



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

Diocese of Chester

SSMs and Parish Vacancies: A Good Practice Guide

August 2024

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Please note:

The information provided in this brief guide, is to enable SSMs navigate life during a parish vacancy, when they find themselves without an Incumbent / Priest-in-Charge. Likewise, this guidance should also be noted by 'out-going' and 'in-coming' Incumbents / Priests-in-Charge, Churchwardens, and PCC members who minister with and alongside SSMs.

It is important to note that the information, advice, and guidance provided herein does not replace or supersede any existing diocesan policy pertaining to parish vacancies and/or any other HR policies or practice.

Finally, **this guidance should be read in conjunction with the 'SSM Handbook'**, that can be accessed on the SSM page of the diocesan website.

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Introduction

As a Diocese we are extremely grateful and indebted to all our SSMs for the rich ministry they offer and the multifarious ways in which they serve the Church and build the Kingdom of God.

Vacancies can be difficult for a parish, not least as the ongoing ministry and mission of the parish has still to carry on, despite the absence of an Incumbent / Priest-in-Charge. Thus, a vacancy – the period a parish is without an Incumbent or Priest-in-Charge (formerly known as an ‘Interregnum’) – can be both demanding and stressful for all concerned, not least any SSMs licenced to the parish, and the Churchwardens of that parish.

It is clear that during a vacancy the role of the SSM, as well as the Churchwardens and PCC, is key to ongoing mission and ministry.

It is for that reason **any SSM who finds themselves at a parish which is in, or about to be Vacant, is strongly encouraged to speak to the Bishop’s Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry at their earliest convenience.**

Essentially, there are four stages to any vacancy:

1. Pre-vacancy, once the Incumbent has announced their resignation
2. The Vacancy (proper)
3. Post-appointment, pending installation and licensing
4. Post-installation and licensing

Each stage of the Vacancy can bring challenges for the SSM, and Churchwardens, in particular, need to ensure sensitivity of approach and collaborative working at every opportunity.

As ever, the Bishop’s Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry and other colleagues at Church House and all the Bishop’s Staff in the Diocese – Bishops and Archdeacons – are available to support any SSM and/or Churchwarden going through this process, as is their Rural Dean, who has pastoral responsibility and oversight of the SSM at this time.

NB, if the SSM is a Curate-in-Training and/or still undergoing IME, they should NOT routinely assume any additional responsibility during any

Vacancy. Instead, they should first seek support from the Bishop's Adviser for Curate Development and Clergy Transition for more information.

1. Pre-Vacancy

a. Introduction

Following the announcement of the resignation of the Incumbent / Priest-in-Charge, decisions can be made re: the specific role and responsibilities the SSM will have during the vacancy.

However, care should be taken during this period, as the Incumbent / Priest-in-Charge remains in-post until their last day in office, and they should not be made to feel as though things are 'happening around them', over which they have no control.

It is fair to say that the role of an SSM during a parochial vacancy is often misunderstood. Legally, during any vacancy, responsibility for the parish falls to the 'sequestrators', that is the Churchwardens, and the Rural Dean. It is they who have overall responsibility for the parish in question, although the SSM does have spiritual authority, since they share the 'cure of souls' with the Bishop.

The Churchwardens do not have any line-management or supervisory responsibility for SSMs during s vacancy. The SSM remains accountable to the Archdeacons and Bishops.

Essentially, for practical matters, the SSM will work / minister under the direction of the sequestrators, as they, as well as any other members of the 'Ministry Team', have no legal responsibility for the everyday functioning of the parish.

Therefore, to avoid any misunderstandings, before the vacancy begins, the SSM, together with the Churchwardens and where possible, the Rural Dean, should meet to clarify roles and expectations. Thus, it is entirely appropriate that agreement is reached as to what the SSM might, could and should do, as well as not do, during the Vacancy.

