

PRESBYTERY REVIEW COMMITTEE MAY 2025**Proposed Deliverance****The General Assembly:**

1. Receive the Report.
2. Receive the Summary Reports for the pilot Presbytery Reviews of Edinburgh and West Lothian Presbytery and of Perth Presbytery set out in Appendices A and B (*Section 2 and Appendices A and B*).
3. Agree that the Presbyteries to be reviewed in 2025/26 will be the Presbytery of Clyde and the Presbytery of the South West, and that the Presbyteries to be reviewed in 2026/27 will be the Presbytery of Lothian and Borders and the Presbytery of the North East and Northern Isles (*Section 2.6*).
4. Note the report on the Inspection of Presbytery Records set out in section 3 (*Section 3*).

Report**1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 The General Assembly of 2024 established the Presbytery Review Committee as a new Standing Committee of the General Assembly.

1.2 The remit of the Committee is:

- To be responsible for Presbytery Review through a flexible five-year cycle in which two or three Presbyteries are reviewed each year by a Review Group which reports back to the Committee.
- Provide a Summary Report to the GA for Presbytery Reviews carried out each year.
- To be satisfied that:
 - each Presbytery Review is thorough and forward looking;
 - good practice is highlighted and shared across the Church;
 - problems are faced and tackled with appropriate support and input; and
 - non-compliance is addressed and rectified.
- Inspect annually the records of Presbyteries.

2. PRESBYTERY REVIEW

2.1 The General Assembly of 2024 instructed the Committee to carry out two pilot Presbytery Reviews, one for Edinburgh and West Lothian Presbytery and the other for Perth Presbytery.

2.2 The Committee developed a process for conducting these pilot Presbytery Reviews, including the preparation of a Presbytery Questionnaire and a Congregational Questionnaire. The Committee also established two Review Groups, each with five members drawn from the Committee. None of the members of a Review Group were members of the Presbytery being reviewed.

2.3 Between October 2024 and January 2025, the Review Groups each carried out their reviews as described in the Summary Reports (see 2.4 below). Each Review Group then drew up a Presbytery Review Report which was submitted to the Presbytery in question. The Presbytery had the opportunity to comment on the Review Report.

2.4 The Summary Reports for the Presbytery Reviews of Edinburgh and West Lothian Presbytery and of Perth Presbytery are set out in Appendix A and Appendix B respectively.

2.5 Feedback received from the pilot Presbytery Reviews was generally positive and the Review Groups are grateful for the friendly co-operation of the Presbyteries and congregations involved. The Committee will continue to evaluate and adjust its processes so that they meet the aims and objectives of Presbytery Review in a way that allows time for reflection, mutual encouragement and highlights areas for development in a constructive way. Now that an initial process has been established, in future years the Review Groups will be able to commence their work much more quickly after each General Assembly, so that there will be less time pressure for the Presbyteries and Review Groups.

2.6 In view of the fact that the Legal Questions Committee will recommend that Presbyteries outside Scotland are brought within Presbytery Review at a future date, the Committee would intend at that stage to provide a schedule of Presbytery Review visits. In the meantime, the Committee proposes that the Presbyteries to be reviewed in 2025/26 will be the Presbytery of Clyde and the Presbytery of the South West. The Committee also proposes that the Presbyteries to be reviewed in 2026/27 will be the Presbytery of Lothian and Borders and the Presbytery of the North East and Northern Isles, and documentation will be circulated to those Presbyteries in advance of the General Assembly of 2026.

3. INSPECTION OF RECORDS

3.1 The General Assembly of 2024 also instructed the Committee to submit a report on the Inspection of Presbytery Records in accordance with the draft Act.

3.2 An Inspection of Records Sub-Group was established by the Committee to consider how best to inspect Presbyteries' own records, and to support Presbyteries in their inspection of congregational records.

3.3 The Sub Group has drawn up a list of the documents which it is intended will be inspected every year, and this will be included in the Guidance to be issued by the Legal Questions Committee. The list has been based on the requirements laid on Presbyteries by the Church Courts Act, and includes the policies which are required by church law or by good practice. Discussion took place with the Clerk and appropriate Conveners of Edinburgh and West Lothian Presbytery regarding the list and the Sub Group is grateful for their views. It is likely that the list will need to be amended from time to time, depending on decisions made by future General Assemblies.

3.4 Discussion has also taken place with the Safeguarding Service, the Stewardship and Finance Department and the General Trustees regarding the information which they require from Presbyteries to enable them to be satisfied that both Presbyteries and congregations are complying with the requirements of the Church Courts Act and civil law. To minimise duplication, it is not intended that these matters will be included in the inspection of Presbytery records, unless a situation arises which necessitates this Committee becoming involved.

