

Ofsted to consult and publish guidance on religious clothing policy

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The schools inspectorate Ofsted has said it will consult "a range of stakeholders" before finalising guidance over its approach to religious garments such as hijabs.

In a statement an Ofsted spokesperson said the body would "hold further discussions with our inspector workforce and with groups such as the Association of Muslim Schools, school leaders and individual MPs". It said it would take into account "the views we have canvassed and the need to ensure equality for pupils" and finalise its guidance "on this sensitive matter in a considered way".

Ofsted also said its inspectors would not "single out individual children", despite a "misconception" to the contrary.

"Inspectors already routinely talk to groups of children about a range of issues, such as discrimination, bullying and their understanding of other cultures. Exploring why primary age girls are wearing the hijab may be another theme they discuss along with other issues such as relationships, bullying and radicalisation."

The statement comes amid a row over Ofsted attempts to tackle the normalisation of Islamic fundamentalist attitudes to gender in schools, particularly among young children. Last week Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman said she would recommend to inspectors that they should ask primary school children why they wear the hijab.

Her announcement came shortly after a meeting with feminist campaigners, mainly from Muslim backgrounds, who raised [concerns](#) about the rise of the hijab in primary schools.

Some responded by accusing her of targeting Muslim girls. A letter signed by more than 1,100 teachers, academics and 'faith leaders' [said](#): "It is a kneejerk, discriminatory and institutionally racist response that will violate civil liberties and create a climate of fear and mistrust in schools, and must be retracted immediately."

The signatories included the likes of: Moazzam Begg of CAGE, an advocacy group which campaigns for suspected and convicted jihadis; Dr Shazad Amin of Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), [which](#) has frequently attacked liberal Muslims and been accused of promoting conspiracy theories about terrorist attacks; and Harun Rashid Khan of the Muslim Council of Britain, which has been [accused](#) of undermining de-radicalisation efforts.

A joint statement from councils of mosques in Manchester, Stockport, Bolton, Oldham and Rochdale alleged that Ms Spielman had failed to "consult with a wide range of grassroots community groups". The groups said parents should not "allow your daughters to be subject to questioning by Ofsted inspectors about your daughter wearing the hijab".

They also accused the campaigners of being "disconnected from grassroots communities", exhibiting "an intolerant, unsound and incoherent understanding of Islam and Muslim practice" and

"stirring up anti-Muslim hatred".

One Labour MP, Afzal Khan, called for the names of the campaigners to be published. In a [blog](#) for the National Secular Society, activist Yasmin Rehman said such demands had "worrying echoes of the lists compiled by religious fundamentalists that have resulted in attacks on, and murders of, activists campaigning for gender equality, human rights and civil liberties in Bangladesh, Pakistan and elsewhere".

Ofsted's statement said it was aware that discussing the reasons why children wear faith-related garments was "uncomfortable for some". But it said it had "a responsibility to take seriously concerns about pressures children face in schools, and to ensure there is no detriment either to their learning or to their preparation for life in modern Britain".

In recent weeks NSS research has found that girls in dozens of English schools are [forced](#) to wear hijab, while nearly 60% of Jewish schools [enforce](#) religious dress. A *Sunday Times* [survey](#) also found that one in five primary schools had listed the hijab within their uniform policies.

The NSS said it welcomed Ofsted's commitment to developing guidance on the subject.

Stephen Evans, the NSS's chief executive, said: "We trust that any forthcoming guidance will make clear that it is wholly unacceptable for schools to have uniform policies that require pupils to wear religious clothing. Such policies are at odds with the fundamental British value of individual liberty and with wider human rights norms on children's rights.

"Schools should also be clear that where they feel the accommodation of religious clothing undermines the aims of the uniform policy, they are within their rights to refuse parents' – or pupils' – demands for accommodations to be made.

"It is telling that even the suggestion that Ofsted might try to deal with fundamentalist attitudes to women and girls has sparked a ferocious backlash, smears against those involved and a welter of misinformation. This has come not only from Islamist troublemakers but from many in respected positions in industries such as academia. Such is the evidence of how deeply-rooted deference to religion remains within our society."

Ofsted statement in full

"Recently Her Majesty's Chief Inspector and senior Ofsted colleagues met with a group of Muslim women to discuss the increasing number of primary schools that are including the hijab as either a compulsory or optional item in their uniform policy. This was a matter of concern to the group given that, traditionally, the hijab is not worn until girls reach puberty, as a mark of modesty as they become young women.

"We are aware that discussing the reasons why children wear certain garments related to their faith in school is uncomfortable for some, and that doing so would be controversial. However, as an inspectorate we have a responsibility to take seriously concerns about pressures children face in schools, and to ensure there is no detriment either to their learning or to their preparation for life in modern Britain.

"In developing and clarifying our inspection policies we regularly meet a range of stakeholders, including those from different faith groups. Similarly, we intend to hold further discussions with our inspector workforce and with groups such as the Association of Muslim Schools, school leaders and individual MPs as we develop our guidance for inspectors on this sensitive matter in a considered way. When we have completed our discussions we will finalise the published

guidance for inspectors, taking into account the views we have canvassed and the need to ensure equality for pupils.

"In the meantime, before we are in a position to publish further guidance, it is important to clarify a particular misconception that has taken hold since that original meeting.

"Inspectors will not be singling out individual children. Inspectors already routinely talk to groups of children about a range of issues, such as discrimination, bullying and their understanding of other cultures. Exploring why primary age girls are wearing the hijab may be another theme they discuss along with other issues such as relationships, bullying and radicalisation.

"All our inspectors are either current or former school leaders or teachers themselves, so they know how to talk to children and ask questions sensitively. They ensure that such questions are appropriate to the age of the children, and their culture and faith."

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