

## Response to Surrey County Council's consultation on: **Proposal to open a new school by amalgamating Christ Church C of E infant School and Englefield Green Infant School and Nurseries**

February 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 **strongly disagree** with the proposal to open a new school by amalgamating Christ Church C of E Infant School and Englefield Green Infant School and Nurseries, as it currently stands.
3. According to the proposal, the new school would be established by closing Englefield Green Infant School, which is a community school, and re-opening it as a voluntary aided Church of England school on the existing site.
4. **We see no reasonable justification for converting this community school into a Church of England faith school.**
5. If one of the two schools named in the proposal must close, **the most logical and equitable solution is to close Christ Church C of E Infant School and simply re-locate its pupils to Englefield Green Infant School without re-opening it as a voluntary aided Church of England school.** Englefield Green Infant School should remain a community school. Community schools are fully inclusive and treat children, families and staff from all religion and belief backgrounds equally. The same cannot be said of voluntary aided faith schools.

### 1. Faith schools are inherently discriminatory.

6. **By their very nature, faith schools treat pupils of different faith and belief backgrounds unequally.** Pupils from non-Anglican backgrounds at a Church of England school ('church school') suffer a disadvantage, because the school will affirm Anglican beliefs and traditions above all others.

7. The information circulated by the Council (but prepared by the Diocese of Guildford) in 'related documents' states "The Church of England is clear that its schools are not faith schools for the faithful, but church schools for the community". This is misleading. Faith schools are defined in law as "schools which are designated as having a faith character."<sup>1</sup> In their recent report the former education secretary Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead put forward their own definition:

*"Faith schools can be defined by their admissions policy; governance arrangements and sponsorship; employment policy for selecting senior staff; ethos and values."*<sup>2</sup>

Under this definition – or any other objective definition – it is clear that the proposed Church of England school would be a faith school. The rhetoric employed in this document amounts to denying (or attempting to deny) the nature of a school with a faith designation. It is merely an attempt to avoid association with the unpopularity of faith-based schooling. It is however at odds with Church of England policy and practice.

8. Despite the Church of England's frequent talk of 'inclusivity', church schools are increasingly under pressure from the Church of England to assert a robust Christian ethos – even in schools with a religiously diverse and largely religiously indifferent school community. In addition to Ofsted inspections, church schools are subject to Section 48 Inspections by their local dioceses to ensure that they are "distinctively and recognisably Christian institutions". **The council's own consultation document has confirmed that the faith school replacing Englefield Green Infant School would have "a distinctly Christian ethos"**.
9. Many church schools, under pressure from their diocese to assert their Christian ethos, make religion an inescapable part of school life. Many church schools have prayers at the beginning and end of each day and before and after lunch, introduce 'prayer corners' in classrooms, prominently display Christian symbols, have regular visits from clergy, and even employ clergy as 'school chaplains'. Proselytism and evangelism is a distinctive feature of school life in church schools. This undermines parental rights and children's religious freedoms. Many parents do not want somebody else's religion imposed on their children whilst at school.
10. However, many parents feel uncomfortable raising concerns about the way in which religion is promoted in their child's school, because senior staff and governors in church schools are often practising Christians themselves. Parents often fear their perfectly reasonable stance will be regarded as 'anti-religious' by the religious authorities running the school – and indeed they are often given a dismissive and defensive response to their concerns.
11. Parents have the right to withdraw children from religious activities, but many parents regard this as an unreasonable imposition on both themselves and their children. And even though parents have withdrawal rights, this is often very difficult to exercise in practice. Those difficulties can become insurmountable in church schools when worship encroaches into the classroom and religion permeates the whole school experience.

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<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Library Briefing Paper: Faith Schools in England: FAQ (20 December 2019) <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06972>

<sup>2</sup> <http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Clarke-Woodhead-A-New-Settlement-Revised.pdf>

12. To add insult to injury to non-Anglican locals, the vast majority of capital funding for the new school at Englefield Green will come from public sources (90% from the DfE) but Guildford Diocese will hold the school in trust. 100% of running costs will be paid by taxpayers. Local residents we have spoken to have characterised the proposed school takeover as a “land grab” by the Church of England.

## 2. Voluntary aided faith schools can apply discriminatory admissions policies.

13. Although the proposal says the Englefield Green faith school will have the same admissions criteria as Englefield Green Infant Schools for September 2021, there are no guarantees that it will remain fully open to families of all faiths and none. **In the future, the school could choose to select 100% of its pupils based on the religion of their parents, prioritising Anglican church-goers above other pupils when oversubscribed.** Both Christ Church C of E Infant School and St Jude's C of E Junior School (which the proposal says would “work closely” with the new faith school) both operate discriminatory admission policies.
14. Schools and academies with a religious designation have several exemptions from the Equality Act 2010, which allows them to apply discriminatory criteria in their pupil admissions. When voluntary aided (VA) faith schools are oversubscribed, they are permitted to use religious criteria to give priority in admissions to children of parents who practice a particular religion. In many cases schools will require evidence of baptism or religious practice from a minister of religion. Quite simply, families of no religion, or of the ‘wrong’ religion, are discriminated against.
15. A discriminatory faith school replacing a school with an inclusive admissions policy is likely to provoke justified outrage from locals. The vast majority of voters, including those from every religion surveyed, disagree with religious selection in school admissions<sup>3</sup>. VA faith schools can also apply a religious test when hiring, promoting or retaining any teacher. This is most commonly applied to senior roles and RE teachers.

