

Part H – The Parish Return Form

Section 1: Introduction

PARISH NAME: St Joseph

PARISH TOWN: Birtley

DEANERY: Sunderland and Durham

What was the process followed to reach these conclusions?

The Pastoral Strategy was discussed by the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) and agreed the following process with the aim of giving as many people as possible the opportunity to be involved in the discernment.

A letter to all parishioners was given out after Mass, posted on the Parish website and posted on the primary schools' websites and newsletters. The letter invited parishioners to attend one of two meetings, one in the afternoon and one in the evening and/or to submit written comments by posting them, in a box at the back of church or submitting them via a dedicated email address, set up for this purpose. To help people prepare for the meetings a handout was attached to the letter summarising the Strategy toolkit and the key areas for consideration.

38 people attended the afternoon' meeting and 26 people attended the evening' meeting, as well as taking notes of the attendees' verbal comments, people were given the opportunity to provide comments using post-it notes under the heading of Worship, Teach, Serve and Community. The use of the post-it notes proved popular and many people used this method as an opportunity to add their comments.

An initial review of the attendees at these meetings revealed that there had been very little representation of the young adult (35-50) age group, it was, therefore, decided to hold a third meeting for this age group. 14 people attended this meeting, in the age group 33-48, with children aged between 3 and 18.

The notes of the three meetings, the content of the post-it notes and the written responses received were reviewed by the chair, secretary and a member of the PPC. There was a high degree of consistency between the three meetings and the written responses received but there were some differences in priorities and the appetite for change. The attendees at the third meeting were particularly focused on the need for change, with a willingness to be involved in and lead that change, despite some concern about whether their views would be listened to.

A member of the PPC prepared a first draft of the Parish response that was reviewed at a special meeting of the PPC, before being presented to two further open meetings of parishioners.

Beacons of Hope

Catechesis

A strong, very able, group of catechists who lead the preparation for First Holy Communion and Reconciliation and the Sacrament of Confirmation. With an important emphasis on the Parish taking the lead but within a collaborative and supportive partnership with the Parish Primary schools. It is particularly encouraging that most of the catechists involved are in the 30-50 age group.

Service

The large number of people who are involved in service, both within the parish (membership of the Parish Pastoral Council, liturgical ministries, Eucharistic Ministers, SVP and the practical tasks of cleaning, gardening and maintenance, etc) and in many cases service that extends beyond parish boundaries. (Vinnies at St Dominics, Food Banks, Holy Island Camp, Lourdes serving with the Diocesan Pilgrimage and/or the Lourdes Hospitalite, and Credit Union).

WORSHIP – Celebrating the Sacraments as places of encounter.

Reflection and Conclusions

People are made to feel very welcome in St Joseph's church, an aspect that was thought particularly relevant in relation to the increasing number of ethnic communities, The Music Ministry in the parish is seen as a strong point. There is a good team of well-trained altar servers, that is comprised of children, young people and adults. Involvement of many people in liturgical roles (welcomers, readers, offertory procession, children's liturgy, writing bidding prayers, eucharistic ministers).

Parish led preparation programmes for First Holy Communion and Reconciliation are well received by children and their families, but the timing of the weekend Mass (5pm Saturday) is not regarded as family friendly and a barrier to consolidating the learning from the catechist sessions in celebrations in Mass.

Parishioners who do not attend the weekend Mass in St Joseph's (5pm Saturday) find it difficult to attend Mass in the other churches in the Partnership, which although they are close, as the crow flies, are divided by the A1(M) motorway. It is impossible to travel from Birtley to any of the churches in Washington / Penshaw on public transport without making at least one change of bus and the journeys of those who could travel by car are extended by driving via the points where they can traverse the motorway. As a result, those who attend Sunday Mass are in the main travelling to Low Fell and Gateshead, which are not in the same Partnership as St Joseph.

The Parish's inclusion in the Benedict Partnership and its links to St Robert of Newminster School, Washington, is seen as barrier to engagement with the secondary school that most of the young people from the parish attend (Cardinal Hume), which, in particular, has a negative impact on the Confirmation preparation programme.

What are we proposing to?

- (1) Request a move of the parish from a partnership with Washington / Penshaw to a partnership with Low Fell / Gateshead.
- (2) Increasing the involvement of children in the celebration of weekend Masses (highlighting children's liturgy activities and ensuring the Celebrant is aware of the theme of the Masses linked to the sacramental preparation programmes).

