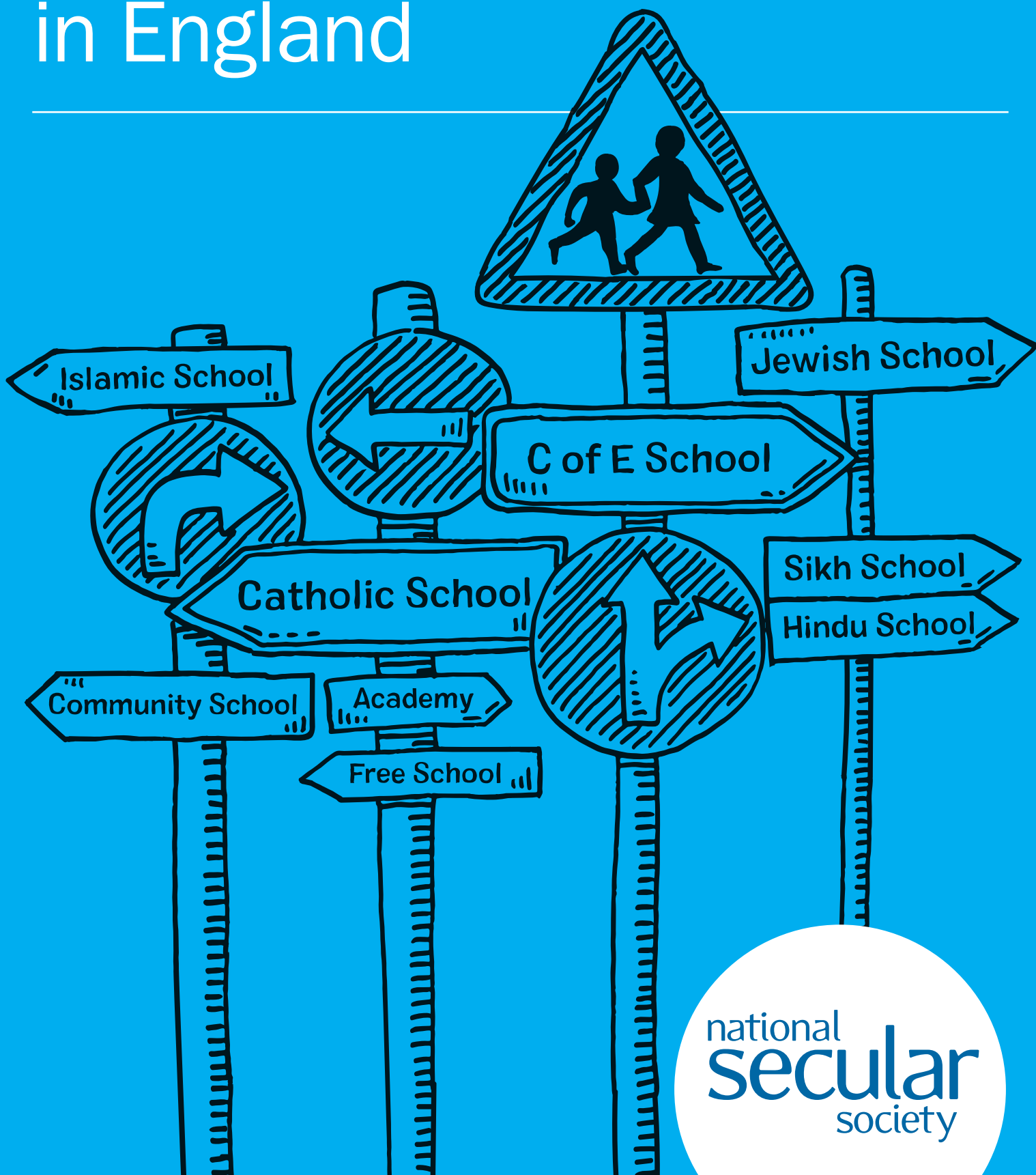


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# The choice delusion: how faith schools restrict primary school choice in England

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## Executive summary

Faith schools are a contentious subject among parents, the wider public and politicians alike. State support for faith-based schooling is often justified in terms of parental choice.

This report highlights how the existence of faith schools limits primary school choice for parents who do not want a faith-based education for their children, or do not share the faith of a particular school in their area. For many parents the so called ‘choice’ offered by faith schools is illusory and narratives around choice often mischaracterise the restrictions they face.

In some parts of the country, particularly in rural areas where the only primary school is Church of England, parents are often left with little or no choice but to send their child to a school with a religious ethos. This situation clearly fails to respect parents’ and pupils’ religious or philosophical convictions and denies the ability of parents to choose a religiously-neutral education for their children. Successive governments’ support for faith-based education has left us in the unjust and unsustainable situation where a state education system in one of the most secularised nations in the world isn’t able to provide parents with a secular education for their children.

The Government has made no assessment of how many parents are in this situation. This report recommends a mechanism monitoring this, and prioritising inclusive schools in areas of highly restricted choice, along with wider reforms.

Whilst it is reasonable to allow followers of certain religions to have their children educated according to a particular faith doctrine, there is no reason why this should take place in schools or be funded by the state.

A policy of only providing state funding for secular schools would not restrict choice for people of faith. Community schools and other schools without a religious designation welcome children of all faith backgrounds and none and, unlike many faith schools, never discriminate on religious grounds in their admissions. Although it is true that such schools would not offer confessional or directive education in religion, this is not a reasonable expectation of the state in any case.

To ensure that the greatest number of parents have the greatest amount of choice, there needs to be a move away from faith-based schools in favour of inclusive secular schools that welcome children of all faith and non-faith backgrounds equally and educate them together.

