

Response to Renfrewshire Council's consultation on Admissions to Schools and Placing Request Policy

March 2020

Introduction

1. The National Secular Society works for the separation of religion and state, and for equal respect for everyone's human rights so that no one is either advantaged or disadvantaged on account of their beliefs. We regard secularism and equality as essential features of a fair and open society. This includes within state-funded education.
2. We are **against** the proposed changes to the Admissions to Schools and Placing Request Policy. Specifically, we are against:
 - Proposal 2: Revise primary 1 registration allocation of catchment places
 - Proposal 3: Revise transfer from primary to secondary allocation of catchment secondary places
 - Proposal 4: Revise allocation of placing request places
3. Proposals 2, 3 and 4 would all disadvantage non-Catholic families and further segregate communities in Renfrewshire.
4. We strongly oppose any religious discrimination or selection in admissions. There is no justification for restricting access to a publicly funded school based on the religious beliefs of children or their families.
5. Introducing further religious selection in admissions would needlessly exacerbate sectarian divisions as well as ethnic and socio-economic segregation.
6. Scotland, and particularly Renfrewshire, already experience significant problems with sectarianism. Separating children according to the religion of their parents is not working to end the problem, and merely entrenches division. It is imperative that local councils work to solve the problem of sectarianism by ensuring children of families from all religion and belief backgrounds learn and play together, so they can live and work together as adults.
7. Northern Ireland, which also experiences high levels of sectarianism, is working on integrating its schools and bringing Protestant families, Catholic families, and families of other religions and beliefs together. Scotland should be moving in that same direction.

8. We are particularly disturbed by the criteria in Proposals 2 and 4, which would prioritise children with a baptism certificate over children with siblings in the school and children with medical needs that cannot be accommodated in any other school, including wheelchair users. Such criteria clearly place the desire of the Catholic Church to maximise the number of Catholics in the schools it controls over the welfare needs of pupils and their families. It is outrageous that a local council would put the agenda of a religious institution before the best interests of the children in their community.
9. For these reasons, religion should not play any role at all in school admission or transfer processes. We ask the council to abandon these plans and to treat all families equally – regardless of their religion.

Specific objections to statements in the consultation documents

10. We feel it is important to highlight our objections to particular assertions made in the accompanying documents to this consultation. Specifically, we object to the following statements *in Appendix 1 – Procedures for consultation relating to: Proposal to consult on: Admissions to Schools and Placing Request Policy* (pp. 7 –24 in the [Consultation on Admissions to Schools and Placing Request Policy - Board Report](#)):
11. Para 5.2.2: *“The proposal to change the admissions policy will allow the Council to fulfil its duty to provide education to children and young people who are baptised into the Roman Catholic Church in a denominational school.”*
12. The Council has a duty to ensure children and young people have equal access to good education. It does not have a duty to further the mission of the Roman Catholic Church. By entitling children with baptism certificates a privileged position in school admissions, the Council is allowing itself to function as an instrument of a religious organisation. This is neither compatible with basic democratic principles, nor with the Council’s duty to treat all citizens under its jurisdiction equally and fairly.

Like all of Scotland, Renfrewshire is a place of growing religious diversity. If the Council claims it has a duty to ensure Roman Catholic families can access state-funded schools tailored to the Roman Catholic faith, there is nothing to stop other religious groups insisting that the Council provide them with access to state-funded schools tailored to their religion. For example, the Council should expect to see greater demand for Muslim schools, Hindu schools etc. Attempting to accommodate the varied educational wishes of parents and ‘faith leaders’ from many different faith groups is not only impractical but also undesirable – it will lead to segregated communities, destruction of community cohesion, and an end to the principle of equal education for all.

13. Para 5.2.5: *“All Renfrewshire schools remain open to all pupils and will continue to have an inclusive, supportive, tolerant and respectful ethos with a drive to help every child achieve and attain their very best. The diversity of our school communities contributes to their success.”*
14. The very principle of giving priority to pupils with baptism certificates means that effectively, denominational schools are not “open to all pupils”. Where oversubscribed,

they will be open to baptised Catholics only – even pupils with medical need who are not Catholic would be rejected. Additionally, any school that does not treat pupils equally on the basis of religion, and promotes one specific religion or belief above all others, cannot truly be called “inclusive”, “tolerant” or “respectful”. Favouring Catholics over non-Catholics in admissions is also not conducive to “diversity” within a school community.

