

## Ministry Council: Periodic External Review Follow-up Report

### St Stephen's House, Oxford

Conducted onsite, November 2022

Published 2023 by the Ministry Development Team of the Archbishops' Council  
Copyright © The Archbishops' Council 2023

Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3AZ

Switchboard: +44(0)20 7898 1000 Email: [ministry@churchofengland.org](mailto:ministry@churchofengland.org)

Website: [www.churchofengland.org](http://www.churchofengland.org)

The Archbishops' Council of the Church of England is a registered charity

# Senior Reviewer's Follow-up Report to the 2021 Periodic External Review of St Stephen's House, Oxford

## Introduction

### *Periodic External Review of St Stephen's House*

The Periodic External Review of St Stephen's House took place in November 2021 when reviewers appointed by the national Ministry Development Team met staff, students, Council members and a number of other stakeholders during a couple of two-day visits during that month. Prior to that the Senior Reviewer conducted an online exploratory conversation with the principal. After the onsite visits were completed the Senior Reviewer met online with the chair of the House Council.

The introduction to the PER report, published in the Spring of 2022, made some general observations which set the wider context for the PER. First, that St Stephen's House was preparing for a transition away from having the status of Permanent Private Hall (PPH) of the University of Oxford – the key reason being that the University would no longer permit a PPH to deliver another university's academic awards, which SSH does in common with many of the Church of England's ministry training institutions in offering Durham University's Common Awards programmes.

Second, that the national context for the Anglo-Catholic tradition of the Church of England was (and continues to be) a challenging one in general and for St Stephen's House in particular, something indicated by the relatively low number of ordinands seeking to train residentially and on roll at St Stephen's.

Third, that there is a challenge both for St Stephen's House to present its theological training offer in ways that enable it to be accessible to a wider range of ordinands, especially in the Catholic tradition, than it appears to be currently.

St Stephen's House achieved a positive result with the overall outcome of Confidence with Qualifications. In two categories – Formational Context and Community, and Teaching and Learning - the outcome was Confidence.

A number of commendations were identified by the reviewers. These included a strong affirmation of the creative work now being offered by the Edward King Centre for Pastoral Theology which is reaching out strongly and providing a focus for Anglo-Catholic theological reflection; the richness of daily worship that inculcates a discipline in the prayer life of the community and its members; the high quality of theological reflection demonstrated by students on placement; and the offer of a formational environment where diversity is welcomed and debate is encouraged.

The recommendations offered by the PER report reflect the challenges that St Stephen's House faces at present and will continue to face, including ones that encourage reflection and action in the communication of all that St Stephen's House has to offer the wider church.

*PER Follow UP Review*

St Stephen's House was requested to develop an action plan covering the recommendations set out in the final report. The action plan was reviewed with the principal at the end of November 2022 and the Senior Reviewer wishes to thank Canon Robin Ward for the detailed discussion held and also for the amount of work that St Stephen's House core staff and Council have already given to the recommendations. Some of the recommendations require considerable reshaping of the language and communication style being used to ensure that the key messages of what St Stephen's House offers are heard more effectively. Other recommendations were to do with governance systems including the development of one comprehensive business plan to guide strategic development.

Note that the methodology I have used to make this action plan review has been to take the St Stephen's House response to each recommendation in order and extend their commentary to include a summary of my discussion with the principal.

I am satisfied that all the recommendations have been addressed or are in the process of being attended to. I note that there are at least two recommendations to which considerable and careful thought has been given but which has resulted in the recommendation not being adopted. In these cases, I trust that the discussion itself has produced renewed intentionality about existing practice and that the reviewers' reflections have proved helpful to the development of the structures and mission of the college. I would continue to encourage St Stephen's House to address the important task of continuing to communicate effectively its distinctive theological education offer not only for the benefit of the Anglican Catholic constituency and the wider church, but also for the missional and ministerial benefit of its students.

In summary I conclude that the St Stephen's House team are responding effectively to the PER of November 2021. The reflections and actions taken are to be commended and I look forward to learning about the medium and longer term impact on both the college and the wider church in the future.

The Very Rev'd Dr Peter Robinson, Senior Reviewer  
February 2023

## St Stephen's House's response to the 2021 PER recommendations

The 2021 report's 20 recommendations are set out below in **bold**. Each is followed by text in regular type representing both the response by St Stephen's House (SSH) and the Senior Reviewer's assessment of progress to date.

### Recommendation 1

**We recommend that SSH should make a clear and central statement of its formational aims on its website and in the prospectus, using the wording from the Formational Scene Setter document and from the 2018 Common Award PER document.**

This work is being undertaken as part of a complete overhaul and re-stating of the college's outward facing media, including the Edward King Centre for Pastoral Theology and the proposed Sacred Music Institute. The college intends completing this work by the end of Hilary Term 2023 and is on target to achieve this goal.

### Recommendation 2

**We recommend that SSH makes further efforts to grow its recruitment, engaging in different and creative ways with a wider range of dioceses.**

The college continues to engage with a range of dioceses and the overall number is increasing. This is happening through a more systematic and regular range of contacts with DDOs, and a more versatile offer of visiting opportunities for candidates, for example through more flexible arrangements for open days. Recruitment for the academic year 2022-23 included two female candidates in their 40s for whom the college was able to source funding for full time training, and one candidate from an Australian diocese.