*“I’m a Christian but I believe faith schools cause big problems in society. They cause segregation and reduce school choice for parents. It is so much better for all children to learn together, mixing with all the children in their community. It is wrong that children are turned away from a school or prioritised for entry based on what their parents happen to do on a Sunday! I know a number of people who’ve told me they faked faith to get a school place, and I know one rather corrupt C of E primary school that helps out children who fail the 11-plus with their secondary application, so they go to a faith school not a regular high school. These sorts of problems are avoided by having all schools open to all local pupils.”*

**Joanne, from CANTERBURY<sup>1</sup>**

1 Part of a selection of quotes from the No More Faith Schools petition on the theme of “choice”.

## Key findings

The restriction of parental choice resulting from faith schools manifests itself in two ways:

1. A lack of reasonably accessible religiously-neutral schools for those that desire them.
2. Restrictive and discriminatory admissions rules at faith schools which might otherwise be a parent's preferred option.

The report examines the actual primary school choices available:

- Across England
- And within rural villages specifically

It also analyses school admission data and other school preference research to quantify how these effects impact school choice.

- **Almost three in ten families across England live in areas where most or all of the closest primary schools are faith schools.** There is significant regional variation and the problem is more prevalent in rural areas. However, even in urban areas around one in four families live in areas with high or extreme restrictions.
- **Every year between 45,000 – 60,000 families apply for primary schools in areas with extreme restrictions on non-faith school choice**, with a further 111,000 – 136,000 in areas of high restriction.<sup>2</sup>
- **In 43.4% of rural areas<sup>3</sup> restrictions on non-faith school choice are categorised as “high” or “extreme”. In fact, 53% of rural primary schools are faith-based.**
- **20.6% (7,727) of those who missed out on their first choice of a non-faith primary school in September 2018 were assigned a faith school.** This includes 1,398 people who had made all their preferences (typically five) for a non-faith school.
- When parents appeal against the allocation of a faith school, there is no guarantee they will succeed – effectively forcing children into faith schools against their parents' wishes.

*“My son recently started reception at a faith school. Not because I'm religious, but because I had no choice. This is our local school; most other local schools are also faith schools. As a result, I will be forced to navigate challenging conversations with a four-year-old whether I feel he is prepared for them or not. Religious families will already be speaking to their children about religion at home, and non-religious families will not appreciate having to contradict what their children are taught at school.”*

**Jenny, from SOUTHAMPTON**

*“I live right by a school (2 min walk) that I would like my daughter to go to. But as we are not a religious family I'm told she can't go there and will now have to drive my child to school as the others are 5–10 minute drive from our home.”*

**Zoe, from WOLVERHAMPTON**

<sup>2</sup> Based on 608,000 applications for primary places for September 2018,

<sup>3</sup> See analysis on rural administrative wards.

## Background: The choice delusion

While significant research exists on the effects of faith-based admissions in restricting school choice, this report is the first to attempt to quantify the number of parents who do not have reasonable access to a school without a religious ethos.

In 2014, a parliamentary question<sup>4</sup> revealed that the Department for Education has made no estimate of the number of people living in areas where the only reasonably available state schools are faith-based. As of April 2018 this situation has not changed.<sup>5</sup>

Unless this issue is addressed it is likely to be an increasing problem, as the proportion of faith-based schools has increased slightly and shows no signs of diminishing.<sup>6</sup> This is despite the fact that religious affiliation in Britain has reached a new low – particularly among younger generations. Seventy per cent of 16- to 29-year-olds in the UK say they have no religion and 59% say they never attend a religious service.<sup>7</sup> The situation is also likely to be particularly acute in rural areas where school choice is already restricted, and faith schools are prioritised in school reorganisations/amalgamations.<sup>8</sup>

It is not uncommon for parents to be allocated a faith school against their wishes. The prevalence of faith schools and a shortage of school places in some areas means parents are increasingly being expected to send children to schools with a religious ethos that they don't share.

Parents cannot appeal against the school they have been allocated, but can appeal the decision not to admit their child to their preferred school. In cases where pupils are allocated faith schools, it's hard to do this without pointing out why the allocated school would be unsuitable.

The National Secular Society is often called upon by parents to assist them with their appeals. In some cases, appeals have been successful. For example, when 20 children from non-Sikh backgrounds were allocated places at a free school with a "strong Sikh ethos", all appeals were successful and the local authority managed to find them all alternative places in neighbouring schools.<sup>9</sup>

However, in some cases appeals are not successful, or alternative offers are entirely unsuitable, often due to distance of the alternative school offered. In such cases parents are left with little or no option other than to send their child to a religious school.

School amalgamation and unique local circumstances can also pressure parents into faith schools.<sup>10</sup>

4 [parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2014-06-18/201185/](https://parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2014-06-18/201185/)

5 [parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-04-13/135492/](https://parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-04-13/135492/)

6 Between January 2000 and January 2017, the proportion of faith schools increased steadily, from 35% to 37% of primaries and from 16% to 19% of secondaries. Source: House of Commons Library

7 [stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/europes-young-adults-and-religion.aspx](http://stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/europes-young-adults-and-religion.aspx)

8 [secularism.org.uk/news/2018/01/research-reveals-systemic-bias-against-secular-schools](http://secularism.org.uk/news/2018/01/research-reveals-systemic-bias-against-secular-schools)

9 [secularism.org.uk/news/2015/04/nss-backs-parents-allocated-sikh-school-against-their-wishes](http://secularism.org.uk/news/2015/04/nss-backs-parents-allocated-sikh-school-against-their-wishes)

10 [secularism.org.uk/news/2015/10/academy-closure-will-force-children-into-faith-schools](http://secularism.org.uk/news/2015/10/academy-closure-will-force-children-into-faith-schools)  
[secularism.org.uk/news/2018/01/research-reveals-systemic-bias-against-secular-schools](http://secularism.org.uk/news/2018/01/research-reveals-systemic-bias-against-secular-schools)

Even when families do include faith schools in their choices, the factors in their decision are frequently unrelated to the faith ethos of the school. In 2013 research by Professor Linda Woodhead found that only a quarter of people in Britain who might have a school-age child say they would send them to a faith school. Yet the proportion of faith-based schools has remained around one third for the last decade.<sup>11</sup>

The same research showed that when making a choice 77% of parents consider the academic standards and 58% the location of the school. Just 5% and 3% respectively make decisions based on “grounding of pupils in a faith tradition” and “transmission of belief about God”. Rather than being consumers ‘shopping around’, most parents simply want a good local school and for the majority their closest school is their first option.<sup>12</sup>

With non-faith considerations being so dominant in parents’ school choice (even when such choices involve faith schools) it suggests that the faith element is something they choose to go along with, rather than actively seek out.

