

Proposals for the future of SACREs, ASCs, RE and collective worship

2015 saw the publication of a number of significant reports for religious education, collective worship, SACREs and ASCs.

This detailed paper written by Chair of NASACRE, David Hampshire, brings together proposals from three reports and the judgement of Mr Justice Warby in relation to the Secretary of State's position regarding non-religious worldviews as part of GCSE Religious Studies.

The reports do not cover the same themes, but there is significant overlap between them.

The table below sets out the areas covered by the reports and the High Court judgement.

	SACREs	ASCs	RE	Collective worship
A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in schools	SACREs would remain to support RE locally	Abolished	Nationally determined	To remove the requirement for collective worship but to have inclusive assemblies
LIVING WITH DIFFERENCE community, diversity and the common good	No comment is made on SACREs	Not mentioned in the report but to be abolished in light of national determination	Nationally determined	To remove the requirement for collective worship but to have inclusive assemblies
REforREal	The need to review their purpose and remit	Abolished in light of the recommendation for a national curriculum framework for RE	Nationally determined	Mentioned in relation to learning in RE
Mr Justice Warby	Not a concern for this report	Religious education is different from religious studies and should include non-religious belief systems	Not a concern for this report	Not a concern for this report

A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools

This report was the subject of **SACRE Briefing 8** and that briefing should be consulted for a fuller treatment. Since that briefing, the RE Council has decided to put in motion a process of consultation by setting up an independent commission to discuss the proposals with a view to putting the recommendations to government. It is clear that the RE Council believes that there is a clear political

window of opportunity to move things forward in terms of the Clarke-Woodhead proposals. SACREs are represented on the RE Council by NASACRE and, therefore, it is important that NASACREs representatives on the RE Council know and understand the 'mind' of SACREs as this process unfolds.

LIVING WITH DIFFERENCE: community, diversity and the common good

The REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON RELIGION AND BELIEF IN BRITISH PUBLIC LIFE, chaired by The Rt. Hon. Baroness Elizabeth Butler-Sloss GBE covers much ground, not simply religious education and collective worship. The commission was first convened by The Woolf Institute in September 2013 and **the report** comes after two years of research and reflection, although it's not without challenge (see The Tablet 12th December, 2015 *Keep the faith in schools* by Mike Craven). The relevant sections of the full report are reproduced below.

Religious Education

Syllabuses, teaching and worship

4.13 A range of problems and challenges were put to us in relation to schools beyond the question of segregation in admissions policies and four of these are considered below. Some of them are pressing in all four of the UK's nations, whereas others are primarily an issue in just one nation. Not all the matters referred to below are equally serious everywhere. With particular regard to issues in England, most of the problems mentioned have been highlighted and documented by Ofsted and a range of major reviews.

4.14 First, the relevant curricula throughout the UK are extremely diverse. There are in theory 174 different agreed syllabuses in local authorities in England and Wales, a range of different syllabuses in different Anglican and Roman Catholic dioceses and several thousand different syllabuses in academy schools, which are now a majority of secondary schools in England. The diversity arguably reflects remarkable trust in, and respect for, local decision making. But also it implies a lack of diligence and concern, for it seems anomalous to have so many different syllabuses in different localities across the country. No other curriculum subject is treated in this way. On the contrary, the approach to religion and belief education in England is in distinct contrast to the way other subjects are regulated. In these, only one programme of study is set for each subject, and although academies are free not to teach it, most do because of pressures applied by Ofsted inspections.

4.15 Second, the content of many syllabuses is inadequate. They fail to reflect the reality of religion and belief, having a rather sanitised or idealised form of religion as their content. They tend to portray religions only in a good light, focusing for example on the role of religions in encouraging peace, harmony and caring for the poor or the environment and tend to omit the role of religions in reinforcing stereotypes and prejudice around issues such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race, and the attempts to use religion as a justification for terrorism. Further, a great many fail to include non-religious worldviews, for example humanism, and do not deal with competing truth claims. They do not deal with the full spectrum of religion and belief issues covered in this report. Experienced and knowledgeable teachers of education about religion and belief can usually overcome such weaknesses in written documents and achieve better teaching than the syllabus might suggest. Good teaching, where it exists, undoubtedly helps children and young people to learn both about religion and from it, and makes a powerful contribution to mutual understanding and cohesion.

4.16 Third, the shortage of well-trained teachers of education about religion and belief in England and Wales (in contrast to Scotland) means that shortcomings in official syllabuses are compounded in practice. Many primary school teachers are so poorly trained in relation to teaching about religion and belief that, whatever the curricula provided, the handling of the issues contained in them is extremely variable. Of the teachers who were questioned in a survey of over 300 primary schools, only 19 per cent reported receiving more than 11 hours of initial training devoted to religious education. In secondary schools, there are fewer specialist teachers of religion and belief education than for any other academic subject. A massive recruitment and retraining for teachers of education about religion and belief is required if these matters are to be treated seriously and deeply in these unprecedented times of religious confusion and tension.

