

**GENERAL SYNOD****House of Bishops Transparency Group: interim report****Summary**

This paper reports on the work of the Transparency Group and sets out the steps the House of Bishops has approved to be undertaken to increase transparency.

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**Background**

1. In answers to Synod questions 173-174 from February 2024 the Archbishop of York explained that the House of Bishops had established a working group to advise it on steps to be taken in relation to transparency and Standing Order 14. The answers set out the terms of reference of that group.

**Interim report**

2. The House of Bishops has approved the proposals in the interim report attached. The particular proposals are for publication of the minutes of meetings of the House of Bishops and for publication of the analysis and information that the House has had to support making decisions. The House will continue to meet without public attendance and will amend its standing orders to be honest that it is doing so. The House will also propose changes to Canon H 3 and other legislation where necessary to allow acting diocesan bishops to vote. Some of these can be implemented immediately, some will require changes to Standing Orders and to legislation, as set out in the report.
3. The working group has identified some additional areas it wishes to attend to around the role of the House and on the role of the participant observers of Global Majority Heritage. It will report further once these have been undertaken.

Simon Gallagher, Director of the Central Secretariat

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## HOUSE OF BISHOPS TRANSPARENCY GROUP: INTERIM REPORT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The House of Bishops Transparency Group recommends the following steps are undertaken to increase openness and transparency of the work of the House.

**Recommendation 1:**

**Minutes of all meetings of the House of Bishops should be published on the relevant section of the Church of England website once they have been approved at the subsequent meeting. These should be minutes rather than transcripts (page 6).**

**Recommendation 2:**

**The House of Bishops will adopt a “maximum transparency” approach so that the analysis and information that the House has had to make decisions will be made available. In particular formal legal advice from the Legal Office or written advice from the Faith and Order Commission and other such groups should be provided to the General Synod as an annex to the relevant GS paper. The agenda for each House of Bishops meeting will be published with the circulation of papers. Papers to the House of Bishops should continue not to be published (page 7).**

**Recommendation 3:**

**The House of Bishops should continue to meet without public attendance, and should amend its standing orders to be honest that it is doing so, removing the fiction of public participation in Standing Order 13 (page 11).**

**Recommendation 4:**

**The House of Bishops will propose changes to Canon H 3 and potentially other legislation to provide for acting diocesan bishops to vote at meetings of the House and General Synod (page 13). In advance of that chairs might ask acting diocesan bishops informally to indicate how they would have voted were they eligible to vote.**

The Group intends to monitor the operation of these changes and following a period of experimentation in relation to recommendations 1 and 2, enshrine these in Standing Orders to ensure that future House of Bishops are not able to retreat from these steps. This will not be the final word on the topic of transparency and the Group will consider any further representations on matters necessary to improve the transparency of the House of Bishops.

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## PART 1: INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

1. We have heard substantial and reasonable criticism of the way in which the House of Bishops operates, particularly in relation to how transparently it works. Those criticisms have been voiced in the General Synod, on blogs and in correspondence, and by some within the House. Some of the key themes in that criticism have been:
  - a. That the principle, established in the Standing Orders, is that the House should generally, like all Houses of Synod, meet in public. But the House has increasingly used Standing Order 14 procedures to enable it to meet as a Committee of the Whole House without the public present. As a result there is no public access to hear the nature of the House's discussions;
  - b. That papers for all other Houses are made publicly available and the decisions of those Houses are easily accessible, but the papers for the House of Bishops and any decisions it makes are rarely published. Instead the House of Bishops only publishes a short press release after the meeting. The House has recently started publishing a Summary of Actions and Decisions after each meeting. Whilst this has been welcomed there has been criticism that this has enabled the House of Bishops to hide the advice it has received on, for example, the legal implications of Living in Love and Faith;
2. The result has been a loss of trust in the House of Bishops and its workings from other Houses of Synod and from the wider Church<sup>1</sup>. It is perceived that bishops are insufficiently accountable to the wider Church of England. In addition, members of the House themselves have been concerned that the House was not following the spirit of its standing orders.
3. The House of Bishops accepts these criticisms. In part current practices represent a continuation of systems that were adopted during the COVID era; in part they represent the incremental acceptance of practices that might be right for individual discussions becoming the norm for all meetings; in part they represent a lack of clarity about when the House is meeting as a Synodical House, and when it is meeting as the collective episcopal leadership of the Church of England.
4. The House therefore resolved in November 2023 to:
  - a. Find ways of making its business more transparent;
  - b. Establish a working group to identify options for doing so; and
  - c. In the interim, publish Summaries of Actions and Decisions to make its decisions and work more transparent. These are available [here](#)
5. The Group has been chaired by the Archbishop of York with terms of reference and membership as set out in Annex A.
6. Although the Group was set up in response to a specific set of issues around the lack of trust in the transparency of the work of the House of Bishops, the House has also reflected on why openness and transparency have long been regarded as important for good governance. The fifth [Nolan Principle](#) is that of openness: that "Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing". The [Charity Governance Code](#) sets out how openness and accountability