### CASE STUDY<sup>13</sup>

Turkish Cypriot parents from London were allocated a place for their son at a Greek Orthodox School in Barnet, despite the family not listing the school in their list of preferences. Members of their family lost their lives in the civil conflict in Cyprus between Greeks and Turks between 1963 and 1974. The parents called the offer of a Greek orthodox faith school “wholly unacceptable” and an “insult”.

The family refused the place, and were subsequently offered a place at a school three and a half miles away from where the family live, which was entirely impractical. In order to secure an appropriate secular education, the family eventually opted to educate their son privately.

*“Both our children have had to go to faith schools because they were the only local schools available. We are an atheist family, and this was not at all what we would have chosen. In country areas the local faith school is effectively compulsory. Politicians bend over backwards not to offend faith groups, but by far the largest ‘faith’ group, atheists, are ignored.”*

**John, from PLYMOUTH**

*“In my area I have a choice of one primary school for my son if he wants a non-religious education. It’s upsetting and discriminatory that the vast majority of non-religious people, and religious people who don’t believe that belief is a public matter, in this country aren’t catered for.”*

**Martin, from BRIGHTON**

11 [secularism.org.uk/news/2013/09/opinion-poll-shows-big-opposition-to-faith-schools](http://secularism.org.uk/news/2013/09/opinion-poll-shows-big-opposition-to-faith-schools)

12 [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)

13 [secularism.org.uk/news/2014/07/turkish-mothers-insult-at-greek-orthodox-faith-school-allocation](http://secularism.org.uk/news/2014/07/turkish-mothers-insult-at-greek-orthodox-faith-school-allocation)

**CASE STUDY<sup>14</sup>**

In 2014 Hertfordshire County Council failed to offer five children any of their preferred schools – and instead allocated a Church of England school. Despite informing Hertfordshire of their philosophical objections to the school, the parents' appeals against the allocations were unsuccessful.

Jo Hammond, whose 11-year-old daughter Bethany is one of the five affected children, told the NSS: "Not being religious ourselves we think this school is completely inappropriate. We've been told we can withdraw our daughter from worship and RE but there's no alternative provision, and sitting outside a classroom feels like punishment. Why should our daughter be punished for not being religious?"

Katie Harford, another parent who rejected a place at the Christian faith school, said her daughter was "absolutely devastated". "We are not religious and the school is unsuitable for her. It is wrong on so many levels. The journey would take over an hour and would be done in the dark during winter. I do not want that for my child."

*"I was gobsmacked and outraged when they told me I didn't get any of my six chosen choices of schools... I didn't want her to go to a Hindu school so I am surprised the council would think I would accept a faith school which I didn't even apply for."*

**Naz, from EAST LONDON**

*"We decided we couldn't live with our son being indoctrinated in the Catholic faith, a religion we don't follow, and the alternative of excluding him from classes and religious activities is just not acceptable. The appeals panel said they understood our decision but said they couldn't guarantee a place at an alternative school by September."*

**Rachel, from MANCHESTER**

*"My child had no choice but to go to a faith school – all of the state primary schools near us are faith schools. We eventually placed him in a private school in order to get out of the faith system – not an ideal solution. I really object very strongly to the stranglehold that religion is taking in our children's education. The state system is forcing non-faith families into religious obligations around our children's education. This is unacceptable and contrary to the freedom to follow and practice any religion or none!"*

**Sarah, from SWINDON**

14 [secularism.org.uk/news/2014/08/church-school-allocation-angers-non-religious-parents](http://secularism.org.uk/news/2014/08/church-school-allocation-angers-non-religious-parents)



## Are faith schools a reasonable expectation?

Article 2 of the First Protocol of the Human Rights Act protects children's right to an effective education, and parents' to ensure that their religious and philosophical beliefs are respected during this education.

This *does not* mean that the state needs to accommodate every preference, or to provide or subsidise any specific type of education. This does not oblige the state to fund religious schools of any kind. However, it strongly suggests that the state has a duty to provide an education option which is neither religiously nor irreligiously directive.

Religiously directive (i.e. faith<sup>15</sup>) schools pose rights concerns for both parents and children that religiously non-directive (i.e. non-faith, community or secular) schools do not. These are summarised in the following table.

This is not to suggest that there is not a large amount of variation within faith schools, nor that faith schools do not vary widely on the extent to which they impinge on such rights. However, the fundamental asymmetry is that non-faith schools do not impinge on such rights.<sup>16</sup>

In effect non-faith schools are a compromise between religious and irreligious schools. But as a society we have decided that atheist schools (i.e. schools that are irreligiously directive or organised around irreligious identity) are not a reasonable expectation.

A religiously neutral school satisfies the state's obligation to respect parents' religious or philosophical convictions and their role in the religious or philosophical formation of their children, in a way that that faith-based schools do not.

If it is reasonable to organise schools around the protected characteristic of religion, then wouldn't it be reasonable to organise around other protected characteristics, race or sexuality?<sup>17</sup>

Political ideology and identity are in many ways analogous (in some cases even contiguous) with their religious counterparts. However, as a society we have decided that political schools are not a reasonable expectation. Legally in England no school could be arranged around political identity or direction and all schools are legally forbidden to engage in partisan political direction.<sup>18</sup>

Currently religious families have the choice of more schools that won't discriminate against them than non-religious families. Even within faith schools there is a hierarchy of choice which disadvantages the non-religious majority relatively more than other non-Christian groups, as many faith schools give priority to families who are of any religion over the non-religious.<sup>19</sup>

*"Having a daughter due to start school next year, there are few options other than faith schools locally."*

**David, from KINGSTON UPON THAMES**

15 This would also include irreligiously directive (i.e. positively atheist) schools, but at present no such schools operate in the state sector – or to the best of our knowledge in the independent sector.

