



The Church of England
Diocese of Ely



STRENGTHENING MULTI-PARISH BENEFICES PROJECT

Project Leader Recruitment Pack

ABSTRACT

The Diocese of Ely is investing £¾ m in a programme to make our multi parish benefices great places for disciples to grow and clergy to lead. Will you take this project forward with us?

Richard Harlow

Archdeacon of Huntingdon & Wisbech

Recruitment Pack for Project Leader – Strengthening Multi Parish Benefices

We seek a Project Leader who will be responsible for one outcome: making multi parish benefices in the diocese of Ely welcoming spaces for residents to grow and serve as followers of Jesus, and happy places to lead and work for their clergy.

In October 2025, Ely Diocesan Synod approved up to £750,000 budget over 5 years for a project to enable multi parish benefices in the diocese to become units fit for mission and ministry amongst the populations that they serve. This project aligns with 3 of the 6 bold outcomes envisaged by the Church of England's Strategic Priorities:

- *A Church of England which **fully represents the communities we serve** in age and diversity.*

A pathway for everyone into an accessible and contextual expression of church through:

- ***A parish system revitalised for mission** so churches can reach and serve everyone in their community.*
- *Creating **ten thousand new Christian communities** across the four areas of home, work/education, social and digital.*

We are seeking a project leader to deliver a change programme that will take multi parish benefices further on their journey into a Christ-like church. Specifically, by:

1. Working with Archdeacons to mentor and support clergy who lead multi parish benefices, as they juggle the weight of demands alongside leading their benefices into greater fruitfulness.
2. Working with incumbents and Archdeaconry Mission & Pastoral Committees to simplify and improve governance, leadership and clarity of vision, so that PCCs and Joint Councils are competent to oversee and support growth.
3. Overseeing and directing a Parish Support Officer (half time) who will provide EA support to this project and day to day line management for parish administrators.
4. Directing the work programme of up to 12 part time administrators, who will help implement change in the benefices selected for the programme.
5. Working with the Director of Mission & Ministry to develop a pipeline that prepares clergy to lead multi parish benefices in the future, preparing them for the challenges and envisioning them with the opportunities.

You will have considerable freedom to play with models and processes in consultation with local stakeholders to achieve the outcome of making our MPBs great places for clergy and lay people.

You will give 16 hours (2 days) per week to this role and be recompensed either £20k pa or by a pro-rata credit to the benefice that releases you to undertake this work. You will

receive full expenses. The post will last for 5 years. If you are a priest with common tenure, this post will not affect or remove your common tenure terms.

The post holder will need to demonstrate significant experience successfully leading change, and deep understanding of the role of incumbent clergy in multi parish benefices. Previous experience leading a multi parish benefice would be a significant advantage. You will need to be a car driver, owing to the rural nature of many benefices. You will demonstrate and teach best safeguarding practice and will be required to complete the Church of England confidential disclosure form.

You will be accountable to the Ven Richard Harlow, Archdeacon of Huntingdon & Wisbech, and work collegially with both Archdeacons in the Diocese of Ely, as well as colleagues in the Mission & Ministry Department and Church Buildings Team.

Key Outcomes:

1. Reach – 12 benefices will be committed to participate in this programme by end of year 2; lessons learned will be available to the rest of the diocese.
2. Growing congregations – 8/12 of MPBs in the programme will be reaching new people and be growing numerically by year 4.
3. Clergy wellbeing – clergy in participating MPBs will report wellbeing consistent with or better than other clergy posts in the diocese.
4. Sustainability – 10/12 MPBs in the project will contribute in Ministry Share what is agreed by Diocesan Synod by year 4.
5. Sustainability – 10/12 of participating MPBs have adopted legal/administrative arrangements that they can sustain with available finance and volunteer resource by 2031; 12/12 participating MPBs will be registered with the Charity Commission by Dec 2031.

Everything that follows is open to negotiation provided the outcomes are achieved.

Background:

Two thirds of parishes in the Diocese of Ely belong to multi-parish benefices (MPBs), with over a third of parishes in MPBs over 6 parishes in size. Whilst individual churches in MPBs are growing (some have grown by 100% in a few years), in general MPBs are where we see the most challenges. Some of these challenges are missional and spiritual (e.g. growing younger). Others relate to clergy recruitment. Some challenges are organisational:

1. Lay officers – recruitment of wardens, PSOs, treasurers and PCC members is difficult. At least one MPB has just 2 churchwardens across 4 PCCs.
2. Complexity of governance – with up to 12 PCCs the challenge of leadership is enormous. Many MPBs do not have an effective Benefice Council or Joint Council, so clergy find themselves in many meetings that can be pulling in different directions without any effective means of unifying vision and direction.

