

NSS backs more inclusive faith school admissions in Suffolk

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The National Secular Society has supported plans to end discriminatory admissions policies for some faith schools in Suffolk.

The NSS said it "strongly" welcomes Suffolk County Council's proposals to remove oversubscription criteria for voluntary controlled (VC) Church of England schools that prioritise Anglican families.

The council launched a [consultation](#) on the proposals in October. If approved, they would apply to the 2023/24 academic year intake onwards.

Unlike other types of faith schools, admissions at VC schools are managed by the local authority rather than the school itself. It is rare for local authorities to apply faith-based selection for VC schools.

The current admissions arrangements give priority to children whose families "have been practising members of the Church of England (or other church within the Worldwide Anglican Communion)" for a minimum period of one year before the school application closing date.

The proposal to remove this priority was made in response to concerns raised about equality and inclusion.

In the summer term of 2020, at the request of the St Edmundsbury and Ipswich Diocesan Board of Education, the council adjusted the admissions arrangements for the 2021/2022 school year so that families who were unable to attend church due to COVID-19 restrictions could still be given priority for school places.

To retain this arrangement, the council had to launch a consultation for the 2022/2024 school year. In response, fifteen parents or carers expressed concerns "in terms of equalities and inclusion" about the prioritisation of Anglican families.

This led to the council and the diocese to review these criteria and consult for the 2023/2024 school year.

NSS response

In its response to the consultation, the NSS said religiously selective admissions criteria "send a message that legitimises discrimination and can give the impression that religious adherence is required to attend the school."

It highlighted that 31% of pupils in Suffolk [face high or extreme restrictions](#) on the choice of a non-faith primary school, and that in September 2021, 122 pupils were assigned places at faith schools against family preferences for a non-faith school.

It said removing barriers to entry for pupils of all backgrounds would increase all families' access to suitable local schools.

The policy will not affect the 66 voluntary aided and academy faith schools in Suffolk where the council is not the admissions authority, many of which may have faith selective admissions.

The NSS said that it hopes the change "acts as a catalyst" for the council to encourage these schools to end discriminatory oversubscription criteria.

NSS head of education Alastair Lichten said: "By ending discriminatory admissions in schools where they are the admissions authority, Suffolk County Council sends an important message.

"We are glad to see the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich supporting these changes. Diocesan rhetoric concerning a move away from faith-based selection is far too rarely reflected in tangible actions."

The consultation closes on 12 November. [More information is available on the Suffolk County Council website.](#)

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