

Hotwells and Cathedral Primary Schools Merger – Joint feedback to DfE for 19 Nov 2025 from Hotwells Community

The Hotwells community urges the Regional DfE Director to reject the Cathedral Schools Trust's (CST) proposal to merge Hotwells Primary School (HPS) with Cathedral Primary School (CPS), two Bristol primary schools in their Trust, and instead adopt the [Hotwells Community Proposal](#) for the reasons outlined below, summarised using the DfE's own criteria for this decision making.

CST created a [Risk Register](#) relating to the proposed merger, which they shared at their Board meeting in early October 2025, no doubt contributing to their decision to go ahead with the merger. However, this document was only made public on 20 October 2025 after community members requested the information be shared. Having studied the risk register, the HPS community has serious concerns that the decision making process which led to the merger proposal is lacking in validity. The risk assessment does not appear to follow any of the government guidance on managing risk in Academy trusts¹ and despite a FOI request we can find no evidence of any other work by CST prior to the decision to consult on this merger .

To enable more balanced decision making, we've updated CST's document removing erroneous risks and adding some which had been omitted – [see the revised Risk Register here](#) which we refer to throughout the rest of this document. We have maintained the original format to enable easier comparison². In this new assessment, the total risk scores of merging the schools is now over double that of the Hotwells Community Proposal, even though we've been unable to include calculations for some merger risks due to lack of information from CST.

¹ [Academy trust risk management - GOV.UK](#)

² Separate risk assessments should be produced, listing risks against the status quo baseline for each proposal

1. Strategic need

This merger is not aligned with [Bristol City Council's \(BCC\) School Organisation Strategy](#) (currently draft) to address the city's falling numbers of primary school aged children by reducing existing class sizes, focusing on larger schools first, and protecting smaller, well-performing schools. CPS's case for the merger is heavily weighted towards maintaining the status quo of the 2 form entry (2FE) CPS ignoring all the strengths of the 1FE HPS which will be lost if the school is closed.

The merger will result in an increase to CPS's Published Admission Numbers (PAN) if any HPS children are admitted to CPS. This goes against BCC strategy to reduce the city's PAN but no assurance has been given by CST that they've sought BCC's agreement for this increase, despite the Trust working on this proposal for the last 3 years. This is already causing significant emotional stress to HPS parents who are concerned that they might have to find spaces at other schools for their children if they're not guaranteed places in the merged school, splitting up the close-knit school community and in some cases, siblings.

The alternative [Hotwells Community Proposal](#) is to keep HPS open but with second-tier feeder school status to secondary Bristol Cathedral Choir School (BCCS), with priority given to admitting children from CPS. BCCS is a very popular Bristol secondary school and so this change would immediately make HPS more attractive to parents, solving its admissions shortfall and meeting one of the CST's stated objectives to address overcrowding at the CPS site.

The Hotwells Community Proposal also suggests a gradual reduction of CPS's size from 2FE to 1FE over 7 years meeting the BCC strategy to reduce large school sizes to meet demand.

2. Educational performance

Closing HPS and merging it with CPS is likely to reduce educational outcomes.

In 2023/24, HPS had better key stage 2 SATs results than CPS with the % of pupils achieving higher standards being 2.5 times greater at HPS than CPS as shown below³.

School name	Type of school	Number of pupils at the end of key stage 2	% of pupils meeting expected standard	% of pupils achieving at a higher standard	Average score in reading	Average score in maths
Hotwells Primary School	Academy	22	73%	18%	110	105
Cathedral Primary School	Academy	60	63%	7%	108	104

Although official figures for 2024/2025 will not be published until December, local newspapers reported that HPS has maintained its position as 12th highest performer in Bristol for SATs results this year, whereas CPS has dropped in the rankings from 30th to 33rd⁴. In addition, HPS ranked 2nd in Bristol for SAT reading scores this year and CPS were ranked 12th⁵.