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<sup>1</sup> The selection of answers to Synod questions in February at annex B illustrate the concern from Synod members at the lack of transparency in the process of the House of Bishops.

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forms one of the key elements of good governance. “Making accountability real, through genuine and open two-way communication that celebrates successes and demonstrates willingness to learn from mistakes, helps to build this trust and confidence and earn legitimacy.” Although the House of Bishops is not a public body nor a charity and bishops are not holding public office, this principle applies to the work of the House of Bishops for the following reasons:

- **Trust.** Openness about what is being done, why and by whom contributes to a culture of trust within the Church of England. The foreword to GS 2307, the report of the Governance Review, noted that “The Project Board, in carrying out its work, has become more and more convinced that the problems at the heart of National Church governance identified by the [Governance Review Group], are both an expression of and contribute to a culture of mistrust which harms the reputation and effectiveness of the Church and diminishes its prophetic voice”;
  - **Good governance.** There is evidence that those who are conscious they will have to account for their decisions publicly are more likely to make good decisions and less likely to make decisions motivated by self-interest;
7. It is also true that where there is an established expectation of openness and transparency – for example, that there should be access to minutes of meetings or that there is a right to attend in person – and those expectations are departed from in practice, whether for good reason or not, this is particularly corrosive to trust and engagement. Such expectations are, in the case of the House of Bishops, entirely legitimate given past commitments and the Standing Orders. It has also been noted that the House of Bishops’ practice may be different from that of either of the other Houses of Synod or the Synod itself, which meet in public (and in the case of the General Synod are also broadcast on livestream) and where full transcripts of discussions are published.
  8. It is also true that achieving trust and good governance requires an element of confidentiality. Church members expect their personal information to be treated confidentially in line with best data protection principles. Safeguarding cases must be managed with careful confidentiality to maintain the trust of survivors. Leadership teams build trust between each other by being vulnerable and having honest private discussions, where they can be present and curious with each other rather than speaking for a wider audience. Good governance demands that legal, commercially and market sensitive and personal matters are appropriately protected to protect against loss of funds or exploitation by third parties. Concern of media, and in particular social media, reporting can work against speaking out, taking unpopular positions or challenging decisions – all elements of good governance. Organisations that do not create the right space for this in their formal governance tend to find that key decisions happen outside the formal processes – which contributes again to bad governance.
  9. The challenge is to get the balance right – between the levels of openness and transparency that are necessary to build and maintain trust, provide for good governance and to support discipleship across the Church - but with space for honest debate and challenge within the organisation. Each organisation needs to grapple with this and keep this balance under review and seek honest feedback from its members on how it can get that balance right.

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10. This paper sets out the work of the Transparency Group and its recommendations for the future. The Group intends to undertake further work on the nature of the House's work with reference in particular to the practice, principle and perception of how it operates.

