

NSS criticises creation of Muslim state schools in Manchester

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The National Secular Society has criticised the creation of two state-funded, single-sex Muslim secondary schools for up to 800 children each as Manchester City Council prepares to build them.

The council's Planning and Highways Committee will consider a plan for a permanent development in the Cheetham Hill area of the city on Thursday evening. Its remit is focused on construction and planning issues and a [report](#) to its members has recommended approving the plan.

Tauheedul Trust, which runs 26 schools across the north of England, the Midlands and London, has been running the schools in temporary accommodation since September. The decision to create the academies, one of which will be for boys and the other for girls, has encountered opposition from local MPs.

In advance of the vote Graham Stringer, the MP for Blackley and Broughton - which includes Cheetham Hill - has said the plan "doesn't fit in with the current philosophy and priorities of Manchester schools".

"Land is scarce and should be used for the purposes of education - or housing - that is in line with the council's policies."

The council's current "vision for Manchester", [The Manchester Strategy](#), says one of its main five themes is creating "a progressive and equitable city". Under that section of the strategy it says "everyone will have the same opportunities and life chances no matter where they're born or live".

And last year an [education strategy document](#) said the council faced the "particular challenge" of "ensuring fair access and inclusion for all".

Lucy Powell, who represents Manchester Central and is on the parliamentary education committee, has previously described the schools as the "completely wrong" fit and said single-sex education would worsen Manchester's school place shortage.

An NSS spokesperson said local and national politicians should "roll back the influence of religious groups in schools" and "prioritise genuinely inclusive and secular schooling in areas where there is a shortage of places".

"Education should enable children to make their own minds up about religion when they are ready to do so. These large Muslim schools, which appear to be out of line with Manchester City Council's stated priorities, will also exacerbate social segregation in Manchester."

Recent developments have also highlighted the issue of misogyny in Islamic schools. In October the Court of Appeal [ruled](#) that an Islamic school's policy of segregating boys from girls amounted to unlawful sex discrimination.

And in November a dossier of evidence from Ofsted reports [revealed](#) a series of endorsements of wife-beating and misogyny in Islamic schools. The findings prompted the government's former

integration tsar, Dame Louise Casey, to call for a moratorium on the opening of new faith schools.

The NSS spokesperson said this context should "give policy makers pause before approving single-sex Islamic schools".

"They should be aware of their potential to limit girls' horizons, promote misogynistic attitudes and encourage gender segregation in wider society."

There have previously been concerns about Tauheedul Trust promoting intolerance. In 2011 Haras Rafiq, a former government adviser on the prevention of extremism, [highlighted](#) issues at the trust in a dossier given to the Department for Education.

And in 2013 a report in the *Sunday Times* outlined policies at Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School in Blackburn. The school [required](#) girls to wear the hijab [headscarf] "outside the school and at home", to "recite the Koran at least once a week" and "not bring stationery to school that contains un-Islamic images", such as pictures of pop stars.

Around 10% of those in the sixth form wore the niqab and all pupils had to wear "long purple tunics over black trousers so no flesh is exposed".

Tauheedul now runs both faith-based and non-faith primary and secondary schools. It has said the new Manchester schools work to "an inclusive Islamic faith ethos" and do not select on the grounds of faith.

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