

Catholic school's transport 'discrimination' claim disputed by secularists

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Swansea Council is facing a judicial review after deciding to phase-out its subsidy for faith school students to have free transport to school.

The council is defending its new policy, after Bishop Vaughan Roman Catholic comprehensive school, along with the Diocese of Menevia and 'Child W', whose siblings attend the school, initiated legal action. The policy, which was supported by 34 councillors and opposed by 17, means that free transport to faith schools will only be provided if there is not a closer mainstream school. The council had previously subsidised transport to Swansea's six faith schools.

However, critics have argued that the change will mean parents cannot afford to send their children to faith schools.

The council says that pupils will still "have access to a good local school". Additionally, the change is being introduced over a six-year period, meaning current pupils of faith schools will not be affected. Swansea, like all local authorities, will also still be legally obliged to provide travel arrangements free of charge for children from low income families.

Nevertheless, religious leaders and school officials have strongly condemned the change. The Bursar of Bishop Vaughan School, Laura Howden-Evans, said that the new policy is "brutal" and "will be devastating on Swansea children seeking a faith education."

However, a spokesperson for the National Secular Society said he thought the legal action was unlikely to succeed.

Stephen Evans, NSS campaigns manager, said: "For years local authorities have been more than generous by subsidising parents' preferences to send their children to more distant religious schools. This has always been done on a discretionary basis. It's easy to see why the removal of such subsidies might be resented by faith communities, but it's a fundamental mistake to regard the removal of privileges as in any way unlawful or discriminatory."

The school argues that the policy is discriminatory because Welsh language schools will continue to receive subsidised transport. However, Welsh legislation places a statutory duty on local authorities in Wales in relation to transport and travel arrangements for pupils studying in the Welsh language.

Swansea Council said: "This is a test case about a decision regarding discretionary home to school transport which the council argues strongly is not discriminatory.

"It's important to be clear no child currently at Bishop Vaughan School is affected by the council's decision, those at the school who receive free transport now will continue to receive it until they leave school. The children affected would be those who join the school from September this year and in future years."

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