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## PART 2: HOUSE OF BISHOPS PAPERS, MINUTES AND AGENDAS

Minutes

1. At present the Secretariat produce minutes of all meetings of the House of Bishops. These are generally:
  - a. Produced by the Secretariat<sup>2</sup> within 48 hours or so of the meeting and shared with the Secretary of the House of Bishops<sup>3</sup>;
  - b. Sent to members of the House in draft shortly afterwards;
  - c. Submitted to the next meeting for approval. They will be taken at the next meeting and unless there are comments to the contrary are agreed as a fair record of the meeting;
  - d. Not published.
2. Different committees have different styles of minutes. At present the approach for the House of Bishops is:
  - a. Unlike the General Synod, no transcript of discussions is produced;
  - b. The minutes tend to record the name of the person introducing the item, and the key points made in their opening remarks;
  - c. Comments are anonymised, tending to take the approach of “the following points were made in discussion”. On occasions the name of a contributor has been minuted where that was particularly relevant – for example if the chair of the Faith and Order Commission spoke to a particular item as chair of FAOC;
  - d. The Chair’s summing up, and where required any vote or decision, are recorded. Action points are noted;
  - e. In those (relatively rare) occasions where the House of Bishops considers formal motions and amendments, the minutes record: the motion and or amendment; the person who spoke to introduce it, and their argument; the points raised in discussion; the results of any vote, but not who voted each way – the House votes by show of hands rather than through using Synod-style handsets that would record who voted in which way; and the final motion (as amended) passed by the House;
  - f. Some elements are not minuted. Worship is not minuted, nor is group work or table discussions, nor more informal items (for example bishops have discussed how they are taking forward the vision and strategy of the Church of England in their dioceses in informal discussion);
  - g. Accordingly different meetings can lead to different lengths of minutes: the minutes of the 15-17 May 2023 House of Bishops ran to 11 sides; those of the 30 October to 1 November 2023 House of Bishops ran to 19 sides; those of the 9 October 2023 House of Bishops ran to 17 sides; those of the 29 November 2023 House to 5 sides;
  - h. Minutes are shared with the members of the House and relevant staff. The Secretariat maintains an electronic file copy.
3. A press release is published on the day of the meeting, produced by the communications team and agreed with key staff and with the Archbishops. This tends to be bland and factual.
4. Since November 2023 in addition summaries of actions and decisions have been produced by the Secretariat. These are derived from the minutes and simply remove much of the detail of the discussion.

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<sup>2</sup> Generally Simon Gallagher, Director of the Central Secretariat

<sup>3</sup> William Nye, Secretary General

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5. The following practical points arise in relation to the publication of minutes:
  - a. The minutes are not agreed until the subsequent meeting and therefore the most logical time to do so would be after that meeting;
  - b. The House often takes items from external experts. Lord Boateng has addressed the House on Racial Justice; politicians have addressed it on matters relating to the Election; heads of church charities (such as the Clergy Support Trust) may speak into the room. We would need to notify them that their comments would be recorded in the minutes and would be made public;
  - c. Staff may also present to the House of Bishops – for example lead staff on key projects on safeguarding, vision and strategy, theological advisors etc may lead the discussion on those items. We would need to decide whether we are happy for staff to be named in the minutes and for their introductory presentation to be attributed to them; and
  - d. It is possible that there may be items where the House may genuinely need a private space to discuss and decide without publication. One could imagine this might be where the House discusses matters relating to appointments, where it is briefed on judicial processes, where confidential remarks from others in the Anglican Communion or from national life are brought into the room. It also may be relevant where the House reacts to recent Synods, or where the House wants to have a particularly difficult wrangle over an issue where it wants space to be honest and vulnerable.
6. The Transparency Group recommends as follows:
  - a. All minutes of all meetings of the House of Bishops should be published on the Church of England website;
  - b. Minutes should be made available after they have been approved by the House of Bishops at its subsequent meeting. So the minutes of the March meeting should be published after the House has approved them at its May meeting etc;
  - c. Minutes should record all motions, amendments (including the mover of such motions and amendments) and voting results (but not who voted in which way);
  - d. Nothing will be redacted from the minutes. However it may be that certain items – for example anything that refers to particular individuals, or current litigation – might be minuted in more summary terms;
  - e. That the style should continue to name lead presenters including staff but not to attribute names to individual contributions and we should not move to a transcript of all contributions;
  - f. The minutes should not produce detailed voting records of who voted for and against each item;
  - g. External visitors and staff should be told before attending that their introductory comments and any response will be attributed to them;
  - h. The House should continue to be able to use informal group discussions, informal debate, videos, etc as part of its discussions and these should not be minuted.

**Papers**

7. Almost all items of the House's business is conducted on the basis of papers. These are generally produced by staff and approved by the Secretary General and the relevant lead bishops, and may be in the name of the relevant lead bishop or have been produced by another body (for example a report from the Faith and Order Commission).

