

Press release – Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign

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CATHOLIC SCHOOLS CASE GOES TO COURT

Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign announced today that the long-running argument about the Council's plan for an exclusive Voluntary Aided Catholic secondary school is going to court.

In February, RISC pointed out to the Council that, under the new Education Act, a council that thinks it needs a new school must first seek proposals for an Academy/Free School, where there is a limit of 50% faith-based admissions. But the Council is continuing to support proposals for a Voluntary Aided Catholic secondary school so that up to 100% of admissions can be faith-based. The Council's view is that the Act still enables them to do that. The issue will now be decided in a Judicial Review.

The case is being brought jointly by RISC and the British Humanist Association (BHA). BHA Chief Executive Andrew Copson explained why it had decided to become involved: "We have seen repeatedly how religious providers largely avoid competition when establishing state-funded schools, and instead make arrangements directly with local authorities to open schools without local people being offered any alternative. These approaches to local authorities have always been successful. If the practice is not challenged, we face a future of discriminatory state-funded religious schools being opened without the same rules applying to them as to inclusive schools. In an ideal education system, there would be no state-funded religious discrimination at all, but for as long as it is unfortunately permitted, at least new schools should be opened as a result of fair competition on a level playing field."

"The BHA respects the fact that RISC is broadly-based and includes many people with religious convictions as well as the non-religious. We also recognise that the main driver for the campaign is not to oppose faith schools generally, but to ensure that new state-funded schools in Richmond do not discriminate against local children on the basis of their parents' religion, or increase religious segregation. The BHA's own objects include the promotion of equality and non-discrimination, and of understanding between people holding religious and non-religious beliefs. The BHA is taking up this case because of its national implications, but we look forward to working with supporters of RISC, and with Accord, on the basis of this shared understanding."

RISC spokesman Jeremy Rodell welcomed the BHA's decision: "We know that the Council and the Catholic Diocese are playing the system to secure the most exclusive type of Catholic secondary school possible. And it has become increasingly clear that the Council has no intention of changing its plans, whatever the outcome of its recent consultation. Only a legal challenge will make any difference, but RISC does not have the resources to mount one. So we very much welcome the BHA's involvement."

"RISC remains an inclusive campaign for inclusive schools. There is no change to our position on faith schools generally, which is to focus on whether they are genuinely inclusive. That is why we have not objected to the inclusive primary Free School proposed by the Church of England in Hampton. But the Voluntary Aided secondary school the Council and the Diocese propose is being set up to ensure that 100% of the pupils are children of Catholics, reducing to a minimum of 94% after 7 years. Others need not apply. That can't be right."

Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain MBE, the Chair of the Accord Coalition which formally supports RISC, commented, "We welcome today's news that the Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign and the BHA are to take legal action on this matter. Accord does not oppose "faith" schools, but has specific

aims for legislative reform, including opposing all faith-based admissions. Any moves that will serve to limit religious discrimination must surely gain support from all those who value an inclusive state-funded education system.”

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Notes for editors:

For further details, contact Jeremy Rodell on home@jrodell.com or 07798 935569.