

Oldham Council ordered to hand over land to 'faith sensitive' free school

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Councillors in Oldham have reacted angrily to a ruling from the Department for Education ordering them to hand over a plot of land worth £4m to a new 'faith sensitive' free school.

Oldham Council had planned to sell the site of the old South Chadderton secondary school to finance the Council's regeneration plans and to invest in its new secondary schools. However Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, has insisted that the land should be handed over without charge to the Collective Spirit Trust which plans to set up a "faith sensitive" free school.

The people behind the proposed free school say it will be a "faith sensitive" school, but insist it is not a 'faith school'. The school's backers say parents want their faiths better represented in school, but want to avoid single faith or segregated schools. The school's timetable promises almost two hours of religious education in a school week that ends with an hour of collective worship.

The power to order local authorities to transfer the sites of former schools to academies is granted to the Secretary of State under the Academies Act 2010.

Oldham Council, which had proposed alternative sites for the Free School, said it was "extremely disappointed" by the final ruling from the Department for Education.

Jim McMahon, Oldham Council Leader, said: "This is a prime development site adjacent to the M60. Its sale was an important part of our regeneration plans with significant value — not just in terms of finance, but also the great new homes it could have offered for local people.

"We don't agree that it is in the best interest of local taxpayers to simply write off this site: especially when there was a viable alternative site for the Free School.

"There's already been significant investment in Oldham's secondary schools, so I'm also concerned that this increasing fragmentation will lead to even more schools here chasing fewer pupils with less money."

According to the school's consultation report, local council officers and politicians perceived the free school proposal to be a Muslim faith school by the back door, and expressed concern that the school could undermine local authority schools' attempts to build cohesion within local communities.

Stephen Evans, campaigns manager at the National Secular Society, said: "It's hard to understand why a school that claims to place such an emphasis on cohesion, at the same time appears to be so focussed on religion. It's clear that this school will only appeal to parents who want religion to play a fundamental role in their children's education. 'Faith sensitive' schools can hardly claim to be truly inclusive if they marginalise children from non-religious or religiously unconcerned families.

"All the statistics indicate that the British public are becoming increasingly less religious and more secular in their outlook. It is therefore concerning that our state school offering is heading in the

opposite direction. We would prefer to see public funding only made available only to community schools that educate pupils in a secular context appropriate for all local children regardless of their religious and philosophical backgrounds."

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