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8. The House receives many different sorts of papers. An illustrative range is set out below:
- a. Draft papers for the General Synod. These in turn might divide between draft reports from other Church bodies (for example the report of the Clergy Discipline Commission) and draft papers from the House to the General Synod (for example draft proposals on Living in Love and Faith). The former tend to be sent on to the General Synod without amendment or comment; comments may be received on the latter and then incorporated into the paper that is ultimately presented to the General Synod;
  - b. Draft public statements. For example the draft statements on the war in the Middle East might be discussed by the House;
  - c. Interim reports and briefings. For example lead bishops and staff may produce reports on work under way – for example on the work to implement the Jay report;
  - d. Reports from sub-committees (eg the annual report of the Committee on the Five Guiding Principles, reports of the working group on pastoral prayer etc);
  - e. Doctrinal or pastoral papers that might form the basis of the sort of teaching documents published by the House of Bishops, either in draft or final form, at [House of Bishops | The Church of England](#);
  - f. Procedural resources designed to support episcopal ministry – process notes/ privacy notices for Clergy Discipline Measure cases etc etc;
  - g. Evidence, data and surveys, many of which may have been published, but some of which may not have been at that point – for example data on racial justice in dioceses, surveys of clergy wellbeing, diocesan finances etc etc;
  - h. Advice, which could be either legal advice or more general policy advice “we recommend the House discuss in their dioceses issue xx”.
9. Typically a paper might form a combination of these – there might be a covering note from the lead bishop that explains the background, the process and the key issues and choices for the House, an annex of a draft report, annexes comprising some of the key evidence. Papers are also prepared by external groups who come to present to the House.
10. There will also be an agenda and, if there are to be motions and votes, an Order Paper is produced. Because worship is integral to the work of the House, there will also be liturgy for collective worship.
11. Papers are distributed a week before the meeting with any motions for consideration (though in extremis papers may be circulated later). If there are amendments an Order Paper may be produced on the day the House meets once the deadline for amendments has passed.
12. Given the diversity of types of papers that go to the House of Bishops it seems unlikely that a set of general rules for what should, and should not, be published could be produced. As with minutes, there is a public interest in access to these papers, but equally there is a need for the House to have a space where it can discuss draft proposals. Papers may also contain legally privileged information, relate to litigation or investigations, contain personal detail or contain commercially sensitive information. Data on financial or other position of individual dioceses may also be locally sensitive.
13. Accordingly the Transparency Group proposes that papers of the House of Bishops should not be routinely published but instead a “maximum transparency” approach should be adopted that says:
- a. There is a public interest in the House of Bishops “showing its workings” where possible;

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- b. In particular the analysis and information that the House has had to equip it to make decisions should be made publicly available;
- c. Specifically, where the House has received formal legal advice from the Legal Office, that advice should be provided to the General Synod at the relevant point, probably as an annex to the relevant GS paper. The intention would be to see the formal papers (or parts of papers) that go to the House rather than just a summary of the advice;
- d. Written advice from FAOC, or other such groups (for example the Liturgical Commission or the Legal Advisory Commission), to the House should similarly be made available, either as an annex to the relevant GS paper or by separate publication;
- e. It is possible that exceptions may need to be made – advice on handling litigation may need to be withheld for example – but the default expectation should be that advice from the Legal Office and other professional advisors is published by the House;
- f. Agendas should be published at the point papers are distributed – ie around a week before the House meets.

Retrospection

- 14. For reasons of administrative resource, the difficulty of establishing after the event which issues were of sensitivity and because those speaking into meetings would not have expected their comments to be made public in this way, it is not proposed that historic minutes are published in line with the protocol described above.
- 15. However there is a separate issue which we will explore about the “closed” Church of England materials at the Lambeth Palace Library and whether we can move to a 20 year rather than 30 year rule for disclosure in line with the reduced disclosure period that now routinely applies to government and other national archives under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.

Standing Orders

- 16. The Standing Orders of the House say remarkably little at present about the publication or otherwise of papers, minutes etc, other than the general principle at Standing Order 1 that unless prescribed otherwise and so far as circumstances permit, “the procedure of the House shall be the same, *mutatis mutandis*, as the procedure of the Synod”.
- 17. The view of the working group is that we should not seek to codify these into Standing Orders at this stage but test out the new arrangements and then establish how best they can be codified into Standing Orders after they have been running. The GS Misc paper that accompanies these papers might however include statements of commitment that provide decent resilience against the House reneging on its commitments to transparency.

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**PART 3: PUBLIC ATTENDANCE**Current Standing Orders

1. The House of Bishops Standing Orders concerning public access deliberately mirror the General Synod Standing Orders, and currently read:

## SO 13: Admission of the Public

(a) The public shall be admitted to all sittings of the House within the limits of such seating capacity as may be allocated by the Secretary for this purpose in accordance with SO 3 of the Synod.

