

District Review Monitoring Group

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Status of Paper	Final
Action Required	Decision

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	To report to the Council on the progress of District review conversations and to present the Council with recommendations for changes to take place from 2022 onwards.
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District Review Monitoring Group

1. In October 2020 the Council appointed the District Review Monitoring Group (DRMG) in MC/20/103.
2. The following persons have been appointed to the DRMG:
 - Mr Michael King (Chair and Past Vice-President of the Conference)
 - Mr Steve Cooper (Synod Secretary, Liverpool District)
 - Ms Jane Allin (Synod Secretary, Plymouth & Exeter District)
 - The Revd Nigel Cowgill (Co-Chair of the London District)
 - The Revd Loraine Mellor (Chair of the Nottingham & Derby District)
 - The Revd Richard Andrew (Chair of the Darlington District)
3. The DRMG has met three times.
4. The Terms of Reference of the District Review Monitoring Group agreed by the Council in MC/20/103 are as follows:
 - To ensure that all Districts engage in conversations alongside others about regional ways of working
 - To offer regional groups guidance and frameworks for conversations to take place using best practice (arranging meetings to be supported by Connexional Team staff)
 - To receive reports from regional groups on proposals for the future, and to offer feedback from a connexional viewpoint on what has been proposed.
 - No later than March 2021, to report to the Council on the outcome of the conversations of regional groups making recommendations for the Conference of 2021 for change from 2022 onwards.
 - To present to the Council proposals for how a successor body will continue to oversee District regional conversations beyond 2021-22.

To ensure that all Districts engage in conversations alongside others about regional ways of working

5. The DRMG has received updates from conversations taking place in nine regional groupings. It has been affirming to see that all Districts are engaging in such conversations, which has made the task of the DRMG much easier. The Connexional Secretary and/or the Secretary of the Conference have attended many of the regional conversations where that has been felt to be beneficial to those involved. Conversations have been wide ranging, innovative and productive.

The DRMG has been heartened by the conversations and wishes to pay tribute to the District Chairs and Synod Secretaries for the way they have engaged with this work.

To offer regional groups guidance and frameworks for conversations to take place using best practice

6. Explorations were made early on in this process as to whether a framework document could be produced and offered to those facilitating the regional conversations. However, the feedback we received on this was for the need for conversations to be light touch and flexible given the need for contextual ways of working to be considered across a variety of places. As a result, the conversations have simply centred around the four areas identified in MC/20/103:
- Knowing what we are doing well together
 - Analysing what we could be doing more of together (addressing particular areas of concern for the future)
 - Assessing the sustainability of the life of the District over the next period (taking into account finances, volunteers etc)
 - Identifying what ‘groupings’ with a region’s conversations may be best taken forward.

To receive reports from regional groups on proposals for the future, and to offer feedback from a connexional viewpoint on what has been proposed.

7. The reports received show that there are various ways of regional working being explored. One key theme that has arisen is that each region is different in nature and the importance of regional ways of working being contextual. There is little appetite for Districts being formally merged but there is a lot of appetite for sharing personnel and resources across Districts in a regional setting. The exact nature of this will depend upon the context of the region. The only feedback from a connexional viewpoint in what is being proposed is the importance of change evolving organically and being tailored to each local setting.
8. It has been extremely useful for these conversations to receive connexional support and the presence of someone connexional (whether the Secretary of the Conference, Connexional Secretary or a member of the Learning Network) has been of great value. The DRMG also wishes to acknowledge the background support by many involved in the conversations to facilitate the process using models such as Appreciative Inquiry.
9. The highlights of each conversation are listed in the table below:

Name	Districts involved	Highlights from conversation so far
North West & Mann	Lancashire	Having considered each district’s mission plan to establish any similarities and convergences, the NW & Mann Review Group has agreed to set up a sub-group to re-draw the map. A process is being established for the sub-group to bring proposals to the NW & Mann Review Group. Recommendations will then be made to DPCs and Synods by Spring 2022.
	Bolton and Rochdale	
	Manchester and Stockport	
	Chester and Stoke	
	Liverpool	
	Isle of Man	
	Cumbria	
West Midlands	Birmingham	It is not thought at this stage that merging the two districts should be explored but

	Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury	conversations between them have highlighted areas of cooperation. 2025 is seen as a date from which different ways of working might be implemented.
East Midlands	Northampton	The meeting has noted the areas of cooperation developed and explored issues of leadership. A mapping exercise will be undertaken of the roles of the Chairs, Deputy Chairs and Assistant Chairs to develop ideas about co-/ team-working.
	Nottingham and Derby	
	Lincolnshire	
	East Anglia	
South West	Plymouth and Exeter	Further conversation will be taking place regarding different regional groupings for Safeguarding, Learning Network, and Stationing. Conversations are also continuing between all five districts over areas of cooperation.
	Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	
	Bristol	
	Southampton	
	Channel Islands	
Wales	Wales	A proposal has been prepared for the Spring Synods of the two Districts and a report will be made to the Council in October 2021.
	Cymru	
Yorkshire	Sheffield	The substantial work undertaken in 2016/17 has provided a Yorkshire Plus District structure which is bedding in effectively and providing appropriate models of District life to fulfil SO 400A. The group is committed to further explore opportunities for shared and federated working in partnership with the Yorkshire Plus Learning Network.
	Yorkshire North and East	
	Yorkshire West	
North East	Darlington	Conversations have highlighted the good model of co-operative partnership and working already in place and on which the Districts continue to build without any appetite to merge.
	Newcastle	
South East	Beds, Essex & Herts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> London will take forward the conversation about leadership and undertake a review The SE district will rewrite its mission plan and share it. There is no appetite for boundary change but important that across the three districts there are significant cohorts (eg of probationers) to make meetings profitable.
	London	
	South East	
Scotland and Shetland	Scotland Shetland	Already working together as two Districts sharing a Chair

