

Options paper: the future of Sixth Form provision at St Mary's Catholic College (St Mary's Catholic College)

Context

St Mary's Catholic College (St Mary's Catholic College) is an 11–18 voluntary academy within the Holy Family Catholic Multi Academy Trust, serving a community with levels of disadvantage above the national average. The school currently educates approximately 1,100 pupils, with a published capacity of around 1,300. A significant proportion of pupils are eligible for free school meals and the number of pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans is also above national averages. This context presents both challenges and moral imperatives around equity, inclusion, and securing strong outcomes for all learners.

The most recent inspection (January 2026) judged the school to be meeting expected standards across most areas, including safeguarding, behaviour, curriculum, leadership, and sixth form provision. The sixth form was recognised as offering a supportive environment where students typically demonstrate secure understanding and make appropriate progress from their starting points. However, leaders acknowledge that not all students are fully prepared for their next steps, and outcomes at Key Stage 5 remain below national averages in terms of attainment and value added.

At Key Stage 4, pupil outcomes are significantly below national benchmarks, particularly for disadvantaged pupils. Progress 8 and attainment measures indicate that, while improvements are underway, raising standards for pupils aged 11–16 remains a critical priority. Within this broader school improvement context, the sixth form plays a relatively small but resource-intensive role. While it contributes positively to the school's ethos and provides a limited number of progression opportunities, it serves a minority of students and operates in a challenging financial and demographic environment. Declining cohort sizes, inconsistent retention, and below-average post-16 outcomes have reduced its overall impact and sustainability.

The school is located in an area with access to a range of alternative post-16 providers, including further education colleges and larger sixth forms offering broader curricula and more viable cohort sizes. This local landscape provides realistic and potentially advantageous progression routes for students.

The Trust and school leaders therefore face a strategic decision: how best to balance the benefits of retaining an in-house sixth form against the need to secure financial sustainability, improve outcomes at Key Stages 3 and 4, and ensure high-quality post-16 pathways for all students. This options paper is situated within that context—seeking to align educational quality, financial responsibility, and long-term strategic priorities.

Option A: Closure of Sixth Form at St Mary's Catholic College from September 2027

The sixth form at St Mary's Catholic College has historically provided students with pathways into higher education, employment and training, and has been an important part of the school's offer. However, there are some significant concerns regarding sustainability, educational impact and financial viability.

Over recent years, declining student numbers and low retention have significantly affected the viability of the sixth form at St Mary's Catholic College. Current and projected cohort sizes remain small, with average class sizes as low as 5 - 10 students in some subjects. This has resulted in inefficiencies in curriculum delivery and staffing deployment, with a disproportionate allocation of teaching resources to a relatively small number of students .

The rationale for the proposed closure is as follows:

- **Sustained low student numbers and viability concerns**

Sixth form provision at St Mary's Catholic College is operating significantly below capacity, with small class sizes and limited cohort numbers. This impacts both the breadth of curriculum that can be offered and the quality of peer learning experiences. The decline in student numbers at St Mary's Catholic College Sixth Form in recent years is outlined below.

Academic Year	Year 12	Year 13	Total
2026/27 (forecast)	45	35	80
2025/26	52	38	90
2024/25	48	58	106
2023/24	90	82	172
2022/23	88	88	176
2021/22	95	95	190

Key points:

- There has been a **significant decline in overall numbers** since 2021/22.
- **Year 12 recruitment has reduced sharply**, with little recovery.
- Retention from Year 12 to Year 13 has also been inconsistent.

- Current cohort sizes contribute to **small class sizes and reduced curriculum viability,**
- **Disproportionate staffing and curriculum costs**
The 2024 SRMA report highlighted that staffing costs at St Mary's Catholic College were exceptionally high at over 90% of total revenue income (TRI), well above recommended benchmarks. As of April 2026 the percentage of staffing in terms of TRI is ??%. A key contributing factor of this high TRI percentage is the delivery of small sixth form classes, which requires a level of staffing that is not financially sustainable .
- **Cross-subsidisation from Key Stages 3 and 4**
Analysis indicates that sixth form provision is being subsidised by funding intended for lower school phases. Currently (April 2026) approximately ??% of teaching time is allocated to Key Stage 5 despite it generating only around ??% of income, creating a significant financial imbalance .
- **Impact on whole-school financial sustainability**
The current model contributes to an in-year deficit (forecast to be at around £900,000 by September 2027) and places pressure on the overall budget. Continuing to fund an under-subscribed sixth form risks negatively affecting resources available for the majority of students in Years 7–11 .
- **Inefficient use of staffing and low class sizes**
The delivery model results in low pupil-teacher ratios and underutilised teaching capacity. This reduces overall efficiency and limits the school's ability to deploy staff effectively across the curriculum.
- **Availability of strong alternative post-16 provision**
There are a range of high-quality sixth form and further education providers within the local area, offering broader curriculum choices, larger peer groups and more sustainable provision for post-16 learners.
- **Strategic focus on improving outcomes for all students**
The Trust has a responsibility to ensure that resources - financial, leadership and staffing - are directed where they will have the greatest impact. Prioritising Key Stages 3 and 4 will support improved outcomes, curriculum delivery and student experience for the majority of learners.