15. Para 5.2.6: *“The proposal introduces more control on school applications and would ensure that within denominational schools available places are prioritised for baptised Roman Catholic pupils. These pupils would more likely be able to attend their local catchment Roman Catholic school instead of being redirected (with any associated transport costs) and placed in a school outside their local area until a place becomes available at their local school. There are educational benefits arising from this because pupils will face less disruption and be more settled if they are accommodated in their local Roman Catholic school. This is because they will not need to travel to an alternative school in a different area and possibly a different school to their sibling(s); and they will not face the prospect of a second transfer between schools after moving into the area.”*
16. While this paragraph makes clear the advantage of the new proposal for Catholic families, it completely ignores the impact the policy will have on non-Catholic families. Non-Catholic families would also like their children to attend their local school without having to travel in a different area, but if their local school is a Catholic school, their children would be far less likely to get in under the proposed new admissions criteria.
17. Para 5.2.7: *“...Under the proposed new arrangements, children who are baptised Roman Catholic would accord priority. This recognises the educational benefits of the time spent in a denominational primary and of the pupils’ faith and experiences.”*
18. Again, this paragraph considers only the perceived advantages for Catholic families, but not non-Catholic families. It also assumes that the pupils from Catholic families are themselves Catholic, which is often not the case. Baptism and enrolment into a Catholic primary school are usually performed at an age before children can even understand the concept of religion, let alone communicate religious preferences. This means many pupils baptised as Catholics and sent to Catholic schools do not in fact believe in the Catholic faith. Schools should be places where children can develop their own ideas about religion and make a genuine choice about what religion they wish to follow, if any. Increasing faith-based segregation into Renfrewshire’s school system further impedes children’s ability to do this.
19. Para 5.4 *“...Equitable application of the policy would ensure fairness and transparency.”*
20. The proposed policy itself is not equitable and not fair, because it disadvantages non-Catholic families.
21. We also object to the following statement within the report titled Proposal to consult on Admissions to Schools and Placing Request Policy (p. 1 – 6 24 in the [Consultation on Admissions to Schools and Placing Request Policy - Board Report](#)):
“The Recommendations contained within this report have been assessed in relation to their impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or

potential for infringement of individuals' human rights have been identified arising from the recommendations contained in the report."

22. This is an utterly bewildering statement. By prioritising Catholics in school admissions, the new policy has the potential to cause discrimination against people with a number of different protected characteristics, including:
- **Disability – Direct discrimination.** Proposals 2, 3 and 4 make it clear that children with a baptism certificate will be prioritised over pupils who have “medical needs that cannot be accommodates in any other school”, including those who are a “wheelchair user”.
 - **Gender reassignment – Indirect discrimination.** [Documents](#) published by the Catholic Church indicate that they do not recognise the concept of transgender. Parents/guardians who are transgender are therefore less likely to baptise their children into the Catholic faith, and so they are more likely to be disadvantaged by admissions criteria that prioritise baptised Catholics.
 - **Marriage and civil partnership – Indirect discrimination.** The Catholic Church is clear that it only recognises opposite-sex marriages. It also considers it immoral to have children outside of marriage. Parents/guardians who are unmarried, in a same-sex marriage, or in a civil partnership are therefore less likely to baptise their children into the Catholic faith, and so they are more likely to be disadvantaged by admissions criteria that prioritise baptised Catholics.
 - **Race – Indirect discrimination.** Religious affiliation is closely linked to race. Certain ethnicities are far less likely to be Catholic than others. Families belonging to a race that is less likely to be Catholic would therefore be more likely to be disadvantaged by admissions criteria that prioritise baptised Catholics.
 - **Religion or belief – Direct discrimination.** All children who are not baptised Catholics will be disadvantaged by admissions criteria that prioritise baptised Catholics.
 - **Sexual orientation – Indirect discrimination.** The Catholic Church teaches that sexual relations between people of the same sex are immoral. It also does not recognise same-sex marriage. Parents/guardians who are gay, lesbian or bisexual are therefore less likely to baptise their children into the Catholic faith, and so they are more likely to be disadvantaged by admissions criteria that prioritise baptised Catholics.

Conclusion

23. Renfrewshire Council should abandon the policies in Proposals 2, 3 and 4 within this consultation, on the grounds that they will result in unnecessary discrimination and segregation.
24. Instead, Renfrewshire Council should work towards phasing out faith-based education in its state schools and concentrate on bringing families of all faiths and none together.

25. The National Secular Society is happy to work together with Renfrewshire Council to explore alternative options.

26. We also have a good relationship with the [Integrated Education Fund](#), which works to build more integrated schools in Northern Ireland. We would be happy to arrange introductions with them if Renfrewshire Council would consider pursuing a more inclusive, cohesive approach to education.

This response was prepared by Megan Manson, campaigns officer, National Secular Society