Since the SSM is often expected to assume great responsibility for parochial matters, with no specific official authority, it is important that the below points are discussed with Churchwardens and the relevant Rural Dean.

b. The Ministry (and Training) Agreement:

The SSMs M(T)A should remain in place until such time as it is re-negotiated with the new Incumbent / Priest-in-Charge. However, it can be reviewed, in light of the impending vacancy –

- Will the SSM simply adhere to and honour the M(T)A as currently set out – that is, not assume any more responsibility or additional tasks during the vacancy?
Or:
- Will the M(T)A be supplemented by an additional document, detailing what the extra responsibilities of the SSM will be during the vacancy?

c. Agreeing Strategy

If the SSM is to assume greater responsibility, the following points should be considered:

1. **The PCC** – what role will the SSM have / hold at PCC meetings? Usually, the chair will be the nominated / elected lay vice-chair, who should already be in place. However, in certain cases, it is appropriate for the SSM to assume the chair of these meetings. If the SSM is to chair the PCC, there needs to be clarity as to why this is happening, and express permission must be sought from the Diocesan Bishop to ‘allow’ this to happen. Regardless of any decisions made, the SSM remains an ‘ex-officio’ member of the PCC
2. **Finance and Buildings** – what role will the SSM have in regard to finance and buildings? Ideally their input should be no more than that of being consulted and of being kept informed
3. **Sunday Worship** – what services will the SSM be expected to lead / preach at?
4. **Mid-week Worship** – what are the expectations around mid-week worship (e.g., Wednesday morning Holy Communion services)?
5. **Occasional Offices** – who will assume responsibility for these? There are organisational issues to consider, as well as who will actually take

any services – if the SSM is unavailable to take any of the occasional offices, who finds an alternative minister?

6. **Christmas & Easter** – at key points in the liturgical calendar when church life can be even busier (such as Christmas and Easter), what will the SSMs involvement be? What pattern of services will take place, will they be involved in these discussions and how will any 'additional' ministry be managed, such as Lent Study Groups, Advent Reflections etc.
7. **Worship / Ministry Rota** – will the SSM assume responsibility for compiling this, if not, how and when will they communicate their availability? Who decides hymns, and service content etc?
8. **Licensed Lay Ministers** (including Readers and Pastoral Workers) – unless these are paid employees (such as Children's Workers, see below) who will supervise LLMs, and decide their level of involvement? NB, any Ministry Agreement an LLM has, should be honoured as any agreement should for SSMs.
9. **Occasional Worship Leaders** – as with any LLMs, who will supervise them and decide their level of involvement?
10. **Cover** – if the SSM is not available for services and/or parochial work (due to holidays, illness, prior commitments, secular employment etc) who finds 'cover', and what procedures, if any, should be implemented in terms of keeping the SSM in the loop, as to what other ministers are active within the parish?
11. **Pastoral Care** – including visits to care homes, hospitals etc. What will be the arrangements for this and how will the SSM be kept informed re: any information pertaining to pastoral care and need within the parish?
12. **Children and Schools Work** – what will the role of the SSM be in this respect, will they have any oversight of this work and what might their commitment, in terms of, for example, taking collective worship in

school(s) be? Ideally, the SSM should never assume the role of Chair of Governors, as per Diocesan DBE guidance

13. **Paid Church Employees** – the SSM, as clergy not in receipt of a stipend, and not the Incumbent of the parish (even if they were ‘selected’ under incumbent, rather than assistant status) should not line-manage paid church employees, so as to avoid any issues under employment law
14. **Communication within the Parish** – how will effective communication be ensured between the SSM and the Churchwardens (and, where appropriate, the relevant Rural Dean)? How often will meetings take place and how will decisions be taken?
15. **Communication to the Parish** – will the SSM be expected to write articles for parish magazines, websites, newsletters and the like? What form should this work take?
16. **Other parish events** – what involvement will the SSM have in any other parish events, such as social evenings, groups, fund-raising, visioning, working parties etc?
17. **Community Events / Meetings** – where the church has interests and representation on community groups, will the SSM be involved in any of these – what role will they play and what are the expectations?
18. **Support** – what support will be offered to the SSM to enable them to carry out any additional responsibilities within the parish? What will this ‘support’ actually ‘look like’?
19. **The Parish Profile** – see Section 2 below

How these revised duties and expectations are recorded and/or set out are down to the parish in question, but it should be shared with the Rural Dean in the first instance. It may also be appropriate to share this document, for information and/or comment, with the relevant Archdeacon and/or the Bishop’s Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry. There is a suggested template (see Appendix

2) that SSMs may however wish to use to capture any additional responsibilities and duties as agreed.