3. Financial weakness – MPBs may have a worshipping community that is over 100, but they have responsibility for multiple church buildings, often medieval in origin. 137 churches in the diocese have a usual Sunday attendance below 12 people. Each building absorbs finance and effort that can completely overwhelm the energy for mission or ability to pay Ministry Share.
4. Buildings at risk – most buildings on the Heritage at Risk Register (HARR) are situated in MPBs. Lack of high-level maintenance, lack of finances, over-stretched PCCs combine over decades to make buildings cold, damp and often without even a toilet. Such buildings are not easy to make welcoming either for worship or community events.
5. Safeguarding administration – small PCCs struggle to find a PSO, and thus their assurance of meeting safeguarding standards is less secure.
6. Charity Governance – the growing awareness that PCCs need to have a raft of policies and procedures to remain safe and legal is overwhelming to small PCCs. The requirement for all PCCs to register with the Charity Commission looms.
7. Income maximisation – with the end of the era of the village fete, and the loss of some older givers, small parishes can easily move from viability to debt. A church cannot operate without about £10k simply to keep the doors open.

These challenges impact:

1. Recruitment & retention of clergy – long vacancies are not uncommon in MPBs. Curates seeking posts of first responsibility seem to avoid these posts, because they are perceived as too burdened by administration or too complex in which to thrive. Many clergy have not been trained well for the style of ministry required.
2. Lost opportunities with children and young people – many schools (including Church Schools) are in MPBs and many village churches run toddler groups, but developing a pipeline of ministry that sustains children across the age range is harder the more thinly spread resources are.
3. Did we want to add in a reluctance/confidence to change? I think lack of confidence is really a key feature in all of the challenges
4. Reluctance to work collaboratively

The Long View

Some of these issues reflect the challenges of the rural & market town economy, as wealth, power & youth have moved to the cities. Others arise because parishes sometimes prioritise the immediately local over the wider good of the benefice or the common good/Kingdom of God.

Parishes came into existence in the first place¹ in recognition of the autonomy of a place – perhaps because of geographic separation, or because of land-holdings or the interests of guilds – and for many centuries were England's basic unit of local patriotism and civic government. It is natural that villages look to their church as a symbol of identity, and that parishioners value their autonomy and local decision-making.

¹ This is a fascinating subject in its own right. For further reading, we recommend N. J. G. Pounds, *A History of the English Parish: The Culture of Religion from Augustine to Victoria* (CUP, Cambridge, 2008).

However, parish independence has been in retreat for many years. Aside from the extensive changes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which tended to affect cities and industrial areas, the twentieth century saw major challenges to local autonomy in the countryside. The local asset base of benefice glebe was pooled in the 1970s (a response to local mismanagement, as well as inequitable distribution). Then declining congregations and a weak giving-base² meant places could not afford their own priest, and so we entered this century with the principle of sharing clergy well-established (even if the concomitant cultural shift towards lay leadership has been slow to develop).

The current position is that villages are used to sharing clergy but otherwise many expect to run themselves as independent charities. However, we now face a further challenge in that many struggle to deliver competently what our society expects from small charities, or even to recruit the core officers that are required for basic functioning.

The medium-term future seems, inevitably, to involve greater collaboration. We need a framework in which local churches can preserve what they care about most (usually: worship, the building and local relationships), while legal and administrative burdens are carried out by much larger entities. These larger entities probably need to grow until their financial base is large enough to pay people to do many tasks that used to be done by volunteers.

Strengthening MPBs Project: Ely Diocese wishes to take action on 4 fronts:

1. **Governance simplification** – you will encourage and support PCCs and Benefices as they navigate towards structures that enable clergy and lay time to be used to best effect in the mission of the church. The answer is not to multiply levels of leadership, but to ensure that leadership is exercised at the appropriate level (the principle of subsidiarity).

Revision of the Church Representation rules in the last decade has created a range of structures by which greater collaboration can be achieved. However, take-up is extremely slow. A core part of diocesan strategy will need to be emphasising how local churches do not need to hang onto legal independence if they are to preserve what they really care about – while, conversely, the excessive burdens involved in the current model of parochial independence seem to be killing many small churches.