Collective worship

4.17 Fourth, there are still requirements on most schools across the UK to provide religious worship and for this to be Christian. The arguments in favour of retaining compulsory Christian worship in UK schools are however, no longer convincing. There are arguments for total repeal but there is also widespread support for an alternative provision, as distinct from abolition. In this connection we applaud the joint initiative in Scotland between the Humanist Society Scotland and the Church of Scotland to work together for an inclusive 'time for reflection'. The commission endorses this approach as an example for the rest of the UK and notes that it would build on the good practice of holding inclusive assemblies that already exists in many schools but remains technically unlawful.

The commission makes a number of recommendations on the basis of the report's findings:

6. Statutory entitlement

Governments across the UK should introduce a statutory entitlement for all schools within the state system for a subject dealing with religious and non-religious worldviews. They should establish content and learning objectives that can be flexibly applied by teachers, allowing the minimum requirements to be built on differently by different schools. The content should be broad and inclusive in a way that reflects the diversity of religion and belief in the UK, and the subject should have the same status as other humanities subjects. (Paragraphs 4.22–4.24 and 4.27)

7. Collective worship

Governments should repeal requirements for schools to hold acts of collective worship or religious observance and issue new guidelines building on current best practice for inclusive assemblies and times for reflection that draw upon a range of sources, that are appropriate for pupils and staff of all religions and beliefs, and that will contribute to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. (Paragraphs 4.17 and 4.28)

The claim in 4.15 that the content of many syllabuses is inadequate may be a useful starting point for Agreed Syllabuses Conferences, although it is not clear how the commission came to this judgement. Similarly, the claim that there are potentially 174 different agreed syllabuses does read as rather absurd, and it is indeed misleading (see the Letter of the Chair of NASACRE to the Church Times, 11th December, 2015 in response to Lord Harries).

The RE Council's commission may look at the recommendations from the Butler-Sloss report but may confine itself to the Clarke-Woodhead report. When this becomes clear NASACRE will inform SACREs of the consultation process.

RE for REal

The **REforREal project** has been developing at Goldsmith's, University of London, under the supervision of Professor Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw. It surveyed students, teachers, parents and employers in light of current literature. SACREs

may find it useful to discuss the findings from these four groups as a way of reflecting on the impact that RE is having within their local authority area and as a way of informing ASC discussions. The ten recommendations from this report are:

1. A statutory National Framework for Religion and Belief Learning should be developed, and be applicable to all schools, balancing shared national approaches with school level determination.
2. Since SACREs currently play a leading part in religion and belief learning, there is an urgent need for review of their role, and the role of others, such as professional bodies, local education authorities, schools themselves, and other experts, in the forming of learning. This should inform and result in the appointment of a national panel to develop the framework.
3. The National Framework panel should be mandated to consider and make recommendations about i) the purpose, ii) content and iii) the structures of teaching and learning, It should also consider and make recommendations about the relationship between learning inside RE, outside in other subjects, and in the wider life of schools, especially in relation to the Act of Worship, and the right to withdraw.
4. Religion and belief learning should be a compulsory part of the curriculum to age 16, and consideration should be given to what, if anything, happens in post-16 learning. The panel should consider the related question of appropriate progression pathways and connections between education in primary, secondary, FE, HE and in to CPD.
5. Content should reflect the real religious landscape, as revealed by cutting edge theory and data in the study of contemporary religion and belief.
6. The process of producing a National Framework for Religion and Belief Learning should determine the mix, content and location of religion and belief learning specific to RE, and that which takes place in a distributed way in learning outside of RE.
7. GCSE Religious Studies should remain as an optional subject for schools, and consideration should be given to clearly demarcating the boundary between academic study of the real religious landscape, and other religion and belief learning associated with citizenship and SMSC (spiritual, moral, social and cultural development) outside of the GCSE.
8. There should be continued investment in Initial Teacher Training for subject-specialist RE teachers.
9. There should be increased investment in continuing professional development for non-specialist teachers of religion and belief.
10. The process of producing a National Framework should include a review and

decision on the name or names of religion and belief learning in schools.

Common themes: Uncommon solutions

There are a number of themes that SACREs may wish to discuss.

- **Nationally determined RE.** Clarke-Woodhead writes about a National Syllabus for RE, Butler-Sloss appears to indicate a National Curriculum Order (aligned with Humanities subjects) and Dinham-Shaw, a National Framework (aligned with Citizenship and SMSC). What is not clear is whether they are talking about the same thing or not. It is not clear where RE would be in relation to the National Curriculum. Dinham-Shaw however, does consider learning about religion and belief outside of RE and its contribution to pupils' religious education.
- All agree that RE does not currently cover the **diversity** that it should, or that it reflects the nature of religion and belief as it exists in current British society. What is not clear is what this means in practice. There seems to be little attention given to the amount of time that RE has within the curriculum, the need for depth as well as breadth or to how teachers might make sense of the diversity on the ground whilst teaching about traditions as a whole. There has been much support for these proposals from across a wide variety of groups but it is not clear which groups, beliefs and practices would or would not be included. The reality is there is not enough time within the curriculum for every group to have 'its fair share of attention'. None of reports actually have any clear indication of how these proposals would be worked out in practice.
- All three reports focus on the need for more **high quality training**. This is both at initial teacher training and as part of teachers' continuing professional development. Given the government's current policy on ITE and CPD, these proposals would seem difficult to achieve. SACREs may wish to look seriously at the training that is being provided by ITE providers and those providing CPD to the schools and academies in their local authority's area. The key question would have to be about the quality of training. How would an ITE or CPD provider, or school/academy know whether the training provided was of quality? What would the impact of effective training be in contrast to mediocre or poor training?
- **Withdrawal from RE.** Clarke-Woodhead takes this challenge up in a way that Butler-Sloss and Dinham-Shaw do not. Clarke-Woodhead proposes that