It is worth stating that the SSM should never be expected to assume responsibility or be involved in all of the above, but they should be included, informed and consulted when decisions are made, not least as they are licenced to the parish in question.

The SSM has the right to request any agreement entered into during a vacancy be amended to reflect any changes in circumstances, and any such requests should, in the first instance, be made to the Rural Dean.

Regardless of any 'supplementary' additions to the M(T)A, in terms of workload for the SSM, **it should be made clear to parishes, in most, if not all cases, a vacancy doesn't mean 'business as usual' and SSMs cannot and should not simply be expected to fulfil the role of a full-time Vicar!**

NB, the Churchwardens do not have any line-management or supervisory responsibility for SSMs during s vacancy. The SSM remains accountable to the Archdeacons and Bishops.

Finally, parishes and Churchwardens need to be clear that the SSM is entitled to time off and holidays.

2. The Vacancy

NB, the Churchwardens do not have any line-management or supervisory responsibility for SSMs during a vacancy. The SSM remains accountable to the Archdeacons and Bishops.

a. Background

There is a delicate balancing act to be achieved during the actual vacancy –

- Care should be taken to ensure that Churchwardens in particular, are not ‘disenfranchised’ of their status and responsibility by the SSM, with regard to their leadership during the vacancy
- Equally, Churchwardens should ensure the SSM is fully included, involved and consulted and that communication is open, clear and transparent.

b. Agreed Strategy

The ‘strategy’ for managing the vacancy should have been agreed between the SSM and the Churchwardens, in consultation with the Rural Dean, and where appropriate the relevant Archdeacon and/or the Bishop’s Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry.

Part 1 of this guide details things that SSMs, Churchwardens and parishes may wish to consider and agree before the vacancy begins, although the list is not exhaustive.

As part of that strategy, it is entirely appropriate that liturgical matters (e.g., worship rotas, arranging baptisms etc.) may be devolved to an SSM, but it is of paramount importance that all remember the SSM is not legally ‘in-charge’ of the parish. Equally, the SSM must ensure the ‘status-quo’ is maintained and service patterns, policies, procedures etc. are not changed ahead any appointment.

c. The Parish Profile

Under no circumstances should any clergy licensed to serve within a parish that is in vacancy, as stipendiary or as SSMs (this also includes clergy in receipt of PTO and retired, that is, not active, clergy), be appointed or nominated to serve as the 'Parish Representatives'. They may however take part in PCC meetings and be asked to *contribute* to the Parish Profile, but they certainly should not write it.

It is important that the Parish Profile, when created, includes detailed reference to SSMs and the contribution they make – this goes in part to ensure expectations are understood, in terms of the SSM's contribution, even before any formal interviews have taken place.

It is **not enough** to simply state that there is an SSM in the parish and give their name, include a photograph etc.

d. Pastoral Care of SSMs

It is the Rural Dean's responsibility to provide pastoral support and oversight of SSMs in a parish in vacancy within their deanery, in the first instance.

That said, Parishes and Churchwardens should be aware that the vacancy and the process of finding of a new Incumbent are key times of change and can also be sources of great concern for SSMs. Thus, it is clear that PCCs and Churchwardens can help by:

- Ensuring all SSMs are *included* in discussions and *contribute* towards the drafting of the Parish Profile
- Ensuring the role(s) and scope of the ministry the SSM undertakes is *clearly and explicitly referred to* in the role description and/or the parish profile
- Ensuring existing Ministry (and Training) Agreements are upheld during the vacancy, with a view to the agreement being renegotiated within the first year of any new incumbency
- Ensuring any areas of additional responsibility held temporarily (e.g., co-ordinating worship) during the vacancy are documented, acknowledged and discussed with sensitivity

Additional support, information, advice and guidance is also always available from the Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ministry, as well as all the staff at Church House, as required and requested.

e. The Appointment Process

For the actual appointment process, the SSM should have no involvement.

However, it is entirely right that candidates may meet with the SSM ahead of any formal interviews, to provide an opportunity for them to ask any questions of the SSM, either about the Parish, or the ministerial contribution they make. It is clear the SSM in this context, can often hold the 'collective memory' of ministry and mission in the Parish, as well as to provide useful insights, intelligence and history. Equally, this also gives the SSM a 'feel' for those candidates being interviewed.

