



Thursday 20 May 2021

FAO: Matthew Paul, Associate director for school place planning Kingston upon Thames Local Education Authority

Sent by email: [matthew.paul@achievingforchildren.org.uk](mailto:matthew.paul@achievingforchildren.org.uk)

**RE: Response (objection) to proposed Kingston CofE secondary school**

Dear Mr Paul,

No More Faith Schools is a national campaign coordinated by the National Secular Society, with supporters from a broad social, political, and religious spectrum. We're dedicated to an end to state funded faith schools. We would like all schools, particularly new schools, to have an inclusive community ethos, free from any religious discrimination, privilege, or control.

We are writing in response to the statutory proposal by the Southwark Diocesan Board of Education (SDBE) to establish a new voluntary aided (VA) secondary school in Kingston upon Thames.<sup>1</sup>

**Kingston upon Thames Council should not support this proposal and should instead rigorously pursue alternative inclusive options to address new school need.** In the unfortunate event that the council do support this proposal we hope they take significant steps to mitigate the harm and discrimination caused. For example, by insisting that the school does not adopt discriminatory admissions criteria.

**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, no evidence is provided for this and they do not acknowledge that an exclusive faith ethos is detrimental to these aims.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kingstoncofesecundary.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Kingston-CofE-Secondary-School-Statutory-Proposal-1-2.pdf>

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.<sup>2</sup>

## **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.

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nomorefaithschools.org/news/2018/12/dfе-assessment-new-selective-faith-schools-will-disadvantage-families>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.secularism.org.uk/faith-schools/choicedelusion.html>

In a community ethos school, 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, potentially unlawfully, 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 or their most objectionable elements and (2) support for a new local school is being conflated with support for this faith school.

The SDBE’s statutory proposal shows no meaningful engagement with concerns of residents over the school’s exclusive ethos. Though they have had limited opportunities to be heard, many residents of Kingston have shared their views with our organisation, a selection of their comments follow:

*“We embrace people of all faiths and none. To select school places based on the faith of the parents is discrimination and is obscene. I strongly oppose a new faith school in Kingston. I live in the area and my 10-year-old daughter deserves to not be discriminated against when selecting a school for her to go to.” – Dominic, from Kingston*

*“This is discrimination, selecting children based on their parents faith isn't right and it won't help create a cohesive community. Local schools should serve the communities they are in and selection should not be based on faith. Teaching of all religions is important but not using one religion as the main focus within any school... How can I teach my child that society is fair and doesn't discriminate according to religion when the very institutions that are supposed to teach inclusion, tolerance, diversity are doing the exact opposite?” – Louise, from Kingston*

*“As a parent and resident of Kingston upon Thames, I strongly oppose the idea of a faith school completely backed up with public funds.... The Kingston CofE Faith School project is specifically outrageous in the sense that the diocese contribution to the school is kept minimum. The proposal simply asserts that Kingston council allows taxpayers' resources to be used instead of the financial contribution expected from the diocese. The council should stop the process and investigate alternative plans where the same resources can be allocated for an inclusive secular school.” – Sedar, from Kingston*

*“Kingston council have failed to consider any alternatives. None of the other Kingston Secondary Schools were consulted and there was no exploration into whether they could provide any additional spaces. It is not right that we are using council money to fund a secondary school that is not inclusive in nature and fails to serve the entire Kingston community.” – Victoria, from Kingston*

*“At a time when religious prejudice is an increasing problem in the UK, planning another faith school is the worst possible option for Kingston. Recruiting staff and a third of its pupils on the basis of religion is not a recipe for community cohesion. If the school is undersubscribed, pupils of no faith or a different faith could be allocated places at this C of E school against their wishes. Kingston should instead offer a school with true community ethos which accepts children of all faiths or none.” – Penny, from Kingston*

*“Children of minority faiths and no faith should have equal access to high quality education. The current system allowing publicly funded schools to discriminate against children on the basis of religion is unfair. My children's school choices were limited by the fact that many of the schools in our area were faith schools which offered far too few places to local children from outside the faith. I believe schools funded by the state should be inclusive and secular.” – Nadia, from Kingston*

*“Such a faith school is divisive and unwelcome. I don't want public money funding such a project.” – David, from Kingston*

*“This area is in desperate need of school places. Already privileged access to so much provision in the area is afforded to some congregations which is neither fair nor contributory to supporting knowledge and understanding within the diverse communities these schools are situated within. Perhaps more importantly, it is vital to individual and national success that we learn to work with and harness the power of diverse thought and experience as we seek to perceive risk and devise solutions to the seemingly intractable issues facing future generations.” – Mindy, from Kingston*

*“We don't want any more faith schools in the area. The practice of making a proportion (1/3 in this case) of school places as 'foundation places' means that if/when it is oversubscribed then up to a third of pupils will be selected based on faith; this is an outdated practice that needs to be consigned to history.” – Paul, from Kingston*

**On the basis of these objections and others, I urge you to recommend that the council not support this proposal and should instead rigorously pursue alternative inclusive options to address new school need.**

Yours sincerely,

Alastair Lichten  
Head of education – National Secular Society  
Campaign coordinator – No More Faith Schools