CST's estimates of class sizes for the 6 years from merger (see Capacity section below) shows increases in all years except each new annual Reception intake. Year 6 is forecast to have 84 pupils for 2026/27. The trust has suggested that no additional classes would be formed, but rather all children would be accommodated in two form classes per year group. This level of overcrowding is a significant change for both HPS and CPS children and is likely to impact their wellbeing. Together with the disruption of the merger, and the challenge of an overcrowded school, how likely is it that educational performance will improve let alone be maintained?

See also Section 1 of the [Revised Risk Register](#) quantifying the risks related to this section.

³ <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/schools-by-type?step=default&table=schools®ion=801&geographic=la&for=primary>

⁴ [Bristol's 31 top-performing primary schools based on 2024 grades and Ofsted ahead of application deadline](#)

⁵ [Primary school rankings: Bristol's 19 best performing primary schools based on the latest reading scores](#)

3. Financial sustainability

HPS has shown significant falls in pupil numbers in the last five years as a result of falling birth rates and rising house prices in its catchment area, which are factors common to many schools across Bristol and the UK. We believe that the resulting financial shortfall at HPS is the main driver for CST's proposal to merge HPS with CPS. However, the CST stated reasons for the merger were:

- Maintain provision on both school sites and ensure that there continues to be a school serving the Hotwells/Harbourside community.
- Address concerns around the volume of students on the Cathedral Primary School site on College Square by providing a more appropriate learning environment for the youngest children on the Hotwells Primary School site.
- Support the city with the aim of reducing places across primary schools⁶.

The community proposal also meets these stated objectives.

CPS is already oversubscribed, in large part because the pupils are guaranteed entry to Bristol Cathedral Choir School (BCCS) for secondary. Although merging HPS with CPS removes any financial deficit, it does so by effectively closing HPS whilst also continuing to collect a large part of the HPS grant as well as additional government funding for split-site and merged school operations. In practice, the only part of Hotwells remaining after the 'merger' will be any children who are allowed to attend CPS (as yet there is no guarantee of this). In addition, although running only one 2FE school also reduces staffing costs⁷, the community proposal with two 1FE schools in a collaborative trust should be similarly priced.

Not only that, but straight financials don't cover all the other cultural and educational losses resulting from the merger, as outlined in this document.

CST shared financial comparisons of their merger proposal with the community proposal (see the HWP Modelling tab on the [Revised Risk Register](#)), which show the merger as the least costly option. But the financial modelling is not explained fully and there are discrepancies in the figures which need further scrutiny, as below:

- We need more detail of estimates of staffing numbers for the projected costs, to understand how the figures have been estimated. The data currently appears to show no reduction at all in teaching staff when reducing CPS to 1FE.
- HPS with feeder school status to BCCS isn't shown as reaching full capacity of 210 pupils until 28/29. It's more likely that this will happen at least a year if not 2 sooner once parents learn of HPS's new status as a BCCS feeder school because of the popularity of this secondary school. In addition, CPS currently has a waiting list which could be offered HPS as a second tier feeder school. This could reduce the projected

⁶ CST Consultation FAQs Version 1. June 2025.

⁷ CST have stated that they have no plans to create additional classes, merely to overfill the current two classes per year group

deficit by hundreds of thousands of pounds, changing the overall comparative costs of the merger proposal compared with the community proposal.

- CPS reducing to 1FE doesn't show funded pupil numbers reducing until 28/29 when we'd expected that figure to reduce by 30 each year from the start of the reduction process.

Better auditing and explanations of CST's financial projections are needed to make a balanced, fully informed decision.

See also the Section 2 of the [**Revised Risk Register**](#) relating to this section.

4. Wider Community impacts

The legal agreement between the DfE, CST and HPS signed on 1 July 2021 when HPS joined the CST Academy, states in section 12a:⁸

The school will be at the heart of its community, promoting community cohesion and sharing facilities with other schools and the wider community;

The proposed merger of HPS with CPS breaks the above agreement because HPS, a school which has been educating children in its buildings since 1894, will be closed.

HPS is a significant part of the Hotwells area with strong community links through its curriculum, local partnerships, and parent involvement. It utilizes its local area for learning, partners with organizations like the [North Bristol Foodbank](#) and [Trinity Day Centre](#), and participates in events like the [West Bristol Arts Trail](#). HPS also provides amenities for the community such as the [Hotwells Music Workshop](#) founded in 1971 which is attended by many local people. Local non-parent community members regularly volunteer at HPS adding to the intergenerational atmosphere that make it so special.

