

Council set to approve discriminatory faith school in Peterborough

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A new discriminatory Catholic primary school is expected to open in Peterborough after education officials on the local council recommended its approval.

In a [decision notice](#) Peterborough City Council's cabinet member for education was advised to proceed with a plan to open a voluntary aided (VA) faith school.

The plan to open the school says it will have an exclusively Catholic ethos which will "permeate all areas of the curriculum and underpin the school's work and objectives".

VA faith schools are allowed to select up to 100% of their pupils on a religious basis, although the local Catholic diocese has said religious selection would be capped at 80% in the first year in Peterborough.

The proposal already has support from the Department for Education (DfE) and is now expected to go ahead.

In response the National Secular Society said it would explore the possibility of a legal challenge to the decision.

The proposal to open the Catholic school is in direct conflict with an alternative bid to open a school with a community ethos at the same site, in the Hampton Water area of the city.

In response to the council's decision, NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "It's deeply disappointing that Peterborough City Council is set to approve a new discriminatory Catholic school, particularly as that seems likely to mean an inclusive, secular alternative will now not be able to open.

"Many local residents will wonder why their taxes are going to fund a school which explicitly promotes religious beliefs and discriminates against their children on a religious basis in its admissions policy. The school's all-encompassing religious ethos will be alienating for many families and infringe on children's independent right to make their own minds up about religion.

"Politicians both locally and nationally must be willing to stand up to religious groups when they make unreasonable demands which infringe on children's rights and undermine social cohesion."

The NSS recently [urged](#) the council not to open the Catholic school, describing the proposal behind it as "discriminatory, poorly reasoned and unsuitable".

The society also coordinates the No More Faith Schools campaign, which [rallied opposition](#) to the proposal to open the school.

Objections to the plan

The council's decision notice cited "four main themes" in objections to the proposal from local residents, in order of commonality:

- Opposition to a Catholic faith school in principle;
- Concerns relating to the school's discriminatory admissions criteria;
- Concerns about potential increase in traffic as a result of children travelling to attend schools away from their local communities;
- Concerns that opening the school would have a negative impact on the local community.

Government backing for new VA faith schools

The government [announced](#) plans for a new wave of VA faith schools, which act as their own admissions authority and can select up to 100% of their pupils on a religious basis, in 2018.

The decision came amid opposition to any limit on religious selection from the Catholic Education Service, which runs Catholic schools in England and Wales.

The DfE [assigned](#) funds for 14 VA faith schools in March 2019.

The NSS has strongly lobbied against efforts to open these schools and in favour of inclusive, secular alternatives. The proposal to open a school in Peterborough is the only one to have reached this stage to date.

Further notes on VA faith schools

- In VA faith schools 100% of running costs and 90%+ of the capital costs are paid by the state. In this case the local Catholic diocese's capital contribution comes from public funds, as the city council has an agreement with a major housing developer to provide the school building. The costs for this are being passed to initial house purchasers.
- VA faith schools are permitted to teach denominational religious education (inspected by the religious body that runs them, rather than Ofsted).
- VA faith schools can apply a religious test when hiring, promoting or retaining any teacher (though in practice such discrimination is usually restricted to senior roles and RE teachers).

See also: [***New Catholic school in Peterborough set to be approved***](#), in the Peterborough Telegraph, with the NSS quoted.

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