

Lancashire church leaders unhappy at proposal to increase parents' contribution to faith school transport costs

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Lancashire County Council is under fire from church leaders who accuse them of planning to "penalise" parents who send their children to religious schools.

The Council is considering ways to reduce the £8.5 million bill spent on school transport – half of which is spent transporting children to religious schools outside their catchment areas.

They now plan to hold a consultation on ideas for saving money. One suggestion is that parents should make a larger contribution towards the transport provided to get their children to faith schools and a reduction in the numbers who qualify for free transport.

Father Timothy Lipscomb, vicar of Preston, told the *Lancashire Evening Post* "I think it's a shame that they have to be penalised because they have some faith conviction. I think people should have the choice of whether they go to faith school or not, and it seems a lot to pay."

But Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society, said: "Parents will still have the choice to send their children to a faith school, but they will have to do so without financial assistance from the state – just like everyone else who chooses a school other than their local one.

"Removing a subsidised transport privilege from one particular section of the community is not 'penalising' it. If anybody is being penalised it is those who send their children to community schools and get no help at all with transport costs, but still have to pay — through council tax — for those going to a faith school."

In 2011 parents were asked to contribute £380 a year towards the costs of the transport, but this still left the taxpayer picking up about 60% of the cost.

The Council is now proposing to increase this contribution by 25%, with a year-on-year rise after that, based on the retail price index plus 5%.

A Council spokesperson said the council had to save about £300m and none of the authorities services could be spared from cuts.

County Councillor Matthew Tomlinson, cabinet member for children, young people and schools, said: "I know that no one wants to either lose free transport or pay more for it, but unfortunately we are in the position of having to consult about these difficult decisions."

The consultation can be [accessed here](#).

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