

NSS: council should tackle discriminatory school admissions in review

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The National Secular Society has called on Liverpool City Council to consider the impact of discriminatory admissions policies in faith schools as it reviews its policies towards school admissions.

Last week the council [set up a panel](#) to consider how rules on admissions disadvantage children from ethnic and religious minority backgrounds.

The review comes after a group of Muslim parents in the city said admissions criteria for faith schools and academies nearby meant their children often ended up having to travel long distances to school.

The parents also said some of the girls had faced anti-Muslim abuse on the journey.

In a letter to Barbara Murray, the council's cabinet member for education, the NSS welcomed the review and recommended steps which the council could take to improve access to inclusive schools.

Contents of NSS letter

The NSS said the council should:

- Consider the impact of faith schools in restricting school choice and suitability as it monitors local school provision.
- Explicitly tell the government that it would prefer inclusive community schools if new schools were required in Liverpool.
- Ensure the admissions policies for existing voluntary controlled faith schools, where councils are the admissions authority, did not endorse religious discrimination.
- Ensure its wider policies supported inclusive schooling and prioritised social cohesion.

The NSS also highlighted evidence that local families had been affected by discriminatory admissions policies:

- The society is currently working with a parent in Liverpool who is concerned that her child with special educational needs may not be able to access a suitable non-faith school.
- Elsewhere a family in the city was unable to send their child to a school just five metres from their house because they didn't attend the local church.
- NSS supporters in Liverpool have noted that many local parents attend church just to secure a place at a convenient school.

NSS comment

NSS head of education Alastair Lichten said the council should "take this opportunity to make Liverpool's schools more inclusive".

"The council is rightly concerned that school admissions processes may be exacerbating racial and social inequalities. It's unjustifiable that some children have to travel across the city to school and appalling that some have faced anti-Muslim abuse while doing so.

"Admissions policies in faith schools are unfair and far too complex nationally, and that needs national attention. But there are a series of practical steps available to councillors which would help to defend inclusive community schooling and make children more welcome. We urge them to take them."

Need for national response

The NSS's letter also noted that many necessary changes to address the problem would need to be addressed at national level.

In 2018 a government-commissioned report found that poorer pupils and pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds were [significantly less likely](#) to get into church schools than their counterparts.

A 2018 report from the NSS, [The Choice Delusion](#), also highlighted the ways faith schools impede on school choice for many families, including through discriminatory admissions policies.

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