

# Education Secretary hails 'beacon' free school in Handsworth

by Jonathan Walker, Birmingham Post

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Nishkam Free School in Handsworth

*Birmingham's new Sikh-led free school will be "a beacon" to others in the city, Education Secretary Michael Gove tells Political Editor **Jonathan Walker**.*

Education Secretary Michael Gove has praised Birmingham's new Sikh ethos school as an example of the "big society in action" and rejected claims that more schools with a religious links will lead to divisions in society.



Speaking to the *Birmingham Post*, he also sought to bury the hatchet with Birmingham City Council following a series of rows, and insisted he was "a big fan" of the council's Tory leader, Mike Whitby.

But the authority has expressed deep concern about the Government's "free school" policy, which [led](#) this week to the opening of 24 new schools including Nishkam Free School in Handsworth, Birmingham.

Like other free schools, Nishkam is state-funded but independent of local authority control.

The school, a primary with an intake of 180 pupils, has a religious character as a Sikh-led school, although it will serve the entire community and half its places will be offered to non-Sikh children if the school is oversubscribed.



While the city council has worked closely with Nishkam, it has warned that the introduction of free schools – many of which are likely to be religious – could create divisions.

Coun Les Lawrence, cabinet member for children, young people and families, set out his concerns again in a recent interview, saying: “I have a belief that it will create more divisions and exclusivity rather than the philosophy we have in this city, which is inclusivity.”

But Mr Gove said: “Church of England schools and Roman Catholic schools and Jewish schools have been part of the educational fabric for 100 years and they are hugely popular.

“I don’t see any reason why you can’t have Sikh and Hindu and Muslim schools that are also exemplary.

“In fact one of the best comprehensives in the country is the Guru Nanak Sikh School in Hillingdon in west London.

“And the great thing about that school is that there are non-Sikh children there, while the people who are behind that school are proud of their Sikh identity, proud of the fact they are English and proud of the fact their school is doing a fantastic job.”

The Government had insisted that free schools with a religious character could only select 50 per cent of their students on the basis of their faith, and would prevent any extremist or fundamentalist organisation from opening a school, he said.

“So I think, yes to celebrating schools that reflect multicultural Britain, but a firm no to anyone that has a separatist agenda.”

Free schools including the Nishkam would be “beacons” to others, he said:

“These 24 schools are offering children, in areas where education provision hasn’t been as good as it should be, longer school days, smaller class sizes, more focused and more effective teaching. And they are acting as beacons which can help raise the standard of state education overall.

“They are the big society in action. So you’ve got groups like the Krishna Avanti group in Leicester or the Nishkam Free School in Birmingham, which are driven entirely by local communities.”