SSMs should ask the relevant Archdeacon, in the first instance, if it is appropriate for them to meet candidates, if it is their wish to do so, ahead of the actual interviews. NB, this may not always be possible, but good practice dictates this should happen more often than not.

If during the appointment process, there is an opportunity for candidates to meet 'key people' within the Parish (besides the Parish Representatives), it is expected the SSM should routinely be included as a matter of course.

3. Post-Appointment, Pending Installation and Licensing

It is good practice for the SSM to meet at least twice with the appointee and begin to forge a positive working relationship before the actual installation and licensing service. These meetings can take place in person or online, as need dictates.

The appointee and the SSM need to be aware of each other's sensitivities and acknowledge the changing roles and dynamics that this new relationship will bring.

It is important that the SSM gives:

- An overview of their involvement, as detailed in their M(T)A
- An overview of any additional responsibilities they have assumed for the period of the vacancy

It is also appropriate to discuss ways in which the licensing service / Induction could include the SSM and acknowledge the role(s) played by SSMs as the new incumbent / Priest-in-Charge begins their work.

During the Licensing Service, the SSM should always be invited to robe, as well as to speak during the 'Welcome'. It may also be appropriate for the SSM to join any processions around the church, during the *Act of Dedication*. This should however be discussed and agreed with the relevant Rural Dean and/or Archdeacon beforehand.

4. Post-Installation and Licensing

It is hoped parishes would want to thank the SSM and recognise the work they have undertaken during the Vacancy.

After a period of no more than one year, it is appropriate for the Ministry (and Training) Agreement to be reviewed.

SSMs should be careful not to 'drop' any additional responsibilities as soon as the new Incumbent / Priest-in-Charge assumes their new role but ensure a smooth and managed transfer of ministry / tasks, under the guidance of their new Incumbent / Priest-in-Charge.

The appointment of a new Incumbent / Priest-in-Charge can be unsettling for an SSM. If the SSM feels unhappy in post following a new appointment, it is suggested they give things time to settle. However, if any perceived issues continue, they should feel free to consult the Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry in the first instance for further support and guidance.

Conclusion

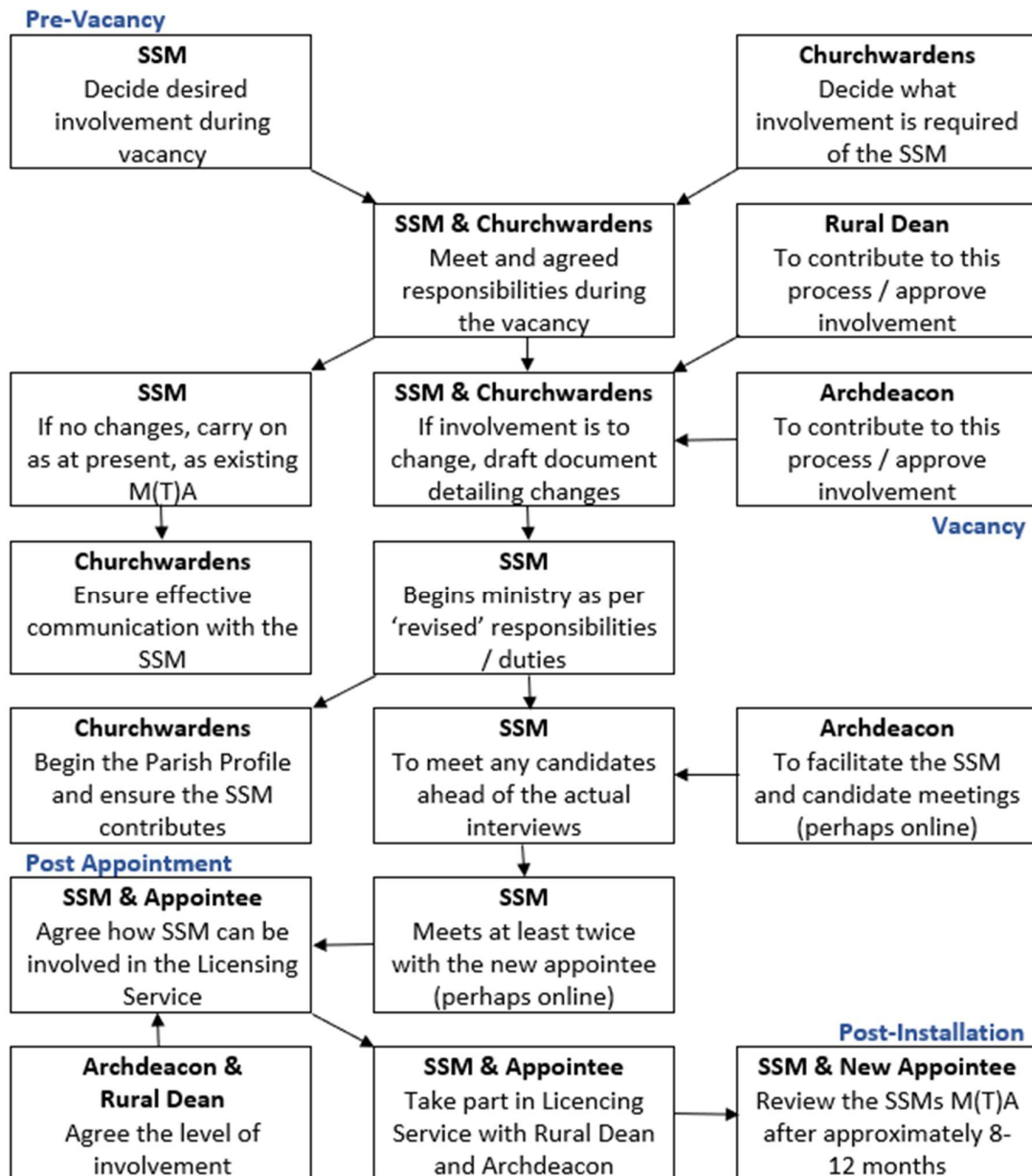
It is hoped the information above provides some clarity around SSMs and their role and status during a vacancy.