## 3. Most parents just want a good local school – not a faith school.

16. Though religious organisations want more faith schools, most parents and the general public just want good local schools. This is certainly true of parents of children at Christ Church C of E Infant School. **Just 7 families chose Christ Church C of E Infant School in 2019/2020, which suggests few parents specifically want a Church of England school.**
17. Research shows that most parents choose schools based on their locality and academic standards – very few choose faith schools for their religious characteristic. In a 2013 survey by YouGov and the University of Lancaster, 70% of British adults said they would choose a school on the basis of its academic standard. Only 5% said they would choose on the basis of giving a “grounding in faith tradition” and an even smaller 3% for

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/majority-of-all-religious-and-belief-groups-oppose-religious-selection-in-school-admissions-17.pdf>

"transmission of belief about God"<sup>4</sup>.

18. Other statistics show faith schools to be nationally unpopular:
- 58% of the adult population oppose faith schools and only 30% say they have “no objection” to faith schools being funded by the state. (Opinium, 2014)
  - 59% of teachers in England support an end to new faith schools and 51% support ending state funding for faith schools. (TeacherTapp, 2019)
  - Only a quarter of people in Britain who might have a school-age child say they would send him or her to a faith school. (YouGov 2013)<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. A new faith school would create an imbalance of denominational provision and impede parental rights.

19. According to data from the 2019 British Social Attitudes survey, only 12% of British people identify as Anglican – **including just 1% of people aged 18-24**. The population of Englefield Green East is significantly younger than the average for England & Wales and southeastern England, with 42% of residents being aged 18-29<sup>6</sup>. School reorganisations should take into account the long-established demographic shift away from Church of England affiliation and respond accordingly. This proposal runs counter to this trend.
20. Faith schools are often defended in terms of parental choice. However, faith schools in fact restrict choice for parents who do not want a faith-based education for their children, or who do not share the religion of their local school. According to our research, in 2017 18,000 children were sent to faith schools against their parents' preference<sup>7</sup>.
21. Replacing Englefield Green's community school with a faith school will mean some parents who are not Anglican may have little or no option other than to send their child to an Anglican school, even if that is not what the family wishes, if other local schools are oversubscribed.
22. We remind the local authority of its legal duty to provide schools “sufficient in number, character and equipment to provide for all pupils the opportunity of appropriate education.” Community schools are appropriate for pupils of all faith and belief backgrounds. Faith schools are not. The assessment of whether schools provided are sufficient in number and character should take into account, and be compatible with, Convention rights including Article 9 (right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion) read in conjunction with Article 2 Protocol 1 (right to education).
23. The possibility that the new faith school could, at any time, decide to use its privilege as a VA school to apply discriminatory admissions criteria would further reduce parental choice. If a non-Anglican family still wish to send their child to the Englefield Green school (because it is the closest to their home, for example), they could be turned away.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/4n6d3tnayp/YG-Archive-University-of-Lancaster-Faith-Matters-Debate-results-180613-faith-schools.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/4n6d3tnayp/YG-Archive-University-of-Lancaster-Faith-Matters-Debate-results-180613-faith-schools.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.secularism.org.uk/data.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.findahood.com/locations/englefieldgreeneast/6281605>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2018/04/18000-children-sent-to-faith-schools-against-parental-preference>

24. Even if the school retains a non-religiously selective admissions policy, the religious ethos of the school is likely to put persons of a particular protected characteristic at a particular disadvantage.
25. We therefore urge the council to have proper regard to the way in which this proposal will detrimentally impact on the equality of opportunity for people of faiths other than Church of England, or of no faith at all. For the avoidance of doubt, we would remind the council that the protected characteristic of “religion or belief” means any religious or philosophical belief including a lack of belief.

## 5. A new faith school would harm community cohesion.

26. Faith schools have a negative impact on social cohesion, foster the segregation of children on social, ethnic<sup>8</sup> and religious lines and are antithetical to freedom and equality. Organising children and young people's education around religious identities is the worst possible response to Surrey's growing religious diversity. Schools are our golden opportunity to foster understanding and tolerance amongst tomorrow's generation. It is utterly misguided to squander this opportunity by replacing community schools with faith schools.
27. While it is understandable that there are parents who wish for their child to be raised according to their religious tradition, they don't have the right to that via the state. The state has a duty to provide schools and to respect parents' religious freedom. The case law is clear that this doesn't create a duty to provide faith-based schools.
28. The council has not demonstrated a specific demand for Anglican faith school places and has provided no convincing rationale for wanting to expand them. Surrey does not require faith schools to cater for families of different religions in the area. Englefield Green Infant School, which is open, inclusive and equally welcoming to all children whatever their religion and belief backgrounds, does that by default.
29. If either Christ Church C of E Infant School or Englefield Green Infant School and Nurseries are to close, we see no reason why Englefield Green Infant School should not remain open as it is (being the larger and more modern of the two) and simply absorb the pupils from Church C of E Infant School. This would not only be the most equitable solution for the reasons set out above – it would also avoid any potential disruption caused by the process of closing, re-opening and renaming a perfectly good community school. Handing over an inclusive school to the Church of England is a step in the wrong direction. For Englefield Green and its surrounding communities to thrive, every effort should be made to provide schools that treat everyone equally, exclude no-one on religious grounds, and let children make up their own minds about religion.
30. We see no rational basis for converting Englefield Green into a faith school for which there is no demand. We therefore urge the council to reconsider this proposal and seek ways to reorganise education in the area without expanding faith-based provision.

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<sup>8</sup> Research in 2017 found that primary faith schools are more ethnically segregated than schools of no faith: <http://tedcandle.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Understanding-School-Segregation-in-England-2011-2016-Final.pdf>

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