16 Excluding individual examples of bad or inappropriate practice (i.e. non-faith schools acting as faith schools) and anomalies where non-faith schools include religious direction (e.g. coercive worship). A true non-faith school would not include these practices.

17 [newstatesman.com/politics/2015/01/lgbt-school-good-idea](http://newstatesman.com/politics/2015/01/lgbt-school-good-idea)

18 [secularism.org.uk/opinion/2018/06/religion-and-politics-the-discrepancy-at-the-heart-of-our-schools](http://secularism.org.uk/opinion/2018/06/religion-and-politics-the-discrepancy-at-the-heart-of-our-schools)

19 [nomorefaithschools.org/news/2018/06/report-highlights-scale-of-discrimination-against-non-religious-in-admissions](http://nomorefaithschools.org/news/2018/06/report-highlights-scale-of-discrimination-against-non-religious-in-admissions)

	<b>Faith schools</b> (i.e. religiously directive or organised around religion)	<b>Non-faith schools</b> (i.e. not religiously directive and not organised around religion)
Direct discrimination	Many such schools practice religious discrimination in their admissions. Of these many operate a hierarchy, with a preferred religion at the top, followed by other religions, with the non-religious at the bottom.	No such schools practice discriminatory admissions.
Indirect discrimination	A school environment which either indoctrinates, inculcates or immerses children in a religious worldview intrinsically preferences the needs of those who share this worldview, and to a greater or lesser extent fails those who do not.	By not expressing religious, non-religious or irreligious preferences, and not organising around any one religion such schools do not engage in such indirect discrimination.
Parental education rights	Faith schools respect the preferences of parents wishing the school to provide such direction. However, this direction is counter to those that do not desire it and so does not respect this parental right for all.	Such schools respect the parents' rights to provide religious or irreligious direction to their children, however do not provide such direction themselves. Though some parents may miss out on their preference for such direction, no parents' children receive a direction which is counter to their preferences.
Child's educational rights	By directing the child towards a religious worldview, such schools provide an environment in which the child's choice – their right to develop their own beliefs is to a greater or lesser degree restricted.	By not directing the child towards either a religious or irreligious worldview, such schools provide an environment in which the child's choice – their right to develop their own beliefs is not restricted.

*“As a former parent and chair of governors of a faith school I have seen first-hand how a school that was good in so many ways could exclude members of the local community and discriminate in employment practices.”*

**Joseph, from SOUTH EAST LONDON**

## School choice restriction

We used a hypothetical parent considering what percentage of their potential local primary schools would be faith or non-faith schools.

In more urban areas parents are likely to have a higher number of schools within a similar geographic area, and so are more likely to actively choose between schools.

In rural areas parents are likely to have their realistic options further restricted. If the second closest school is in an entirely different village or on the other side of town, then your choice is more restricted than if your second closest school is simply a street further away.<sup>20</sup>

To capture this, we settled on two criteria for hypothetical parents living across England looking at which schools may be a reasonable choice.<sup>21</sup>

School choice restriction	Proportion of faith schools	Criterion 1 The three closest schools	Criterion 2 The local schools (The up to three closest schools which are not more than 1 mile more distant than the closest school)
None	0%	None of the three closest schools are faith schools.	None of the local schools are faith schools.
Low	33%	One of the three closest schools is a faith school.	A third of the local schools are faith schools.
Medium	50%	N/A	Half of the local schools are faith schools.
High	67%	Two of the three closest schools are faith schools.	Two thirds of the local schools are faith schools.
Extreme	100%	All of the three closest schools are faith schools.	All of the local schools are faith schools.

While these are an imperfect measure which cannot capture everyone's preferences or circumstances, they serve as a baseline for comparisons.

**Criterion 1** is the main criterion used for comparisons. **Criterion 2** is good for capturing the situation in rural areas where the second or third closest schools may be much more distant. An example of this is presented in the following table.

<sup>20</sup> [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/715650/2018\\_School\\_Application\\_Offers\\_Text.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/715650/2018_School_Application_Offers_Text.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Criteria and methodology were formulated prior to the searches being carried out. A third criteria (based on travel time) was considered during the planning stages but abandoned prior to the searches.

Postcode	School 1 distance	School 2 distance	School 3 distance	School 2 additional distance from 1	School 3 additional distance from 1	Criterion 1	Criterion 2
B15 2PQ	0.49	0.53	0.60	0.04	0.11	3 closest schools	3 closest schools
TN12 9PS	0.59	1.44	1.77	0.85	1.18	3 closest schools	2 closest schools
WR8 0LL	0.12	2.98	3.58	2.86	3.46	3 closest schools	1 closest school

In all three of these example postcodes Criterion 1 examines the three closest schools.

In B15 2PQ it isn't much further to the second or third closest school. Criterion 2 examines all three.

In TN12 9PS it isn't that much further to the second closest school but going to the third closest school would be an additional journey of over a mile. Criterion 2 only examines the two closest schools.

In WR8 0LL traveling to the second or third closest school would be an additional journey of over a mile. Criterion 2 only examines the closest school.