(b) Subject to Standing Orders 11 and 12 above no person other than a member of the House shall address the House and members of the public shall remain silent while in the hall.

(c) The expression 'public' in this Standing Order and in Standing Order 14 includes the press.

## SO 14: Committee of the Whole House

(a) By direction of the Chair or resolution of the House, the House may at any time during a session go into Committee of the whole House. Any member may move at any time, but not so as to interrupt another member's speech, the motion 'That the House do now go into Committee'; if that motion be carried, the Chair shall ask members of the public to withdraw until such time as, with the general consent of the House, he gives instructions to the Secretary for their re-admission.

(b) Such motion shall be a question of procedure and, by permission of the Chair, shall not require notice.

The General Synod motion parallel to SO 14 is 'That the public gallery now be cleared' or 'That the press and public do now withdraw' (General Synod SO 150, Press and Public).

Difficulties of Implementation

2. SO 13 was drawn up in 1978, but immediately proved difficult to implement. Initially, the public were admitted to some parts of House of Bishops sittings, but as early as 1980 residential House of Bishops meetings returned to being entirely private. The public have not been admitted to any House of Bishops meeting since 1983 other than "legislation only" meetings for example during a General Synod to perform certain functions for a draft measure or canon. The Group voiced considerable concern that if SO 13 is to remain in the Standing Orders, it should be taken seriously, or it should be removed.
3. The Group considered four options:

Option 1: Public Broadcast

4. Breadth of access should be equivalent for every type of House of Bishops meeting – whether in person or on Zoom, whether residential or day-meeting. It would be easier,

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for example, to broadcast and record Zoom meetings only, but equivalent breadth of access would then be required for other meetings also. One form of public access (not anticipated by the 1978 Standing Orders, which are concerned only for seating capacity) is to broadcast House meetings online, either live (as with General Synod) or soon afterwards. This is logistically possible at Church House Westminster (though would require additional resourcing). However, it is not feasible in other venues currently used, such as conference centres, which are not equipped with cameras, microphones and podiums. For example, bishops speak from their places, without amplification. It would be a major logistical task to broadcast these meetings. One solution is to hold every meeting either on Zoom or in the main debating chamber at Church House Westminster, but this has several drawbacks. Most importantly, it would hinder the vital relational aspects of meetings, which are a particular strength of in-person meetings in smaller venues and would make gatherings always Londoncentric.

### Option 2: Public Admittance

5. If the public are admitted physically into the room, this also provides logistical challenges. It is not only a matter of seating capacity, which could be solved by issuing tickets in advance by ballot. Additional security would be required, as for any public event. House of Bishops meetings may also attract public disruption and protest. At Church House Westminster, the public would be seated in the gallery, but at a conference centre they would be seated at the back or edge of the room, which significantly changes the dynamics of the meeting. There are also questions over whether the public would be admitted to more informal parts of House meetings (eg to observe table discussions) or would be invited to mingle with the bishops during social times, such as at meals or in the conference bar, or join in during worship. There would naturally therefore be concerns among some members of the public about which other members of the public had been admitted (!), and whether they were unduly influencing the bishops by these close interactions during the meetings. This could also be solved by holding every House meeting on Zoom or in the main debating chamber at Church House Westminster, but the same drawbacks apply as for Option 1.

### Option 3: Press Corps

6. A third option is only to admit a small number of accredited members of the press. This would be logistically easier to manage and similar to gatherings like the Lambeth Conference and the Anglican Consultative Council, which are private meetings but with press access. It might be a form of syndicated press access, representing several key outlets. Whether press only, or public and press, there would be difficulties of ensuring accurate and balanced reporting if the House does not also broadcast its proceedings (see Option 1). First, members of press and public would be able to record the proceedings privately (audio or video), and then broadcast them (or selected parts of them) online. Second, if press or public inaccurately or partially report what a bishop has said, but there is no official recording, it is not easy to correct the public perception. Third, the official minutes are not verbatim and do not name the bishops taking part in general discussion or their precise words. These minutes would no longer be feasible or satisfactory if press and public have access to their own private recordings (or notes) of proceedings.

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7. An alternative would simply be to accept recent practice and agree that all meetings of the House take place in private, and to amend Standing Orders to remove the expectation on public access set out in Standing Order 13.

