

Hackney launches consultation on unregistered schools

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Hackney has launched a consultation into the safety of pupils and the quality of education in unregistered schools following scrutiny from the NSS and critical media reports.

The [consultation](#) came after pressure from the National Secular Society to clarify just how many unregistered, illegal faith schools were thought by the local authority to be operating in Hackney.

The authority now says it wants help to "gain a better understanding of whether the Council is doing all it can to ensure the quality of education, the safety and the safeguarding of children in unregistered settings in Hackney."

It cited "a number of articles in the national media, in the spring and summer of 2016, that questioned the safety, safeguarding and the quality of education provided in allegedly unregistered educational settings". These 'schools' have been a [long-running concern](#) of the National Secular Society.

In response to a freedom of information request from the NSS in October 2016, the London Borough of Hackney said that it had received five reports of unregistered schools operating in the borough in the last three years leading up to October.

Three investigations had been launched into possible unregistered schools, and the authority had made five referrals to Ofsted or the Department for Education over the three year period. One unregistered school had been closed down in that time.

However, in November [media reports](#) surfaced quoting Andrew Lee, the Assistant Director of Education Services of the Hackney Learning Trust saying that there were "possibly 35" unregistered ultra-Orthodox schools alone in Hackney – meaning that there were more illegal faith schools in operation than legal ones.

Lee described these suspected sites as "establishments where our officers have passed by on a number of occasions at various times during the day and have seen a significant number of young people entering and leaving."

He did add that "Perhaps 13 of those settings may be linked to some of the 33 registered settings, which would bring the number down somewhat."

However, that would still be significantly more than the schools Hackney identified in response to the National Secular Society's freedom of information request.

After the comments came to light, the Society asked the local authority to explain the "massive disparity" between the figures.

They said that Lee's figure of up to 35 unregistered schools referred to institutions which the Council had known about for longer than the three year period of the FOI request – and that "all were referred to Ofsted at the point they were believed to be operating."

The Society's FOI request also established that no unregistered school in the three years leading up to October 2016 had registered after being identified, casting doubt on the likelihood getting large numbers of illegal schools across the country to register and subject themselves to proper regulation.

Vast numbers of children are ['missing'](#) from education registers in Hackney.

During the 2014-15 academic year 30,000 pupils across England and Wales went missing from schools for "substantial" periods of time, [according to BBC research](#).

Stephen Evans, campaigns director of the National Secular Society, welcomed Hackney's consultation.

"For too long a blind eye has been turned to unregistered and illegal schools which has enabled insular religious communities to deprive children of their fundamental rights. This approach has also left countless children exposed to harm, exploitation, or the influence of extremist ideologies. Instead of pandering to religious communities, state agencies need to be clear that religious freedom does not give adults carte blanche to hinder the rights of others."

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