*“Over subscription in our area means the catchment area for us is tiny. We have a Catholic school and a C of E school, both of which require additional forms signed off by priest or vicar and church to confirm your attendance. The school we got for our child is a 40-minute walk from our house, so we have to drive every day.*

*“Although it's a wonderful infant school, it feeds into a C of E junior school which for the sake of my son and the friendships he has made I will send him to. I feel I have no choice and I can't believe more parents aren't outraged that our taxes majority fund a school that actively discriminates against our children based on religion. Our local Catholic school has 13 levels of entry. These were Catholic looked after children from local parish, siblings of children in the school, other children from parish. It then went through these three groups but anywhere in borough, any Christian children, any other religion and at the very bottom non-religious children.”*

**Kirsty, from SUTTON**

*“Everyone should be entitled to have their children educated at the school that is nearest to them, regardless of whether or not they subscribe to a particular religion or other superstition. No one should be discriminated against on the grounds of “faith”. I object to having to contribute to funding the local school to which my own child was denied access on religious grounds while also having to pay for him to be educated privately as a result.”*

**Rob, from SOUTH EAST LONDON**

## Part 1: Post code analysis

For this analysis 520 representative English postcodes were randomly selected<sup>22</sup> and their potential primary school choices were collated. This data was then weighted<sup>23</sup> to extrapolate the percentage of the population in school choice restricted areas.

All England		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	24.8	28.7
Low	45.5	40.6
Medium	0.0	2.7
High	22.3	18.3
Extreme	7.4	9.8

Given the 608,000 applications for primary places for September 2018, this means that between 45,000 – 60,000 live in areas with **extreme** restrictions on non-faith school choice. A further 111,000 – 136,000 families live in areas of **high** restriction.

As the following tables show, there is significant regional and urban/rural variation.

North East		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	17.9	17.9
Low	55.9	55.9
Medium	0.0	0.0
High	21.2	21.2
Extreme	5.0	5.0

North West		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	13.5	14.7
Low	45.9	44.1
Medium	0.0	1.2
High	32.5	31.9
Extreme	9.1	9.1

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix 1

<sup>23</sup> See Appendix 2

<b>Yorkshire and the Humber</b>		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	45.3	49.1
Low	39.2	37.3
Medium	0.0	1.9
High	11.7	5.0
Extreme	3.9	6.8

<b>East Midlands</b>		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	31.0	41.1
Low	50.7	38.4
Medium	0.0	5.0
High	12.6	6.8
Extreme	5.8	8.7

<b>West Midlands</b>		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	27.0	30.0
Low	41.4	38.4
Medium	0.0	0.8
High	27.9	24.1
Extreme	3.8	6.8

<b>East of England</b>		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	23.6	28.3
Low	50.4	45.7
Medium	0.0	1.6
High	24.5	16.7
Extreme	1.6	7.8

<b>London</b>		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	20.0	20.0
Low	57.5	57.5
Medium	0.0	0.0
High	17.5	17.5
Extreme	5.0	5.0

<b>South East</b>		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	27.0	32.1
Low	33.8	26.7
Medium	0.0	4.1
High	23.2	19.0
Extreme	16.1	18.2

<b>South West</b>		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	20.0	26.6
Low	41.7	30.1
Medium	0.0	8.3
High	26.7	18.4
Extreme	11.7	16.6

<b>Urban</b>		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	26.0	26.6
Low	48.2	46.4
Medium	0.0	1.2
High	20.2	20.0
Extreme	5.6	5.8

<b>Rural</b>		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	19.8	37.9
Low	33.6	15.0
Medium	0.0	9.1
High	31.5	10.8
Extreme	15.1	27.3

*“My village school is C of E – most who attend do so because it is the village school, not because of its religious affiliation. My children attended for this reason but have been shown pictures of God’s garden presented as fact, been given alcoholic wine without my consent and it has been a challenge to keep their minds open and objective about religion. I’ve now removed my children from the school.”*

**Helen, from YORK**

*“It is appalling that in this day and age children continue to have religion forced upon them. A child should be allowed to make their own mind up when in possession of all the information and when they are able to fully assess their options. There are no non-faith schools where I live and consequently my children have to go to school in the neighbouring town.”*

**Tim, from REDHILL**

*“Why is my child facing such blatant discrimination due to the beliefs of her parents? I have always encouraged her to learn about all religions and decide for herself when the time feels right. So, I haven’t had her christened or baptised because that isn’t my choice to make for her. But now we need to apply to high schools and it seems she isn’t worthy enough to even be considered for half of the faith schools in my area based on religious criteria.”*

**Emma, from WARRINGTON**

*“Parents attend church just to get them into their most convenient school, not because of their devotion to the religious orientation. We have a school five meters away from our house, but our son can’t go there because we refuse to attend the local church. This should not be happening in today’s society. Children should be able to make their own choice when they are able to make that choice.”*

**Darren, from LIVERPOOL**



## Part 2: The only school in the village?

As seen in Part 1 faith-based restrictions on school choice are more prevalent in rural areas, based on the greater prevalence of faith schools and greater distance between schools.

53% of primary schools in rural areas are faith-based. Average travel distances to rural schools are also further. On average an urban resident's third closest school is closer than a rural resident's nearest school:

	School 1 average distance (miles)	School 2 average distance (miles)	School 3 average distance (miles)
URBAN	0.32	0.52	0.67
RURAL	0.80	1.76	2.30

A common complaint we hear from parents concerned about restricted school choice is that they have had to send their children to a faith school because it is the only school in the village, or they are desperate to get into a specific school because it is the only non-faith school in the village.

In Part 1 Criteria 2 went some way to measuring how pervasive this 'only school in the village' effect was. This was explored in more depth in this follow-on research.

A dataset of all open primary schools in England was extracted on 27 September 2018. These were then broken down into schools in rural and urban postal areas. We had intended to compare the proportion of faith schools by village. Unfortunately, the data is not in a format where such a comparison could be made or extrapolated. We therefore used administrative wards as the best available stand-in.<sup>24</sup>

In rural administrative wards containing schools there are an average of 2.0 primaries, as compared to 2.5 in urban administrative wards.<sup>25</sup>

Because there is greater variation in the number of schools within administrative wards<sup>26</sup>, the school choice restriction labels were changed to ranges.<sup>27</sup>

School choice restriction	% of schools in rural area which are faith-based
None	0 to 10
Low	11 to 37
Medium	38 to 63
High	64 to 90
Extreme	91 to 100

24 As of 31 December 2015, the UK has 9,196 administrative wards with an average population of 5,500. They are the key building blocks of UK administrative geography. [ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/ukgeographies/administrativegeography/england](https://ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/ukgeographies/administrativegeography/england)

25 8.71% of rural administrative wards do not have any primary schools, as compared to 15.08% of urban administrative wards.

