

**NO MORE  
FAITH SCHOOLS**

# Briefing: Proposed C of E faith school (VA secondary) in Kingston upon Thames

## Background

Southwark Diocesan Board of Education (SDBE) have proposed a new voluntary aided (VA) secondary school in Kingston upon Thames. Since the proposal was published on Friday 23rd April 2021, objections can be sent to associate director for school place planning for Kingston, at: [matthew.paul@achievingforchildren.org.uk](mailto:matthew.paul@achievingforchildren.org.uk), by Friday 21st May 2021

This is known as the statutory representation period and is the first time that the public will be able to provide their opinion directly to the decision maker. The No More Faith Schools campaign and National Secular Society are urging supporters to respond to the consultation calling on the council to:

1. Reject the proposed faith school.
2. Rigorously pursue all options to provide inclusive community ethos school places in Kingston upon Thames.

In the unfortunate event that the council do support this proposal, supporters should urge them to:

3. Insist on additional measures to mitigate the harm and discrimination caused by the school.

## Objection #1: Exclusive faith ethos

In their statutory proposal, the SDBS claim that the school will have a “community ethos”. This is potentially misleading and obfuscates the proposal’s faith school status, which the SDBS presumably recognises would be unpopular. “Community ethos” refers to schools without a religious designation or ethos, based on the community school model. An exclusive faith ethos will not be inclusive for those who do not share it. The council should support a genuinely community ethos school i.e., one with a community, rather than faith specific ethos.

The SDBE claim that they have had to demonstrate “integration and community cohesion plans to ensure that pupils from all faiths and none feel welcome at the school”. However, they do not acknowledge that an exclusive faith ethos is detrimental to these aims. The Department for Education have refused to provide transparency on how they assess these claims, and their own equality impact assessment has found that voluntary aided schools may harm community cohesion and be detrimental to those who do not share the faith.



## Objection #2: Discriminatory admissions

The SDBE's statutory proposal and promotional material attempts to obfuscate the discriminatory nature of the admissions policy. It states that *"It will be open to all children from all backgrounds. Children from families of any faith or no faith will be able to gain admission."*

However, up to 1/3 places will be "foundation places" subject to religious selection, meaning many potential pupils will still miss out due to their families being of the 'wrong' or no faith. As an independent admissions authority, the school may increase this level of religious selection in future years potentially up to 100%.

Alternatively, if the school is undersubscribed it may lead to pupils being assigned a faith school against their families' wishes. In September 2020 110 pupils in Kingston upon Thames were assigned a faith school having preferred a non-faith option.

In an actual community ethos school, discrimination on the basis of faith would not be permitted in any admissions, and the school would be suitable for families of all backgrounds.

## Objection #3: Other discrimination

The exclusive faith ethos of the school will have impacts beyond discriminatory admissions. As a VA school, a religious test can be applied in hiring, promoting, or retaining any teacher. In practice such discrimination will be limited to senior teaching positions. A majority of trustees will be selected by the SDBE for their ability to promote the school's religious ethos, and these foundation governors must take direction from the SDBE, reducing independent oversight.

As a VA school, religious education (RE) will be denominational and used to promote the religious ethos. It will also be inspected by the SDBE, rather than Ofsted. Relationships and sex education (RSE) may also be taught through a religious ethos, with potential discriminatory effects. The SDBE's statutory proposal is not transparent on any of these facts.

VA faith schools are far more assertive than is common in their application of the legal requirement for daily acts of directed collective worship. These will be of a specifically denominational nature and the legal right to withdraw is often impractical.

In an actual community ethos school, none of this discrimination would be permissible. The religious education curriculum would be fully pluralistic and pursue only educational aims. Ofsted would inspect all areas of the school. And the collective worship requirement would likely be interpreted in a more inclusive manner, assemblies may even simply be inclusive with an opportunity for non-directed prayer or reflection.



## Objection #4: Failure to consider inclusive alternatives

Both SDBE and representatives of the council have asserted that ‘there is no alternative’ to this proposal. However, the council have a legal duty to ensure adequate school provision and have not produced evidence that they have adequately explored and rigorously pursued all options. Any of the genuinely positive aspects of the statutory proposal could be delivered by any qualified provider, without the need for an exclusive and divisive faith ethos.

As with all other state schools, 100% of the running costs in this case will be provided by public funds. In the case of voluntary aided schools, the (religious) foundation is normally expected to provide a 10% contribution to capital costs. This “capital contribution” is used to justify VA faith schools’ wider power to discriminate, and their value for public expenditure.

However, in this case, the SDBE capital contribution will be provided by the council, who will also be providing a publicly owned site for a 125-year lease. These are assets that the council could have put towards exploring and attracting alternative, inclusive alternatives, rather than committing to a religious organisation.

## Objection #5: Transparency and public opinion

Since 2017, the SDBE have been carrying out a quasi-consultative process as they gather support for their proposal. This representation period was relaunched as the council even intended to delegate this to the SDBE, depriving residents of any independent public consultation.

The efforts taken by the SDBE to obfuscate or downplay the exclusive faith aspects of the school, and the lack of information on alternatives, mean that (1) many local residents will be unaware of these proposals and (2) support for a new local school is being conflated with support for this faith school.

You may previously not have engaged in surveys run by the SDBE. **This consultation is your best chance to have your say and to appeal directly to the decision maker.**

We have seen in supporting previous campaigns that testimonials and comments from local residents can be particularly impactful. We encourage all supporters of inclusive education to respond to this consultation. If you are able to support our [dedicated local petition](#) it will help strengthen and inform our own consultation response.