Risk analysis summary for Option A

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation	Residual Risk
Reputational damage to St Mary's Catholic College and Trust (perception of decline or reduced offer)	Medium	High	Clear communication strategy; position decision as quality-driven; highlight strong alternative pathways	Medium
Parental and community opposition	High (short term)	Medium	Early engagement, consultation, transparent rationale, transition support	Low–Medium
Student displacement and transition challenges	Medium	Medium	Strong transition partnerships with local providers; careers guidance; guaranteed pathways	Low
Staff redundancies and morale impact	High	High	Phased staffing plan, redeployment where possible, HR support	Medium
Loss of post-16 identity and progression continuity	Medium	Medium	Develop alumni links and progression tracking; strengthen KS4 guidance	Low
Reduced attractiveness to prospective Year 7 families	Low–Medium	Medium	Emphasise strong KS3/4 outcomes and partnerships with high-quality post-16 providers	Low
Dependency on external providers for post-16 outcomes	Medium	Low–Medium	Formal partnerships and tracking of destinations	Low

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation	Residual Risk
Implementation risks (timeline, logistics)	Low	Medium	Clear project planning and governance	Low

Option B: Retain the planned reduced offer for 2026/27 for an indefinite period

Rather than full closure, an alternative model is proposed for consideration: the retention of a **smaller, focused sixth form offering a limited number of high-quality BTEC courses only**, aligned to student demand and local employment pathways. This model would enable St Mary's Catholic College to continue to provide post-16 education while addressing the challenges associated with low student numbers and inefficient curriculum delivery.

From September 2026 Sixth Form offer at St Mary's Catholic College will focus on a vocational A-Level equivalent pathway (BTECs). As per the HFCMAT Board's direction, the plan is to increase class sizes in Year 12 in 2026/27 and therefore utilise fewer staff when compared to the 2025/26 model. The subjects planned for September 2026 Level 3 programme include:

- Applied Science
- Applied Business
- Applied Childcare
- Applied Health and Social Care
- Applied ICT
- Applied Media
- Applied Psychology
- Applied Sport

The rationale for this approach is as follows:

- **The creation of a sustainable model in the context of small student numbers**
The 2026/27 streamlined BTEC-only model allows for larger teaching groups and more efficient staffing, making it more sustainable with lower student numbers.
- **Increase the focus on courses with consistent student demand**
Subjects such as **Health and Social Care, Sport, Business and Information Technology** have demonstrated stronger and more consistent uptake. Retaining only these key areas ensures that the curriculum is aligned with student interest and avoids running unviable courses.

- Removing the inefficiencies associated with A Level provision**
 A Level courses typically require small class sizes across a wide range of subjects, leading to disproportionate staffing costs. By contrast, BTEC courses can be delivered more flexibly, often with fewer staff and more viable group sizes, reducing financial pressure on the school.
- Maintaining an inclusive post-16 pathway for St Mary's Catholic College students**
 Retaining a BTEC-focused sixth form ensures that students who wish to remain within the school community can do so, particularly those who benefit from a familiar and supportive environment and an applied learning approach.
- Improved efficiency in curriculum delivery and staffing**
 A reduced number of courses allows for better deployment of teaching staff, improved class sizes and more effective use of resources. This directly addresses concerns identified in the financial review regarding staffing levels and cost per student.
- Protecting resources for the main school while retaining post-16 provision**
 This model ensures that Key Stages 3 and 4 are not required to subsidise an inefficient sixth form structure, while still preserving a meaningful post-16 offer for students.
- Opportunity for future collaboration and growth**
 A focused BTEC model could provide a foundation for future partnership working with other providers, including shared delivery or progression pathways, without the burden of a full A Level offer.

