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Baroness Barran

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the School System
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Iain Stewart MP

By email: iain.stewart.mp@parliament.uk

14 January 2022

Dear Iain,

Thank you for your email of 4 January, enclosing correspondence from a number of your constituents, regarding new Voluntary Aided (VA) schools.

The government is committed to offering parents and children a diverse education system consisting of a wide variety of providers, and this includes faith schools. Faith schools make a significant contribution to the education sector by providing high quality school places and choice for parents. Faith schools are often popular with parents, whether they belong to a faith or not. Although faith schools have greater freedom to maintain their religious ethos, they remain subject to the same obligations as other state funded schools to promote community cohesion and integration, and to teach a broad and balanced curriculum.

As you may be aware, maintained faith schools are allowed to prioritise children of their faith when they are oversubscribed under the School Admissions Code. This is in recognition of the fact that being able to do so is an important way in which faith schools maintain their faith ethos.

It is only fair that pupils of all faiths and none have similar opportunities to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents and this government is keen to continue to build a diverse system that reflects parents' needs. It is important to note however that whilst faith schools are allowed to give priority to children of their faith, it would be unlawful for them to refuse places to children not of their faith if there are places available. Many faith schools choose to open up a proportion of places to children of no or other faiths and some do not apply faith criteria at all.

With regard to the scheme launched to open new schools that can admit wholly based on the applicant's faith, the VA capital bid scheme was launched in November 2018 to support the delivery of new VA schools. This closed for applications on 1 February 2019 and we do not plan to launch any further rounds of the VA capital scheme.

At this time, the only route to establish a new VA school is under section 11 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006, which enables a proposer to publish a proposal for a new voluntary aided school outside of the free school presumption and competitions process. These proposals are decided by the local authority and may be used, for example, to meet demand for a specific type of place from those of a particular faith. Further details on the VA school proposals are available at: tinyurl.com/Y2vPwdh8.

All other new schools established under the Free School programme are bound by the 50% Rule in English Faith School admissions, which stipulates that where newly established academies with a religious character are oversubscribed, at least 50% of their places must be open places, i.e. allocated without reference to faith. The rule is sometimes referred to as the Faith Cap on admissions.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Diana Barran".

BARONESS BARRAN

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE