

Two more councils review “faith school” transport subsidies

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Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council has started a consultation on whether to stop paying for transport for pupils living more than two or three miles from a voluntary aided (Catholic or Church in Wales) school if there is a mainstream school nearer their home.

Eugene Scourfield, the head teacher of St Joseph's, Wales's largest voluntary aided school and its sole Catholic secondary, said the decision "smacked of discrimination on religious grounds".

Head of resources and commissioning Andrew Thomas said: "We are in proposals with the diocese about building a new St Joseph's school and we have reached agreement in principle. We are in discussions about us spending millions of pounds of council money to provide sustainable Catholic education within the county," he added.

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "Claims of religious discrimination in relation to subsidised transport to faith schools are legitimate – but it isn't discrimination against Catholics, it's discrimination against everyone else who has to pay their own way."

The consultation can be accessed [here](#) and runs until 1 March 2013.

Meanwhile, Bury Council in Lancashire — which voted last month to cut free transport for faith schools — is being threatened with a judicial review by opponents.

The ruling Labour group ruled that the subsidies would stop from this September – affecting 846 children, around 80% of whom are believed to be Catholic.

Opposition councillors called the decision in for closer examination on the grounds that it would unfairly discriminate against parents wishing to send their children to faith schools and that there had been insufficient consultation.

But the policy was upheld following a block vote by Labour members during a meeting last week of the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Opponents, including Catholic head teachers, parents and school governors now plan to take the council's decision to a judicial review on grounds of discrimination and are hoping to gain the support of the Diocese of Salford.

They are due to meet the diocesan director of education, Kevin Quigley, to discuss the issue.

Councillor Ian Bevan, a Catholic, said many Catholic families in rural areas will be unable to afford to send their children to the two Catholic schools situated in the centre of the town.

Terry Sanderson added: "I sincerely hope that the judicial review goes ahead – it could settle once and for all the question of whether such subsidies are legal."

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