

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

Catholic Education Service written evidence

1. The Catholic Education Service (CES) is the education agency of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and represents the collective view of the Bishops to the government on national education policy.

Executive Summary

2. The CES welcomes the Bill's provisions to safeguard children and improve education, specifically:

- Support for breakfast clubs and limiting school uniform items is welcome; the majority of Catholic schools already implement similar initiatives to help tackle child poverty.
- All Catholic schools, including academies, already adhere to the government's School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document (STPCD). The CES welcomes the government's proposed amendment and Minister's assurances made to the Public Bill Committee on 21 January 2025.
- Following the passage of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and its achieving Royal Assent, the CES would welcome a review of the School Admissions Code and Fair Access Protocols. The School Admissions Code and Fair Access Protocols are in need of a full review for them to be workable in the ongoing mixed educational landscape.
- Dioceses have opened new voluntary aided schools in areas of demand from Catholic families since the 1944 Education Act. This Bill does not change that.
- Dioceses have long-standing working relationships with local authorities. A stronger framework for collaboration with local authorities, which act both as education authorities and education providers, is needed to prevent conflicts of interest.

Catholic schools

3. In England there are 2,074 Catholic schools, educating 817,784 students, and representing around 10% of the state sector. Catholic schools, together with those of the Church of England, make up a third of state school education in England, as part of a successful dual system, long term partnership between Churches and government.

4. Catholic schools, just under half of which are academies, employ 47,312 members of staff. Staff members from ethnic minority backgrounds make up almost a quarter of Catholic school workforces, significantly more than the percentage for the state sector as a whole (16%). Just under half of students in Catholic schools are from ethnic minority backgrounds, compared to 39% nationally.

5. Across England there are 10 Catholic non-maintained Catholic special schools and Catholic independent schools for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), as well as voluntary aided and academy schools with SEND provision, all working in partnership with local authorities.

6. Catholic schools also educate 52% more students from the most deprived backgrounds than other schools, according to the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), with fewer

students from more affluent areas. Many parents of pupils at Catholic schools are ineligible for Free School Meals due to immigration status or low-paid casual employment.

7. Catholic schools are therefore on the front lines of the fight against child poverty, providing crucial support to families facing hardship. In December 2024 the CES published the findings of a survey regarding child poverty in Catholic schools. This detailed the challenges posed and measures implemented to tackle the issue, including breakfast clubs, school uniform support and more.¹

8. The Catholic Church is the largest provider of secondary education in the country, and the second-largest provider of primary education. There are also four Catholic universities: Birmingham Newman; Leeds Trinity; Liverpool Hope; and St Mary's, in Twickenham. Collectively Catholic universities train 2,500 new teachers every year, and each of them trains on average more than three and a half times the average number trained by a Russell Group university.

9. In the following response to the Bill, references to Catholic schools include both maintained schools and academies. Due to the remit of the CES this response will focus more on the second part of the Bill, regarding schools.

Part one: Children's social care

10. The CES welcomes these measures to further support the safeguarding of children and ensure a greater role for families and family networks.

Part two: Schools

Breakfast clubs and school food standards (clause 22)

11. Breakfast clubs are an important initiative to help the Catholic schools' mission to tackle child poverty. Not only do they make sure pupils start school with a healthy, nutritious breakfast, they also provide a calm, social environment that helps with pupils' behaviour for the rest of the day, and enables parents, particularly those with children at different schools, both to access employment and also to get to work on time.

12. Our recent child poverty survey shows that 77% of Catholic schools (or approximately 1,600) already provide a breakfast club.² For example, Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Primary School is in a deprived area of the Archdiocese of Liverpool, with two thirds of pupils eligible for Pupil Premium, more than double the national average. The school's breakfast club is helping alleviate child poverty, as well as improving concentration and attendance. It is supported by the school's local partnerships with Magic Breakfast and Tesco.

13. Some Catholic schools' breakfast clubs are free to attend and open to all as funded from the school's budget, while some are funded by local or regional authorities, and others are a paid-for service. The CES looks forward to the Department for Education's early adopters scheme informing a potentially more uniform approach ahead of a national rollout of breakfast clubs.

¹ *Child Poverty in England & Wales: Survey Report*, [CES and Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, December 2024](#)

² *Child Poverty in England & Wales: Survey Report*, [CES and Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, December 2024](#).

School uniforms (clause 23)

14. This is a welcome approach to reduce the cost for parents. Uniform support is one of the most common forms of assistance that Catholic schools provide, with 94% of them (or more than 1,900) doing so, as detailed in our recent child poverty survey.³ Ensuring children have access to appropriate school uniforms reduces stigma and bullying, promoting a sense of equality among pupils.