26 In Part 1 there would be 1–3 schools in each comparison, giving 5 possible percentages. Here each comparison contained 1–9 schools, giving 27 possible percentages.

27 Rounded to nearest percentage point. The percentages used in Part 1 would sit in the same ranges used here

**The analysis found that 43.4% of rural areas (containing 42.9% of rural primary schools) have a high or extreme restriction on non-faith school choice.**

The following table summarises the results. Schools are not equally distributed across rural areas, so the table gives the percentage of rural areas that have various restrictions, and the percentage of rural schools in such areas.

School choice restriction	% of rural areas	% of schools
None	31.8	23.3
Low	7.0	12.6
Medium	17.7	21.3
High	8.0	13.9
Extreme	35.4	29.0

*“I work in a village VC school and have seen the pressure to evangelise to children rising. It’s even worse in VA schools. I wouldn’t want my child to attend a faith school but might have no choice if I lived in a village. They claim to be for children of all faiths but it’s clear that their main concern is with propagating the faith. It’s time to end the segregation of pupils by their parent’s faith and build a more cohesive society.”*

**Christopher, from BRISTOL**

*“My son has to go to a local RC school because of SENS needs – his timetable includes five periods of RE every two weeks. This is more than any other subject and is straight up evangelising. Education should be secular, faith schools severely limit the choice of pupils especially in areas like mine which is a grammar area.”*

**Sally, from CANTERBURY**

*“As an atheist, my children are automatically not eligible for a great number of local schools in my area because I refuse to attend church to get them in. I am paying for these schools as a taxpayer but am not allowed to benefit from them.”*

**Sarah, from TUNBRIDGE WELLS**

*“Faith schools leave non-religious parents with a difficult choice. Too frequently you have to either send your child to a school miles away from your home, or send them to your local faith school and have them be educated about things you do not believe in. I went to church as a child, my mother is a church warden, I understand some of the moral advantages of Christian teaching. I just don’t want it in my children’s schools. Religion belongs in a church, or place of worship.”*

**Coombes, from KINGSTON UPON THAMES**

## Part 3: Admissions analysis

In the final part of this report we turn to analysing admissions data, based on freedom of information requests to the Department for Education.

For the September 2017 entry we found that 14% of families who missed out on their first choice of a non-faith school were assigned a faith school. This included 9,927 admissions to secondary schools and 8,126 to primaries.<sup>28</sup>

The table below updates these figures for the September 2018 entry.<sup>29</sup> For this report the relevant figures are for primary schools:

- **7,727 families were assigned a faith school despite their first preference being for a non-faith school.**  
20.6% of those missing out on their first preference of a non-faith school.
- **1,398 families were assigned a faith school despite all their preference being for non-faith schools.**  
3.7% of those missing out on their first preference of a non-faith school.

	Primary	Secondary
Assigned faith school despite 1st preference for non-faith school	7,727	11,712
% of those missing out on 1st preference of non-faith	20.6	15.0
% of those whose 1st preference was non-faith	1.8	2.5
Assigned faith school despite all preferences being for non-faith schools	1,398	2,660
% of those missing out on 1st preference of non-faith	3.7	3.4
% of those whose 1st preference was non-faith	0.3	0.6
1st Preference for a non-faith school <sup>30</sup>	71.1	80.9

The main problem with this data is trying to extrapolate expressed preference from real preference. As we acknowledge, this problem may not be completely escapable.

In any individual case, we don't know whether a family is applying for (1) the school they want, (2) the school they want out of those available, or (3) the school they think they are most likely to get.

This means that admissions data does not capture:

1. How many people applied for a non-faith school because they didn't want to send their children to a faith-based school, as opposed to for other reasons.
2. How many people applied for a faith school for non-faith reasons, despite a preference against faith-based education.
3. How many people applied for a non-faith school for other reasons, despite a preference for faith-based education.

<sup>28</sup> [secularism.org.uk/news/2018/04/18000-children-sent-to-faith-schools-against-parental-preference](http://secularism.org.uk/news/2018/04/18000-children-sent-to-faith-schools-against-parental-preference)

<sup>29</sup> Where we found the figure had risen to 17%. This including 11,712 admissions to secondary schools and 7,727 to primaries.

<sup>30</sup> In both years, 29% of first preferences were for places at the 37% of faith based primary schools. However, this supply/demand imbalance may be partially explained by variations in school sizes.

4. How many people might have a preference for an irreligious (rather than faith or non-faith) school if it were available.

All that being said, it's reasonable to extrapolate that if someone has put five non-faith schools as their preferences<sup>31</sup> that they are not seeking a faith-based education. The fourteen hundred families in this position therefore are particularly compelling evidence of faith schools' negative effect on parental choice.

