

Written evidence submitted by Catholic Education Service

Executive summary

The CES has worked closely in partnerships with DfE officials to ensure that schools and dioceses are supported to teach during these unprecedented times. We spoke to diocesan staff across England about the financial sustainability of schools and the support they had from the DfE. They reported:

- Funding has increased in real terms over the past 5 years, but it is not necessarily enough to keep up with rapidly rising costs.
- Lots of additional funding can be too proscriptive and narrow focused and being given more discretion over spending would be more useful.
- Some additional costs incurred due to the COVID pandemic are still causing a significant burden on some schools.
- Commitment to funding on longer term basis would allow schools to plan their finances more effectively.

Introduction

The CES represents all Catholic schools in England and Wales on behalf of the Catholic Bishops' Conference. We are the second largest provider of schools in England, with 10% of the national total of maintained schools in England. There are more than 2200 Catholic Schools in England across 19 dioceses, meaning that the Catholic sector is the second largest national provider of education and currently educates over 850,000 pupils. Due partly to historical Catholic migration to the UK and partly due to the Catholic mission of serving the poor, Catholic schools have more pupils from deprived backgrounds than the national average.

The increase of schools funding in real terms, in a way that takes account of cost pressures

Many dioceses have indicated that while funding has increased in real terms, it isn't fully meeting the increased pressure of rising costs. For example, one diocese gave the figures of the increases in funding and costs in their schools on average since 2015/16, with funding increasing by 16.34% but staffing costs rising by 19.89%.

Distribution of DfE funding in line with it's objectives

Several dioceses reported that the extra funding the DfE gives schools can be too proscriptive in how a school is able these funds to meet stated objectives. For example, the Bursary Fund is very narrow in terms of how it can be used and so has much less impact than pupil premium. Another example is the Covid expenses that schools incurred in terms of providing staff with the means to work from home, which were genuine COVID expenses but weren't covered by the DfE guidelines and the claims for which were subsequently rejected.

Support for schools to improve their financial position

Dioceses reported that the DfE have provided tools and facilitated some useful training sessions, but their initiatives make extra work for little gain.

They also reported that what would most help their schools to strategically improve their financial position would be to commit to their funding and pay policy on a rolling 3 year basis, so they can plan longer term budgets accordingly.

Longer term financial planning has also been significantly disrupted by the costs of the COVID pandemic, either through home working expenses claims which have been rejected by the DfE or cashflow issues around providing support for disadvantaged children.

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