

NSS urges council not to approve discriminatory Catholic school

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The National Secular Society has urged Peterborough City Council not to approve plans for a new religiously selective Catholic school, amid concerns about its impact on social cohesion and children's rights.

The NSS has appealed to the council's cabinet member for children's services, who is preparing to make a decision over a new voluntary aided (VA) school imminently.

The school would be the first state-funded Catholic school to open in England for almost a decade. The decision to open it is likely to mean an inclusive school with a community ethos cannot open.

In a decision notice [issued](#) last week, education officials advised Lynne Ayres, the councillor responsible for making the final decision, to approve plans to open the school.

This week the NSS has written to Ayres to urge her to support inclusive education by rejecting the proposal, which already has support from the Department for Education (DfE).

The NSS said opening the school would not be "suitable or fair for local families" or "in the best interests of community cohesion".

Exclusive Catholic ethos

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 is also 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.

Explaining the letter, NSS chief executive Stephen Evans urged the council to "pause and consider the consequences before rubber-stamping this decision".

"Opening a religiously selective Catholic school would be a slap in the face for residents who don't share its religious ethos. Many families will ask why their taxes should fund a school which discriminates against their children.

"Faith schools, particularly voluntary aided faith schools, undermine children's independent right to form their own beliefs and harm social cohesion by giving those with religious worldviews privileged treatment. Peterborough City Council should reject this plan. And the government should encourage inclusive, secular schools to open where school places are needed."

In its letter the NSS highlighted [comments](#) collected by its No More Faith Schools campaign, which showed opposition to a religiously selective school among local residents.

The society also noted a local academy trust's concerns that the school will not meet local demand, would have an adverse impact on families and the environment and would undermine community cohesion.

The NSS is exploring the possibility of a legal challenge to the decision, should it be approved.

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. Shortly beforehand a government assessment had [said](#) new VA schools would be bad for families and teachers who did not their faith and risked harming community cohesion.

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).

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