*"My own (atheist) children were taught creationist beliefs in their village primary school (there was no non-faith school we could choose), and that other faiths were essentially primitive. At secondary level, in our nearest town, there are three non-selective schools, two of which are faith schools. These faith schools don't accept children from families with no faith unless the families lie about their lack of faith. Our 'choice' was restricted to one school, therefore, unless our children passed the selective tests for the non-faith grammar schools. The faith schools' admissions criteria therefore massively distort the secondary system here."*

**Sarah, from TUNBRIDGE WELLS**

*"I am an atheist raised by atheists, the only school in the village I lived in was C of E. I had to go participate in Christian rituals in a church several times a year, was regularly told off for not praying and was taught that Hindu and Muslim legends are "myths" whilst Noah's ark literally happened. Aside from the obvious issues of indoctrinating impressionable children and encouraging tribalism and exclusion, when state schools become faith schools, they actively impinge on the right of anyone who is in that catchment area but not of that faith to raise their children with their own beliefs."*

**Rachel, from CROYDON**

*"I believe that it is harmful for children to be segregated by their parents' beliefs. As a person without a religion, who had not been to a religious school, I was surprised at and disturbed by the level of religious indoctrination in our local state C of E primary school when my children were young, and at the amount of time that was devoted to religious themes."*

**Clare, from EXETER**

*"We were unable to go to our nearest secondary school, because it was a Catholic school. Our children's infant and primary schools were both C of E, which caused them a great deal of confusion – their teachers telling one thing, when they knew we didn't believe."*

**Christopher, from GUILDFORD**

<sup>31</sup> Numbers vary, but five preferences are typical.

*"I went to Church of England schools all my life, meaning I was forced to go to church. Religion should only be through choice not indoctrination. I knew I didn't believe from a young age and was still forced to go by older people up to the age of 15!"*

**Clara, from BRISTOL**

*"Certain parts of Cheltenham are in the catchment area for just one non-religious school, with four religious schools nearby who select children based on the parent's availability to attend church on Sundays. How is this fair on anyone?"*

**Craig, from GLOUCESTER**

*"My daughter can't go to her local school because she hasn't been christened. This is discrimination, no matter how it is dressed up!"*

**Stephen, from NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE**

## Conclusions and policy recommendations

In most areas of public life, even in the purely consumer realm, the law recognises that discrimination has a social harm beyond its immediate impact on choice. Discrimination in the provision of services carries with it an insult to dignity and the wider legitimisation of prejudice.

The discriminatory harm of a restaurant putting up a “No Christians”, or “No Jews” sign would not be mitigated by the choice of two, five or twenty eateries on the same street without such signs. Nor would the discriminatory harm be mitigated if the signs were amended to: *“We prefer and prioritise non-Christians, but if we can’t fill every table then Christians can also come in.”* The harm exists even if our hypothetical Christian or Jewish diners had not wanted to eat at the discriminatory establishments anyway.

While the basis of a civil inclusive society, this logic does not extend to our schools.

No metric designed to compare an entire population can capture everyone’s individual circumstances and we do not wish to downplay the possible discriminatory effect on those who might be categorised in the “low” restriction category. The insult to dignity of being turned away from your nearest school because you are the ‘wrong’ religion, or of facing the indirect discrimination of your faith/belief being treated unequally by your local school, extends beyond the two inclusive schools which may be nearby. Having your reasonable choices reduced from three to two materially disadvantages you.

Another important factor that the analysis does not capture is the variation within faith schools. If the faith school down the road doesn’t practice religious selection, doesn’t teach confessional religious education and is relatively light touch in how it promotes its religious ethos, then that is likely to be seen by parents as less of an unreasonable choice than a rigorously religious voluntary aided faith school.

### Policy recommendations

There are a number of policy recommendations which may address or mitigate the asymmetrical faith-based discrimination identified in this report. These are listed below. While we believe all proposals are reasonable and could command a majority of public support, they have been ordered from most to least politically achievable.

1. The Department for Education monitor faith-based restrictions on school choice and suitability across England. Both local and central school provision programmes (free schools) should focus on addressing these.
2. Local authorities’ duty to identify gaps in school provision should be amended to include a duty to identify areas of particular faith-based restrictions on school choice and suitability. Their present duty to preserve the balance of provision (which currently sits alongside guidance stressing the prioritisation of faith-based schools) should be reformed. Authorities should have a duty to prioritise inclusive suitable school provision when making decisions about reorganisation or amalgamations.
3. Faith-based discrimination in admissions should be phased out, starting with all new schools and academies and extending to all state schools over a reasonable period, with the process accelerated in areas of significant restrictions on school choice.
4. A *de facto* or formal moratorium should be introduced on the opening of new faith-based schools. This could be phased in starting in the areas with the highest faith-based restrictions on school choice and suitability.

5. It should be made easier for faith schools to lose or downgrade their religious designation, particularly in areas where they are contributing to high faith-based restrictions on school choice or are significantly unrepresentative of their local communities. This could take one of two forms:
  - Triggered: This would be similar to the current school integration process in Northern Ireland. A petition of some percentage (perhaps 15%) of the school community (however that is defined) could trigger a consultation on whether the school's current religious designation should be retained, reduced or reformed.
  - Automatic: This would place a duty on all governing bodies to consult their school community on some periodic basis (we suggest every 7 years) on whether their current religious designation is still suitable and whether it should be retained, reduced or reformed. In the case of academies or free schools such consultations could serve as a review of the current trust arrangements, and the consultation intervals of all schools in a multi-academy trust should be synchronised.
6. A 'secular entitlement' should be introduced. This could take two possible forms:
  - Basic: This would be a legal entitlement for all families to have reasonable access to a non-faith school. The provisions to ensure that non-faith schools are inclusive and neither religiously nor irreligious directive would be strengthened.
  - Broad: This would place a duty on all schools to be equally inclusive to families from all faith and belief backgrounds. Equality Act exemptions for faith schools would be repealed and schools would not be permitted to promote particular faiths or faith. This would be analogous to the present duty on all schools not to promote partisan political beliefs.

## Postscript: Would ‘atheist faith schools’ be a solution?

It is occasionally suggested (to varying degrees of seriousness) that greater choice and concerns over the unsuitability of faith schools could be addressed through a sort of atheist faith school – i.e. a school that is irreligiously directive or organised around irreligious identity.

As secularists we do not believe the state should privilege religion or irreligion, nor involve itself in religious or irreligious direction. While an ‘atheist faith school’ may satisfy some parental demand, it would pose the same problems for regarding discrimination and unsuitability that our current faith school system does simply imposing this on a different set of families.

