

Plans to open Sikh faith school in Buckinghamshire village derailed

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Controversial plans to open a Sikh free school in the Buckinghamshire village of Stoke Poges have been recommended for refusal by South Bucks District Council planning officers.

The council received more than 1,100 letters regarding the application by Slough Sikh Education Trust to open a new 840-pupil Secondary Academy – more than 850 of them against the proposals.

Stoke Poges Parish Council has argued that there is no identified need for a new school in the area. The school's recruitment drive has focused primarily on Sikh communities in neighbouring Slough, Southall and Harrow and local residents are concerned that the village does not have the adequate infrastructure to deal with additional traffic that will occur when pupils are bussed in from surrounding areas.

The potential threat to social cohesion was amongst the concerns expressed to the local authority during its consultation process. Local parents also raised concerns that as the school will become the catchment school for the South Bucks area, families who choose not to send their children to the 'faith' school will lose their paid-for home to school transport.

Considering the site in an 18-page report, planning officers [concluded](#) the detrimental impact on Green Belt land outweighed the national need for school places. The planning committee said the fact that the school would be a Sikh faith school had no bearing on the acceptability or otherwise of the scheme in planning terms. The proposals will be discussed formally on 22 May.

Stephen Evans, campaigns manager at the National Secular Society said: "Children attending faith schools typically travel further to school than other children, and this proposal perfectly illustrates the inefficiency of segregated schooling. Aside from the obvious detriment to cohesion, there is an ecological argument against separating children along sectarian lines and then bussing them around to 'faith' schools instead of them attending a local inclusive community school."

Meanwhile, Thurrock in Essex is the latest council to consider withdrawing free transport for pupils attending faith schools. The Council, like others around the country, is looking at ways to cut budgets and is consulting on several proposals for reducing the cost of school transport. As part of the consultation, the council will consider whether to withdraw funding for transport to "faith schools" entirely from September 2014 or to start to charge pupils for it. Details of the consultation are on the [council's website](#).

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