Risk analysis summary for Option B

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation	Residual Risk
Continued financial inefficiency (still below optimal scale)	High	High	Tight curriculum control; minimum class size thresholds	Medium–High
Insufficient student recruitment to sustain even reduced model	High	High	Marketing, employer links, partnerships	High
Ongoing cross-subsidisation from KS3/4	Medium–High	High	Strict financial monitoring; staffing caps	Medium

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation	Residual Risk
Narrow curriculum offer limits student choice and progression	Medium	Medium	Strong guidance; external partnerships for breadth	Medium
Perception of 'diminished' sixth form offer	Medium	Medium	Rebrand as specialist/applied pathway	Medium
Staffing inefficiencies remain (even with BTEC model)	Medium	Medium	Flexible staffing and cross-phase teaching	Medium
Quality risks if cohorts remain small	Medium	Medium	Focus on high-demand courses only	Medium
Risk of future closure anyway (delayed decision)	High	High	Regular review checkpoints	High
Leadership and management capacity diverted	Medium	Medium	Streamlined leadership structure	Medium

Comparative cost-effectiveness (medium–long term)

Category	Option A	Option B
Immediate costs	Redundancy / restructuring Transition support	Lower than closure (fewer redundancies initially)
Medium–Long term impact	Significant savings in staffing costs Removal of structural deficit driver Resources redirected to KS3/4 (majority of students)	Continued inefficiency risk High risk of ongoing subsidy Limited scalability unless recruitment improves significantly
Financial trajectory	Rapid stabilisation → sustainable surplus potential	Uncertain → likely continued pressure → possible future closure anyway

Recommendation

Option A: Closure of Sixth Form is the most cost-effective and strategically sound option in the medium to long term.

Rationale

1. Addresses the root cause - low numbers and structural inefficiency are not resolved by downsizing alone.
2. Eliminates ongoing financial risk - removes a key driver of the projected £900k deficit.
3. Improves resource allocation - enables investment in KS3 and KS4, benefiting the majority of students.
4. Avoids “managed decline” scenario - Option B carries a high risk of delayed but inevitable closure, with additional cumulative costs.
5. System-wide efficiency - local high-quality providers already offer better economies of scale and curriculum breadth.
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Annex 1: Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Proposed Closure of Sixth Form Provision

St Mary’s Catholic College (St Mary's Catholic College)

Proposed implementation: September 2027

1. Purpose of the assessment

This Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has been undertaken to evaluate the potential impact of the proposed closure of Sixth Form provision at St Mary’s Catholic College (St Mary's Catholic College) on individuals and groups with protected characteristics, in line with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) under the Equality Act 2010.

The assessment aims to:

- identify any disproportionate adverse impact on specific groups;
- consider how such impacts can be mitigated; and
- ensure that decision-making is fair, proportionate, and evidence-informed.

2. Summary of the proposal

The proposal under consideration is to close the Sixth Form at St Mary's Catholic College with effect from September 2027.

This is being considered due to:

- declining and unsustainable student numbers;

- below-average post-16 outcomes;
- significant financial pressures, including structural inefficiency;
- the need to prioritise improved outcomes at Key Stages 3 and 4; and
- the availability of alternative post-16 provision locally.

No final decision has been made at this stage, and this EIA forms part of the wider decision-making and consultation process.

3. Data and evidence considered

This assessment draws upon:

- the St Mary's Catholic College Sixth Form options paper (April 2026);
- internal school data on student demographics (FSM, SEND, attainment);
- local demographic context (above-average disadvantage and EHCP prevalence);
- knowledge of local post-16 provision and accessibility; and
- risk analysis contained within the proposal.

4. Impact assessment by protected characteristic

4.1 Age

Impact: Post-16 students aged 16–18

- The proposal directly affects students of sixth form age, removing in-school provision.
- All students in this age group will be required to transition to alternative providers.

Assessment: Neutral in equality terms (as all students in this age group are affected equally). However, differential impact may arise when combined with other characteristics (e.g. SEND, disadvantage).

Mitigation:

- Comprehensive transition programme;
- Individual guidance and support for all students;
- Early engagement with Year 11 cohorts.

4.2 Disability (including SEND)

Impact: Potentially significant. St Mary's Catholic College has an above-average proportion of pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Students with SEND may be more

reliant on familiar environments, established relationships, and consistent support structures.

Risks:

- Difficulty adapting to new settings;
- Disruption to support provision;
- Increased risk of disengagement post-16.

Assessment: Potential adverse impact (high) if not carefully mitigated.

Mitigation:

- Individual transition planning for all SEND students;
- Early liaison with receiving providers;
- Ensuring continuity of EHCP provision;
- Enhanced pastoral and careers support;
- Monitoring of post-16 destinations and retention.

4.3 Sex (Gender)

Impact: Likely neutral, no evidence to suggest that the proposal would disproportionately affect male or female students.