Why are we proposing this?

- (1) To be formally linked with the parishes / churches where the majority of parishioners who do not attend the Vigil Mass in Birtley travel to for their weekend Mass. This will place St Joseph's in a partnership of parishes where, at the moment, there are five churches on or close to a direct public transport link between Birtley and the Gateshead Metro. This would provide access to a nearby and easily accessible church if any of these churches are closed.

To enable close links with the Secondary School (Cardinal Hume) where the majority of young people from the parish study.

- (2) To ensure the Mass is more attractive and more meaningful to the children, their families, and the wider parish community.

Dependencies

- (1) Agreement of the priests and people in the neighbouring parishes and the approval of the bishop.
- (2) Agreement of the Celebrant(s) to adopt and embrace this proposal.

What will be the outcome if this cannot happen?

- (1) Many of the young adults and their families, who are resident in the parish, will continue to attend Mass at churches outside the parish and partnership and this vital cohort of parishioners who are an important part of the community, both now and increasingly in the future will be lost.
- (2) An opportunity to engage with and encourage regular Mass attendance of the children who are preparing for the Sacraments and their families will not be made best use of.

How will worship be organised in the area if there are fewer priests and fewer worshippers?

- (1) The move of St Joseph's into a Partnership with parishes / churches in Low Fell Gateshead will add to the options of churches that could be closed. As there are currently five churches in this area within easy access from a five miles public transport journey.

TEACH – Handing on the Faith

Reflection and Conclusions

Strong catechist led preparation programmes for First Holy Communion and Reconciliation. Very good links with Parish Primary Schools.

A need was identified to provide ongoing adult formation (Alpha, Bible Classes, etc) that was matched by an ambition, willingness from the group of young adults to be involved in delivering this.

Concern was expressed that recently the delivery of RCIA had become largely clergy lead and this had taken away the opportunity for lay members of the parish to be involved in delivering the programme and accompanying the enquirers.

Links between the parish community and Cardinal Hume school (the school the majority of secondary age students from the parish attend) are hampered by the school being in a different partnership.

What are we proposing to?

To work with the group of young adults to develop proposals for them to deliver ongoing adult formation.

As above moving St Joseph's into a partnership with Low Fell and Gateshead churches / parishes to improve links with Cardinal Hume school.

Reinstate the past practice of inviting the families of children preparing for First Holy Communion to take part in RCIA and other adult formation opportunities,

Why are we proposing this?

This will have the double benefit of meeting a need for ongoing adult formation and responding positively to the group of young adults that will both encourage them and reassure them that their views have been listened to.

Dependencies

Agreement of Parish Priest and Pastoral Council to develop this programme of ongoing adult formation and the availability of meeting space in the Parish Hall that is being retained for parish use following the closure of the Parish Centre,

What will be the outcome if this cannot happen?

A need that has been identified from this exercise would not be met and, more importantly, it would miss the opportunity of encouraging and reaffirming the group of young adults and many other parishioners that they are being listened to and their opinions, skills and commitment are valued and important for the future of the parish community.

SERVE - Sharing Christ's Love in Action

Reflection and Conclusions

The large number of people who are involved in service within the parish (membership of the Parish Pastoral Council, liturgical ministries, Eucharistic Ministers, SVP and the practical tasks of cleaning, gardening and maintenance, etc) was seen as a strong point.

The strong well-organised network of Special Ministers who take communion regularly to the sick and elderly in their own homes and care homes is seen as a major contribution of service to the Parish community by the Parish community.

The large number of people who are involved in service that extends beyond parish boundaries (Vinnies at St Dominics, Food Banks, Holy Island Camp, Lourdes serving with the Diocesan Pilgrimage and/or the Lourdes Hospitalite, and Credit Union) was another strength identified in this discernment.

The existence of a long-established Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) that meet monthly to support the Parish Priest in the mission of the parish was something that was initially overlooked until comparisons were pointed out to parishes who did not have a pastoral council.

What are we proposing to do?

- (1) To refresh the role and membership of the PPC in line with the recently produced Terms of Reference for Councils and suggestions in "Reimagining Pastoral Councils" exploring the use of sub-groups in taking forward the PPC. In particular, encouraging the involvement of young adults in the Pastoral Council and any sub-groups.
- (2) Explore ways for those involved in these areas of service to share their experiences and make known these opportunities to facilitate recruiting new volunteers / the next generation.

