



Free schools
Speed read

Tory donor complains of misuse of public funds for free school

In our diary: £11.75m land deal for free school dubbed 'misuse of public funds'; can a chain have 'a proven track record' after just two years?; and reports that are never published

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A computer-generated image of the planned premises for the Sikh-ethos Nishkam School West London.

The government has been accused by a Tory donor of a “massive misuse of public funds” after spending £11.75m buying land for a [free school](#) in west London without having obtained planning permission to build it.

A [deal signed in February](#) between Eric Pickles, then local government secretary, and the Jersey-based company that owns the site in Osterley, Hounslow, in west London, also seems to include clauses that would see the firm, run by the Earl of Jersey, receiving half of any increase in the site’s value should it be resold in the next 50 years.

The land has been passed to the government’s Education Funding Agency (EFA), which supervises free schools, to house the Sikh-ethos Nishkam School West [London](#), which opened in 2013 and is currently housed in an office block.

Some [100 documents](#) setting out the plans are registered on Hounslow council’s planning website. No date has been set for the planning application to be heard. Meanwhile the government has also hired a public relations firm, Forty Shillings, to publicise the case for the school.

IT consultant Laurence Hawcroft, a member of the campaign group Keep Osterley Green, who is also a Conservative party member and donor, said the EFA seemed to have paid hugely over the odds for the site – and complained that the PR and legal costs must be spiralling. “The land would struggle to be worth £1m on the commercial market, given the constraints on its development. This is a massive misuse of public funds. It seems as if the EFA is not subject to any meaningful limits on the spending of public money.” The campaign has compiled a 1,200 signature petition against the plans.

In an email to Hawcroft, the Department for Education said metropolitan open land could be developed if the developer could demonstrate there were “very special circumstances” requiring this. That had to include showing there were no other local sites. Hounslow council had written to accept that was the case before the land was sold, it said.

A DfE spokesman said the department did not wish to respond.