



CHELTENHAM
PREP SCHOOL

Prep School Head's Report

Council Meeting

November 2024

Admissions/Roll

YEAR GROUP	YEAR GROUP TOTAL	FULL BOARDER/DAY SPLIT	BOY/GIRL SPLIT
YEAR 8	65	12/53	39/26
YEAR 7	62	11/51	36/26
YEAR 6	54	8/46	25/29
YEAR 5	37	2/35	19/18
YEAR 4	50	2/48	27/23
YEAR 3	37	1/36	19/17
YEAR 2	33	N/A	21/12
YEAR 1	26	N/A	16/10
RECEPTION	32	N/A	15/17
NURSERY 2	31	N/A	16/15
NURSERY 1	6	N/A	2/5
TOTAL	433	37 Full Boarders	235/198

We currently have 11 offers out for a January 2025 start and would expect numbers to continue to grow throughout the year and to hit our 450 target, for the Summer Term.

	10 Year Plan	Actual	
		September	April
2018-2019	370	366	387
2019-2020	370	400	404
2020-2021	370	407	414
2021-2022	379	407	428
2022-2023	388	423	459
2023-2024	397	428	454
2024-2025	406	433	
2025-2026	415		
2026-2027	415		
2027-2028	420		
2028-2029	420		

The numbers continue to sit positively both in relation to our 10 year plan strategic targets and in relation to the statistics for pupil numbers in the sector which are significantly down.





Entrance@11 only had 24 candidates this year, compared with low 30s in each of the past two years and 50 year the year before. A significant proportion of this decrease comes from our earlier recruitment of children who otherwise may have joined in Year 7. It is also likely that a number of the more speculative applications have been put off by the current climate and by the fact that we offer neither scholarships or bursaries to children in The Prep school. We are expecting to make 22 offers and would hope for 12 to 15 children to accept. If these numbers end up being accurate it would suggest the process has brought in the same number of high quality applicants (and a similar number of acceptances) as previously but it has indeed shed the more speculative ones. What is unclear at the moment is what the size of leave will be from Year 6. I have spoken with all those we suspect may leave, but it is still very difficult to predict. As well as being an obvious time to leave for the likes of Cheltenham Ladies College and Grammars it is increasingly a time where people may consider cheaper local options (Kings, St Edwards, Dean Close) if their finances are stretched. We have some buffer given that this is our biggest ever Year 6 cohort (currently standing at 54). Currently eight are (almost certain) leavers, but that number could easily double before the end of the year. If we can keep the year group numbers static for September 2025 it would be a strong result given the challenges for that specific group in both recruitment and retention.

The Open Morning was reasonably well attended with 33 families on the day. Whilst numbers have been higher in the past they have been dropping steadily over the last few years as we have focussed more on smaller Open Mornings which allows for greater one to one conversations between the families and senior staff. We are already in double figures for families who have registered and set up Taster Days and assessments direct from Open Morning.

Enquiries by YG

Academic Year	2023/24													2024/25				Total
Calendar Year	2023													2024				Total
Enrolment YG	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Total	Sep	Oct	Nov	Total	
⊞ -2	17	6	4		15	5	6	10	2	3	1	3	72	7	6	1	14	86
⊞ -1	4	1	2	3	3	1	1	2	1	4	1	1	24	5	5	1	11	35
⊞ 0	6	3	2	2	1	1	1	2	2		2	1	23	3	2	2	7	30
⊞ 1	1	3		1		1				2	2		10	4	2		6	16
⊞ 2	2				1	3	1	1	1		1		10	1	1		2	12
⊞ 3	4	2	4	3	6	2	1	2			1	3	28	5	3		8	36
⊞ 4	5	2	2	3	6	2	1	1	1		3	2	28	6			6	34
⊞ 5	4	5	3	4	6	6	2	1	2	5	1	2	41	2	1	2	5	46
⊞ 6	4	4	6		1	6	3	2		1	3	1	31	2	3	1	6	37
⊞ 7	20	14	9	8	13	12	9	5	11	11	4	3	119	25	11	3	39	158
⊞ 8	3	11	2	4	3	5	2	2	3	2	1		38	6		2	8	46
Total	70	51	34	28	55	44	27	28	23	28	20	16	424	66	34	12	112	536

As you will see our overall enquiries in September/October are down a little on last year's numbers (121 in September/October 2023, 100 in September/October 2024). There are a number of possible reasons for this. Clearly the market is nervous and sector numbers are dropping. Equally this is likely to drive away the more speculative enquiries so the percentage of meaningful enquiries may be less altered. I have no doubt that losing Jess Ottley-Woodd, our Prep Marketing Manager, has had a significant effect. It was a very difficult post to fill and whilst we do now have someone in place the overall quality of our marketing output has dropped significantly. Andrew



Hailes and I are both working extremely hard to make the significant improvements needed in this area.

As I have explained in the past, predicting future numbers, even for September 2025, is very much not a science. Parents sign up later and later and the current economic climate and challenges of the sector are only exacerbating this. We are currently in a similar position to recent years at this point in the year and we will do everything possible to, once again, hit the 420 target. The biggest challenge to this may well be retention rather than recruitment. Any parent of a Prep School child cannot yet "see the end of the road" for education costs so they are far less able to "stretch" for an extra couple of years for example to see their children through GCSEs or 6th Form. For this reason predicting how many will leave in the summer is incredibly hard. What we have to do is to make that decision as hard as possible by highlighting the very real differences between us and cheaper alternatives.

The position as of today can be summarised below.

