

# Wells Cathedral Special Visitation Determination and Directions

## Foreword

This document comes out of a long and costly journey that has been undertaken by the community and people of Wells Cathedral during the last eighteen months. Its aim is to provide an authoritative conclusion to the enquiries that happened during the visitation and to give a clear and detailed account of the determination and directions that were made as a result of the process that took place.

What this document does not describe is the enormous amount of hard work, commitment and engagement that has taken place since January 2023 to begin to address the concerns identified. A process of deep listening has been taking place and we are proud of the ways in which Chapter, staff and volunteers of the Cathedral and the whole community has embraced publicly, generously and openly the determination's findings. Excellent work has been happening to identify and embed values and a vision for the Cathedral's future. A strategy in line with these is in the process of development. All this is developing firm foundations on which the future of Wells Cathedral can be built.

Bishop Ruth and I want to extend our personal thanks for the rich engagement that has been offered by so many people in both the Visitation process and the responses that have occurred since. We wish particularly to extend our thanks to the Venerable Anne Gell who has so generously stepped up to act as Dean until a permanent appointment is made and who is acting to lead the change of culture that is already taking place. In this we are grateful for the splendid support that Anne is receiving from the newly formed Chapter and from the Cathedral's staff, volunteers and congregation. We would also like to salute the work being undertaken by Bishop Trevor Willmott, our Consultant to the Cathedral Community, as he contributes to all that is happening. We look forward to a future for our Cathedral that is one of confidence, joy, faith and hope.

+Michael Bath & Wells and +Ruth Taunton  
12<sup>th</sup> July 2023

# 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Wells Cathedral is a wondrous place and I am immensely aware of the considerable hard work, commitment, perseverance, grace and love that are poured out at the Cathedral each and every day. The strengths, talents, and skills contributed by many people enable the Cathedral to be experienced as a place of welcome, beauty, holiness, and peace.
- 1.2 A Cathedral, like any organisation, has its own eco-system that requires fostering, nurture, and care. When that eco-system is out of balance, the effects can be far-reaching and felt deeply by those who are part of the life of the Cathedral. Paradoxically, this may not immediately be apparent to the outside world.

# 2. Background to the Special Visitation

- 2.1 The Special Visitation of Wells Cathedral has flowed from the issues raised by the Social Care Institute for Excellence ('SCIE') Audit of the Wells Cathedral. The Audit was undertaken in preparation for the transition of its governance, management, property and financial affairs to the Cathedrals Measure 2021. A draft of the SCIE report was leaked in March 2022, before publication of the final report. A number of people interviewed by the SCIE auditors had voiced concern about culture and leadership within the Cathedral. In early April, the Chapter recognised the importance and seriousness of the matters raised and requested an independent review be conducted, seeking help from the Bishop of Taunton, as Acting Diocesan Bishop at that time.
- 2.2 In the months that followed, efforts were made by many people to make sense of and address the situation that had been found to exist. Regrettably, none of those efforts were found to have sufficient traction to respond adequately to the concerns that had been raised.
- 2.3 In the Action Plan produced by the Chapter to accompany publication of the SCIE Audit, Chapter sought help in following three areas:
  - Leadership
  - Culture
  - Governance
- 2.4 Wells Cathedral is presently constituted and operates in accordance with the Cathedrals Measure 1999. Section 6 of the 1999 Measure provides that Bishops may hold visitations of the Cathedral when Bishops consider it desirable or necessary to do

so or when requested by the Cathedral Council or the Chapter. A Special Visitation focussing on those three areas was necessary and appropriate as they are so much the underpinning of the life of the Cathedral and are vital to its good and effective function.

- 2.5 The 1999 Measure provides that in the course of a visitation, Bishops may give such directions to the Chapter, to the holder of any office in the Cathedral or to any person employed by the Cathedral as will, in the opinion of the Bishop, better serve the due observance of the constitution and statutes. It shall be the duty of any person or body on whom functions are conferred by or under this Measure to act in accordance with any determination made.

### 3. The Special Visitation

- 3.1 A Special Visitation of Wells Cathedral was commissioned in July 2022 on my behalf as Visitor of the Cathedral by the Bishop of Taunton and took place in late September 2022. The Special Visitation followed my appointment as Bishop of Bath and Wells, and predated the commencement of my public ministry. I was kept fully briefed and was involved with decision making. The conclusions reached and directions made following the Special Visitation are my own. I am conscious of the burdens that have been borne by Bishop Ruth and am immensely grateful for her efforts and wisdom in seeking resolution and restoration of trusting relationships within the Cathedral community.
- 3.2 The Special Visitation Team was led by Bishop Tim Stevens, supported by Dr Hilary Lines and Canon Dr Victoria Johnson. Canon Stephen Lynas and Canon Jonathan Lloyd served as Clerks to the Visitation. I am grateful to the Team for the prayerful, objective, and considered approach they brought to their work, and the clarity they have offered.
- 3.3 The Visitation Team undertook its field work from 23 to 28 September 2022 and met 64 interviewees, reflecting a broad range of insights and experiences of the Cathedral community and beyond, and stakeholders.
- 3.4 The Visitation Team did not consider that it was its responsibility to develop or comment on the contents of the SCIE report nor on the Cathedral's related Action Plan. I asked the team to offer a 'narrative' that was frank, constructive, and forward-looking and would enable us to see a way forward in times of uncertainty and anxiety.

