



RESPONSIBILITIES DURING A VACANCY

Instructions from the Bishop of Peterborough
to Rural Deans and Churchwardens

May 2026

This manual sets out instructions and guidance to Rural Deans and Churchwardens to help them discharge their duties during a vacancy.

These are important responsibilities and you are assured of my support and encouragement, and also of my appreciation for the hard work which will be involved. The Archdeacons and Diocesan Office Staff will also be pleased to assist you in whatever ways they are able.

+Debbie
Bishop of Peterborough

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Administration of a Vacant Benefice

When a benefice is vacant the responsibilities normally borne by the Incumbent or the priest in charge are given to a number of people - principally the Rural Dean and the Churchwardens of the parishes that make up the benefice. This manual sets out these responsibilities.

Sequestration

On a vacancy being declared church law provides that “the churchwardens of every parish comprised in the benefice and the Rural Dean (and such other person as the Bishop may appoint, if they feel it desirable to do so) shall be the sequestrators of the benefice”. The parish is then in sequestration and under the care of the sequestrators.

The first formal act is for the Rural Dean to ask the churchwardens to inspect the terrier and inventory of the parish church(es). The Rural Dean will then sign the terrier and inventory once inspected. The property office will inspect the parsonage house. Other church property will be inspected by the churchwardens.

It is the responsibility of the sequestrators “subject to and in accordance with the directions of the Bishop, to make provision for the performance of the ecclesiastical duties of the benefice”.

In conjunction with the Houses Committee, they are also responsible for the proper care of the house (see appendix 1).

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ACTION TO BE TAKEN BY THE SEQUESTRATORS

1. Provision of Sunday services

The Churchwardens and Rural Dean should liaise as early as possible after a vacancy is declared about the provision of services during the vacancy, in order to make the necessary arrangements. The Rural Dean is responsible on behalf of the Bishops for agreeing the appropriate pattern of services in each parish and advising the Churchwardens about the availability of retired clergy and others with permission to officiate (PTO) in the deanery.

Wherever possible, clergy who are licensed, or have PTO in the Diocese, and who live within the deanery (or its immediate neighbours), should be used in order to avoid heavy expenditure on travel. Furthermore, the Bishops, Bishop's Chaplain, Archdeacons and members of the Cathedral Chapter are always pleased to respond to invitations to officiate if they are able to do so.

No additional services beyond the usual custom of the parish should be introduced during the vacancy without the support of the Rural Dean and the agreement of the Bishop (see appendix 2). In some cases the number of services may have to be reduced depending on the availability of clergy.

The Diocesan Office will only reimburse the cost of visiting clergy for those services authorised by the Rural Dean. Please follow the instructions set out in appendix 3 in order to obtain payment.

2. Baptisms, weddings and funerals

All requests for occasional offices should be referred to the Rural Dean or to the person to whom they have delegated the coordination of such arrangements, unless the Bishop has appointed a priest-in-charge of the benefice during the vacancy. No service in church should be arranged without the agreement of the Churchwardens.

The incumbent's fee for weddings and funerals should normally be passed to the Diocese, unless the service is taken by a retired priest with PTO in which case 80% of this fee may be retained by the officiating minister.

If banns of marriage are published by a reader, churchwarden or other lay person, that person should sign the banns' book, but the certificate of banns must be signed by a Clerk in Holy Orders. The incumbent's fee should be sent by the PCC Treasurer to the diocese and the balance retained by the PCC.

3. Monuments in churchyards

During a vacancy (unless a priest-in-charge has been appointed) the Rural Dean is responsible for considering all applications for churchyard memorials and for authorising those which fall within the limits of the Chancellor's Churchyard Regulations.

The incumbent's element of the fee should be passed to the Diocese and the balance retained by the PCC.

4. Clergy House

Please read carefully and follow in detail the instructions concerning vacant houses, which are set out in appendix 1.

5. PCC and Parochial Meetings

The Church Representation Rules make provision for the election of a lay member of the Council as its Vice-Chair and stipulate that “during a vacancy ... the Vice Chair shall act as Chair and have all the powers vested in the Chair unless the rights of presentation are suspended and a minister has been appointed by the Bishop as priest in charge”. Similarly the Vice Chair of the PCC chairs the annual meeting of parishioners and the Annual Parochial Meeting.

While Rural Deans are not automatically members of PCCs of vacant parishes, it is certainly helpful in view of their roles as sequestrators, if they are able, where it is appropriate and needful, to attend meetings of Councils (and the Annual Parochial Meetings) to advise on matters relating to the cure of souls in the parish. They have the Bishop's authorisation to receive copies of the minutes, PCC secretaries should ensure this happens during the vacancy.

