Appendix 5: The Diocesan Context

This appendix provides supporting context to inform parish discernment. It is intended as a reference resource offering deeper background, governance clarity, and key data to support realistic and prayerful planning.

Governance and Structure

Founded in 1850 and renamed in 1861, the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle is both:

- a canonical entity — a Roman Catholic Diocese accountable to the Holy See
- a civil entity — a registered charity and company limited by guarantee, accountable to the Charity Commission and Companies House

In collaboration with the Diocesan Bishop, the Board sets the strategic direction of the Diocese, ensuring the faithful stewardship of resources and the care, oversight, and development of clergy and staff.

The Board is also responsible for ensuring that the Diocese fulfils its charitable objects, including:

- the advancement of the Roman Catholic religion
- the support of education in accordance with Catholic teaching
- the provision of charitable services for the benefit of the public

Geographic and Demographic Profile

The Diocese is one of the largest in England and Wales, covering approximately 3,195 square miles from the Scottish border to the River Tees.

Diocesan snapshot:

- Population: ~2.37 million
- Catholics: ~214,000
- Parishes: 128
- No. churches: 170
- Deanery Areas: 5
- Partnerships: 17

Many parts of the Diocese experience significant social and economic challenge. Some areas have particularly high levels of deprivation, below-average earnings, rising debt, child poverty, and poor physical and mental health outcomes. These realities shape the pastoral context in which the Church carries out her Mission.

Catholic Education

The Diocese serves 52,274 pupils across 156 diocesan schools, supported by 3,236 teachers, approximately half of whom are Catholic.

In some communities, the Catholic school may be the Church's most visible and consistent presence.

Sacramental Participation and Parish Life

Long-term trends indicate substantial decline across key indicators of participation:

- Average Mass attendance has fallen 77% from 87,310 in 1985 to 20,196 in 2024.
- Average attendance per church has fallen 67% in the same period.
- Baptisms have fallen 52%.
- Confirmations have fallen 80%.
- Marriages have fallen 93%.
- Receptions have fallen 49%.

While participation continues to recover following the pandemic, it has not returned to previous levels and aligns with a continued downward projection overall.

Clergy Diocesan Profile

Current picture:

- No. H&N active diocesan priests: 61
- No. of active overseas and/ visiting religious priests:33
- No. H&N retired priests: 47
- No. active permanent deacons: 36
- No. retired deacons: 7
- No. of Diocesan priests aged 40 or under: 6
- No. of seminarians: 3

The number of active diocesan priests has fallen significantly over time and is projected to decline further.

Projected picture for 2035

Active diocesan priests: 42 (down from 65). With fewer priests available for ministry and increasing demands on their time, there is a growing concern for the health and wellbeing of clergy.

These trends highlight the importance of sustainable models of ministry and shared responsibility across the People of God.

Property

The Diocese holds significant property assets developed during periods of greater participation and clergy availability. Bishop Stephen's Pastoral Letter (Advent 2025) reminded us clearly that buildings and structures must serve the Mission — not the other way round.

While many people rightly feel deep attachment to the buildings they and previous generations have supported, attempting to maintain the full number of diocesan properties can become a distraction from the Church's primary purpose. In such circumstances, property risks becoming a liability rather than a support to the building of the Kingdom of God. Future generations will not thank us for inaction. Increasing legislative and compliance requirements — including health and safety — further intensify the pressure on clergy, volunteers, and diocesan teams.

Financial Overview

From a statutory and financial perspective, the Diocese operates as one charity — one diocesan family — with interconnected finances, where pressures affecting one part ultimately affect the whole.

Key trends include:

- Steady decline in parish income
- Rising central costs
- Stable parish expenditure
- Increasing reliance on reserves as costs rise and income falls

Growth in central expenditure reflects several necessary developments, including:

- The biggest impact is the increased support for clergy particularly in their retirement
- Expanded safeguarding and governance
- New legislative and regulatory requirements that have been placed on all large charities
- Investment in departments such as IT, Communications, Health & Safety, and Data Protection reflecting a need to keep the Diocese safe and compliant with legislation and evolving risk e.g cyberattacks.
- Newly introduced bank charges for parishes — currently around £100k per annum — are also being met centrally.

The Diocesan Family has one set of finances shared between Parishes and the Central Budget and one affects the other. There are also Reserves, three quarters of which are in the Parishes, and they are not necessarily in cash as they can be fixed assets e.g. churches, halls, presbyteries. The Parish and Central Budget Reserves currently provide resilience however they are not unlimited. This is the time to review, plan, and act together to ensure long-term sustainability.

Concluding Context

The realities outlined here are not presented to discourage, but to enable clear-eyed and faithful discernment. They invite us to steward wisely what has been entrusted to us so that the Church may remain vibrant, missionary, and capable of serving future generations.