September 2025 as at 19 November 2024

Year	Target	Current	Commentary
8	64	62	Strong. Likely to pick up a couple of boarders pre-College.
7	60	54	Very strong year group, but most challenged. See Entrance@11 detail.
6	54	37	Weakest year group. 1 child in for a taster but otherwise little interest - main focus of the marketing campaign.
5	45	54	Completely full, likely to add an extra class so good PPs are not turned away.
4	45	37	Usually a strong year for September growth.
3	45	36	Strong position with Year 2 currently full. 9 extra spaces open for Year 3 - hopeful of filling a number of them.
2	35	27	8 to target numbers.
1	35	35	Full. One space kept free for large families joining mid-year.
Reception	32	27	Still waiting for confirmation from a number of Nursery families.

As you can see given the strength of number in our lower years, comparative to four or five years ago, we are in as good a position as we have ever been to deal with the current challenges.





369 at this stage (excluding the Nursery numbers) for September 2025 is excellent. The data includes all known and expected leavers but, as previously discussed, these are likely to be significantly more before September 2025.

Other brief points of note worth mentioning are the number of College and Prep staff children attending The Prep (including Nursery who may leave) is 53. We continue to turn down significant numbers of children for either academic or behavioural reasons (c30 in the last 12 months).

The strength of the Nursery should also be mentioned. Full Reception classes and more in the pipeline are absolutely crucial to us keeping the roll at target and the investment in the new Nursery is very clearly paying off.

Full boarding numbers should be 40 by January, which given 26 full boarders left us in June is a very pleasing statistic. It is down on the 47 of last year, but is doing extremely well. As ever, we remain highly susceptible to any issues within the military market, and specifically in relation to CEA funding. Of the 37 full boarders this term 14 are from military families and in receipt of CEA support. This number will grow to 16 in January and 18 in April. Only six of these will leave in the summer. Current rumours suggest CEA will be increased by 12-15%, with an announcement expected at the start of December. Let us hope this rumour is true!

Staffing

I am delighted that Charlotte Webb joins us in September 2025 from Orchard House Prep, in London, as our new Deputy Head Academic. As we went to the market at a better time we had a far stronger field than when we first ran this process and Charlotte was the best of a strong field. She has nine years' experience as a Deputy Head Academic and will bring a slight change in focus. Rather than large scale new initiatives she will be more data driven in ensuring appropriate academic rigour, whilst also providing support to Heads of Department and staff to teach their subjects, to the very best of their ability. I have no doubt she will be outstanding and will also significantly enhance cross Prep/College relations. Both Nicky and Tim were involved in the process and she was their standout candidate as well as ours.

Charlotte will also teach some IT and oversee our digital strategy, at least in the short and medium term. This has meant we will not be replacing Rick Webber, who was removed over the Summer, and is an immediate and significant cost saving.

Laura Owen, our Librarian, is leaving us at Christmas. We have subsequently revised our Library provision and have appointed Laura Bodycombe, one of our English TAs and a trained teacher, to be our new Librarian, but on a 0.5 basis. This won't affect the quality of the provision but provides another 0.4 FTE of saving from January.

One of our Pre-Prep TAs is retiring and will not be replaced in the summer. With clever timetabling her departure will not affect contact time or ratios with the children.

These savings will total up to 2.4 FTE for September, but also offer significant in year saving as the Deputy Head Academic and IT roles were both included and budgeted for an April start, alongside the Librarian savings from January.





I am pleased to say that all of the staff who joined us in September have made excellent starts and I do not foresee any issues with signing off their probation year.

One Head of Department, who started last September, has had their probation extended and I will need to decide in January whether to sign him off and bring him onto the staff permanently or whether to release him in the summer and start an immediate search for an alternative.

We are facing a significant number of serious health challenges within the broader Common Room at the moment.

Leanda Theedom, newly appointed Head of English, is currently off school for the year undergoing cancer treatment whilst several other staff have partners or family who are seriously ill. We are supporting the staff as much as we possibly can, and The Prep community has really shown how close and supportive it is. I know that the care and compassion of colleagues, both in practical terms and emotionally, has meant a great deal to those who are experiencing such challenging times.

Rick Webber was dismissed in the summer, from his role as Head of Digital Learning/Head of Computing/IT Teacher following a safeguarding concern. All appropriate bodies have been informed.

Budgets

The Common Room has taken on the need for mid-year cuts with understanding and extremely good grace. Whilst disappointed that certain things can no longer happen I have not heard an unsupportive word. They understand and want to help. The efforts by all budget holders to cut beyond the required 10% where they possibly can is testament to this.

Summer Works Programme

The works programme, as you know, was cut significantly and therefore the fourth science lab project has had to be postponed. They will continue their lab sharing until circumstances allow this work to be done.

A number of smaller projects were, however, completed with the updating of the Staff Work Room and the refurbishment of the main school corridor.

The Lake project, funded by the CCCT, was also completed and an official opening is planned in the Summer. This event will primarily be a Society event and will take place during a busy cricket afternoon, encouraging as many OC's back as possible. The unveiling of boats back on the lake after an absence of many decades (also kindly paid for by CCCT) will no doubt bring back many happy childhood memories!





Conclusion

As for the day to day life of the school, it really is in excellent health.

Our current Year 8 are a gentler version of last years. They set an excellent example to the rest of the school and continue our steady pastoral progress across the last six years.

Despite all of the challenges thrown at us recently it is a happy ship, aware of the winds picking up speed yes, but a happy, well prepared and ultimately very positive ship.

Tom O'Sullivan
November 2024