3.5 The records of the Presbyteries of Edinburgh and West Lothian and of Perth have been duly inspected and found to be in order, with some particular examples of good practice in both Presbyteries. A number of recommendations have been made, principally around the need for the display of some policies on their websites.

4. PRESBYTERY REVIEW ACT AND GUIDANCE

4.1 In its report the Legal Questions Committee is bringing a Presbytery Review Act in final form to the General Assembly. We understand that this takes account of comments received from Presbyteries on the draft Presbytery Review Act. In addition, the Committee was able to liaise with the Legal Questions Committee to offer its feedback on the pilot Presbytery Review process and Inspection of Records process.

4.2 In accordance with the Act, Guidance will be prepared initially by the Legal Questions Committee, and updated from time to time by the Committee with the approval of the Legal Questions Committee.

In the name of the Committee

MOIRA MCDONALD, *Convener*
CATHERINE COULL, *Vice-Convener*
FIONA SMITH, *Secretary*

Appendix A

Summary Report for Presbytery Review of Edinburgh and West Lothian Presbytery

Introduction

The review of the Presbytery of Edinburgh and West Lothian included an initial meeting with key office-bearers within the Presbytery, followed by the circulation of a Presbytery Questionnaire to glean information from the Presbytery (staff and Conveners) and a Congregational Questionnaire sent to a cross-section of congregations (fifteen in total, with fourteen responses received). Some members of the Review Group visited one of the Presbytery's meetings and a day-long meeting was held with office-bearers, Conveners and staff following the return of the information and congregational feedback.

Report

Formed in 2022, the Presbytery of Edinburgh and West Lothian incorporates city, suburban and rural parishes. Dr Hazel Hastie was appointed Presbytery Clerk with a team of staff including Depute Clerk, Administrator, Mission Coordinator, Safeguarding Coordinator and a Communications Coordinator (service contracted). The Presbytery meets six times per year in one central location within Edinburgh and, while the meetings are streamed, the expectation is for onsite attendance (participation is not possible online).

This is a Presbytery that is well operated with a suitably resourced and experienced team which has learnt from its constituent Presbyteries as it has developed into the new Presbytery. The transition to a new Presbytery and the Presbytery Mission Plan process has brought considerable pressure and stress in these early years which has affected life within the Presbytery. The efforts to retain and build morale, trust and good relationships were appreciated by many congregations.

Main Observations

The following points were provided in the main report as a summary of the Review Group's work. The Review Group:

1. Thanks the members of Presbytery and congregations who engaged with the Review Group.
2. Commends the staff and Conveners for their work on behalf of the Presbytery.
3. Notes the efficiency and effectiveness of the Presbytery in moving through business and in offering advice and instruction.
4. Encourages the Presbytery to develop further ways to foster friendship across the Presbytery.
5. Encourages Parish Ministers to respond positively to the request of the Business Committee when Interim Moderators or participants for Vacancy Advisory Committees are required, and in fulfilling their duty to play their part in the affairs of Presbytery.
6. Notes the burden placed on Parish Ministers who have taken on new unions and the extra work that is needed to nurture a healthy new congregation.
7. Commends the Presbytery on its provision of pastoral care to Parish Ministers and Deacons.

8. Commends the Presbytery on its website presence, noting that work to ensure ease of use is always helpful, and encourages its further development as a hub for information and resources.
9. Encourages the Presbytery to consider adding a strategic communications remit to the role of Communications Coordinator to facilitate the Presbytery's aspirations towards excellent communication within and outwith the Presbytery.
10. Encourages the Presbytery to prepare a Code of Conduct to assist Presbyters in understanding the expectations upon them and good practice for the Presbytery.
11. Notes that the biggest risk to the financial sustainability of the Presbytery would be the withdrawal of core funding by the central Church.

Recommendations

Further recommendations beyond these points were as follows:

1. Expand the availability of training opportunities, perhaps working with other Presbyteries to develop material that may be useful (noting that this is already happening for some doing Worship Training).
2. When delays in communication arise, consider a method for ensuring congregations are not 'left in the dark' and are advised that there may be some time before a decision is forthcoming and what the reason is for that delay.
3. When possible, video record Presbytery events that take place to provide an opportunity for others to participate at a later date.
4. Continue to work with the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team and Programme Groups to improve communication and foster relationships between the Presbytery and those working centrally.
5. Engage with the Assembly Trustees over the budget and financial considerations for the Presbytery's sustainability.
6. Continue to consider ways to encourage discussion and participation in the decision-making process of Presbytery, perhaps by greater utilisation of conference-style sessions.
7. Endeavour to better understand the reasons why there is a disparity in attendance and commitment to the work of Presbytery between Elders and Ministers, in order to find a way to address this effectively. This may involve a survey of Ministers.
8. Consider the current committee structure to balance the workload of each remit and the capacity of each committee's membership.

