

Councils ignoring illegal schools because they “don’t want to upset community relations”

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Ofsted chief Sir Michael Wilshaw has warned that local councils and police are continuing to ignore illegal faith schools, undermining efforts to prosecute the operators and protect children's rights.

In an interview with [The Times](#), the outgoing Chief Inspector said that "political correctness" was causing local authority to turn a blind eye to illegal faith schools, particularly in the case of unregistered Islamic schools.

Sir Michael said that the 150 to 160 illegal schools which are already known about are just the "tip of the iceberg". He told *The Times* that prosecution cases Ofsted is preparing are "very robust" but said local authority inaction was undermining them.

He said local authorities "have to see this as a serious problem, identify where these places are and close them down."

Instead he said that councils' attitudes to Muslim voters was "a bit like the Seventies and Eighties" where "a lot of local authorities didn't confront the Socialist Workers' Party and all those infiltrating schools in those days partly because the councils themselves were made up of some of those people."

Though unregistered schools of other faiths have been identified, illegal Muslim schools were a particular concern.

He said that in one city even the police were not willing to report unregistered schools. He said police in the example he cited "don't see it as a responsibility" to investigate illegal schools.

Ofsted recently published a handbook for "conducting inspections of unregistered schools".

To identify unregistered schools, the guidance states "Ofsted may receive information regarding possible unregistered schools from a variety of sources including, but not limited to, the DfE, parents, local authorities or the police."

But Sir Michael said that some local authorities were actually "getting in the way" of Ofsted's attempts to identify and challenge illegally operating 'schools'.

In the new Ofsted guidance inspectors are given a model warning notice they could give to the operator of an offending 'school' which states: "it is a criminal offence to conduct an unregistered independent educational institution in England."

Anyone found guilty of doing so "is liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or to a fine".

NSS campaign director Stephen Evans commented: "This is a phenomenon we are seeing time and time again. Local authorities and services ignoring the plight of children and young people due to misplaced concerns over religious and cultural sensitivity.

"Children of all backgrounds should enjoy the right to a decent education. It's time to put an end to the bigotry of low expectations that allows children to languish in illegal faith schools that place them at risk of harm and fail to prepare them for life in modern Britain.

"Michael Wilshaw has commendably spoken out against illegal schools and tackled the reluctance of public authorities to identify and take action against them. We'll be seeking assurances from Ofsted's new chief inspector that she will continue to pressure local authorities to identify establishments which leave children and their education neglected. Once identified, the DfE must ensure that illegal schools are closed down, those running them prosecuted and the children attending them receive the education they're entitled to."

Problems in identifying premises which are operating as illegal schools have been reported before. In March 2016 MP [Naz Shah told Bradford Council](#) that they were in "denial" over unregistered schools. She made the remarks during one of a series of local meeting Sir Michael held in Birmingham, Bradford and Luton, areas of particular concern where significant numbers of children are not accounted for in local school rolls. Sir Michael said Bradford Council were being "naïve" and challenged them over what active information-gathering they had undertaken to find illegal schools.

In addition to his comments to the *Times* on unregistered schools, Sir Michael said that home schooling was being used "by parents who want to opt out of the state system because they don't want their youngsters exposed to equality issues or sex education." He said the law needed to be more stringent on home education.

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