

Parents, teachers and governors ignored as council hands community school to church

Posted: Thu, 12th Jul 2012

Barking and Dagenham Council has agreed to the controversial amalgamation of a community school in Dagenham with a neighbouring Church of England voluntary aided Junior School.

At a Cabinet meeting on 11 July the Council decided to close Village Infants community school which will now become part of an expanded William Ford Church of England, complete with a religious ethos that goes beyond collective worship and Religious Education.

Throughout the consultation period, the Council's plans have been opposed by teachers, governors and the majority of parents with children at the school. A petition against the proposals was signed by more than 700 local residents. It has also emerged that Governors at William Ford also voted against the amalgamation at a meeting on Monday.

As a voluntarily aided school, William Ford is permitted under exemptions to equality legislation to discriminate against pupils on religious grounds. Governors at William Ford have said that the school will "remain a school committed to serve its local community" but there appears to be no mechanism to enforce such a commitment. Furthermore, while existing Village Infant's staff will transfer under TUPE regulations, the school will be able to apply a religious test in appointing, remunerating and promoting all future teachers. Despite this being a publicly funded school, some will therefore probably not be able to work for the school on the grounds of having the "wrong" faith or none, not worshipping sufficiently often or not following Church precepts in their private life.

The Council argue that the amalgamation will have "a negligible effect" on parents who want their children to access non faith provision as there are 4 other community schools within 1.5 kilometres of Village Infants.

In the first strike we know of over the unfair employment provisions in religious schools, teachers at Village Infants belonging to the National Union of Teachers (NUT) last week took strike action after their concerns over the merger with a faith school were being ignored by the local authority.

Following the Cabinet decision, which was made with just 4 out of 10 cabinet members present, Councillor Liam Smith, Leader of Barking and Dagenham Council (who described himself as a "committed Roman Catholic") said: "I am extremely disappointed at the language used by members of the NUT and some of their supporters. He added: "The Church of England has been and will continue to be a valued partner in the provision of education in this borough."

Heather Douglas, the outgoing Head teacher at Village Infants, said:

"The final report which went before the Cabinet failed to reflect the view that the vast majority of the correspondence received was opposed to the plan.

"Village Infants has always been careful to make the point that they are not against the Church of England they are against the principles behind voluntary aided schools and

against being forced to change their employer.

"Village Infants has many Christian teachers as well as Atheists and Muslim teachers. They did not choose to work in a faith school and feel compromised by being forced to do so."

Stephen Evans, Campaigns Manager at the National Secular Society said:

"Considering the overwhelming public opposition to these plans, this is a truly shocking decision. The consultation has been a mockery. We have seen numerous instances of widespread objections to local school provision being made more religious being overridden. We call on the Government to introduce a fair system for taking into account parental and community opinion over school re-organisations.

"Whenever we see a community school amalgamate with a faith school there appears to be a presumption that the religious character must remain – which is entirely the wrong way round. Retaining a religious ethos imposes religion on all pupils and teachers, while removing it creates inclusive schools, something our communities desperately need more of.

"The Church of England has made very clear its intention to use schools for aggressive evangelism. Parents and teachers everywhere should be concerned, not only at the Churches' growing interest in education – but also the Government's willingness to let them get on with it using public money. And this takes place in the context of a long term decline in church attendance."

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