3.5 The Visitation Report, which remains confidential to me and the Bishop of Taunton, provides a 360-degree examination of life at Wells Cathedral. The report holds up a mirror to the leadership, governance and culture of the Cathedral as seen by the Visitation Team. I am immensely grateful to everyone who contributed. It took considerable courage for those who met with the Visitation Team to respond to their enquiries so honestly and candidly, often touching on issues where they have experienced pain and hurt.

## 4. Findings

4.1 In relation to the three areas of focus, I summarise the main conclusions below:

### 4.2 Leadership

4.2.1 The leadership of the Cathedral has been fractured. As Jesus himself told us 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.'

4.2.2 Leadership was found to have been short term, controlling, intimidating and exercised within inappropriate boundaries. There is a need to create a leadership structure and culture that provides vision and strategy, direction, collective leadership, systems and processes that encourage clarity of direction, effectiveness and efficiency, a climate of trust, warmth, security and personal growth.

### 4.3 Culture

4.3.1 In recent years the culture within the Cathedral has been marked by deference, fear and perfectionism. The prevailing culture has not been to set free the immense amounts of talent and ability that the Cathedral so obviously contains. It has often been marked by avoidance of difficult issues and the frustration of different people's efforts.

4.3.2 Fostering a healthy, positive, and constructive culture needs to pervade all aspects of the Cathedral's life. The Visitation Team sees the task of the Cathedral leadership in the future to be a significant spiritual challenge. To preach, teach and exemplify a culture in which all members of staff and volunteers are encouraged to support each other, to learn from mistakes as well as achievements, to recognise that while much can be expected of the staff, the structures will support, enable, protect and nourish them on the journey towards excellence, rather than blame and punish them for failure.

## 4.4 Governance

- 4.4.1 It is very important that I preface any comment in relation to this area by being clear that there are no concerns about the governance of the main areas of the Cathedral's life – in finance, safeguarding, fundraising, fabric and so on – which are a credit to the people and organisations involved with those aspects of Cathedral life.
- 4.4.2 The Visitation Team found that the governance of the Cathedral was not effective in addressing the particular situation that existed with respect to culture and leadership at the Cathedral. This impacted negatively upon leadership and culture with the aspiration to excellence and happiness being far from realised. Through the consequences of the leak of the SCIE audit and then as a result of the limitations of Church process available at the relevant times, Chapter has experienced itself disabled in being able to resolve the issues that so needed to be addressed.

## 5. The Way Forward

I appreciate that these findings are difficult things to hear. But this is what was named by those who met with the Visitation Team. Our task is to face these facts together and with a determination address them. I am highly conscious that in recent months much work has already begun to address the situation that has existed. Building on the work Chapter and the wider Cathedral community has already been doing, what is it that we should seek to achieve together in the coming weeks, months and years?

## 6. Support for the Cathedral Community

- 6.1 I am pleased to confirm that Bishop Trevor Willmott, Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Bath and Wells, has agreed to act as Consultant to the Wells Cathedral Community. He will be a listening, reflective, critical friend charged with helping the Cathedral put in place the culture change needed within its common life in line with these directions.
- 6.2 As a Consultant to the Cathedral Community, Bishop Trevor will develop a small team of wise, skilled and competent people who can work with him to support the work to be undertaken in implementing the visitation directions. Bishop Trevor will liaise closely and regularly with me and the Cathedral Chapter about the direction of the work being undertaken offering regular feedback about its progress and development. Bishop Trevor, supported by his team, will support Chapter's development of an action plan designed to enable positive cultural change within all aspects of the Cathedral's operation.

## 7 Directions

My directions following the Special Visitation are as follows:

### 7.1 Values

7.1.1 Work has already been undertaken to develop the Cathedral's values, and draft values have been outlined in the current draft Cathedral strategy. These are not yet widely understood nor embedded within the culture of the Cathedral. Further work needs to be undertaken to develop, adopt, and communicate the core values of the Cathedral.

7.1.2 **I direct** the Cathedral chapter, supported by Bishop Trevor and his team, to put in place a programme of deep and attentive listening. Following consultation with the Cathedral community and stakeholders a detailed Action Plan should be formulated and implemented which will turn words into a reality for living, working, and worshipping at the Cathedral. This will require an exploration of all aspects of Cathedral life; department by department; group by group; to identify and recognise what is working well, and where further work is needed.