Consideration

8. The Group considered whether public access could increase or decrease transparency. There is a danger that by unrestricted admission of the public to House meetings, transparency will be reduced not increased. The House of Bishops seeks to be consultative and conversational – that is, not relying on set-piece debates where the result is often pre-determined, but enabling more informal conversations in which bishops are free to share ideas in a safe environment and often to change their minds from the beginning of the meeting to the end. For proceedings to be recorded and broadcast, or for every word to be scrutinized by press and public, would, in the opinion of the working group, hinder genuine conversation. Bishops will naturally feel inhibited to express themselves freely or will be under pressure to speak to an audience outside the room rather than to their colleagues within the room. A further result is that House of Bishops meetings may become increasingly performative. It is important to recognize that not every meeting of bishops from the House of Bishops is a meeting of the House of Bishops in the same way as a meeting of the House of Clergy or the House of Laity. There is a risk that important conversations would be pushed further into these more informal, unrecorded, unminuted spaces, where Standing Orders do not apply. A 3-day residential, for example, could be designed as 2 days of informal episcopal conversation and debate (where the real decisions take place), and then a final morning for a meeting of the House of Bishops for brief votes on the formal motions. Under current arrangements under Standing Order 13, the press and public would be freely admitted to those formal House of Bishops proceedings, but actually the Church would have lost through reduced transparency.

Conclusion

9. In the judgment of the group, it would be most transparent to allow the House of Bishops space to consult together in private, without the added pressure of public and press scrutiny, and then for minutes of their proceedings to be published. It therefore recommends that Standing Orders 13 and 14 are deleted (because they are unrealistic and not fit for purpose) and replaced by a new Standing Order which guarantees the publication of minutes of all House of Bishops meetings.

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## PART 4: PARTICIPATION

Membership

1. Membership of the House of Bishops is determined by the Canons and Constitution of the General Synod.
2. Article 2 of the Constitution provides that the membership of the House of Bishops shall comprise of the Upper House of each of the Convocations of Canterbury and York.
3. Canon H 3.1 (Canterbury) and 3.2 (York) sets out that the Upper House of the Convocations consists of:
  - a. The two Archbishops;
  - b. All diocesan bishops following their confirmation of Election up until they leave office, including the offshore dioceses of Sodor and Man and Gibraltar in Europe;
  - c. The Bishop of Dover;
  - d. The Bishop to the Armed Forces; and
  - e. Nine suffragan bishops (five from the Province of Canterbury, four from the Province of York) elected by all bishops.
4. In addition, any other person in episcopal orders who is a member of the Archbishops' Council and resides in either province and the Chair of the Dioceses Commission if that person is in episcopal orders, is also a member.
5. The following may attend and speak at the House of Bishops but not vote:
  - a. Acting Diocesan Bishops (where there is a vacancy in the See);
  - b. Six female suffragan bishops (not included in the membership of the House above), chosen according to those who have held office for the longest periods;
  - c. Three Provincial Episcopal Visitors (where they are not included in the membership of the House as set out above) – the Bishops of Beverley, Oswestry and Richborough – and the Bishop of Ebbsfleet;
  - d. UKME/ GMH participant observers: where there are fewer than ten UKME/GMH members of the House any suffragan bishop of UKME/GMH is a member to top membership up to ten, and where this is still below ten, additional UKME/GMH clergy as elected by GMH/UKME clergy in each province such that there are no less than ten UKME/GMH members of the House. This is a temporary arrangement that expires in at the dissolution of the Convocations.
6. At the invitation of the Chair the Archbishop of Wales, Primate of All Ireland and Primus of the Episcopal Church in Scotland may attend.
7. The Secretary General acts as Secretary and attends and may speak. Other people – staff, commissioners etc – may also attend and speak but not vote. As well as the lead staff on any particular item (say the Director of the National Safeguarding Team for a safeguarding item of business) there will generally be support from the Chief Legal Advisor, Chiefs of Staff to the Archbishops and Episcopal Advisor to the Archbishops, staff from Faith and Public Life, Theological and Liturgical Advisors, communications staff and the Central Secretariat (both for minute-taking and for logistical support) may be present.
8. The Group have reviewed whether better membership of the House of Bishops could increase the engagement and transparency of the Group.

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Acting Diocesan Bishops

9. When a diocese is in vacancy, usually a suffragan bishop is appointed as Acting Diocesan bishop, with delegated responsibilities and powers. A proviso to Canon H 3 provides that unless they happen to exercise membership of the Upper House by virtue of one of the above categories, a person exercising the functions of an acting diocesan bishop can 'attend and speak, but not vote' at meetings of House and Synod.