We have, so far, two main structural solutions: either one parish from several parishes or to create a full or partial Joint Council -

- Single parish model: one PCC for several churches, requires a Pastoral Scheme although each church has its own churchwardens, worship pattern and village links, the governance arrangement means: more focussed meetings – instead of a PCC overseeing everything in each place separately, sub-committees exist for mission,

² Itself related to the decline and buy-out of the tithe system, which gutted the financial system that actually built most of our mediaeval churches. We have gone from 100% of the population giving 10% of income, to 2% of people giving 2% of income.

buildings, children's ministry etc.; strongly co-ordinated communications, vision, rotas overseen by one PCC; Joint initiatives can draw on expertise from all 3 congregations; increasingly church members move between congregations growing a shared identity; financial efficiencies.

- Partial Joint Council model: several PCCs across one or more MPBs create a Joint Council, to which they delegate mission and ministry amongst children and young people. This is achieved by 2/3rds majority votes in all APCMs (not all PCCs agreed to join). This model has worked to simplify decision making, allowing for joint employment of a full-time worker, and simplified safeguarding arrangements in the local PCCs. Technically the Joint Council is an extra charity, so the risk is making more meetings, but by delegating upwards key areas of mission and ministry the PCC role becomes simpler and allows lay chairs to focus on the local priorities: worship, buildings and pastoral care.
- Full Joint Council model: several PCCs may delegate all their powers and responsibilities to a single Joint Council, with PCCs becoming effectively sub-committees of the Joint Council. This model may come into its own as the 2031 deadline for PCCs to register with the Charity Commission looms. It has the advantage of the single parish model, but the process is simpler.

Although these schemes require a lot of consultation and persuasion before they can be made, good consultation alone begins to cement relationships and clarify vision. They build a coalition of the willing, which can then become an engine for initiatives. They require skilled leadership, and relational agility, but they have the capacity to navigate round small groups of resistance to change or late adopters. They therefore release hope, capacity and energy and draw in new volunteers, but only if the process is handled well, so that trust grows rather than diminishes. Some central expertise is therefore vital, because most clergy and PCCs will only do this once in their life, so they require advice and support throughout. You will also be aware of PCCs that are too frail to adequately carry out the role that is required of them. You will navigate these PCCs towards a sustainable future.

2. **Sharing building management and maintenance:** you will work with the Church Buildings Team to enable more people to play a role in maintaining & supporting their local church.

Communities do not want their churches to close, but that doesn't mean that the burden of maintaining them should be borne by the worshipping community alone. The Diocesan Church Buildings Team has already developed expertise in building "project teams" and "Friends Groups" who have the capacity, energy and resources to deliver planned maintenance and/or major restoration projects alongside PCCs. The model requires a significant investment of time and energy in the inception but once started it can run with minimal additional effort.

- **Friends Groups:** the aim would be for a Friends Group to constitute itself for continuity with many of the members drawn from the local community or well-wishers. Their focus is on caring for the building and churchyard. They do not need to satisfy the requirements for PCC membership, and often bring resources of time, talent and finance. The incumbent does not need to chair the Friends Group, but attention to governance at the outset can avoid problems later. Models available at Rampton, Outwell, etc.
- **Project Teams:** gather to deliver a specific major project that would otherwise overwhelm a small PCC. The objective might be repairs or adapting the building for wider use. Models available at Weeting, etc.

Although we have growing evidence that these groups run well and significantly improve local relationships and the burden on small PCCs, yet occasionally they produce their own problems (usually around lack of care in their establishment). Their uptake can also be held back by lack of local capacity to do the initial exploratory work. Samuel Pedlar (Church & Community Support Officer) is limited in how much he can drive this work without both capacity in the local PCC and active support from the incumbent. You will ensure that he has both, so that his time is well spent.

3. **Streamlining administration:** you will oversee a team of centrally supported administrative assistants who will be based in selected MPBs to ensure that clergy are supported and a consistent vision of change is communicated.

We know that churches grow by keeping the main thing (Jesus) the main thing! Yet so often clergy end up as administrators, rather than leaders of vision and change. Communications are central, so these administrators will first and foremost build effective communications and marketing systems, ensuring that they comply with GDPR. They will also set clergy and lay leaders free to spread the Gospel and grow our churches.

You will ensure that a Parish Support Officer understands the needs of MPBs and what best practice in administration looks like. One of the tasks of administrators will be to ensure that PCCs in MPBs are fit for purpose. Similar to the role of a parish clerk in a Parish Council, they will understand the role of trustees in a charity, church building legislation and enough Canon Law to be able to manage risk whilst enabling change.