Performing Arts are a strong part of the HPS curriculum, reinforced by links with the Hotwells Pantomime group, a community amateur dramatics group that has been running for over 40 years in which many HPS perform at Hope Chapel, Hotwells, every spring. HPS Year 6 children also perform an annual end of year musical theatre production, which has been staged for many years in Hope Chapel. Changing HPS from a full primary to an infant school would mean that these cultural connections are likely to be lost. This effect is likely to be magnified, should the merger happen, due to all management being from CPS where the only community outreach is to the Cathedral itself through their status as a VC school.

HPS's PTA, supported by many parents and non-parents from the local community, would be affected by the merger. As an infant school, with children attending from a city-wide catchment area in line with the CPS admissions policy, there is likely to be less parental connection and engagement with the local area and those local organizations, affecting community cohesion.

⁸ <https://www.cathedralschoolstrust.org/media/2588/hotwells-funding-agreement-donv-july-2021.pdf>

5. School Community Impacts

Both HPS and CPS communities would be significantly disrupted by the logistical changes of the proposed merger; particularly the split site. With almost a mile between the two schools, it's not an easy option for families with children in both schools to walk between the two at drop off and collection. The route between the two school buildings is also a major road, often heavily congested in the morning rush hour, dangerous for cyclists and subjecting anyone walking along it to high levels of airborne pollutants affecting their health. More complicated travel arrangements for many families would add even more time to the proposed longer school day caused by the CST suggestion to stagger the start and end times at each site. This is likely to have a significant impact on children's wellbeing and ability to concentrate in class.

It is likely that a number of parents with children at both school sites would drive between them (but see the Equality section below for more on the impacts on parents who don't drive). There would also be a need for some teaching staff to travel between the two sites, which takes up time in the school day, so driving is likely to be their first choice. More cars driving to and from both schools would increase air pollution at both localities which is a threat to children's and adult health. Increased car use also contributes to higher carbon emissions and climate change which directly contradicts the Net Zero emissions policies of Bristol City Council.

Adjusting to the changes with new school buildings and teachers for many children would also be challenging and disruptive, affecting their wellbeing. The challenges faced by all schools since Covid, which impacted attendance and children's confidence with knock-on effects on educational attainment, are only just returning to 'normal'. This merger would be a hugely disruptive and backward step for community cohesion both within the schools and externally. This is bound to affect children's attainment at a merged HPS/CPS school.

Merging HPS with CPS will also remove the only secular school in this area, as the new merged primary school will be CofE. The [Secular Society and Humanists UK have written to the DfE](#) outlining their objections, which are shared by many of the HPS parents who come from very diverse backgrounds and have chosen this school specifically because it is without religious affiliations. The merger would also have an impact on HPS children from non-Christian backgrounds who might find it more difficult to integrate into CPS's CofE setting.

6. Capacity

The merger would significantly increase PAN for CPS⁹ meaning that there would not be enough classroom provision in what is already an overcrowded school. The table below shows CST's estimate of pupil numbers after merger for September 2026¹⁰. Some year groups are going to have to find space for over 80 children – nearly 3 ‘normal’ class sizes ‘merged’ into two forms.

These overcrowded conditions will continue for many years, as the merged HPS classes work their way up CPS. This is likely to be damaging for children’s wellbeing and is unlikely to deliver positive educational results.

Year group	Potential combined numbers Sept 26 - subject to admissions
Reception	60
Year 1	73
Year 2	78
Year 3	81
Year 4	70
Year 5	75
Year 6	84

The community proposal allows more teaching space for pupils because CPS will be reducing in size with a more gradual transition from a 2FE to 1FE school.

⁹ Reducing PAN overall for both schools by 101 (increasing to 210 after 7 years). The community proposal would reduce PAN for the city by 210 places over the same period.