parents would lose the right to withdraw from RE if the school/academy adopted the National Syllabus for RE, but would retain the right in schools/academies that didn't. If the Butler-Sloss proposals went forward and there was a National Curriculum Order for RE then the right to withdraw would be taken away in schools that had to follow it, but not Academies and Free Schools as they do not have to follow the National Curriculum at all – although they do currently have to provide religious education.

- **Collective worship.** Clarke-Woodhead proposes national guidance on assemblies but leaves the detail up to the governors of the school in question. Butler-Sloss proposes national guidance but does not indicate who would make decisions about what this would mean in specific schools. It would appear that Butler-Sloss would like to see a *national* settlement for this and Clarke-Woodhead a *local* settlement. The report *Collective Worship and Religious Observance in Schools: An Evaluation of Law and Policy in the UK* (2015) by Cumper and Mawhinney calls on the government to undertake a thorough review of the current legislation and guidance for England produced by the DfE. What Cumper-Mawhinney does not allude to is the guidance on collective worship given by local SACREs, this is also true for Clarke-Woodhead and Butler-Sloss. Indeed, all of the debates appear to neglect the local in terms of collective worship.

The way forward

SACREs are encouraged to discuss the reports.

At present the only proposal for a consultation is from the RE Council and the timetable for that takes us to mid-2018.

2 December 2015 to 25 January 2016 Steering group works on draft terms of reference for the Commission.

26 January 2016 RE Council Board meeting. Board discusses first draft of the terms of reference.

27 January to 11 April 2016 Member organisations and other stakeholders consulted over the draft terms of reference. Consultation via an online survey and by follow-up meetings. Steering group edit and change the draft terms of reference in the light of member and stakeholder input.

12 April 2016	RE Council Board meeting. Board discusses and signs off final version of terms of reference.
13 April to 15 June 2016	Steering group works on the appointment of commissioners and a Chair.
12 May 2016	RE Council AGM. Update on progress and discussion with authorised representatives.
16 June 2016	RE Council Board meeting. Board discusses and signs off the appointment of commissioners and Chair.
17 June 2016 onwards	Commission begins its work, overseen by the Commission Chair. RE Council to act as secretariat to the Commission.
Mid 2017	Interim report
Mid 2018	Final report

NASACRE's concern is that the window for consultation about the terms of reference might exclude some SACREs and this will be taken up by NASACRE's representatives at the next full meeting of the RE Council. What is also unclear is how this commission is going to be funded and how that will limit its scope and impact.

Will GCSE Religious Studies as proposed by the government, meet the requirements to religiously educate pupils at KS4? The judicial review of Mr Justice Warby

The Claimants' case is that the state has a duty to ensure that any educational provision it makes for religious education ("RE") treats religious and non-religious views on an equal footing, and in a non-partisan way; and that it has failed to discharge that obligation. (Paragraph 5)

Furthermore... the Claimants contend that delivery of that content (as set out by the DfE) will not exhaust the state's obligation to provide RE (Paragraph 6).

This was made in relation to the DfE's statement that:

"By setting out the range of subject content and areas of study for GCSE specifications in religious studies, the subject content is consistent with the requirements for the statutory provision of religious education in current legislation

as it applies to different types of school.”

This appears to be at odds with the definition of RE given in the 1996 Education Act 375 (3) that:

Every agreed syllabus shall reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.

Given that the judgement from Mr Justice Warby applies to the State, it may have an impact on the current definition of RE contained within the 1996 Education Act but it does not apply to Agreed Syllabus Conferences. The DfE has responded to the judgement on its [website](#) in light of claims made for the judgement by the British Humanist Association. The judgement does not say that RE must include non-religious worldviews rather the judgement states:

It is undoubtedly true that the ultimate decisions about syllabus content are made at the local level, by the ASCs and individual schools. (Paragraph 56).

There is no need for a SACRE to request the Authority to appoint an Agreed Syllabus Conference on the basis of this judicial review but may wish to consider the place of non-religious world view in its next review of the Agreed Syllabus.

Conclusion

As can be seen these are exciting times for RE, collective worship, SACREs and ASCs. There is no indication, at the moment, that the government is interested in legislative change and all of the proposals put forward may come to nothing. Nevertheless, NASACRE will continue to update member SACREs on the RE Council consultation and inform them how they might become involved.