

Councils powerless to help children in illegal faith schools

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A report from Hackney Council has highlighted the urgent need for new legislation to regulate [unregistered 'schools'](#) that deprive children of safety and adequate education.

The report, released by Hackney Council's Children and Young People's Scrutiny Commission, investigated yeshivas (Jewish religious schools) and other Unregistered Educational Settings (UES) run by the Charedi Orthodox Jewish community in Hackney. It is estimated that there are at least 20 UES in Hackney, attended by as many as 1,500 teenage boys from Charedi families.

The Commission found that "legislation around the regulation of unregistered education settings is at best patchy and at worst contradictory," and as a result Council and other statutory bodies "find it impossible to satisfy themselves that the expected standards of safety and safeguarding are in place".

It has recommended that the Council develop a "clear, comprehensive and transparent" strategy for dealing with UES. It said the Council should continue to lobby the Government for "an improved and effective regulatory and enforcement framework for unregistered educational settings which is backed up by legislative change".

This would mean extending the definition of "school" to include those that teach religion exclusively, expanding inspection powers over UES and increasing regulation around home schooling.

The Commission also recommended that the Charedi Orthodox Jewish community "engage and work with the City & Hackney Safeguarding Children Board who are ready to support the development of a safeguarding assurance process in unregistered educational settings". Representatives of the Charedi community have denied that safeguarding is an issue at the schools.

The Commission acknowledged the challenge of finding support within the Charedi community. It said Charedi Jews "would find it difficult to complete a survey which invited critical reflections on traditions which were central to their religious belief," and the survey itself could be considered "sinful". Humanists UK, which contributed to the study, warned that parents would be pressured to give compliant answers by community leaders and rabbis, who dominate education in the Charedi community.

When it canvassed views from the Charedi community, they suggested Charedi religious beliefs were "at odds" with the Council's statutory duty to safeguard children and the Government's duty to ensure they receive an appropriate education which conforms to national standards. Members of the community described inspections at registered Charedi schools as "interference". Charedis said there were "irreconcilable differences" between what independent schools must teach and what the community would consider religiously acceptable.

The lack of adequate education in the Charedi community has led to disproportionate unemployment and poverty. According to the Census 2011, 44% of Jewish adults in Hackney have no qualifications compared with 20% of the population, and only 48% of Jewish people in Hackney are in employment, which is 10 percentage points lower than the overall population overall.

The report was [launched](#) shortly after the National Secular Society pressurised Hackney Council to clarify how many unregistered schools were operating in the borough.

Concerns regarding the lack of safeguarding procedures in UES also came to the Commission's attention when 34 children from a yeshiva in Hackney had to be rescued by Kent Coastguard after getting into difficulties on an outing.

Megan Manson, campaigns officer at the NSS, said: "We welcome this report, which reveals the urgent need for a change in law so that all children from all communities can receive a high quality education in safe surroundings, as is their right.

"At present, councils and central government have their hands tied so they cannot give children the protection they need. The result is a proliferation of unsafe schools that fail to prepare children in the most basic skills for life in the UK.

"We're concerned that while parents in the Charedi community also want to see a change in their children's educational settings, they are being silenced by religious leaders. To give these families the protection they need, the legal loopholes that allow children to disappear into covert unregistered schools need to be closed."

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