Why are we proposing this?

To give the opportunity to more people to offer their talents and enjoy the benefits of being involved in providing these valuable opportunities to serve, and to ensure continuity in providing these services by effective succession planning.

Dependencies

The willingness of those currently involved in these areas of service to share their experiences with others and the availability and commitment of others to become involved in the future.

What will be the outcome if this cannot happen?

Over time the number of people involved in these areas of service will decline, as they get older, and the provision of these services and the benefits to both the providers and recipients will be reduced and eventually disappear.

COMMUNITY – Building a Family of Faith

Reflection and Conclusions

There was a strong parish community with support for regular events such as the coffee morning that brought people together socially and raised funds for charities and good causes.

Parishioners had made great efforts to support Partnership events that had been organised for the whole Partnership (Penitential Services, Celebration of the Feast of St Benedict, Days of Recollection, Adult Formation events, etc) but the logistics of travelling to other Partnership churches for Sunday Mass had resulted in the majority of Parishioners attending Sunday Mass going to churches outside of the existing Partnership. As a result, there was little sense of belonging to the Benedict Partnership community.

There were concerns expressed about the recent closure of the Club and Parish Centre and the importance of retaining, refurbishing and the development of the old Parish as a facility where the parish community could come together,

What are we proposing?

Request a move of the parish from a partnership with Washington / Penshaw to a partnership with Low Fell / Gateshead.

Why are we proposing this?

To encourage the development of a sense of community with the parishes / churches in Low Fell and Gateshead that would survive and thrive as a community even when some of the churches will inevitably close.

To some extent this realignment has already begun with parishioners from St Joseph's attending Mass in Low Fell and Gateshead and in some cases becoming involved in other activities in these parishes.

Dependencies

Agreement of the priests and people in the neighbouring parishes and the approval of the bishop.

What will be the outcome if this cannot happen?

The wider community of parishes / churches in the Birtley, Low Fell and Gateshead area will not develop the strong sense of community that will be needed to ensure we can respond positively to and embrace the challenges of fewer priests and fewer churches.

Section 3 – Stewardship and Our Common Home (Property)

Accessibility (to be completed by Parish)

Site Name	Building Name	Estimated Occupancy Capacity	Estimate hours of use per week	Estimated number of car parking spaces	Level access into and within the building (Yes/No)	Accessible WC within the building (Yes/No)	% of people travelling by car	Describe local transport links
St Joseph Birtley	St Joseph's Church	400	6	45	Yes	Yes	80%	Good and regular public transport links North and South within and beyond Birtley (even on Sunday) There are no direct Public Transport links to other churches in the current Partnership
	St Joseph's Presbytery	Residential 4 people Meeting spaces 10 & 14	24 / 7	3	No	No	N/A	
	Middle Lodge	This was formerly a rented residential property. When the last tenants moved out the Parish recommended the demolition of the building, which was approved by the Diocese. However, as the building is on the proposed site of a new Primary School the CEO of the Trust requested that the building be retained for proposed inclusion in the design of the new school.						
	St Joseph's Club and Parish Centre	The Club Parish Centre closed on 31 st March 2026 A decision on whether the building will be sold (providing a one-off injection of funds) or leased to an external user(s) (providing an ongoing regular income) is still to be made.						
	St Joseph's Youth and Community Hall (the old Parish Hall)	80	The Hall has only been used one night per week by the Youth Club. The Parish now intend to make greater use of the Hall	45	Yes (with planned minor adjustment)	No	??	

Existing and Potential uses (to be completed by the Parish)

Site Name	Building Name	Existing uses	Potential future uses
St Joseph Birtley	St Joseph's Church	Vigil Mass on Saturday Weekday Masses on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday Occasional use by Indian Community for prayer and adoration and Mass	As the church is Grade II listed any adaptations for non – ecclesiastical uses would be limited
	St Joseph's Presbytery	Residence for one priest Used for Parish meetings and Parish admin tasks	If at anytime in the future there was no resident priest in Birtley the Presbytery could be rented out as a residential property Following the closure of the Parish Centre the meeting room(s) in the Presbytery will be used for smaller parish meetings
	Middle Lodge	Vacant	Incorporation in design of new school or demolition
	St Joseph's Youth and Community Hall (the old Parish Hall)	Post Covid, until the recent closure of the Parish Centre the Hall has only been used one night per week by the Youth Club	Following the closure of the Parish Centre the old hall has been isolated from the remainder of the building for Parish use. This will include continuing use by the Youth Club and use by the Parish for RCIA, other ongoing adult formation, sacramental preparation, coffee mornings and other social and fund-raising activities. It may also be possible to attract previous commercial users of the Parish Centre (Irish Dancing, Keep Fit, Weight-Watchers, etc)
	St Joseph's CMS Club and Parish Centre	The Parish Centre closed on 31 st March 2026 A decision on whether the building will be sold (providing a one-off injection of funds) or leased to an external user(s) (providing an ongoing regular income) is still to be made.	