*Provided that, where a See is vacant during any meeting of the Upper House, and a suffragan bishop is, during the period of that meeting, exercising functions of the diocesan bishop by virtue of an instrument under section 14 of the Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure 2007, and has not been elected to the Upper House under subparagraph (c) above, the suffragan bishop may attend and speak, but not vote, at that meeting in place of the bishop.*

10. Suffragan bishops have long expressed their frustration and that of their diocese at this, and many have said they feel devalued in their ministry as acting diocesan bishops as a result. There are currently six dioceses that are vacant, one in seven of the total, with more soon to follow. Vacancies are currently lasting around 12 months, but some have gone on for 18 or even 24 months.
11. There is a good case for allowing Acting Diocesan Bishops to become full voting members for the following reasons:
- a. It allows for representation of all dioceses in the House of Bishops in its voting, bringing every diocese into the room, and helping to ensure a proper balance of views;
  - b. Fairness for acting diocesans – they are otherwise expected to perform almost all other functions of a diocesan bishop, attend House of Bishops and General Synod and enact their decisions without having the right to vote;
  - c. The decisions made at the House of Bishops and General Synod directly impact on the management and leadership of dioceses as they consider safeguarding structures, diocesan finances, clergy discipline processes and so on. Dioceses should have representation in the House of Bishops as well as the Houses of Clergy and Laity during a Vacancy.
  - d. It was strongly recommended by the Episcopal Wellbeing Group following a survey of all bishops in 2022 reflecting feedback from acting diocesan bishops.
12. The Group therefore recommends giving acting diocesan bishops the right to vote in the House of Bishops and in General Synod during a vacancy. This would begin from the date on which instrument of delegation becomes effective (which usually coincides with the resignation or retirement of the outgoing diocesan bishop), and would end at the confirmation of election of the new diocesan bishop.
13. This change would require a change to the provisions of Canon H 3 by way of an amending Canon and potentially changes to other legislation. On the legislative process, once introduced an amending Canon would go through the usual synodical process of First Consideration, consideration by a Revision Committee, the report and revision stage in Synod and then Final Drafting and Final Approval. The Amending Canon would then be presented to the Sovereign for Royal Assent and Licence before returning to Synod for the motion that it be 'made, promulgated and executed', which is then proclaimed in the diocesan synods. The precise timetable depends on how much support there was in the wider Synod, but could take up to two years.

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14. In the interim we suggest that Chairs might ask acting diocesan bishops asked to indicate which way they would have voted if they were able to at House meetings. This would not be possible in Synod meetings.

UKME/ GMH participant observers

15. The arrangements for UKME/ GMH participant observers set out in Standing Orders 12A and 12B took effect on 1 February 2022 and, as set out in the footnote to both Standing Orders, ceases to have effect on the next day on which the Convocations of Canterbury and York are dissolved (Summer 2026).
16. Further work is required to review whether successor arrangements are needed, consulting GMH members of the House of Bishops and participant observers.

## GENERAL SYNOD

## ANNEX A

## MEMBERSHIP OF THE WORKING GROUP

Terms of Reference (February 2024)

1. To review the operating procedures and practices of the House of Bishops and to make recommendations to the House of Bishops for changes which can improve the effectiveness and in particular transparency of the way in which the House works with a view to increasing confidence in its work across the church.
2. To consider whether aspects of the membership and constitution of the House – for example on voting rights for suffragan bishops covering a diocesan vacancy could be improved.
3. The group will comprise the Archbishop of York, the Bishop of Dudley, Andrew Atherstone, Charlotte Cook, Margaret Swinson and Michelle Tackie, supported by staff as necessary. It may bring in others as necessary for its discussions.
4. Proposals that would involve legislation, amendments to Standing Orders are not out of scope. However, noting that such changes would take time and are not always in the gift of the House, the Group is invited also to consider other “quick wins”.
5. It intends to meet at least three times with a view to producing proposals for the May House of Bishops.”

## GENERAL SYNOD

## ANNEX B

## Synod Questions February 2024 relating to House of Bishops Transparency

Miss Debbie Buggs (London) to ask the Chair of the House of Bishops:

**Q171** Given the College of Bishops is not a formally constituted body, when and why did the House of Bishops start taking note of its votes? Please provide a list of all matters voted on by the College which were noted by the House of Bishops in the last 10 years.

