to the next Synod.