

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 8 October 2025
15th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

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

Introduction

Petitioner Elizabeth Spencer

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to require education authorities to adopt a uniform set of criteria and a standard consultation for assessing community demand for denominational schools.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2129>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 19 February 2025](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage](#).
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial response to the petition on 20 December 2024](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 88 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

8. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
October 2025

Annexe A: Summary of petition

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

Petitioner

Elizabeth Spencer

Date Lodged

4 December 2024

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to require education authorities to adopt a uniform set of criteria and a standard consultation for assessing community demand for denominational schools.

Background information

The Education (Scotland) Act 1918 integrated Catholic schools into the public system, ensuring support for their religious identity. However, the absence of standardised demand assessment and funding support has led to regional inconsistencies in access to Catholic education. Councils like Aberdeen face barriers to establishing Catholic schools despite demand, unlike councils in Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Dundee. This petition calls consistent and equitable standards that ensure access to Catholic education across Scotland.

A set, standardised criteria would provide standards to objectively assess demand, which would help local authorities avoid arbitrary thresholds or inconsistent measures in their decision making. A standardised consultation process would guarantee that all community voices are given equal representation, thus creating a more inclusive process.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2129 on 19 February 2025

The Convener: Our next petition is PE2129, which was lodged by Elizabeth Spencer. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to require education authorities to adopt a uniform set of criteria and standard consultation process for assessing community demand for denominational schools.

The Scottish Government's response to the committee points to the statutory consultation process under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 for significant changes to the school estate. The submission highlights that the legislation ensures "that local authorities consult widely with communities when making decisions about school provision, including establishing new denominational schools, and that there is transparency and public involvement in that process."

For those reasons, the Scottish Government is of the view "that the current framework for decision making around the establishment of denominational schools is sufficient."

The petitioner's written submission states: "Despite the legal framework, local authorities vary greatly in how they interpret and apply" the legislation. Her submission also calls for a dedicated fund for denominational school proposals and clear national guidance to minimise local biases when proposals are being assessed.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action in the light of the Scottish Government's response?

Maurice Golden: I do not think that I need to declare an interest, but I attended a Catholic secondary school for some time. I think that we should write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to ask whether she is confident that the consideration of proposals for denominational schools is fair and consistent across Scotland and, if so, what evidence exists to support that view.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Golden. Are colleagues content that we should take those actions?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C: Written submissions

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills written submission, 19 April 2025

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

Thank you for your letter dated 3 March 2025 regarding *PE2129: Standardise criteria and consultations for assessing demand for denominational schools* updating me on the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee consideration of the above petition at its meeting on 19 February 2025.

The Committee asked whether Scottish Ministers are confident that the consideration of proposals for denominational schools is fair and consistent across Scotland and if so, what evidence exists to support this view.

As I noted in my previous response to the Committee, local authorities are responsible for the school estate, including in relation to denominational schools. It is a longstanding feature of Scottish education that decisions about the establishment of new schools rest with local councils, in consultation with their communities.

When establishing a new school, local authorities are required to carry out a consultation under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 which has to include at least 30 school days, engage with a specific list of relevant consultees and include a public meeting. Education Scotland also produce a report about the educational benefit of the proposal and the LA has to produce a final report summarising responses to the consultation.

The position reflects the importance of local democracy in Scotland. Local communities also have the opportunity to reflect any concerns about local decision making at the ballot box in local council elections.

I have no evidence to support the view that the current arrangements for the establishment of new schools, including denominational schools, is unfair or inconsistent.

We do, of course, keep our policies under regular review and, in the event we receive compelling evidence of poor practice, I would be happy for my officials to consider this issue further.

JENNY GILRUTH

Petitioner written submission, 25 April 2025

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

Thank you for your continued consideration of Petition PE2129. I write in response to the Scottish Government's recent submission, and to clarify the scale and significance of the injustice faced by the Catholic community in Aberdeen.

1. A Global Church, A Neglected City

Catholicism is the world's largest Christian denomination, with more than 1.3 billion adherents globally. In Scotland, we are a visible and long-established faith community. Yet Aberdeen remains the only major Scottish city without a single Catholic secondary school — not even one, not ever!

The recent death of His Holiness Pope Francis, a moral leader respected by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, should prompt deep reflection. His papacy championed equality, justice, and the inclusion of the marginalised. His passing is not just symbolic — it reminds us how far we still must go to ensure that Catholic families in Aberdeen are treated fairly and equally.

2. The Numbers Are Clear

- Nearly 20,000 practising Catholics live in Aberdeen (census data)
- Over 60,000 people of other faiths choose Catholic education for its values-based ethos
- Aberdeen has three Catholic primary schools — all oversubscribed, with a 50% cap on Catholic enrolment
- No Catholic secondary school has ever existed in Aberdeen
- Dundee, with a similar Catholic population, has 2 Catholic secondary schools and 11 Catholic primaries
- A formal Council consultation received over 1,300 supportive responses
- A public petition has gathered over 1,000 additional signatures
- Total: Over 2,300 voices calling for equality — and still ignored.

3. Exclusion and Discrimination

During the consultation, Aberdeen City Council chose to disregard responses from:

- Non-Catholic parents who actively support Catholic education
- Grandparents, despite many being primary carers or guardians

This narrowing of community input is not “local democracy” — it is institutional bias. It undermines the purpose of consultation and excludes legitimate voices simply because they don't fit a narrowly defined criteria.

4. This Is Not a Local Issue Anymore

This is no longer a question of local authority discretion. It is now a national failure to deliver educational equity to a protected faith community.

The Scottish Government cannot hide behind “localism” when local systems have demonstrably failed to uphold fairness or equality. If any other protected group had been treated this way — ignored, filtered out of consultation, and systematically denied provision — the response would be immediate.

We ask for no privilege. Only equal treatment under the law and in practice.

We respectfully request that the Committee:

- Recognise this as a systemic failure of educational equity
- Recommend urgent ministerial engagement and an independent review
- Ensure Catholic children in Aberdeen are finally granted the same educational opportunities as their peers elsewhere in Scotland

Petitioner written submission, 23 September 2025

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

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.