*The Archbishop of York to reply as Vice-Chair of the House of Bishops:*

**A** Thank you for your question. Members of the House of Bishops, in making decisions, have always had regard to the views of others in the Church of England, including those of other suffragan bishops. Episcopal discussions have long been enriched by the more diverse representation of the wider College of Bishops.

Discussions in the College of Bishops are not minuted and therefore it is not possible to answer the second part of this question.

Mr Clive Scowen (London) to ask the Chair of the House of Bishops:

**Q172** What decisions has the House of Bishops and/or its Standing Committee taken as to (a) holding all the House's meetings in public unless it has identified and publicly recorded specific reasons why a specific meeting or part of it needs to be held in private; and (b) the House's future practice relating to the publication of the minutes of its meetings, in particular those which (i) record the House's formal resolutions and the voting numbers in relation to those resolutions; and (ii) the reasoning necessary to enable non-members of the House to understand the basis of its decisions?

*The Archbishop of York to reply as Vice-Chair of the House of Bishops:*

**A** Thank you for your question.

As set out in the answer to questions 173 and 174 below, the House of Bishops has established a working group to advise it on steps that may be taken to look at various areas including transparency and Standing Order 14. Those answers also set out the terms of reference for this work. In the interim the House of Bishops has agreed to publish a summary of actions and decisions. This is available on the website at [House of Bishops | The Church of England](#).

Dr Gracy Crane (Oxford) to ask the Chair of the House of Bishops:

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**Q173** In the light of the welcome publication of fuller notes from recent meetings of the House and College of Bishops, when will fuller notes from the meeting of Oct 9th be made available, and what plans are in place to remove the misuse of standing orders to keep meetings of the House of Bishops, a house of this publicly accountable Synod, a secret?

Mrs Catherine Butcher (Chichester) to ask the Chair of the House of Bishops:

**Q174** Will the House of Bishops in future report all its formal decisions and the voting figures as it has apparently now done in relation to the meetings in November and December 2023?

*The Archbishop of York to reply as Vice-Chair of the House of Bishops:*

**A** Thank you for your questions. With your permission chair, I intend to answer these questions 173 and 174 together.

I want to reiterate what I said to the Synod in November. We have set up a working group to advise on these areas and the Terms of Reference are set out below.

“Terms of Reference

2. To review the operating procedures and practices of the House of Bishops and to make recommendations to the House of Bishops for changes which can improve the effectiveness and in particular transparency of the way in which the House works with a view to increasing confidence in its work across the church.
3. To consider whether aspects of the membership and constitution of the House – for example on voting rights for suffragan bishops covering a diocesan vacancy could be improved.
4. The group will comprise the Archbishop of York, the Bishop of Dudley, Andrew Atherstone, Charlotte Cook, Margaret Swinson and Michelle Tackie, supported by staff as necessary. It may bring in others as necessary for its discussions.
5. Proposals that would involve legislation, amendments to Standing Orders are not out of scope. However, noting that such changes would take time and are not always in the gift of the House, the Group is invited also to consider other “quick wins”.
6. It intends to meet at least three times with a view to producing proposals for the May House of Bishops.”

Br Philip Dulson (Religious Communities) to ask the Chair of the House of Bishops:

**Q175** What dates did the House of Bishops meet in 2022 and 2023, and what dates will it meet in 2024?

*The Archbishop of Canterbury to reply as Chair of the House of Bishops:*

**A** Details are set out below.

In 2022 the House of Bishops met on:

- Thursday 24 March

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- Monday 9 to Wednesday 11 May
- Monday 6 June
- Thursday 14 July
- Monday 26 September
- Tuesday 29 November

In 2023 the House of Bishops met on:

- Tuesday 17 January
- Monday 30 January
- Monday 15 to Wednesday 17 May
- Wednesday 7 June
- Tuesday 18 July
- Monday 9 October
- Monday 30 October to Wednesday 1 November
- Wednesday 29 November
- Tuesday 12 December

In 2024 the House of Bishops met briefly on 19 January at the end of the College of Bishops. Further meetings are scheduled for:

- Wednesday 20 March
- Wednesday 15 to Friday 17 May
- Monday 15 July
- Tuesday 22 to Wednesday 23 October
- Tuesday 10 December

Further meetings may be scheduled at the decision of the Standing Committee.