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10. The broad recommendation is that the review process is encouraged and resourced so that the progress and momentum continues. A number of reflections have emerged which the DRMG believes are important to highlight:

a) The importance of representation

In a number of discussions about the purpose of Districts, a point that seems to assume importance is the District role in providing “representation” on various bodies, spread across the country. This raises the following issues that could be followed up by:

- Exploring the number of Districts in the future
- Exploring ‘communities of interest’ and not just geographical neighbours
- Ensuring appropriate representation of diverse issues as well as geographical locations if the number of Districts is reduced
- Using online technology to improve levels of representation

b) Ecumenism

It is important to acknowledge ecumenical opportunities locally, but in many cases matching boundaries to those of our ecumenical partners is difficult. Very few Districts have co-terminus boundaries with our partners and to change to do so would be a huge amount of work.

c) Regional ways of working

The boundaries of the Stationing regions and Learning Network are not always in the same places. At this stage there is no clear recommendation that the two be aligned, but this must be kept under review going forward.

It should be noted that the Learning Network groupings can be changed to support the structures that the Methodist Church wishes to adopt.

d) Standing Orders

Considerations about regional ways of working provide us with an opportunity to look at the Standing Orders relating to Districts and review accordingly. It has been noted that at some stage a definition of a region may be required, and that Standing Orders may need to be written in the near future, to progress further work on regional working. Other things to consider include the provision of a structure that allows, for example, a region to open a bank account, rather than having to use one from a District for collaboration between more than one District.

e) Sharing mission plans

The DRMG has realised the importance of Districts sharing their Mission Plans with one another, and to include good practice and examples of what did not work. At present there is no proscribed mechanism for this to happen. Therefore, to ensure that this takes place, the DRMG recommends that mission plans be submitted connexionally and that the Secretary of the Conference (or relevant member of the Connexional Team) ensure that they are shared and discussed among the District Chairs, the CLF, and any other relevant parties.

Furthermore, it was noted that each District is required to have a Development Master Plan on property and personnel (SO 962), but the DRMG felt that this could be included in a District Mission Plan. The DRMG recommends that the two should come together, to incorporate work areas from the Learning & Development Forums. This would ensure the District Mission Plan was central to planning on all fronts and could be utilised in resource allocation in the future.

f) District Review process to be de-coupled from a Chair’s invitation.

The District Review process is currently tied to the process for a Chair's invitation. The DRMG considers that the process should take place formally every three years, but that the DPC should constantly be updating it as a 'live' document. The DRMG also recommends that Standing Orders be amended so that the annually updated Mission Plan is included in the information that Synod Secretaries submit annually to the Conference Office.

g) Names for any Joint Chairs across a region

Some models of regional working being explored involve having Joint Chairs across more than one District. Such joint working may require revision of the language or titles for leaders. The DRMG noted that some conversations were already considering whether or not each defined geographical District needs to retain its own Chair. The DRMG also noted that there are already different arrangements in place in Scotland and Shetland, as well as in London.

To present to the Council proposals for how a successor body will continue to oversee District regional conversations beyond 2021-22.

11. It is suggested that a successor body should be similar to the size and composition of the DRMG, composed of around 5 people, with two District Chairs and two Synod Secretaries. It will be important for this group to be able to co-opt different voices to subsequent specific meetings if required.
12. The process of monitoring is needed over the next 15 months to ensure conversations have taken place which may lead to any regional structure that would be best agreed by the 2022 Conference. Assuming such structure is agreed, the same personnel would be encouraged to monitor the process for a further 15 months. Any delay on this 15-month timetable will have severe financial implications and may necessarily lead to more direction from the Conference regarding regional groupings.
13. Direct monitoring/review of the regional conversations will cease in June 2022 (as implementation of anything decided at the 2022 Conference will be from 2023 onwards).
14. The Council is invited to consider these recommendations and if it wishes to bring these recommendations to the 2021 Conference.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

39/1. The Council receives the report.

39/2. The Council agrees to establish a successor body as indicated in the report.

39/3. The Council recommends that Standing Orders be amended so that the District Mission Plan becomes part of the Development Masterplan, and is updated annually.

39/4. The Council recommends that that the District Mission Plan is included in the information that Synod Secretaries submit annually to the Conference Office.