Please remember, during a vacancy, the absence of an Incumbent or Priest-in-Charge can put huge strain on the parish. SSMs, Churchwardens and PCCs are respectfully advised to be patient with one another and seek clarity of expectation, openness, transparency and effective communication at all times.

Finally, regarding Vacancies in their broadest sense, SSMs, Churchwardens and Rural Deans may wish to consult the Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry for further support and guidance in these matters and should feel entirely free to do so.

Appendix 1: Process Flowchart

Simplified 'flow-chart', detailing the above processes. Fuller detail can be found elsewhere in this publication.



The Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry is available to advise and/or assist with any aspect of the above process.

Appendix 2: Supplementary MA for use during a Vacancy

Supplementary Ministry Agreement for Self-Supporting Clergy (only for use during a Parish Vacancy)



NB, whatever 'supplementary' agreement is reached, the SSMs current MA remains in place and current. For SSMs still undergoing IME and/or designated as Curate-in-Training, please seek guidance from the Bishop's Adviser for Curate Development in the first instance.

The 'Supplementary' Ministry Agreement for SSMs during the vacancy period

When drawing up a 'Supplementary' Ministry Agreement (MA), clergy are reminded to read the relevant section of the 'SSM Handbook', as well as the 'SSMs and Parish Vacancies' booklet that can be found on the Diocesan website.

It is important that when drawing up any supplementary agreement, that reference is made to the SSMs current Ministry Agreement and Statement of Particulars (SOP) for those who are licenced (not in receipt of PTO).

NB, this template is for use by SSMs whose parish(es) are either about to go into vacancy or else are already in vacancy. The contents need to be agreed with the relevant Churchwardens, and the Rural Dean.

Name of SSM	<i>Enter name here...</i>
In the Parish, the SSM is to be known as	<i>Curate, Assistant Priest, Associate minister etc</i>
Name of Rural Dean	<i>Enter name here...</i>

Contact details (preferred email and phone details for contact regarding parish matters)	Home: Mobile: Email:
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The PCC

1. Will the SSM attend PCCs during the Vacancy?	YES	NO
2. Will the SSM chair the PCC?	YES	NO
<i>Please state the rationale for this decision and ensure permission has been obtained from the Diocesan Bishop if the SSM is to chair these meetings:</i>		
3. Will the SSM 'lead from the second chair'?	YES	NO
<i>Please detail any other role or responsibilities the SSM will have with regard to the PCC during the Vacancy:</i>		