### Recommendation 3

**We recommend that staff development time should be given to developing the already evident good practice across the staff team in engaging with those of a range of educational backgrounds.**

This continues to be a priority, and the recruitment of external candidates for the Common Awards MA has demonstrated that college staff have developed the capacity to teach via Zoom and support candidates in a parish setting who are some years past their previous experience of formal education. Staff development training has been held with regard to more effective online education and also the embedding of study skills. A training day has been held for staff in respect of teaching and learning for those on the autism spectrum. There is a developing programme to use former students, located in their own parishes as visiting lecturers. This creates a 'pop-up' SSH experience in a parish setting, gathering local people together around a learning experience animated by the former student, and which is also available online. It is anticipated that this new form of learning will draw in a wider range of students into the college's life.

#### **Recommendation 4**

**We recommend that through activities such as its open days, SSH begins to see itself more closely allied to the wider Church of England in promoting vocations. This may involve, for example, a review of the language, phrases, and expressions it uses to ensure that the inclusivity that is so evident in the College begins to be better understood by the wider world.**

The college is undertaking this in conjunction with implementing Recommendation 1, using in particular the new Annual Self Evaluation external adviser as a sounding board. Progress in this area is evident in the recruitment of new communications skills into the SSH senior team, as is a recent advert in the Church Times for SSH open days.

#### **Recommendation 5**

**We recommend that the placement pattern for each student includes serious engagement with Church traditions they are less familiar with. For example, it might mean every student having one of their placements in a less familiar tradition. This should be monitored by the staff responsible for the placements.**

The Principal reported that this recommendation has been carefully considered and consciously reviewed since the PER. It was felt this was largely the case in SSH's existing practice, and will continue. The termly formational review is already in place which reviews placement progress for each student and ensures that any specific recommendations in the candidate's BAP report are covered, and comments from Bishops and DDOs are taken into account in placement selection. Quite a range of placements are available and undertaken within the Evangelical tradition and every effort is taken to ensure that individual placements complement participation in any group placement undertaken.

#### **Recommendation 6**

**We recommend that the College considers adding explicit policies on Consent and Confidentiality.**

The college has adopted the University of Oxford *Guidance on Confidentiality in Student Health and Welfare* Policy, which is published in the College Handbook and on the College website.

#### **Recommendation 7**

**We recommend that the College considers recruiting a house chaplain (potentially on a voluntary or House for Duty basis) to cater for the spiritual and pastoral needs of ordinands, their spouses, and families.**

The House Council has considered this but has chosen to retain the current practice of ensuring that all students both new and continuing and their families are provided with clear guidance about spiritual direction, confession and pastoral support from clergy who are local, and clear scheduled times of regular visits from the local incumbent. This carefully considered decision was reached in consultation with

student representatives and SSH will continue on an ongoing basis to explore with the student body and spouses their pastoral needs and how they are met.

### **Recommendation 8**

**We recommend that the College considers, as the make-up of the House naturally changes and evolves, that measures are put in place to ensure that the current healthy dialogue and mutual tolerance of both ordinands and staff is maintained, and new options for eucharistic presidency and gender inclusion are considered.**

The college continues to review this: in each year the balance of views on this issue changes within the student body, but so far the existing practice which has been in place for the past two decades seems the most appropriate way of ensuring the qualities of dialogue and tolerance remain in place. SSH's leadership is clear that there is a consultative framework to enable this discussion through a termly meeting with the Vice-Principal, group conveners and ordinand representatives who collect feedback. The minutes of this meeting are reviewed by the core staff.

### **Recommendation 9**

**We recommend that SSH considers the relative roles of Trustees and Members and whether there is merit in appointing Members who are not Trustees to provide additional scrutiny of the trustees' work.**

This has been reviewed by the House Council and they have determined that this is not possible under the Articles of Association (8.1) – 'The Trustees from time to time shall be the only members ...'. Two new trustees have been appointed, each of whom have brought key skills into the governing body, and also addressed the gender balance of the Council. The Council is aware that new appointments to its number help to commend SSH to a broader range of audiences.

### **Recommendation 10**

**In the light of the work of the Chairman's Strategy Group, we recommend that Trustees review their committee structure to ensure they have the most effective way of working given the future challenges for SSH.**

The House Council has considered this and is giving attention to the recruitment of new members to the Finance and General Purposes Committee and the replacement of the dormant Fundraising Committee with a Development Circle. The Council can use its power to appoint members to these committees who are not themselves members of the Council, which also contributes to the fulfilling of the additional scrutiny part of Recommendation 9. Recognising that a number of House Council members have already served extended terms of office the renewed composition of its committees is considered to be a high priority by the Council.

### **Recommendation 11**

**We recommend that the trustees reshape the Council’s agenda to allow regular quality time together in reserved business without staff present.**

This has been carefully considered by the SSH Council. The college decided on incorporation to continue the governance model of the unincorporated Trust by having Staff and Student trustees with the same responsibilities and duties as the other trustees. Reserved business at meetings is restricted to confidential employment material.

