

Consultation



The trustees of CSET (Castle School Education Trust) and TPLT (The Priory Learning Trust) have jointly explored the potential for a merger of our two trusts. Our vision is to create a new organisation based on our shared values and aspirations, combining our strengths and resources to meet the educational challenges ahead. We are now inviting all those with an interest in the trusts and our schools to contribute to a consultation on our proposal to merge.

Our Proposal

CSET and TPLT propose to merge, creating a new trust with a new identity that draws on the complementary strengths of the two existing trusts. There are three principal benefits:

1. **We can provide a great education for more children.** We have significantly improved outcomes in recent years, but the social context in which we are working is challenging. In a larger trust we can more easily connect colleagues and direct resources to address these challenges. This will enable us to support all students, including those who are disadvantaged and those in schools where standards have been lower, to achieve the strong outcomes already experienced by many of our children.
2. **We can reinvest savings in professional development for staff.** By merging our central services, we can provide stronger support to schools at lower cost. We will also have better purchasing power as a larger organisation. This will allow us to spend more money on school improvement, and in particular on professional development for staff. We want to recruit, train and retain great staff through initial teacher training, early career to experienced practitioner development, apprenticeships and leadership pathways. This will increase the opportunities open to existing staff, and will also enable us to fill vacancies in shortage roles, improving the educational experience for children.
3. **We can grow sustainably in the future, serving more communities.** Our trusts have grown over recent years, and we know that further schools are interested in joining us. As a larger organisation, we will have the systems and capacity to support new schools in joining, blending a strong trust offer with a commitment to the unique identity and ethos of each school. By growing our family of schools, our ambition to provide a great education will be sustainable for the next generation of children.

Our Consultation

We are consulting on our proposal to merge from **Monday 8th January to Monday 5th February**. If you would like to respond to the consultation, ask questions, or find out more about the proposal, please email consultation@cset.co.uk or consultation@theplt.org.uk.

Our Trusts and Schools

[Castle School Education Trust](#) was formed in 2013 and now comprises four secondary and four primary schools, located in the eastern suburbs of Bristol and in the town of Thornbury and surrounding villages (South Gloucestershire). There are currently 5457 pupils on roll across the eight schools:

- The Castle (joined 2013) 1474 pupils aged 11-18
- Downend (joined 2016) 1411 pupils aged 11-18
- Mangotsfield (joined 2015) 1111 pupils aged 11-16
- Marlwood (joined 2014) 547 pupils aged 11-16
- Lyde Green (opened 2015) 498 pupils aged 4-11
- Charfield (joined 2013) 205 pupils aged 4-11
- Severn Beach (joined 2014) 141 pupils aged 4-11
- Tortworth (joined 2023) 70 pupils aged 4-11

Cherry Garden Primary School will also be joining CSET in 2024.

[The Priory Learning Trust](#) was formed in 2016 and now comprises three secondary and six primary schools, located in Weston-super-Mare (North Somerset) and the town and villages around Highbridge & Burnham (Somerset). There are currently 5438 pupils on roll across the nine schools:

- Priory (joined 2016) 1513 pupils aged 11-16
- King Alfred (joined 2018) 1354 pupils aged 11-18
- Worle (joined 2017) 1348 pupils aged 11-16
- Castle Batch (joined 2018) 415 pupils aged 4-11 & age 2-4 nursery
- St Anne's (joined 2018) 389 pupils aged 4-11 & age 2-4 nursery
- Berrow (joined 2023) 150 pupils aged 4-11 & age 2-4 nursery
- West Huntspill (joined 2021) 116 pupils aged 4-11 & age 2-4 nursery
- East Huntspill (joined 2021) 86 pupils aged 4-11 & age 2-4 nursery
- Pawlett (joined 2019) 67 pupils aged 4-11

Burnham-on-Sea Infant School and St Andrew's Junior School will be joining TPLT in 2024.

St Anne's, Berrow and St Andrew's are Church of England primary schools within the Diocese of Bath & Wells.

Our Name

We want our new organisation to have a new identity, and our proposed name is **Pathway Trust** which emphasises the importance of opportunity and collaboration within our family of schools. Pathways connect us together and create networks between us, and evolve over time as new pathways are explored and established. Pathways provide a route map for the educational, professional and personal journeys that we share. We hope that our new name will help us to establish an identity for our trust that is meaningful for our pupils, staff and wider communities.

Our Vision

Our vision is to create a new trust, drawing on the very similar founding principles and shared ambitions of TPLT and CSET.

Our ambition is to enable every child to experience a great education. This means ensuring that all children, including the most vulnerable, secure essential skills for life such as literacy and numeracy. We will strive to provide a rich and inspiring education through which young people develop their knowledge and understanding of the world around them, expanding horizons and raising aspirations. Through this we will promote personal development, enabling children to flourish both now and in their future lives, with the moral character to navigate the complexity of the world around them.

For our Church schools, this ambition is rooted in the vision for education of the Church of England, which informs the Christian distinctiveness of our Church schools. This vision is echoed in all our schools through our shared belief in the power of education to make the world a better place.

