

NSS criticises council proposal to expand faith school provision

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The National Secular Society has called on Milton Keynes Council to rethink plans to meet increasing demand for school places by significantly expanding faith school provision.

Under the Council's proposal, St Mary's – a tiny church school with "a distinctive Christian ethos" – would be relocated and expanded to serve 2,700 homes on a new housing development.

Stephen Evans, NSS campaigns Director, said: "Given Britain's rapidly changing religion and belief landscape it's hard to see how a Christian faith school would meet the needs and wishes of families moving to the area.

"It should be possible for local parents to have their children educated at their local school without other people's religion being foisted upon them.

"Building a new inclusive school without a religious designation is the only sensible option if Milton Keynes Council wants to ensure that its future educational provision is appropriate and equally welcoming and respectful to all children and families, irrespective of their religious outlook."

According to the school's latest Anglican inspection report, the "Christian foundation of the school permeates all aspects of school life". All children at St Mary's take part in daily Christian worship.

The Council argue that the plan to expand and relocate St Mary's "will provide further choice and diversity in the local community". However, in September 2015 the church school admitted just 2 pupils living in its catchment into the reception year group, suggesting minimal demand for church school provision in the area.

According to the British Social Attitudes Survey, parents of school children are some of the least religious sections of society. 60% of 35-44 year olds describe themselves as non-religious with a further 11% describing themselves as religious but non-practising.

The 2011 Census shows that those in Milton Keynes in this age range are 4-5% points less Christian and more non-religious than national figures for England.

In its response to the Council's consultation the NSS argued that the character of new school should be established with these trends in mind.

The NSS also criticised the council for prejudicing the outcome of the consultation on the provision for a new primary school in favour of expanding church school provision.

The consultation failed to give equal weight to an alternative option of building a new school and running a national competition to determine who will run it – describing the option to expand the Christian faith school as the "sensible" option.

Mr Evans added: "The apparent lack of even-handedness regarding these proposals is startling. The Council has failed to explain why it favours the expansion of an unpopular church school over

the possibility of creating a new school that promotes commonly shared societal, rather than religion-specific values.

"Under the council's plans many parents could be left with little option other than to send their child to a school with a religious character that runs counter to their own beliefs. This clearly isn't acceptable."

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