

PE2129/E: Standardise criteria and consultations for assessing demand for denominational schools

Petitioner written submission, 23 September 2025

I submit this statement as the petitioner of PE2129 and as a Catholic parent in Aberdeen. Families in Aberdeen deserve the same opportunity to provide a Catholic secondary education as families in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee.

At present, Aberdeen has no Catholic secondary provision. This leaves our families disadvantaged by inconsistent and shifting criteria.

Moving Goalposts and Arithmetic Games

In March 2024, I launched an online petition on 38 Degrees, a UK-wide campaigning platform. It gathered over 1,000 signatures in support of a Catholic secondary school in Aberdeen — even though the original goal set before us was just 500.

To top it all, nearly 1,700 families then gave detailed responses to the Council's feasibility study — Catholic families and non-Catholic families alike who wanted the option of a Catholic secondary for their children.

Instead of welcoming this overwhelming response, the Council introduced filters. Entire groups were excluded — including non-Catholic families who actively choose Catholic primaries, Catholic families unable to provide baptism certificates, and grandparents. As a result, the headline figure was reduced to 1,081 “valid” responses.

Even on that narrowed basis, 814 families (around 75%) confirmed their child had a Catholic Baptism certificate — overwhelming evidence of Catholic demand. Alongside them were over 690 respondents who were either non-Catholic families or grandparents. Many of these families already send their children to Catholic primaries or would choose a Catholic secondary if it existed. Their views reflect the broad community appeal of Catholic education in Aberdeen. Yet their voices were struck off as if they did not matter.

And then came the arithmetic. Councillors began debating how many children each “verified” Catholic household might have — one, three, or more — and from there, how many secondary-age pupils that might imply. By this logic, the 1,081 responses could magically shrink to 350, or balloon to over 2,000. Suddenly, Aberdeen was hosting its very own Maths Olympiad, where the prize seemed to be finding any equation that made Catholic demand look smaller.

The contradiction could not be starker. On one hand, the Council uses its “open to all” policy to place non-denominational, out-of-zone pupils into Catholic primaries whenever their own schools are full. This directly squeezes Catholic children out of their own denominational schools. On the other hand, when those same non-Catholic families took part in the feasibility study, their views were discounted. If their children are counted in the school roll, how can their parents be excluded from the

count of demand? The Council cannot have it both ways. This is not openness — it is a managed cap on Catholic places, dressed up in jargon.

Wider Invisibility and Exclusion

This invisibility is even sharper for minorities within minorities. As a brown Catholic, I live with the added assumption that Catholics are only white, or that if you are brown, you must be Hindu or Muslim. The identities of many immigrant Catholic families in Aberdeen are overlooked when our voices are excluded.

Parents have campaigned consistently and constructively: gathering signatures, responding to feasibility studies, addressing the Education Committee and Full Council, and submitting this petition. Yet too often we learn of key developments only after they appear in the press.

This is not about sectarian division. It is about fairness, representation, and the democratic right of families in Aberdeen to be heard.

Supplementary Evidence

Families have long held hope for a Catholic secondary school in Aberdeen. The BBC reported on this hope on 17 September 2024: “Calls to create Aberdeen’s First Catholic Secondary School.” *‘Elizabeth Spencer, leading the campaign, explained that Aberdeen was not meeting the needs of its Catholic population.’*

Aberdeen Ethnic Minority Women’s Group CIC also campaigned tirelessly from March 2024, gathering thousands of signatures and amplifying feasibility study responses that reached nearly 1,700.

That hope was dashed, not because demand was absent, but because criteria and consultations were repeatedly altered. Decades ago, a bid was rejected for being a few responses short of the 500 required. This time, despite nearly 1,700 responses, the target was changed to 1,000, then reduced to 1,081 once families were excluded, and then undermined again by mathematical assumptions about household size.

The strength of feeling is clear from recent coverage:

- Council rejects bid for Catholic secondary school again – Aberdeen Business News
- Calls to hold talks over Roman Catholic secondary school denied for second time – STV News
- Aberdeen Catholic secondary school – Press & Journal

Request to the Committee

For these reasons, I respectfully ask the Committee to:

- consider whether criteria and consultations for denominational schools are being applied consistently across Scotland;
- examine whether the experience of Aberdeen families shows the need for national guidance and oversight;

- ensure that petitioners and parents are properly included in these processes, not sidelined or discounted.

Finally, I ask the Committee to make an exception and allow me to give oral evidence. Written submissions cannot fully convey the frustration, injustice, and urgency felt by families like mine. This is precisely the kind of exceptional circumstance where hearing directly from the petitioner is justified.

Our voices matter. Our children's futures matter. We ask for transparency, inclusion, and respect.

Faced last year and again this year with parades of hatred on our streets, minority families like mine look for a different story to be told — one of fairness and solidarity. With all the hostility aimed at people of colour and at minority faiths, we need a ray of hope: that when families of colour with faith put this much effort into a petition, Scotland can respond with inclusion rather than exclusion. We are Scottish too. We contribute to this city. We campaign constructively, side by side with non-Catholic families, and we ask only for fairness.

This is an historic moment. Establishing a Catholic secondary school in Aberdeen would not only address an immediate need but also mark a shift towards a better future — one built on faith, cooperation, and community, rather than old hurts and divisions. It is an opportunity for Aberdeen to show leadership, fairness, and inclusivity for generations to come.

Not listening to our collective voices in the process does not just harm Catholic families, it tells minority families that their voices still do not matter.