Our trust will serve the region around Bristol, from Somerset up to Gloucestershire. Our focus will be on supporting both large and small schools, and those in rural as well as urban communities. Our proposed governance structures will provide an option for Church schools that are currently Voluntary Controlled or Voluntary Aided within the Dioceses of Bath & Wells, Bristol and Gloucester to join the trust, alongside other schools within the area.

School Improvement

The approach of TPLT and CSET to primary education is very similar, and there is a strong track record of school improvement in both trusts across our existing 10 schools. By merging, we will be able to invest in dedicated primary improvement capacity and significantly develop professional networks across our existing schools as well as those that join us in the future. A particular focus will be on the curriculum, pedagogy, and responding to the social challenges around behaviour, attendance, SEND and vulnerable learners.

Both CSET and TPLT have demonstrated improvement in secondary school provision over time, but whilst outcomes are above average in some schools, they are below average in others. One of the early benefits of the merger will be that we can share expertise to accelerate improvement in those schools where outcomes are not yet above the national average. This will be achieved by further aligning our approach to pedagogy, and investing in professional development for classroom practitioners. In the longer term, we will be able to align our curriculum more closely in response to future changes in national frameworks. As a larger trust, we will be able to develop expertise to support vulnerable learners in our schools, both in the classroom and through additional early-intervention provision.

Our school improvement model will be based upon a strong culture of shared responsibility across the trust for all children, along with sharply focused strategic accountability for improvement. We propose to develop a 'Teaching College' that acts as custodian for the trust's approaches to classroom practice, and coordinates training and professional

development for teachers and educational support staff at all stages of their careers. This investment in professional development will be a central feature of a larger organisation that could not be realised within the resources of the existing trusts.

In order to maximise the investment in leadership and teaching, the trust will need efficient operating systems, balancing the need for high levels of compliance across the trust with an agile approach that enables school leaders to respond quickly to changing context. We propose to achieve this by holding accountability for Finance, HR, Facilities and IT centrally, with small expert central teams supported by four geographic partnerships providing visible support in schools. This architecture has been designed to be scalable, and in particular to support the needs of smaller schools as the trust grows.

Frequently asked questions

How have the proposals been developed?

In October 2023 the Trustees of CSET and TPLT agreed to formally explore a merger of the two trusts. A Joint Trustee Oversight Group met fortnightly, with regular engagement from TPLT and CSET Trustees & Members, as well as trust leaders and external stakeholders including the Department for Education and Dioceses.

This exploration demonstrated that the opportunities presented by a merger significantly outweigh the challenges. Furthermore, due diligence has not revealed any detriment to pupils resulting from resources being shared across the two existing organisations. There is considerable enthusiasm for the potential a merger brings to accelerate improvement to the benefit of our children, staff and communities.

What are the implications for pupils and parents?

All our schools serve distinct communities, and we have maintained the unique identity and ethos of each of our schools to reflect this. The process of merging will not result in any immediate changes for pupils and parents in our existing schools. Over time, we want to ensure that children and young people in our schools receive the best possible education, and our ability to share expertise and resources within a larger family of schools will support us in achieving this. As a larger trust, we will have greater ability to support issues such as staff recruitment that are challenging even for successful schools.

What are the implications for staff?

The work of our classroom teachers, along with the other professional staff who support them, is central to our trusts. Our staff already work collaboratively within and between schools. As a larger trust, we will be able to strengthen networks that connect colleagues who are working in similar roles, and share expertise between those working in similar contexts. We will be able to invest more in development for staff, so that there are strong professional pathways within the trust for those seeking to develop their careers. We will be better able to support flexibility and staff wellbeing to help us recruit and retain great staff.

Although some changes will be needed to bring about the benefits of merging, such as aligning systems, we will work closely with staff to implement changes in a carefully planned and gradual approach over time.

What are the financial implications?

The financial position of both trusts is secure. However, school funding presents a challenge in all the local authority areas we currently work in (South Gloucestershire, North Somerset and Somerset). A single, larger trust will have greater economies of scale and increased purchasing power, which will enable us to continue investing in schools over the coming years within a challenging financial environment.

There will be some costs associated with the merger, but they will be strongly outweighed by the savings of running a single organisation. We will be eligible for external funding to support some of the costs of merging, so this will not impact on school budgets.

Will other schools join the trust?

We know that many schools which have not yet joined a trust are exploring the possibility of doing so at some point in the future. It is important that each school finds the right trust for their unique context, at a time that is right for the school community. Part of our rationale for merging is that it will give us more scope to support growth over time, including schools that are already working together in existing local partnerships.

What are the next steps?

Trustees will consider responses to this consultation at their Board meetings in February. In parallel, we are developing the details of the structures for governance and leadership that would oversee a merged trust. Following this, we will be in a position to submit our proposal to the Department for Education for approval. We aim to complete this during the Spring Term. Following that, we would be able to commence the legal processes needed for the two trusts to merge. We aim to complete the merger for 1st September 2024.

Summary

CSET and TPLT propose to merge, creating a new organisation, Pathway Trust, that draws on our complementary strengths. There are three principal benefits:

1. We can provide a great education for more children.
2. We can reinvest savings in professional development for staff.
3. We can grow sustainably in the future, serving more communities.

If you would like to respond to the consultation by 5th February or find out more about our proposals, please email consultation@cset.co.uk or consultation@theplt.org.uk.