

## **Let Us Talk – Okeford Benefice**

*Q1 – What is the “personality and character” of your local church?*

The Okeford Benefice is composed of five villages to the north west of Blandford. These are Child Okeford, Hammoon, Manston, Okeford Fitzpaine and Shillingstone. This is a rural area with little local employment and where many of the local villagers are retired. There is a shop/post office in both Child Okeford and Okeford Fitzpaine, whilst Shillingstone has a combined garage/shop. Four of the five villages still have a pub and Child Okeford still supports two. The church reflects the local population with the congregation primarily being older although we are fortunate to have children worshipping on a fairly regular basis in two of the five churches. There is a range of traditions - one of a lower church tradition, two moderate and traditional, one broad church and one with a more catholic character, all led by a liberal-catholic incumbent. Worship is gradually becoming more benefice rather than parish based and services are similar across the benefice. All of our churches are Grade 1 or Grade 2/2\* listed and enhance the landscape in which they are set. We think we are pretty typical of rural parishes nationwide, with a number of our parishioners having roles at services and most involved in some form of voluntary work, whether in the local community or beyond.

*Q2 – What are the priorities in your local church?*

Each of the five parishes of the benefice recognises the issues associated with having small congregations of mainly older people, especially in terms of the survival of our church communities. One of these is that it can be difficult at times to fill key offices, including Churchwardens and PCC members. Outreach to younger generation is a priority and the three Church schools in the benefice provide opportunities for this which can be developed further. Liturgical changes have been made to support this outreach to younger generations and further development is planned. Above all, a need to broaden the outlook of many in our parishes is recognised. Pastoral care is also a priority area as many of the existing ministry team have retired over the last twelve months.

*Q3 – Is there one thing you would like to take on and develop in the coming year recognising that this mean you may need to stop doing something else?*

Specific needs identified across the benefice, which may be appropriate to one or more of our parishes include: the development of house and prayer groups, and an Alpha course. The development of lay ministry in various forms is an ongoing need, but resources are limited. The development of shared collective worship with the school(s) is a priority in one of our larger parishes.

*Q4 – Are there ways in which we can work together with neighbouring churches to achieve more?*

We now hold a benefice Eucharist every month as an outward expression of our shared life as a benefice. Other benefice events, including some acts of worship, take place and there is a need for these to be supported more strongly. The question of whether the benefice should

seek to become a single parish has been raised and has been initially positively received. This will be the subject of further discussions in individual PCC meetings in the near future.

*Q5 – How can we best measure the quality and impact of church life?*

Most of the villagers look to the church in time of trouble and the occasional offices provide us with opportunities to reach many who do not come regularly. We have recently held a successful AwayDay for parishioners from all five parishes to consider the way forward for us all and we think the positive results from this (summarised as our response to Q2-4 above) show the impact that church life has on its members. In one of our villages we provide facilities for the Post Office to use two afternoons a week enabling the provision of a post office in that village (only two of the five villages have a full time post office).

Measurement of quality is difficult but we are encouraged in the development of our worship and the fact that we have new liturgical deacons and lay worship leaders who are being carefully trained for their roles as well as an LLM in training. The main impact of church life on the wider village comes through our work in the three primary schools in the benefice as well as through our pastoral work with villagers as well as church members.