Section 4: Stewardship Review Discernment

Stewardship: FINANCES

Finances are regularly monitored by the Parish Priest and the Parish Finance Committee to ensure that best value for money is obtained, and expenditure is focussed on supporting Mission.

Due to ill-health, there has not been a Gift Aid Officer in post in recent years and there are two years of arrears of gift aid refunds to claim. A Gift Aid officer is now in post and claims will be brought up to date and following the completion of 2025-26 accounts an appeal for the new and increased gift-aid contributions will be made.

Finances have been adversely impacted by the retention of Middle Lodge. The parish have had to pay significant amounts in back Council Tax and in responding to frequent vandalism of the property. When the new Primary School is built in Birtley the Parish will recoup the expenditure on Middle Lodge and replenish the parish reserves from the sales of the sites of the exiting infant and junior schools.

While the closure of the Catholic Club and Parish Centre has not been well received by parishioners the parish will benefit financially, either from a one-off injection of funds if the property is sold or a regular income if the property is leased to other users. The parish is working with the Diocesan Property team to decide on the best course of action.

There are no major costs envisaged in the foreseeable future and as both the Church and Presbytery are Grade II listed any future major expenditure should be assisted by grant funding.

If at anytime in the future there is not a resident priest in Birtley the Presbytery could be rented out as domestic accommodation.

Stewardship: BUILDINGS

While there has been disappointment in the closure of the CMS Club and Parish Centre this has also had a positive impact with many parishioners' expressing optimism about the potential future use of the Old Parish Hall, which is being retained for parish use. The disposal of the club building (by either sale or lease) will ensure greater use of the retained hall.

The disposal of Middle Lodge (either being incorporated in the design of the new school or demolition) will remove major expenses that the parish has incurred in recent years.

The church is fully accessible and has an accessible WC. The old parish hall currently has two steps down from the external footpath but there is sufficient space to replace these steps with either a gentle slope or ramp to the doors of the building. The best solution is being investigated and will be implanted at moderate cost in the near future. The installation of an accessible WC in the old parish hall will be considered as part of the refurbishment plans.

When the refurbishment of the old parish hall is complete it may be possible to attract commercial users who previously used the parish centre (Irish dancing classes, keep-fit classes, weight watchers, etc).

We don't have a secondary school in the parish, and the old infant and junior schools do not have facilities that would be useful for parish activities, but this can be looked at again when the new school is built.

The church has very poor roof insulation that has an adverse impact on both heating costs and the carbon impact. Improved insulation could benefit both and it is proposed to carry out a cost-benefit analysis of possible solutions.

Stewardship: PEOPLE

The availability of people willing and able to serve the mission of the parish, church and wider community was identified as one of the beacons of hope in the parish's discernment.

The parish has a long-established Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) with fifteen members who meet on a monthly basis, supporting and advising the parish clergy. The PPC has recently spent time studying the report "Reimagining Pastoral Councils" and are committed to reshaping the PPC in line with the suggestions in this report and the Diocesan terms of reference for Pastoral Councils.

The parish has a large number of volunteers involved in all the liturgical ministries (readers, welcomers, music, offertory procession, eucharistic ministers, children's liturgies, etc) as well as admin and finance, church cleaning, garden and maintenance. There are also many parishioners who volunteer in areas of service beyond the parish (Vinnies at St Dominics, Food Banks, Credit Union, Holy Island Camp, Lourdes with both the Diocesan Pilgrimage and the Lourdes Hospitalite).

As a parish community we are very aware of the age profile of these volunteers and the need to encourage younger people to become involved, but we are also in a good position because there is a group of young adults (30-50 age band) who are both very capable and very keen to become more involved in parish life. Many of this group have suffered past hurts and disappointments in their involvement with the church but despite this expressed a willingness to be involved in and lead the change that should come out of this discernment exercise. This group are vital to the life of the church in this parish and beyond and this is an ideal opportunity to engage with them and to support them through formation and training to become leaders within the church and the wider community.