4. **Equipping leaders:** you will work (alongside archdeacons and the Mission & Ministry team) with ordained and lay leaders to develop high functioning teams of leaders who love their role and love their community, and for whom safer working practices are second nature.

The economics of stipendiary posts mean that each fte in the diocese needs to be supported by £60-70k just to cover stipend, housing, pension and a few on-costs. In some parts of the diocese this means that it requires 10-12 parishes to form a benefice that can sustain such a post, even without the costs of admin assistance. At the same time, the Lord has called many people into Christian discipleship and given the gift of

the Holy Spirit to enable their ministry. Some of those ministries are recognised and equipped by the church (e.g., retired clergy with PTO, SSOMs, LLMs and ALMs). MPBs therefore provide perfect opportunities to develop a variety of ministries.

Developing the ALL/Focal Minister model in each place will be down to the incumbent in the benefice, but there will be an assumption that centralising is not the route to saving our churches. Each village or community needs a centre of worship, of study and pastoral care (perhaps in a house or community hall, if no church is suitable). Leaders will need calling, training and supporting. The role is not to sustain the building, but to hold Jesus at the centre of every community.

Authorised Local Leaders can help to sustain the local church; they can be the visible face of the church (alongside churchwardens, who have a different role); they provide resilience, local knowledge and relationship. They become essential during a vacancy. They may, indeed, be the future of the church in many parishes.

You will engage with archdeacons and Mission & Ministry department to explore how local leadership can be called, developed and sustained. The support of incumbents as they engage with this sharing of ministry will be key to flourishing of clergy and lay leaders. Some clergy may need support in navigating the transition from parish priest to team leader and enabler. Current patterns of formation have often not prepared clergy well for this style of leadership.

The Project

We have effective approaches already in our toolkit – but take-up is slow and patchy, and we have not committed to (and resourced) accelerating progress. A lot of work is needed to explain the models, work with early adopters, negotiate with the wary and manage round those who resist change at all costs. Essential to delivering benefit and not harm from these plans is that processes are handled safely and openly. We cannot afford to diminish trust in the process of saving time or resources.

This programme invests in a network of staff, some of whom are locally deployed but networked (and maybe employed) diocese-wide, with a view to driving and integrating progress.

The key levers of the process:

- a) Project Leader – your role.
- b) Parish Support Officer - EDBF employee - This person will sit in the archdeacons' team, with links to the Church Buildings/Pastoral Department. Their role will be to see projects through and help realise the mission gains from this process. They will work with the pastoral secretary and archdeacons to design processes that fit each benefice that chooses to work with you. They will train and supervise a bank of administrative assistants. They will especially support MPBs in vacancy alongside

archdeacons and rural deans. Initially this post will be for 5 years. They will be half time in the role of archdeacons' EA (line managing Archdeacons' pa) and half time for this project.

- c) Administrative assistants - clergy tell us that “administration” is burdensome and keeps them from doing the parts of the role that they enjoy and were trained to provide. Admin assistants will provide key functions that release clergy to lead the change that they want to see. Their role is not to disempower volunteers, or remove clergy from the frontline of pastoral work, but to embed more effective and efficient ways of working. They will be trained centrally in key skills and processes. The key tasks of admin assistants will be:
- Developing benefice communications, both between churches, and with their communities. This not only grows congregations but also helps build trust and can support the development of Friends Groups and Project Teams.
 - Developing and maintaining databases that are secure and useful.
 - Helping to develop streamlined processes for life events and rota planning.
 - Supporting PCC officers with governance and policy development.
 - Developing and supporting the PCC's strategy for growing income.
- MPBs that wish to work with an administrative assistant will need to join the programme, which will mean agreeing a 5 year plan with you. Admin assistants are not here to support business as usual, but sustained focus on healthier benefices. Participating MPBs will be expected to engage with mission, as well as working on simplified governance, Friends/Project groups and growing income. They will be safe places for volunteers, staff and church attendees.
- d) Incumbent support: some incumbents will immediately know how to get the best from this programme; most will need some mentoring through the process of change. This support will be provided by the Project Leader.

How to apply: (by 12 noon, Monday 8 Dec 2025)

1. Complete the application form
2. Send a video (no more than 10 minutes) answering this question: **how I would make multi parish benefices in the diocese of Ely welcoming spaces for residents to grow and serve as followers of Jesus, and happy places to lead and work for their clergy.**

Enquiries to Richard Harlow, archdeacon.handw@elydiocese.org or 07415757527