

NSS calls on Wigan Council to rethink non-faith school closure

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The National Secular Society has called on a council not to close a community primary school, warning the move would devastate local secular school provision.

The NSS has been [supporting families](#) in the Abram area of Wigan, where Wigan Council must consider closing either Holy Family Catholic Primary School (a Catholic faith school) or Abram Bryn Gates Primary School (a community school) to address financial issues arising from falling pupil numbers.

Earlier this year, the council bought forward plans to close the community school, despite [warnings from the NSS](#) that this may breach their duty to provide "appropriate education".

In its [response](#) to the council's most recent consultation on the issue, the NSS argued the council's reasoning for their decision to close the community school did not give adequate consideration to their Education Act or Human Rights Act duties, or guidance on maintaining the "balance of denomination provision".

NSS analysis shows [81% of postcodes in Wigan](#), and 90% of postcodes in the Abram ward, already experience "high" or "extreme" restrictions on the choice of a non-faith primary school.

And its [analysis](#) of school places figures provided by the council indicates that if Abram Bryn Gates were to close, 69% of pupils would be reassigned to faith schools.

In a March 2022 [report to cabinet](#), the council acknowledges parents of children at Abram Bryn Gates Primary "have specifically chosen a nonfaith school for their child".

The report says: "There is no desire for their children to be taught in a faith-based school. There are no other community non-faith based schools available within the area or within a reasonable distance of where children live that have places available."

The council's analysis recognised there is "no preferred option by stakeholders". In response to a [consultation](#) last year, 45% of respondents supported the closure of Holy Family, while 47% supported closing of Abram Bryn Gates. Both schools have similar budgetary, levels of undersubscription and Ofsted results.

Comments

NSS head of education, Alastair Lichten, said: "Closing Abram Bryn Gates will be bitterly disappointing to many families and highlight the desperate need to address the bias against secular schools in such considerations.

"While imagining a duty to 'provide a Catholic school place for all', the council continues to treat parents' opting for a community school as not worthy of protection or adequate consideration."

Local resident Julie told the NSS: "Closing this school would not only devastate pupils and staff but rip the heart out of the community too. Choice of non-faith schools is already limited for parents."

Another parent, Janine, commented: "Closing ABG is a joke! There are no other schools in this area for children who aren't religious."

"It's a fantastic school and if it closes children will be forced to go travel miles to go to another school many of which are full and have no places available anyway."

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