7.1.3 The formulation and implementation of the Plan should be undertaken within the 12 months from the publication of this document.

7.1.4 Critical Success Factors to measure progress will be developed by Chapter with the support of Bishop Trevor and his team. Bishop Trevor and his team will meet at intervals with different teams within the Cathedral to assess whether change in the living out of clear values is really happening and if not, to enable me to hold Chapter accountable to redoubling its efforts to make this possible and to make further recommendations to initiate change where that will be needed.

### 7.2 Whistle Blowing, Grievances and Conflict Resolution

7.2.1 We have to find ways to address problems before they become intractable. Much of the unhappiness of recent years seems to me to have been the result of the lack of effective ways to raise whistleblowing, grievances, conflict resolution or simply raising straightforward concerns about behaviour within the Cathedral community. I recognise that much work has previously taken place to improve matters among lay staff. However, effective means of addressing behaviours among clergy have not kept pace with this.

7.2.2 **I therefore direct** the Cathedral Chapter, supported by Bishop Trevor and his team, to review the Cathedral's whistle blowing, grievance and conflict resolution procedures for staff, clergy and volunteers, ensuring that the procedures are user-friendly, respect

confidentiality, and are simple to understand. All who are involved in the life of the Cathedral must have confidence in the procedures and that any concerns will be handled appropriately and respectfully when problems arise.

- 7.2.3 Chapter must keep me informed and seek my input in relation to the review, which must be completed within the 12 months from the publication of this document.

### 7.3 Performance Management

- 7.3.1 The Cathedral has a remarkable team of staff and volunteers who are dedicated, committed, hardworking, and who go many extra miles to make the worship and ministry of the Cathedral possible. It is to the benefit of everyone that we have clear guidance as to what is expected of us all and this is especially important when an organisation emerges from a state of affairs that has existed for many years. There is a danger that everyone can become hypersensitised to concerns about perceived bullying behaviours, control or intimidation which makes normal, everyday management of the organisation incredibly difficult.

- 7.3.2 I **direct** the Chapter, supported by Bishop Trevor and his team, to undertake a review with all staff and volunteers of the parameters of what can reasonably be expected of the management of performance within the organisation. I know that everyone wants to give of their best - but that will not always happen for a variety of reasons. There need to be good and effective ways to address problems when they arise and we all need to work on that together. The review is to be undertaken and completed within the 12 months from publication of this document.

### 7.4 Strategy

The Chapter has already undertaken considerable work over the last 10 months to develop a draft Strategic Plan. I **direct** that the draft should be reviewed by Chapter, supported by Bishop Trevor and his team, and that the draft Cathedral Strategic Plan is consulted on with stakeholders both within and without the Cathedral community. The Strategic Plan should be finalised and implemented within the 12 months from the publication of this document.

### 7.5 Appointments

- 7.5.1 A challenge for the Cathedral after the last year is that several leadership roles have become vacant. The Dean has retired, the Canon Chancellor left for a new post in the summer, two lay members of Chapter resigned in the autumn and two of the residentiary canons are due to leave in August this year.

7.5.2 I therefore directed that new lay Chapter members and a new Canon Chancellor be appointed as soon as possible, and this has happened. The Venerable Anne Gell, the Archdeacon of Wells, who is a residentiary canon of the Cathedral, has been appointed as acting dean following the retirement of the Very Reverend Dr John Davies. Anne has already started her work of supporting the culture change that the visitation revealed is required and my hope is that we shall be in a position to appoint a new dean by the end of the year.

## 8. Lessons for the Church of England

8.1 The Special Visitation has highlighted the importance of facilitating learning and support between dioceses and cathedrals and the sharing of good practice as they encounter challenges and move to more robust forms of governance.

8.2 The application of the Charities Act 2011 to the Chapter of a Cathedral to which the Cathedrals Measure 2021 applies may better provide Chapter with the tools to challenge, tackle, and resolve issues when they arise in the future.

8.3 The Special Visitation has emphasised the importance of ensuring that the appointment processes to Cathedrals of lay and particularly ordained staff are fit for purpose and support and training is given to those in leadership positions in large and complex roles.

8.4 Mentoring, support, supervision and development and coaching opportunities should be seen as integral in assisting with the transition of appointees to new roles and enabling good governance and leadership. This work should be co-ordinated by the Archbishops' Advisers for Appointments and Development Office and the work of Church of England Development bodies who oversee the training of Bishops, Deans and Residentiary Canons.

8.5 There is a need for clear lines of accountability within the church when concerns are raised about the behaviour of those holding senior positions and those who hold extensive lay responsibilities.



The Right Reverend Michael Beasley  
Bishop of Bath and Wells

12<sup>th</sup> July 2023