

Ms Lucy Livings
Regional Director for South West
South West Advisory Board
Regional Department for Education (DfE) Directors
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Sent by email: RG.SW@education.gov.uk

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Dear Ms Livings,

RE: Proposed amalgamation of Hotwells Primary School and Cathedral Primary School

I'm writing on behalf of Humanists UK to raise our concerns, and those of parents and the local community, about the proposal to fold Hotwells Primary School, a long-standing, community school of no religious character, into Cathedral Primary School, a Church of England school. If this amalgamation takes place it would remove the only primary school of no religious character in the immediate area and leave every local primary school with a Church of England character. We urge you to reject this proposed amalgamation.

We appreciate the pressures on trusts arising from falling rolls and constrained budgets. However, solutions to these challenges must not come at the expense of genuine diversity in provision or of the rights and choices of local families from all religions and beliefs. The effect of this proposal would be to create a local monopoly of Church of England provision, with the nearest non-CofE school a significant walk away – approximately 30 minutes – for many families. This is an avoidable barrier for parents seeking a school that does not promote a particular faith ethos.

There is a clear legal and policy context for protecting diversity and parental choice. The Education Act 1996 requires that the schools available in an area be sufficient in 'number, character and equipment' to offer all pupils appropriate education, and it obliges decision-makers to secure diversity of provision and increase opportunities for parental choice.¹ Added to this, the Department for Education's own statutory guidance on opening or closing maintained schools urges proposers and decision-makers, where both a school of a religious character and a school of no religious character are involved, to weigh the needs of the local community, the balance of denominational and non-denominational provision, and parental demand, especially in merger scenarios.² These duties and expectations should lead decisively away from arrangements that would eliminate the area's sole inclusive, non-faith option.

¹ Education Act 1996, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/14>

² DfE (2024), 'Opening and Closing Maintained Schools', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66fd4f0a080bdf716392eccf/Opening_and_closing_maintained_schools_2024.pdf

The local context strongly reinforces this. Bristol is one of the most non-religious cities in England, with 51% of residents ticking 'No religion' on the 2021 Census, and with substantial diversity among minority religions as well.³ In a community of many beliefs, a school of no religious character is a core part of a balanced local offer. Removing that offer would risk undermining cohesion by forcing families of no, or another, religion to choose a Church of England-based education or travel further afield.

It is also clear that there is meaningful local concern about the proposal. A petition to save Hotwells Primary School has been signed by 1,425 people.⁴ Parents from both Hotwells and Cathedral Primary have publicly voiced opposition and raised questions about process and transparency, including whether credible alternatives have been fully considered. Confidence in local governance depends upon a fair consultation that presents options neutrally and explores them on equal terms – including any option that retains Hotwells' name, ethos, and identity.

An outcome that removes the community's only primary school of no religious character would be a step backwards for inclusion, choice, and cohesion in Bristol. We urge you to reject the proposed merger, keep Hotwells Primary open, and safeguard parental choice.

Yours sincerely,

Lewis Young
Education Campaigns Manager

³ Bristol Council (2021), Bristol Census 2021 Dashboard,
<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/6297-bristol-census-dashboard/file>

⁴ Save Hotwells Primary School petition (2025),
<https://www.change.org/p/keep-hotwells-primary-school-open>