¹⁰ CST's merger FAQs, question 14. <https://www.hotwellsprimaryschool.org/media/7651/consultation-faqs-v5.pdf>

7. Demand

There is likely to be an increase in families moving into the Hotwells and Ashton areas in the next decade with several developments delivering between 1000 and 1500 new homes¹¹.

Ashton Gate Primary School, the nearest primary school to HPS south of the river, is already a 3 form entry school meaning that further expansion is unsuitable to meet this rising demand for primary school places because it's not in BCC's strategic plan. Losing HPS to provide full Reception to Year 6 teaching to all these new children would mean a significant lack of educational provision in the area. Keeping HPS open as outlined in the Community Proposal would provide capacity for the likely increased demand.

¹¹ Vistry/Clarion's River Gateway development next to Brunel Way/Bedminster Cricket Club with over 200 homes, 98 of which will be social housing. Works in progress now, completion date delayed from 2025, so expected 2026.

<https://www.clarionhg.com/news-and-media/2022/06/06/former-bristol-railway-sidings-to-become-new-housing-scheme-with-nearly-100-affordable-homes>. Goram Homes (Bristol City Council) development of 166 flats at Baltic Wharf, Spike Island. Work started October 2025. Completion date TBC. <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/plans-approved-166-flats-harbourside-10382920>. Western Harbour development of between 650 and 1200 homes, delivery 2034 earliest.

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/residents/planning-and-building-regulations/regeneration/western-harbour>

8. Equality, and inclusion (with particular attention to **safeguarding educational quality and fairness**).

The proposed merger will result in significant changes for HPS children from diverse backgrounds, including those with English as an additional language, those receiving free school meals and those on the Pupil Premium Grant, all of whom are in higher proportions at HPS than at CPS, as shown in the table below¹².

	Cathedral Primary School	Hotwells Primary School
Number of boys	51.0%	51.2%
Number of girls	49.0%	48.8%
% of children from a Minority Ethnic Background	52.1%	50.4%
% of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL)	18.3%	31.8%
% of pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)	15.2%	14.0%
% of pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)	3.6%	3.9%
% of children in receipt of Free School Meals	22.4%	27.1%
% of pupils in receipt of the Pupil Premium Grant	25.8%	28.7%

Moving to a larger school with much class sizes larger than the standard 30 pupils, and a loss of community support would impact heavily on their education. The community proposal to keep HPS open would maintain its supportive community where educational outcomes are higher than at CPS, despite HPS's more diverse intake.

HPS has a slightly higher proportion of children with EHCPs than CPS; the two schools have roughly similar proportions of pupils with SEND. But moving EHCP and SEND children from a 1FE to a 2FE school (or for CPS students, adding a large amount of new children to their already full class) is likely to have negative emotional and educational impacts because a larger school is more challenging for these children to adjust to. Indeed, many children at HPS moved from larger schools for this reason.

BCC's SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2028¹³ aims “*to have an education system where the majority of children and young people with SEND can thrive in their local mainstream early years setting*”. The merger proposal is in conflict with that aim because it will result in

¹² CST's merger FAQs, question 48 - <https://www.hotwellsprimaryschool.org/media/7651/consultation-faqs-v5.pdf>

¹³ Bristol SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2028 https://wecil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/34ee1c6639be4fa1f9b3c05f3d5f5a1e_SEND_and_Inclusion_Draft_Strategy_w_partner_logos_Accessibility_1.pdf

disruption for HPS's EHCP and SEND children rather than letting them remain in a small local school which is well known for its excellent provision for these children's needs.

No details have been provided by CST about new provision for SEND pupils provision after the merger which is far from reassuring.

The logistical challenges of operating across a split site will be particularly acute for working parents, who have tight schedules when dropping off or collecting children to enable onward travel to work. This applies particularly to lower income families who don't have cars and will suffer an extra financial burden re travel arrangements. The proposed merger will discriminate against these parents.

No work has been done to date by CST to suggest any support that might be provided to cover transport costs between schools at drop off and pick up by means of a school bus.

See also various sections of the [**Revised Risk Register**](#) relating to these criteria, although not all the above objections have been quantified as risks, because the CST document is skewed towards risks for CPS and the Trust rather than HPS or the wider community.