6. When an appointment is made

Details of the appointment procedures are contained in the companion guide *Appointment of a Parish Priest*.

Churchwardens and Rural Deans will receive notification from the Archdeacon when an appointment is made. The Rural Dean has the responsibility for overseeing the arrangements for the service of institution, collation or licensing and will seek the assistance and co-operation of the Churchwardens in the benefice as together they make the arrangements to welcome the new priest. Appendix 4 sets out the Bishop's instructions to Rural Deans for the proper conduct of such occasions.

When an incumbent is instituted the sequestrators' duties are complete.

VACANT CLERGY HOUSES

Sequestrators' help is requested in taking care of the clergy housing while it is vacant, particularly in any period when the house is not occupied. It is diocesan policy to keep vacancies as short as possible and to only let houses if they are not immediately required and, otherwise, to prepare houses as swiftly as possible for occupation by a new incumbent.

The houses are managed by the Property Officer and Assistant Property Officer.

The Diocesan Property Officer, based at the Diocesan Office in Peterborough, will advise Churchwardens of any works which are to be carried out to a property whilst it is vacant, and will liaise directly with contractors, providing them with access.

Please contact the Diocesan Property Officer if any problems arise
(Janine.weaver@peterborough-diocese.org.uk)

The following is a checklist for easy reference:

Council Tax	Please forward any correspondence to The Property Officer, Diocesan Office at The Palace, Peterborough PE1 1YB.
Electricity	This should be turned off at the main switch board if it does not need to be connected to operate a burglar alarm. The Diocese will continue to pay standing charges. Any correspondence should be forwarded to The Property Officer.
Garden	If the parish is able to maintain the garden this is much appreciated. If not, The Property Office will arrange to maintain the garden during the vacancy using contract gardeners.
Gas	This should be turned off at the main inlet. The Diocese will continue to pay standing charges. Any correspondence should be forwarded to The Property Officer.
Inspections	Unless it is occupied please ensure the house is checked internally at least once every week and that any correspondence is dealt with [see "Post/Telephone"]. A log of visits should be kept for insurance purposes.
Insurance	The Diocesan policy ceases to cover for vandalism, theft and water damage (through burst pipes) 30 days after the property becomes vacant. Please ensure, therefore, that no one turns the water back on once the system has been drained down [see "Water"].
Keys/Security	Notify the Property Officer that the house is empty and who holds keys. One set of keys together with the burglar alarm code should be sent to the Property Officer by the outgoing priest, to allow access. If this has not been done, please provide a set on request. Another set should have been given to one of the Churchwardens, acting on behalf of the sequestrators (or of the Diocese, in the case of non-clergy houses). Check all window and door locks. If there is an external opening to the cellar which cannot be secured, the internal cellar door must be locked.

Post/Telephone	Please forward any mail, not personal to the previous occupant, to the appropriate person and dispose promptly of all “junk” mail and free newspapers. The telephone should remain connected to ensure the number is retained and any invoices should be forwarded to The Property Officer for payment.
Repairs	The Diocesan Houses Committee has the responsibility to maintain clergy houses (excluding any owned by PCCs). Therefore, please notify the Property Officer immediately if the house is in need of repair through storm damage, vandalism etc. Please do not instruct a contractor to carry out any work as the Diocese cannot pay for work carried out without authorisation. Minor repairs/maintenance will be noted in the inspection report when the house is vacated. Contact number for repairs are as follows: Diocesan Property Officer 01733 887024/887023 In the case of an emergency outside office hours contact Blounts for plumbing, British Gas, water company and Police (for burglary). Separate and more detailed guidelines are issued to Incumbents when properties are occupied, dealing with repair and maintenance issues.
Trees	Please ensure that no trees are felled, lopped or topped without the consent of the Property Officer. This is both for your protection and because large fines are imposed for unauthorised work to trees which are subject to preservation orders or in conservation areas.

Water	If the house is to remain empty, the Property Officer may arrange for a contractor to drain down the system. Please ensure that no-one subsequently turns the water back on as the insurance policy will not cover frozen/burst pipes. The Property Officer will arrange for the system to be checked and refilled when the house is re-occupied. Please forward any correspondence from the water company to The Property Officer.
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SERVICES DURING A VACANCY

The Rural Dean will be prepared to authorise the normal Sunday Services, together with any weekday services on special holy days, which are customarily observed in the benefice. These will normally include.

The Epiphany

Ash Wednesday

Maundy Thursday

Good Friday

Ascension Day

All Saints' Day

Patronal or Dedication Festival, or Feast of Title (if not observed on the nearest Sunday)

The Rural Dean is also able to authorise for reimbursement the cost of such mid-week services as are important to the maintenance of the life of the benefice during a vacancy. This would not normally exceed one weekly mid-week service per parish in multi-parish benefices or two per week in large single parish benefices.