We believe the most equitable solution is for all schools to be inclusive and suitable for families of all faiths and none.

*“As a teacher I see a lot of schools, often in areas where there is no educational choice, adding the weight of respected adult support to a set of beliefs they expect very young children to follow. This should not be done using public money!”*

**Vikki, from PETERBOROUGH**

*“I had never looked into the rules of faith schools and admissions before. Now that I am expecting a baby soon, I have searched locally - I am shocked to discover that unbiased education free from religious dogma is not an option.”*

**Peter, from SALISBURY**

*“Parents are forced to send children to faith schools as there is effectively no choice due to lack of school places and/or the need to move to a new house and area to avoid them. A faith school should not be forced up on us.”*

**Tom, from CAMBRIDGE**

*“People should have the right to send their children to a non-faith school. In many villages/ areas this is not practically possible. Segregating children by religion cannot help society.”*

**Joan, from HEMEL HEMPSTEAD**

*“We have taken the very hard decision to remove our children from our local but C of E school. The attempted indoctrination and divisive nature of the school became too much.”*

**Christina, from PETERBOROUGH**



## Appendix 1: Methodology

In Part 1, 520 postcodes were randomly selected from the dataset of current English postcodes (60 from each of the English regions, including 40 urban and 20 rural postcodes, apart from the London region where the population in 'rural' postcodes is inconsequential).

Searches of the government database<sup>32</sup> found the three nearest primary schools to each postcode. These were then cross-referenced to see if they were faith or non-faith schools.

Criteria were decided on before the searches were started. They were:

- State primary schools only (including 'all through' schools)
- Single sex and grammar schools were not included (affecting less than 1% of postcodes)
- Stand-alone junior schools were not included\* (affecting approximately 1% of postcodes)
- Open schools only ("open but due to close" and "due to open" were excluded)

38% of all the schools found in the search were faith schools. This is in line with the 37% of primary schools that are faith schools, and within the bounds of what we'd expect from a random representative sample. It could also be explained by some Church of England faith schools not being correctly listed in the database.

### \*Junior schools

Standalone junior schools were excluded to avoid distorting the data as they don't represent genuine separate choices. Junior schools are normally linked to infant schools.

If someone lives in one of our sample postcodes in Brentford it would make no sense to treat as 4 choices:

- St Thomas of Canterbury Church of England Aided Junior School, Brentwood **AND** St Thomas of Canterbury Church of England Aided Infant School
- St Helen's Catholic Junior School **AND** St Helen's Catholic Infant School

An exception which affected less than 1% of postcodes, was when a faith and non-faith junior and infants' school were linked but entered as separate URNs. This was defined as there being a junior and infants' school with the same name and address, including postcode.

In these cases, the URN<sup>33</sup> of the junior school was used instead of that of the Infants school. This is because it is unreasonable to treat a school not as a faith school when they are so closely linked.

E.g. Pennington Infant School (Priestlands Road, Pennington, Lymington, Hampshire, SO41 8HX) and Pennington Church of England Junior School (Priestlands Road, Pennington, Lymington, Hampshire, SO41 8HX).

This does not cover all cases where a junior and infants school appear to be linked, only those where the name and address matched. For example, it did not apply to: Wyke Regis Infant School and Nursery and Wyke Regis Church of England Junior School with addresses on DT4 9LU and DT4 9NU.

This approach may undercount where the proportion of faith schools are reasonable choices, but not in a statistically significant way.

32 <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> – The search was carried out on 15 August 2018. Further searches were carried out on 5 September on a small number of cases where the URN was not originally matched to the correct school data.

33 URN: This is the unique reference number allocated to all schools by Edubase

## Appendix 2: Weightings

Stage 1 (unweighted results total)		
School choice restriction	% of population (Criterion 1)	% of population (Criterion 2)
None	24	30
Low	45	37
Medium	0	4
High	23	17
Extreme	8	12

In the 2011 Census 82% of the English population lived in urban areas<sup>34</sup>, while the population was distributed across nine regions in the following proportions: South East 16% | London 15% | North West 13% | East of England 11% | West Midlands 11% | South West 10% | Yorkshire and the Humber 10% | East Midlands 9% | North East 5%.

Combined with the most recent data breaking down urban/rural populations by region available<sup>35</sup>, we got the following estimate for weighting use:

Set	Postcodes	% of the TOTAL population in set	% of the REGION's population in set	% of the URBAN/RURAL population in set
01	North East (Urban)	4.15	83.00	5.09
02	North West (Urban)	11.57	89.00	14.20
03	Yorkshire and the Humber (Urban)	8.10	81.00	9.94
04	East Midlands (Urban)	6.39	71.00	7.84
05	West Midlands (Urban)	9.35	85.00	11.47
06	East of England (Urban)	7.59	69.00	9.31
07	London (Urban)	15.00	100.00	18.41
08	South East (Urban)	12.64	79.00	15.51
09	South West (Urban)	6.70	67.00	8.22
10	North East (Rural)	0.85	17.00	4.56
11	North West (Rural)	1.56	12.00	8.37
12	Yorkshire and the Humber (Rural)	1.90	19.00	10.19
13	East Midlands (Rural)	2.61	29.00	14.00
14	West Midlands (Rural)	1.65	15.00	8.85
15	East of England (Rural)	3.41	31.00	18.29

34 [ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/ruralurbanclassifications/2011ruralurbanclassification/rucoaleafletmay2015tcm77406351.pdf](https://ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/ruralurbanclassifications/2011ruralurbanclassification/rucoaleafletmay2015tcm77406351.pdf)

35 The 2009 Middle Layer Super Output Area Mid-Year Population Estimates, Office for National Statistics

16	London (Rural)	0.00	0.00	0.00
17	South East (Rural)	3.36	21.00	18.03
18	South West (Rural)	3.30	33.00	17.70

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Published by National Secular Society,  
November 2018

25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL

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Registered in England No. 1418145

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