15. Many of the families in our communities have multiple children, and uniform support is especially critical for them, as the cost of uniforms can quickly become a financial burden. Almost all Catholic schools operate uniform exchanges or second-hand sales to reduce waste and make uniform more affordable.

Children not in school (clauses 24-29)

16. The Church recognises the primacy of parents as the primary educators of their children, but equally recognises there are circumstances when the state should intervene to prevent harm. The safety of children must take precedence and CES supports a register of children not in school as an important tool in ensuring their safety and preventing any falling through the cracks.

Independent educational institutions (clauses 30-38)

17. All schools should be transparent and accountable in their governance and operation, and both adhere and be held to the highest standards of education. Catholic schools are inspected either by Ofsted or by the Independent Schools Inspectorate. Under canon law they are also inspected separately by the Catholic Schools Inspectorate.

Teacher misconduct (clause 39)

18. The CES welcomes these measures to strengthen safeguarding in schools as part of its commitment to keeping all children safe.

Changes relating to academies (clauses 40-45)

19. All Catholic schools including academies already follow the same approach to teaching staff either having or working towards qualified teacher status (QTS). Catholic multi-academy trusts have set up 'grow your own' schemes to recruit trainee teachers from among their own pupils, offering internships, teaching experience, and bursaries for training to work towards QTS. The CES would welcome both appropriate flexibilities for both voluntary aided schools and academies equally.

20. The CES welcomes the government's proposed amendment and minister's assurances made to the Public Bill Committee on 21 January 2025, to create a floor not a ceiling and to ensure recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers in Catholic schools. Dioceses already require all Catholic schools to use CES employment contracts which adhere to the government's School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document (STPCD). This is to ensure a fair and balanced approach for school staff members' pay. The vast majority of Catholic schools and academies pay the Living Wage to their employees, with many also accredited with the Living Wage Foundation. This is both part of their commitments to Catholic Social Teaching and also to the original founding mission of Catholic schools to aid the poor and to support families.

School admission arrangements (clauses 47-50)

³ *Child Poverty in England & Wales: Survey Report*, [CES and Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, December 2024](#).

21. The governing body of a Catholic school is the admissions authority with responsibility for admissions to the school. Catholic schools also have ten times the size of other schools' catchments areas. They have a long history of collaboration with local authorities on admissions and would welcome a requirement for localised protocols to ensure a level playing field of effective collaboration across the local area, with greater consistency of approach across the country. Since the 1944 Act the Catholic sector has managed admissions to its schools, successfully working with local authorities. This has established Catholic schools as the most ethnically, culturally, linguistically and socio-economically diverse in the country, many in urban areas with pupils experiencing high levels of child poverty.

22. Following the passage of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and its achieving Royal Assent, the CES would welcome a review of the School Admissions Code and Fair Access Protocols. The School Admissions Code was drafted when the education landscape looked very different. Despite some amendments since then, the Code is in need of a full review in order to work effectively amid the current mixed educational landscape of schools and academies. There is also a need for a review of the operation of Fair Access Protocols with a view to ensuring that they too are fit for purpose in the mixed educational landscape and provide a level playing field for all types of schools. They too would benefit from being more consistent in terms of both content and application across local authorities.

Opening new schools (clause 51)

23. This clause does not change the current law which allows proposers (including Catholic dioceses) to open new schools. This ability has remained unchanged in legislation since the Education Act of 1944. The Catholic sector has a long history of opening voluntary aided (VA) schools to serve local communities, in areas where there is a demand from Catholic families. The most recent examples being the Diocese of East Anglia opening a new VA primary school in Peterborough in 2022, and the Archdiocese of Westminster opening a federated VA primary and secondary school in 2013. A new Catholic school would only be proposed in areas where there is sufficient demand from local families. It is commendable that the government has recognised the important contribution of VA schools and the need for this existing route to continue in order to meet local educational demand and allow different types of schools to be established to meet parental choice.

24. Since the 1944 Act the Catholic sector has managed admissions to its schools, successfully working in close collaboration with local authorities. This approach has made Catholic schools the most ethnically, culturally, linguistically and socio-economically diverse in the country, many in urban areas with pupils experiencing high levels of child poverty.

25. The CES would welcome assurances and support from the Government to ensure a consistent approach across the country for dioceses when collaborating with local authorities, so that the educational needs of all communities are met. A stronger framework for collaboration with local authorities, which act both as education authorities and education providers, is needed to prevent conflicts of interest.

26. This is necessary due to inconsistencies in working relationships with local authorities. The chief causes include frequent staff turnover, the reduced service provision of local authority education departments in recent years, and the changing political agendas of different administrations.