There are major housing development projects about to commence within the parish boundaries, with a scheme that is scheduled to run for a number of years building over 300 homes on the former ROF site and Gateshead Housing is about to commence the building of over 400 social housing dwellings on the Elizabethville site.

The lack of public transport links and the barrier of the A1(M) motorway make travel very difficult between the parish and the churches in Washington and Penshaw (in the existing Partnership) but if a request to move into a partnership with Low Fell and Gateshead was agreed there are very good public transport links (even on a Sunday) between this parish and the churches in Low Fell / Gateshead.

Stewardship: SUSTAINABILITY

A move from the existing Benedict Partnership into a partnership with the churches in Low Fell and Gateshead to enable people to travel by public transport and more easily by car to attend Mass and to come together in a genuine Partnership was a very strong clear message that came out of the prayerful discernment in this parish. Although people from the parish responded to invitations to "set piece" partnership events (celebration of the patronal feast, penitential services, training / formation events, etc) there was no feeling of partnership or belonging on a day-to-day basis.

Within a partnership with Low Fell and Gateshead there are four / five churches all served by good public transport links and direct driving routes and such a partnership would increase the options for consolidating property in this area while providing reasonable options for a reduced number of places of worship.

A reduction in the number of churches, presbyteries and other buildings will reduce the financial burdens across the area and have a beneficial impact on the carbon footprint with reduced use of heating and lighting. The fact that the area of this proposed alternative partnership is served by the number 21 bus service, which has recently moved to all electric vehicles also has a positive impact on sustainability.

Section 5: Snapshot Summary and Parish Conclusions

G1. What is thriving and must be strengthened?

The number of people who are very involved and very committed to the Mission of the church, evidenced by both the number of people and the time commitment they give to service within and beyond the parish.

The catechesis and sacramental preparation that is led by people (mainly the young adult 30-50 age group) in the parish in partnership with the parish schools.

G2. What should be adjusted?

The clearest message that came out of this prayerful discernment was the need for the parish to move into partnership with the churches in Low Fell and Gateshead, which was the proposal made by both this parish and some of the parishes in Low Fell and Gateshead as part of Forward Together in Hope. This will enable the creation and development of a more genuine day-to-day partnership, enable the development of stronger links with Cardinal Hume school (the secondary school attended by the majority of young people from this parish), which in turn will strengthen links between parish and school during preparation for Confirmation.

To encourage, enable, empower the skilled, highly motivated, and willing group of young adults play their full part in the planning and implementation of the actions that come out of this discernment exercise and prepare them to quickly move into leadership roles,

G3. What drains Mission, is unsustainable, and need to be released?

To some extent one of the very difficult steps in identifying what was unsustainable was already taking place during this exercise. The decision to close the Club and Parish Centre has caused some disappointment and upset within the parish community, with the club closing on 31st March. However, there are already some positives coming out of that, the income that will come into the parish, either a one-off receipt from the sale of the premises or a regular income from the property being leased will improve the parish finances and there is already a degree of excitement and optimism emerging as parishioners consider how the parish can make best use of the old parish hall.

G4 Where is the Holy Spirit prompting bold steps?

The first prompt from the Holy Spirit came during the process of discernment within the parish, When considering the output from the initial well attended two parish meetings there emerged an awareness that instead of congratulating ourselves on the number of people who had attended the meetings and the prayerful, positive and constructive output from these meetings, we needed to be concerned that there was an almost total absence of the 30-50 age group and it was certainly the prompting of the Holy Spirit that encouraged personal invitations to this age group to come together in a third meeting. A meeting that focused on the need to change and a willingness from the attendees to be involved in and lead that change.

The request to move from the existing Benedict Partnership to a partnership with the churches in Low Fell and Gateshead was also the result of prayerful consideration of what was a barrier to mission and how that barrier could be overcome.

G5. What are our next steps as a parish?

One thing that has become clear from this process of discernment is that prayer needs to be at the centre of everything. Our next step is therefore to continue praying that we are able to move forward embracing the positive and optimistic spirit that has been generated so far. That our request to move into a Partnership with the churches in Low Fell and Gateshead will be granted and we can take forward the spirit of prayerful discernment with our new partners, the clergy and people of our new extended community.