The Chairman of the Council has the opportunity to present the outcomes of the Principal’s annual review for discussion without staff and students present at the Michaelmas meeting of the Council.

### **Recommendation 12**

**Following the end of PPH status, we recommend that the House Council explores working with an external coach/consultant to review its work programme and strategic priorities.**

The College intends undertaking work to undertake this review when the new Senior Tutor arrives in Hilary Term. Already in place are a significant review of the curriculum to reduce excessive workload and complexity, and the recruitment of new House Council members in the light of the skills and diversity audit. Steps have already been taken to identify a consultant to review work programmes and strategic priorities. There has been a change of bursar and so the timing is right with a new senior team in place. The target start date for a consultancy process is in the first half of 2023.

### **Recommendation 13**

**We recommend that the Trustees carry out a thorough skills and diversity audit.**

Led by a member of the SSH Council this has been completed and was discussed at the residential meeting of the House Council in September 2022. It has already informed the appointment of new trustees. Through the audit the Council recognises that the composition of its group of Research Fellows lacks diversity and is embarking on a process of ensuring future diversity in this part of the college’s life and work.

### **Recommendation 14**

**We recommend that the Trustees consider the creation of a Nominations Committee to review current membership of the House Council and its committees.**

The House Council has carefully considered this recommendation at its residential meeting in September 2022 but decided to retain its current practice of considering nominations as a whole body. It took into account the relative smallness of the House Council and members desire to work on the need for diversity, particular skill sets and fresh thinking together.

### **Recommendation 15**

**We recommend that the Development Committee should produce one document to set out clearly and to hold SSH’s vision, objectives, strategy, and planned outcomes including the development of the Edward King Centre for Pastoral Theology.**

There is currently no Development Committee, and this work is being undertaken in conjunction with Recommendation 1. It also interfaces with the deployment of a consultant who will enable thinking and planning on strategic priorities (Recommendation 12). The intention is to create a business plan that draws everything under this recommendation together into one document and it is planned to bring this to the first House Council of 2023.

### **Recommendation 16**

**We recommend that the Core staff and House Council develop and agree a written policy on staff development, including study leave.**

A staff development policy is being prepared, and the principal is currently researching examples of good practice from other institutions.

In respect of the sabbatical leave provision for academic staff, this is linked to the policy adopted by many of the Oxford Colleges through the University of Oxford Associate Professors (Tutorial Fellow - College) organisation, formerly the *Common University Fund*. This makes provision for one term of study leave following every six terms taught. This provision was maintained until the COVID pandemic and will come back into operation in Trinity Term 2023.

### **Recommendation 17**

**Given that the Church places significant emphasis on developing the qualities of being ‘relational, missional, collaborative, diverse and adaptive’ in its trainees and ministers, we recommend that SSH reviews its publicity materials to communicate more clearly how these qualities are developed through its formational programmes.**

This is being carried out in conjunction with Recommendation 2 and 4.

### **Recommendation 18**

**We recommend that SSH seeks to develop and celebrate a more fully articulated and disseminated Anglo Catholic theology and practice of mission, as a gift to the wider Church and to assist in the deeper missional formation of students.**

The move from Oxford qualifications to the Common Award over the last decade, and the recruitment of external candidates working largely in parish ministry, has enabled the college to address missional practice more systematically in curriculum design and delivery. This process continues, in collaboration with academic and funding partners.



The vehicles for responding to deepening an engagement with Anglo-Catholic theology are found in the modules being developed for the MA programme, and also in the development of the Edward King Centre for Pastoral Theology which will enable new audiences to gather. The Institute for Sacred Music is to be launched in early 2023, there are plans to deepen an engagement with Canon Law and a MA programme in Theology and Liturgy is being explored. The ‘pop-up’ theological education experiences through parishes (see Recommendation 3) are also part of the response to this recommendation. One challenge that the college acknowledges is the drawing of all these elements together into a coherent whole in the light of a small core team.

### **Recommendation 19**

**We recommend that SSH reviews how it can encourage the diversifying and deepening of participation in and leading of worship, formal and informal, including appropriate reflection to follow up.**

SSH have reviewed their practice in the light of this recommendation. The college continues to ensure that this is the case through group and individual placements, in conjunction with the implementation of Recommendation 5. Each student undertakes a liturgical audit on arrival at SSH to inform the planning of their training pathway. The leading of diverse acts of worship is actively monitored throughout a student’s time at SSH. There are also opportunities for students to practise leading diverse forms of worship in the Catholic tradition within the pastoral structures of SSH. As the college returned following the Covid restrictions there have been a number of student initiatives within college life for exploring different forms of worship. These have become part of college life without becoming obligatory.

### **Recommendation 20**

**We recommend that the staff and students of SSH review the options for tutorial support, with particular attention to the more personal elements of formation.**

Recent staff changes have given an opportunity for review and consolidation of tutorial provision in this respect, and retraining in the light of the new formational criteria at BAP. This is an area of work that is being taken forward in the new year with the appointment of the new Senior Tutor. Lessons learned from the experience of the pandemic will be incorporated into this review.