

Community school saved from closure by gaining academy status

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The only non-faith school in the west of the Isle of Wight from has been saved from closure by opting out of local authority control and gaining academy status.

Isle of Wight Council was planning to shut Weston Primary School, the only community school in a twelve mile radius, because of a surplus of school places. Under the Council's proposals two local faith schools would remain open.

Earlier this year the NSS backed a local campaign to save the school. We sent a detailed submission to the local council backed up with legal reasons against eliminating diversity of provision in the area and against denying parents any realistic option of sending their children to a non-religious school. The NSS submission was sent to the Department for Education (DfE) when they were considering Weston Primary School's application for academy status.

Prior to the DfE's decision to grant academy status, the NSS was informed by Isle of Wight Council that nothing in the consultation led them to change their mind over their decision to close Weston, indicating that they would proceed with their plans. The Council said they were satisfied that diversity of provision was being protected as alternative community schools were available within the maximum reasonable journey time of 45 minutes (for primary school children) suggested by DfE Home to School Travel and Transport Guidance.

Stephen Evans, Campaigns Manager at the NSS said: "This is great news for the parents, teachers and pupils who campaigned so hard to save their school – and secular schooling in the area. It is unfortunate that the Council appeared unconcerned that non-religious parents or those not wanting a faith-based education would be disadvantaged, having to spend time and money travelling unreasonable distances to secure a state education for their children. Thankfully, now academy status has been secured by the school, the decision of the Council is irrelevant."

The NSS has expressed concern that the consultation document which proposed the closure of Weston, issued by Isle of Wight Council, gave the impression that they were unable to close the "faith" schools due to guidance which specifically protects the proportion of denominational places. This could have implications for other community schools when school closures are considered.

To remedy the situation, NSS honorary Associate Lord Avebury this week tabled an amendment to the Education Bill to remove the presumption that there should be no reduction in the proportion of denominational places in an area, when consideration is being made for a school closures.

Stephen Evans said: "The wording of the existing guidance appears to amount to special protection for schools with a religious character, albeit with certain conditions. We are therefore keen to ensure a level playing field for all schools when closures are being considered."

Responding to the amendment during Wednesday's [Education Bill debate](#), Lord Hill, responding on behalf of the Government, conceded that the guidance sounded "unbalanced". He said "My

officials are developing new guidance to support the Bill. I would be pleased if my noble friend Lord Avebury would contribute to that process by discussing with them the practical implications of some of the points he raised.” The NSS will assist Lord Avebury in these discussions.