

CHURCHES TOGETHER IN ENGLAND

A guide to understanding *A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission*

1. The implementation of *A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission* is a process, rather than something with a distinct starting point. It is a shift in thinking more than a completely new departure. It introduces flexibility and recognizes the creativity of those acting on the ground. Indeed, the document is rooted in pastoral need and is a response to experience at local level which highlighted the inadequacy of old structures in a new ecumenical landscape. So *A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission* is itself part of a process of change and development, not the start of something radically new.
2. Key to understanding the document is the first word of its title, the article. So easy to omit in the cause of brevity, referring to the document as *the* 'flexible framework', runs the risk of setting up misunderstanding from the outset. Crucially, this is 'a' flexible framework, indicating many possibilities and permitting a less bureaucratic approach. No longer must ecumenical partnerships be shoehorned into six clear categories, a rigid framework with little flexibility, fine if it fitted but unhelpful if it didn't. The image chosen to illustrate *A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission* is a modern, rope, climbing frame, one which offers flexible support, moving and adapting according to need, allowing creativity, self-expression and joyful fulfilment. Indeed, *A Flexible Framework* should be a springboard for innovation and creativity!
3. It is tempting to try to summarise the document in this guidance note but doing so would circumvent the nuances of *A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission*. The document itself must be read. A helpful overview is provided by the paper *A Flexible Framework in brief*. Becoming familiar with that enables understanding of the full document. Both can be downloaded from www.cte.org.uk/AFlexibleFramework
4. Having said that, it is worth noting that those newer to local working together may well wonder what all the fuss is about. They come to the document without historical baggage and, we hope, will find it helpful and enabling. They don't need to un-learn assumptions though they may need to accept that some structures are prudent for responsible stewardship. All those responsible for the new local co-operative working will find it fruitful to be in, as it were, listening and affirming mode, while also ensuring that key things are done, especially recording both what has been decided (so that people are clear about it and can remember!) and also what are the lines of accountability.
5. It is also worth recognising that many of the suggested requirements are dictated not by the Churches, but by the state. For example, charities have obligations when they pool resources and legislation protects employees and the general public. Churches encourage good employment practices, child protection structures and care for health and safety etc, but it is the law of the land which demands them.
6. Those Churches which have a long experience of local collaborative working will, we hope, find *A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission* liberating, but they may well need first to adjust to its presuppositions. It is some years since all were agreed that formal Local



Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) were the Holy Grail, as it were, and most accept that they are but one (important) tool in the ecumenical toolbox. In the past, it seemed as if looking at one of the six types of LEPs was the starting point for local working together. *A Flexible Framework* turns this upside down and begins with what churches *want* to do together and with what is *needed* to enable and safeguard that. It is rooted in the local situation and only involves wider Church structures when it is prudent and necessary to do so. *A Flexible Framework* also explicitly recognises what is, perhaps, obvious, that sometimes a short-term and/or informal agreement is all that is needed. It moves us away from an 'off the peg' solution to one which ensures creativity and is tailor-made to a particular situation.

7. A further shift in *A Flexible Framework* is the recognition that it is the Churches which are responsible for the various ways in which they work together, not the ecumenical instruments. This is particularly relevant to formal LEPs which expect Intermediate Bodies, acting as Sponsoring Bodies, to review them. Work needs to be done here on how precisely this works out in practice but holding onto this insight, which is key to the *Churches Together* model of Christian unity, will be crucial. Work also needs to be done on reviewing the different categories of Local Ecumenical Partnerships. Single congregations and shared buildings (perhaps when they involve shared finance, buildings and ministry) may continue to require a formal constitutional agreement, but other existing LEPs, especially Covenanted Partnerships, may wish to consider whether a lighter-touch agreement would be more appropriate. *A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission* offers three examples and stresses that other models are possible. Central to deciding what agreement is needed is a recognition of who the authorities are for each partner church and when they need to become involved.
8. While they don't need formal paperwork, it is nevertheless prudent for lighter-touch agreements to have a certain degree of formalization (an e-mail summarising the arrangement for example), is still necessary as a service to participants so they can focus their minds and have a written record to remind them later of what was mutually decided.
9. Just as Church authorities may need to become involved at the start of an agreement, so, too, may they need to be engaged as the work continues. Different denominations have different understandings, and therefore different structures, of ongoing oversight and those involved in working together need to be aware of this if pitfalls are to be avoided. Partners need to explain to each other to whom they are accountable and need to ensure that the appropriate authorities are appropriately engaged. Whatever our different ecclesiologies, oversight happens, and is a crucial element in good stewardship.
10. In some places Churches may wish to ask an Intermediate Body or Sponsoring Body to carry out part of the task of oversight and this often works extremely well. County Ecumenical Officers and Intermediate Bodies offer ecumenical expertise which the Churches can use and can also proactively remind the Churches of reviews which need to be undertaken. Nevertheless, oversight remains the responsibility of the Church authorities, even if they have commissioned another body to do some of the work for them. And in some areas of England Church Leaders have allowed Intermediate Bodies to become weaker and less effective so that it is not possible for them to act as agents of oversight on their behalf.
11. Just as important as the first word of the document is its last: mission. While it is good and admirable that Churches want to come together in obedience to Christ's desire that 'all may be one', that is not enough. The real imperative is mission, reaching out to others 'that all may believe'. *A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission* makes explicit what has often been implicit, responds to those fired by the urgency of missional activity and is a reminder that deeply rooted in Christian tradition is the idea that we are judged by our fruits: 'If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.' Mission is the fruit of unity and unity the fruit of mission.