

Agenda Item 9

NAME OF COMMITTEE:	STANDING ADVISORY COUNCIL ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION
DATE OF MEETING:	24th November 2015
SUBJECT:	'A New Settlement- Religion and Belief in Schools'.
REPORT BY:	Religious Education Adviser
NAME OF CONTACT OFFICER:	Wendy Harrison
CONTACT OFFICER TEL NO:	07540 604842
CONTACT OFFICER EMAIL ADDRESS:	wendyanne@aol.com
IS THE REPORT EXEMPT?	No
IS THE REPORT CONFIDENTIAL?	No

SUMMARY

This paper was launched by the Rt Hon Charles Clarke and Professor Linda Woodhead on 15th June 2015 as part of the Westminster Faith Debates. The briefing paper focuses on three issues: Collective worship, Religious Education and Faith Schools.

DISCUSSION:

The National Association of SACRES (NASACRE) has asked local SACRES to discuss the recommendations, with a focus on collective worship and RE.

RECOMMENDATION: That the report be noted and any comments made as necessary.

APPENDICES – None

BACKGROUND PAPERS: The following background papers, as defined in the Local Government Act 1972, were relied upon in writing this report.

PAPER TYPE	TITLE	DATE	ACCESSIBILITY
Westminster Faith Debates	A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools	June 2015	www.faithdebates.uk

A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools

What are the issues that SACREs should be discussing?

On 15th June, 2015, Rt. Hon Charles Clarke and Professor Linda Woodhead launched **A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools** (the full document is available on the NASACRE website) as part of the Westminster Faith Debates in the House of Lords under the sponsorship of Lord Sutherland. The briefing paper focuses on three issues:

1. Collective Worship
2. Religious Education
3. Faith Schools

Salient recommendations

Act of Collective Worship

[1] The current requirement in statute for an Act of Collective Worship should be abolished, and the decision about the form and character of school assemblies should be left to the governors of individual schools. Schools should be required to set out their statement and strategy for promoting Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Education, with school community assemblies as an important part of that strategy, upon which they would be inspected by OFSTED. The government should provide non-statutory guidance to help achieve this. (p63-4)

Comment

Whilst this proposal would not stop SACREs from offering advice and guidance in this area it would mean that there would be no role for SACREs in matters such as Determinations, which are required by the Education Act 1996.

Questions to consider:

- How would the government ensure that individual schools and academies would take this new arrangement seriously if they are not taking the current settlement seriously, according to the report?
- If some schools or academies continued to have an act of collective worship as part of any assembly, especially in light of their foundation documents, would parents still have the right to withdraw their child from such assemblies?

Agreed Syllabuses

[3] The Religious Education syllabus in county and voluntary controlled schools should no longer be set by a system of agreed local syllabuses, but by an agreed national syllabus which would have a

similar legal status to the requirements of other subjects in the National Curriculum.

[4] The nationally-agreed syllabus would be determined by the Secretary of State in agreement with a newly created 'National Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (NASACRE)' comprising experts on religion and education, and after formal consultation and input from the relevant established professional bodies and representatives of religions, humanism and other belief systems. This nationally-agreed syllabus should be reviewed every 5/7 years. (p.64)

Comment

LAs would no longer have to convene an Agreed Syllabus Conference to review a syllabus and all locally agreed syllabuses would become void at the point of a nationally agreed syllabus being put in place. There is a question, though, as to the point of a nationally agreed syllabus which would have a similar status to the National Curriculum when, increasingly, schools do not have to follow the National Curriculum due to the Academisation programme being pursued by the government; although that also applies to locally agreed syllabuses as well.

Questions to consider:

- Given that the religious make-up of different parts of the UK is so diverse, how would a national document allow for a study of 'the local' in RE?
- How would a decision be made as to which religions would be required to be taught as part of the national agreed syllabus and which non-religious belief systems should be included?
- How would experts from the broad spectrum of traditions from within each religion and non-religious world view be appointed to such a body?

SACREs

[11] The local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) are given a new role which includes participating in the consultations about the content of the national RE curriculum, helping local implementation of the national RE syllabus, promoting community cohesion and educating for diversity, and advising on local availability of religious instruction. The Local Authority too can use the guidance when it goes through discussions about whether to adopt the syllabus recommended or not. If the syllabus varies widely from the guidance LAs have the right to ask why. In this case members of Committee D of the ASC are crucial as they are the LA representatives on the ASC. If they cannot answer that question the quality of the work of the ASC can be rightly called into question. (p.65)

Comment

The proposal is not to get rid of local SACREs but to see their role transformed. Clearly, SACREs will be involved in the consultation process about a national agreed syllabus but how they would exercise their functions otherwise is not clear. The key question has to be: how would SACREs themselves respond to this re-visioning of their role?

Of course SACREs currently have the role of supporting RE by having links with local initial teacher training providers, supporting CPD for teachers and recommending (or not) resources for schools to use to support the locally agreed syllabus. Would this role be retained by SACREs or would it pass to the government?

Questions to consider:

- To what extent would a SACRE be allowed to hold its LA, schools and academies to account in ensuring pupils receive high quality religious education according to a national syllabus?
- Would any such role conflict with that of Ofsted?

Right of withdrawal

There is a proposal to remove the parental right to withdrawal if the recommendations in the briefing paper are adopted (Proposal 8). What is not clear is how this would work in practice if not all schools or academies had to adopt a new nationally agreed syllabus. This could lead to confusion as to why some parents did have the right to withdraw and others did not.

Therefore, SACREs might like to ask the question:

- If the right to withdraw from RE was removed in schools following a nationally agreed syllabus what would be the arrangements for schools and academies not following such a syllabus?

Helping NASACRE respond to the proposals

When SACREs have considered a response it would be useful if they could be sent to NASACRE to ensure that its own position reflects that of the membership when speaking to government. As there is no current timetable of events it is difficult to know by what point this would be needed, nevertheless all SACREs should have had an opportunity to consider the proposals put forward by Rt. Hon Charles Clarke and Prof Linda Woodhead and respond to them by the end of the Autumn term 2015. Responses can be sent to NASACRE at secretary@nasacre.org.uk