Other special services (e.g. Mothering Sunday, Harvest Thanksgiving, Remembrance Day, Christingle) should be included in the normal Sunday rota.

In the case of non-eucharistic services, the parishes are encouraged to make use of their lay ministers, churchwardens and others to take services, whenever appropriate.

PAYMENT FOR CHURCH SERVICES DURING A VACANCY

Visiting clergy should be paid any fees or expenses due to them by your PCC Treasurer. This payment is best made monthly. However, if the payment is made in cash after the service a receipt should be obtained and care should be taken that the transaction does not result in the netting down of the collection total in the service register.

The services for which reimbursement of payment will be made to the PCC are only those authorised by the Rural Dean on behalf of the Bishop at the start of the vacancy. Payment will only be made on the following basis:

1. Retired and other clergy with Permission to Officiate

A fee for each service plus a car mileage allowance as detailed on the claim form.

2. All other clergy - stipendiary and non-stipendiary and clergy licensed under seal

Clergy who are licensed receive a car mileage allowance only at the rate shown on the claim form.

3. Readers

Readers are not entitled to receive fees for taking services. However, they should be offered travelling expenses at the rate of 45 pence per mile.

Parishes should pay this directly and claim back from the DBF using the vacancy claim form. This is available from the Diocesan Office Finance Department:

lisa.allan@peterborough-diocese.org.uk

INSTITUTIONS, COLLATIONS, LICENSINGS AND INDUCTIONS

Notes for the Rural Dean and Lay Chair

1. These are Diocesan Services led by the Bishop and Archdeacon. Rural Deans have the responsibility for making the preparation for these services in the parishes of their deaneries. Care should be taken over them – they mark the beginning of a priest's ministry and an important new chapter in the life of the benefice. The service should be both a solemn and joyful occasion, mindful that there will be both visitors and members of the wider community present.
2. The Archdeacon will arrange the date and time of the service, in consultation with the Bishop, the Rural Dean, the Patrons, the benefice and the candidate, and the Bishop's Chaplain will then be in touch with the Rural Dean with regard to the order of service. The choice of which church in a multi-parish benefice hosts the service needs to take account of parish "turns", as well as practical issues such as access in darkness, toilets, kitchen and parking.
3. Rural Deans should then arrange to contact the priest, to welcome them on behalf of the chapter and deanery, to advise them of the dates for future meetings for both these bodies, and to have a preliminary discussion about the service itself. The new priest is invited to choose suitable readings and hymns/songs.
4. Rural Deans should meet with the Churchwardens involved to arrange the following matters:

Invitations

The Churchwardens should invite the following:

- Deanery Lay Chair
- Headteachers of schools within the benefice
- Local civic leaders and other representatives of the community
- A list of personal guests which they should ask the priest to provide
- Deanery clergy (inc. SSMs and curates)
- Deanery Readers and lay ministers
- Other ministers (lay and ordained) who have officiated during the vacancy
- Local ministers of other denominations
- A representative of the Cathedral Chapter (for clergy new to the Diocese)

All of the above, where appropriate, should be invited to robe for the service

Parking

Parking spaces for the Bishop, Archdeacon, Patrons and Rural Dean should be reserved and they should be informed where their parking spaces will be.

Order of Service

The Diocesan Final Order of Service will be provided electronically by the Bishop's Chaplain and copies should be printed by the parish for use at the rehearsal and on the day.

Service preliminaries

The Rural Dean should specifically oversee the following matters:-

Rehearsal

This should take place a few days before the service under the supervision of the Rural Dean. It is important that all taking part understand fully their particular role including any movement within the service as well as what to do and say. Please ensure that any person taking part in the act of formal welcome feels at ease and understands exactly what to do, especially if they have not been present at the rehearsal.

Advice to the Bishop

The Rural Dean should inform the officiating Bishop of the names of those whose ministry has supported the parishes during the vacancy and also of any community representatives who may be attending the service about whom they should be particularly aware.

Seating

This must be carefully planned especially when space is limited. Seats must be set aside for the Patron or their representative, as well as all other guests to whom specific invitations have been sent.

Robing

The Bishop, Archdeacon, Bishop's Chaplain, Rural Dean and the new priest robe in the clergy vestry or other suitable place. A separate robing area for choirs, visiting clergy and other ministers should be provided; local conditions will dictate the actual arrangements. A person should be appointed by the Rural Dean to say a prayer with the visiting clergy and other ministers, before they process in. Visiting clergy should wear choir dress.

After the service

Please ensure that the PCC treasurer contacts the Diocesan Office Finance Department for arrangements.

The Bishops are grateful to Rural Deans for their help in organising these services.