Appendix B

Summary Report for Presbytery Review of Perth Presbytery

Introduction

The review of the Presbytery of Perth began in October 2024 when members of the Review Group met with the Business Committee in the Presbytery Office to introduce themselves and the review. The team then attended a meeting of Presbytery in Kinross Parish Church in November and met with Presbyters throughout the day, chatting informally and hearing views. The Convener of the Presbytery Review Committee was invited to speak to Presbytery and introduce the Review Group members. Congregational Questionnaires were sent to five congregations around the legacy Presbyteries, with the aim of reflecting the breadth and depth of the life of Perth Presbytery. We met both OLMs and FTMWS as well as Session Clerks, treasurers and other elders and members of these five congregations, all online. At the end of the process we met, again online, with the Clerk and Depute Clerk, the Business Convener, Church and Community Convener and others, to go through and discuss the completed paperwork.

Report

The Presbytery of Perth was formed in 2023 through the union of five legacy Presbyteries. The new Presbytery includes coastal and farming areas, urban and rural parishes, three cities and many towns and villages. Rev Dr John Ferguson was appointed as Presbytery Clerk and he leads a team including a Depute Clerk, a communications officer, and a buildings officer. Presbytery meets four times a year for ordinary business, twice during the day and twice in the evening, with the opportunity for in person and online attendance.

In addition to the Presbytery Mission Plan, priority has been given, in these early years of Presbytery life, to bringing together people from a very wide geographical area, encouraging Ministers to meet, as well as Session Clerks, Treasurers and Safeguarding Conveners. This is both a pastoral and a practical outlook that has intended to help people get to know one another, share best practice and seek common solutions.

The weekly 'Friday Roundup' brings regular news and updates of what is happening in Presbytery to all congregations, a relatively simple medium which is widely praised and welcomed by Presbyters. Documents, policies and records are all up to date.

It is recognised that the geographical size of the new Presbytery allows people to 'hide' with some not attending Presbytery nor playing a part in its duties. The distance covered also means that some local knowledge is lost or misunderstood when decisions are made or issues discussed. There is recognition too that following the Covid pandemic, the requirements of Presbytery Mission Planning and the work needed to form the new Presbytery, there is a sense of weariness among leaders. There are also concerns around the ability of an increasing number of congregations to cover their costs.

However, praise was overwhelming for the Presbytery Clerk and his team, whose openness, hard work and availability have brought support, encouragement and possibility across both the Presbytery and the many ministries contained within it.

Main Observations

The following points were provided in the main report as a summary of the Review Group's work. The Review Group:

1. Thanks the members of Presbytery and congregations who engaged with the Review Group.
2. Commends the staff and Conveners for their work on behalf of the Presbytery.
3. Commends the members of the five legacy Presbyteries who worked together to form the new Presbytery of Perth.
4. Notes the concerns expressed around the workload of the Clerk and Depute Clerk, and the appreciation of their hard work and accessibility.
5. Commends the communication within the Presbytery, particularly the effectiveness of the Friday Roundup.
6. Commends the Presbytery on its provision of pastoral care to all in ministry, offering a variety of times and services where office holders can meet and share experience.
7. Encourages Presbyters to continue to attend and participate in Presbytery meetings, despite the distances involved in travelling.
8. Notes the appreciation expressed by congregations, in a variety of settings, around the help and assistance offered by other parts of the Presbytery and the positive effect this has brought to some who were struggling.
9. Notes the concerns expressed around the responsibility of every Presbyter being a Trustee.
10. Notes the expressed sense of weariness following changes both of Presbytery and the Presbytery Mission Plan.

Recommendations

Some further points were provided in the main report as a summary of the Review Team's work, as follows:

1. Review and reform of the Congregations in Unsatisfactory State Act at a national level would be welcomed by the Presbytery in order to aid and ease some local situations.
2. We commend and recommend the continuation of the outlook that Presbytery should be more than a court, and instead is seen as a body of support, care and encouragement for all within its bounds.
3. It is recommended that Presbytery seeks ways to encourage a wider and deeper participation of all its members, perhaps based more locally, and to find ways of encouraging attendance at Presbytery meetings, particularly in person.
4. We recommend imaginative thinking around the Giving to Grow contributions which are causing difficulties in an increasing number of congregations.