

Extremism fears prompt Government to scupper plans for Islamic free school

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The Department for Education has scuppered plans for an Islamic free school in Halifax after alarm was raised over its links with a local Islamic centre.

The decision follows a three-month investigation which was sparked after a local MP and Calderdale council's education committee expressed misgivings about the proposed Northern Lights school and its links to the Sunni Islamic Centre.

The Islamic centre had circulated a leaflet to Muslim parents telling them that their children could die if they failed to support the plans for the Northern Lights school. The leaflet read: "If it was said to us, 'If you do not attend this meeting your child will die,' I am certain we would all make sure we attend the meeting. What I am about to address... is even more serious than death and that is for us and our children to be safe on the Day of Judgment."

The school denied any responsibility for the leaflet but this did not allay the fears of Government ministers or local educationalists.

David Whalley, Calderdale council's Head of Learning, said: "The potential risk of a negative impact on community relations within the area is high".

The Department for Education said: "We judged that the capacity and capability of the group was not sufficient for the project to proceed."

Linda Riordan, MP for Halifax, who had called for the investigation, said: "This is a sensible decision, taking in the best interests of community cohesion and education provision in the town. It obviously took a lot of thought from the Minister, but it's the right thing to have done."

A Department for Education spokesperson said: "Setting up a free school is not an easy task. The proposers of the Northern Lights Free School have worked hard on their project. However, our priority has to be to open free schools with the best chance of performing strongly from the outset and giving children a first-class education.

"Unfortunately, in this case, we judged that the capacity and capability of the group was not sufficient for the project to proceed."

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: "I am pleased that the DfE's monitoring of extremism in free school applications has worked in this case, but I wonder how many other applications might have already been approved that were less than honest and will ultimately result in extremist religious groups using taxpayers' money to spread their beliefs among children?"

Mr Sanderson also pointed out the Sunni Centre was running its own "school", which was little more than an indoctrination centre. "There is little or no oversight of such schools or madrassas and given that the Sunni Centre was capable of sending out such an extremist document to parents, goodness knows that they're drumming into children behind closed doors. It is time that

madrassas were brought under some kind of regulatory system. "

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