Assessment: Neutral impact

Mitigation:

- Ensure equal access to guidance and destination pathways;
- Monitor outcomes by gender post-transition.

4.4 Race (including ethnicity and nationality)

Impact: Potential indirect impact. If certain ethnic groups are overrepresented within the school's disadvantaged cohort, there may be indirect effects.

Risks:

- Barriers to accessing alternative provision;
- Cultural or community preferences for remaining in a known school setting.

Assessment: Low–moderate potential adverse impact (indirect)

Mitigation:

- Targeted engagement with families;
- Culturally sensitive communication;
- Support with applications and transitions;
- Monitoring participation and outcomes by ethnicity.

4.5 Religion or Belief

Impact: Potentially significant. St Mary's Catholic College is a Catholic school, and its Sixth Form contributes to faith-based post-16 education.

Risks:

- Reduced access to Catholic post-16 provision;
- Concern from families wishing to continue faith-based education.

Assessment: Low adverse impact, particularly as there are local Catholic post-16 alternatives available

Mitigation:

- Engagement with the Diocese;
- Identification and promotion of faith-based post-16 pathways where available;
- Ensuring students can continue to access pastoral and spiritual support.

4.6 Pregnancy and Maternity

Impact: Potential indirect impact. Young parents or pregnant students may benefit from the familiarity and flexibility of existing provision.

Risks:

- Increased barriers to participation if required to travel further;
- Reduced continuity of support.

Assessment: Low–moderate adverse impact (case-specific)

Mitigation:

- Individual support plans;
- Flexible transition arrangements;
- Liaison with providers offering appropriate support services.

4.7 Sexual Orientation

Impact: Likely neutral, no direct evidence of differential impact.

Assessment: Neutral impact

Mitigation:

- Ensure receiving providers have strong safeguarding and inclusive policies;
- Monitor student wellbeing post-transition.

4.8 Gender Reassignment

Impact: Likely neutral (with safeguarding considerations) - No direct differential impact identified.

Risks: Transition to new settings may present challenges for some individuals.

Assessment: Neutral to low adverse impact (individual cases)

Mitigation:

- Ensure sensitive transition planning;
- Liaison with receiving institutions to ensure inclusive environments.

4.9 Marriage and Civil Partnership

Impact: Not applicable to student cohort

Assessment: No impact identified

5. Summary table of equality impacts

Protected Characteristic	Level of Impact	Nature of Impact	Key Risks	Mitigation
Age	Neutral	Universal impact on 16–18 cohort	Transition disruption	Structured transition programme
Disability (SEND)	High	Adverse (potential)	Disengagement, support disruption	Individual plans, EHCP continuity, provider liaison
Sex	Neutral	No differential impact	None identified	Monitor outcomes
Race / Ethnicity	Low–Moderate	Indirect adverse	Access barriers, engagement	Targeted communication, monitoring
Religion / Belief	Low	Adverse	Reduced Catholic provision	Diocese engagement, faith pathways

Pregnancy / Maternity	Low–Moderate	Case-specific adverse	Participation barriers	Flexible support, provider liaison
Sexual Orientation	Neutral	No differential impact	Wellbeing in new settings	Safeguarding, inclusive providers
Gender Reassignment	Low	Case-specific	Transition challenges	Sensitive transition support
Marriage / Civil Partnership	None	Not applicable	N/A	N/A

6. Overall equality impact assessment

The proposal is assessed as: **Not discriminatory in intent, and aligned with legitimate educational and financial objectives**; Carrying potential adverse impacts, particularly for:

- students with SEND;
- disadvantaged students (intersectional risk);
- those seeking faith-based post-16 provision.

However, these impacts are capable of being mitigated through:

- robust transition planning;
- targeted support for vulnerable groups;
- strong partnership working with local providers; and
- ongoing monitoring of student destinations and outcomes.

7. Mitigation and Action Plan

Key actions required:

- Develop a detailed student transition plan (including SEND-specific pathways);
- Establish formal partnerships with local post-16 providers;
- Provide enhanced careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG);
- Engage proactively with:
 - parents and carers,
 - the Diocese,
 - the Local Authority;
- **Monitor post-16 destinations, retention, and outcomes by protected characteristic;**

- Review and update this EIA following consultation.

8. Conclusion

Subject to the implementation of the mitigation measures outlined above, the proposal is considered:

- **Justifiable and proportionate** in achieving its aims;
- **Compliant** with the Public Sector Equality Duty; and
- **Capable** of delivering improved outcomes for the majority of pupils, **while safeguarding the needs of vulnerable groups.**