Finance and Buildings

1. Will the SSM be consulted re: finance and buildings	YES	NO
<i>Please state what this will 'look like':</i>		

Sunday Worship

1. Will the SSM be expected to lead / preach more regularly than the current MA states?	YES	NO
<i>Please detail what an 'average' month will 'look like':</i>		
2. Will the SSM plan / craft 'special services' on Sunday?	YES	NO
<i>What are these:</i>		

Mid-week Worship

1. Will the SSM lead mid-week worship?	YES	NO
<i>When and how often:</i>		

Occasional Offices

1. Will the SSM take baptisms?	YES	NO
2. Will the SSM take weddings / wedding blessings?	YES	NO
3. Will the SSM take funerals?	YES	NO
4. Will the SSM take Interment of Ashes services?	YES	NO
5. Will the SSM co-ordinate all the above?	YES	NO

<i>Please provide more detail:</i>		
6. Will the SSM receive support with occasional offices?	YES	NO
<i>What will this support 'look like'?</i>		

Christmas & Easter

1. Will the SSM take responsibility for Advent / Christmas and Lent / Easter services and/or other events?	YES	NO
<i>Please detail what:</i>		

Worship / Ministry Rota

1. Will the SSM prepare the Worship Rota?	YES	NO
<i>If 'yes' what are the parameters under which it is compiled? If 'no', how will the SSM communicate their availability, and to whom?</i>		

Licensed Lay Ministers & Occasional Worship Leaders

1. Will the SSM supervise LLMs within the parish?	YES	NO
2. Will the SSM supervise any OWLs?	YES	NO
3. Will the SSM determine involvement (notwithstanding any MAs these people may hold) of LLMs and OWLs?	YES	NO
<i>Please detail what any arrangements will be:</i>		

Cover

1. Will the SSM be expected to find cover for services they cannot take – Sunday, Occasional Offices etc?	YES	NO
2. Will the SSM be informed as, when and if any other clergy, LLMs etc from other parishes assist with parochial duties?	YES	NO
<i>Please detail what any arrangements will be:</i>		

Pastoral Care

1. Will the SSM have oversight of pastoral care within the parish?	YES	NO
2. Will the SSM be expected undertake pastoral visiting at parishioners' homes?	YES	NO
3. Will the SSM have oversight of pastoral care to those in care homes, hospitals or in a hospice?	YES	NO
4. Will the SSM be expected undertake pastoral visiting to those in care homes, hospitals or in a hospice?	YES	NO
5. Will the SSM be informed of any matters pertaining to pastoral care within the parish?	YES	NO

Please give more details in this box:

Children and Schools Work

1. Will the SSM carry out any work in schools?	YES	NO
2. Will the SSM conduct any other work with children and youth and families?	YES	NO
3. Will the SSM co-ordinate any of this work?	YES	NO

Please detail what any arrangements will be:

Paid Church Employees

The SSM should never line-manage paid church employees. Detail below how the SSM will relate to them during the vacancy:

Communication within the Parish

1. Will the SSM meet regularly with the Churchwardens?	YES	NO
2. Will the SSM meet regularly with the Rural Dean?	YES	NO

Please detail what any arrangements will be:

Communication to the Parish

1. Will the SSM write articles for newssheets, magazines and the like?	YES	NO
<i>Please provide details around expectations and work:</i>		

Other parish events

1. Will the SSM be involved in other parish events, such as social evenings, fund raising, working parties etc?	YES	NO
<i>Please provide details around expectations and work:</i>		

Community Events / Meetings

1. Will the SSM be involved in community events and/or meetings?	YES	NO
<i>Please provide details around expectations and work:</i>		

Support

Please detail what additional support will be available to the SSM in order to assist them with the above additional responsibilities:

The Parish Profile

Please detail briefly how the SSM will be referenced in the Profile, as well as what their involvement will be in drafting it:

Signed and dated:	<i>SSM - Enter name</i>	<i>Date</i>
Signed and dated:	<i>Rural Dean - Enter name</i>	<i>Date</i>
Signed and dated:	<i>Churchwarden - Enter name</i>	<i>Date</i>
Signed and dated:	<i>Churchwarden - Enter name</i>	<i>Date</i>

