

National Schools Singing Programme Celebrates Inaugural Conference and Unveils Ambitious Plans for Expansion

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Hamish Ogston Foundation supports award-winning music education initiative with £4 million grant funding

Founded and supported by the Hamish Ogston Foundation, the National Schools Singing Programme (NSSP) – an ambitious award-winning music education initiative – celebrated its inaugural conference last week at Hinsley Hall in Headingley, Leeds.

The two-day conference brought together delegates from Catholic dioceses across the UK to celebrate this national initiative and the remarkable success of the NSSP over the last year. The Hamish Ogston Foundation has pledged £75,000 to each Diocese which joins the scheme to establish and develop excellent youth choirs. So far, 18 dioceses have signed up, ranging from the Diocese of Portsmouth in the South to the Diocese of Aberdeen in the North. By the end of March 2022, it is expected that all English Bishops will have enrolled their dioceses in the programme and will benefit from approximately £4million of generous grant funding provided by the Hamish Ogston Foundation. At the end of its first year, the programme is projected to engage more than 10,000 children every week.

The NSSP initiative takes inspiration from the Schools Singing Programme developed by the Diocese of Leeds in 2003 to establish and improve music programmes for children at Catholic state schools across Yorkshire, which currently reaches around 6,500 children every week. It uses the existing infrastructure of Catholic state schools and offers additional funds to support world-class inclusive music programmes. The

programme's lead musicians, Benjamin Saunders and Thomas Leech, act as consultants for the NSSP and support other dioceses as they develop music programmes for young people.

During the two-day conference, 40 delegates discussed several topics including how to teach the curriculum in schools and sell the music offer to headteachers, as well as delivering several practical sessions on the musical engagement of children and classroom management. In the evening, delegates joined the choirs of Leeds Cathedral to sing Vespers and Mass. Hamish Ogston announced to the conference delegates that a second fund will soon be available to dioceses which establish a financially-sustainable singing programme. This second fund will be accessible to dioceses to replicate Leeds' Keyboard Studies Programme, providing real hope for future organist training.

While many diocesan choirs and large parish choirs have a tendency to attract mature adults, it is important to ask where our choirs will be in five- or ten-years' time. While we are often preoccupied with the immediate (for understandable reasons), we do need to take stock and ensure that we are developing our next generation of choral scholars. Good quality results in fine liturgical singing are never accidental but the product of real effort, determination and skill.

School music budgets have been subject to cuts for several years now and suffered extensively in the last two years as a result of the pandemic. The pandemic has not helped in developing sacred singing, but now there is a tremendous opportunity to change the landscape with a new catalyst for providing musical excellence now and in the future. If we care about equality of opportunity, widening participation and renewing the grassroots of our world-famous choral heritage in the UK, this is an opportunity not to be dismissed.

Ben Saunders, NSSP Consultant and Director of Music at the Diocese of Leeds commented: "The NSSP is incredibly grateful to the Hamish Ogston Foundation for its generosity and long-term support. We have received a fantastic response to the programme and the inaugural conference was a resounding success. The announcement about the National Keyboard Studies Programme generated much excitement and will provide great motivation for the Dioceses to establish financially sustainable School Singing Programmes."

Jo Clunie, Music Programme Manager at the Hamish Ogston Foundation: "The Hamish Ogston Foundation is proud to support the National Schools Singing Programme. The commitment of Dioceses across the UK is indicative of a deep belief that all children should have exposure to excellent singing and music teaching, just as they have access to English and maths teaching. This initiative has exceeded all expectations, over-delivering in every aspect over the past year. We look forward to supporting this exciting programme for years to come, and watching it build real momentum as the NSSP takes root across the UK."