

Anger as non-Catholics forced off the school bus

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Parents in Flintshire have complained of religious discrimination after it emerged that non-Catholics wouldn't be permitted to use a bus provided by the local authority to a Catholic faith school.

This term sees the implementation of Flintshire Council's new policy of only providing free bus passes to faith schools where parents can prove that pupils are attending the school for religious reasons with evidence such as baptism certificates or a note from a priest.

One parent whose twin girls don't qualify for a free pass [told the Flintshire Chronicle](#) that parents have been "furious" to learn their children will not now be allowed to use the school bus, even as paid passengers.

Mum-of-three Emily Hill claims the ban is "religious discrimination" and is fearful about the prospect of her children having to use public transport to travel to school.

She told the *Chronicle*: "When the council did their consultations last year we were always led to believe that our children would still be able to use the bus and pay and we were told it would be about £55 a term, which I had no problem with as it is cheaper than public transport.

"Now my girls will have to use public transport and I'm really worried about their safety as it's going to be dangerous. They will have to walk through an alleyway and along the main road which is very busy.

She added: "it's discriminatory and causing segregation as it's making people stand out based on what religion they are. I'm so angry, it feels like we are all being penalised for not being the 'right' religion. There is enough anger in the world about religion as it is, so why add more."

She claims that dozens of children were made to get off if they did not have a pass, however Flintshire County Council denies that any pupils were made to leave the bus.

Ian Budd, chief officer education and youth for said: "Following thorough consultation, the council's transport policy for faith schools changed for new pupils starting the school with effect from this September.

"The effect of the revised policy is that free transport will be provided only to pupils who can provide evidence that they adhere to the faith of the school they attend.

"Bus passes have been distributed with the help of the school for the last two weeks, and bus drivers have been asked to check passes.

"The council will ensure that transport is provided as efficiently and economically as possible, and if after finalising transport arrangements there are any spare seats on school contract vehicles they may be sold at a concessionary rate".

When introduced in May 2013, Flintshire's policy was [criticised](#) as "morally repugnant" by the National Secular Society, which has condemned the way in which religious beliefs of parents are being used to single out specific children for unequal treatment in local authority school transport policies.

An Equality Act exemption means an authority's duty not to discriminate against a person on the grounds of their religion or belief does not apply to its functions in relation to school transport.

During its scrutiny of Act, the Joint Committee on Human Rights expressed [concern](#) that the existence of the exemptions would encourage authorities to treat the religious and the non-religious differently.

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