

Briefing Note

Commission on Religious Education

Interim Report: Church of England Education Office response

Introduction

We want to start by thanking the commission for its hard work and the production of such a detailed comprehensive and thoughtful report.

The Church of England has approximately 4700 schools, 4500 of those are Primary and First schools. We therefore have considerable expertise in working within the primary sector through our network of RE Advisers. The Diocesan measure of 1991 gives us a legal duty to promote Religious Education (RE) in all schools in all dioceses and we have a particular concern for VC schools through our long-established work with SACREs. We also know from the evidence in SIAMS reports that we represent many primary schools that do exciting and creative curriculum development work in RE. The feedback we have received through our networks indicates that many primary RE coordinators have found responding to the commission's report difficult, complicated and time consuming, many have felt excluded by the academic RE speak of the survey and have given up because of the time needed. We are concerned that the commission's report reflects a secondary/academics perspective and that the voice of the primary RE hasn't been effectively captured.

The commission makes 4 main recommendations and we intend to focus our comments on these.

1. A national entitlement to RE

We welcome this recommendation and we have been calling for this for some time. The Church of England has such a document and we know that it's an approach that can work well.

We are surprised by the nature of the draft that has been provided. It is less an entitlement statement; more a set of organising principles for the drafting of a syllabus. As such it seems heavily influenced by one recently published approach to organising RE curriculum. This approach 'The Big Ideas' is new and innovative but has yet to be fully exemplified or tested in classroom practice. If the commission is to go on to set an entitlement statement in the terms of this one approach outlined on page 8 and 9 and in such detail, we assume this will be further negotiated and tested by the wider RE community. We understand that it is an early draft that it needs work.

Our main concern is over the practicality and workability of what is outlined on pages 8 and 9 of the report. It has 17 points divided into 10 statements of themes and 7 experiences and skills. This makes it more detailed and complex than we feel such a document can or needs to be. This does make it flexible and open but by doing so it becomes impractical as an entitlement statement. It is simply not clear enough about what pupils are entitled to receive.

We appreciate that the commission has begun an important debate on the nature of an entitlement statement. From our experience of inspecting RE in schools we suggest that such a statement must be written in clear, incontestable language that can be inspected. It should start from the needs of pupils and be rooted in classroom practice.

What we would suggest is needed is a high-level entitlement statement that allows for the flourishing of a range of approaches rather than the reliance on one. This higher-level statement should have clear outcomes indicating what RE will deliver in the curriculum, this would then give curriculum equality to all school sectors in relation to RE. This would also reflect best practice in other curriculum areas where the decision about approach and pedagogy is left to the professional judgement of schools and teachers

As an organisation involved in RE with experience of writing and inspecting against statements of entitlement may we perhaps offer our expertise in this field. We would humbly submit that a statement of entitlement needs to be structured in this way.

Reflecting the 1988 Education Act Section 8 (3) namely that RE 'shall reflect the fact that religious traditions are in the main Christian whilst taking into account the teachings and practices of the other principal religions in Great Britain' and in addition

Religious education must be taught as an academic subject that is objective, critical and pluralistic. To be educated for life in modern Britain and to be considered religiously literate pupils are entitled to a balanced RE curriculum that draws on elements of Theology, Philosophy and Human and Social Science to: -

- develop knowledge and understanding of a range of religions, beliefs and worldviews appreciating diversity, continuity and change within the religious and non-religious traditions studied.*
- study the continuing role of religion and belief in the lives of individuals, communities and societies.*
- explore their own religious, spiritual and/or philosophical ways of seeing living and thinking.*

Students studying RE will increasingly be able

- to critically evaluate religious and non-religious text, teaching and practice.*
- to be able to apply their understanding of religion and belief to analyse the role of religion in debates current in society.*

Much more than the above will become something that schools cannot be realistically made accountable for by inspection services that do not inspect individual subjects but focus on curriculum themes. There must be some broad principles of content and approach. This should reflect those aspects that the commission want Ofsted and other inspection services to concentrate on.

Our soundings with our primary schools suggest that whilst they are supportive of the principle of an entitlement statement they feel that the commissions proposed entitlement statement is too long, wordy and repetitive. The following are taken from responses made by Primary teachers .

'A National entitlement statement is a good thing to have but it should not be as long as this... it should be a vision of what we want to achieve. The draft is very repetitive'

'Think a national entitlement is a good idea...although the recommended example seems rather long and overdetailed'

'Statement is too long ...not overarching enough and is repetitive'

'National entitlement is very lengthy and too linked to citizenship'

Many at the whiteboard interaction of RE are calling for clarity and guidance about the content of RE to be studied at each phase. We recognise and understand the reluctance of the commission to be this prescriptive but we suggest that to effectively support teachers this nettle will have to be grasped somewhere in the system. This might be better in an appendix or in a supplementary guidance document and the commission is best placed to do this.

Such supplementary guidance would ideally: -

1. Cover curriculum expectations for each age group, in particular at Key stage 4, although we recognise that the RE community is far from agreed on this.
2. It should say what responsibility Heads, SLT, Teachers, governors and government have in making sure this happens (this could also be extended to cover faith communities and depending upon what the commission is recommending later, SACREs)
3. It should explain where schools are entitled to find support
4. It should cover expectations around withdrawal
5. It should cover how expectations might be adapted for context. This may need to be a series of entitlements for different contexts for example individual SRCs (Schools with a religious character) but also contexts like PRUs and SEND

A high-level entitlement statement combined with supplementary guidance would allow schools and others to design a curriculum built on either a broadly systematic or broadly thematic approach. We feel it would be a mistake for the commission to prescribe which approach schools should use. That should be left to the professional judgement of teachers and curriculum builders in schools or academies as in the case in other curriculum subjects.

2. Holding schools to account for the provision and quality of RE

The commission has two recommendations here.

Firstly, schools should publish details on their website of how they meet the national entitlement. We feel it might be better to recommend that *'in their curriculum map schools must provide evidence of how they have taken account of the entitlement statement for RE'*

We feel that this is a good idea and something that we encourage our schools to do anyway. It will enhance the curriculum map Ofsted expect and will, we think, increasingly use at the heart of inspection. However, we fear that the nature of the current draft may create problems here.

It is unlikely that the average primary school RE coordinator will have the time, inclination or expertise to provide an explanation of how they will meet each of the 17 points suggested. If they had to do this it would be deemed an unreasonable workload and one that is not expected of other subject coordinators. They will simply refer to commercial schemes they have brought in.

Secondly the commission expects inspection frameworks (and we notice the use of the plural which we take as including section 48) to be revised, to monitor whether schools meet the entitlement statement.

Based on our regular contact and working relationship with Ofsted we feel it is unlikely that they will take on another 17 points in their schedule and to do so properly they would need to add an RE specialist to each team. Ofsted ceased inspecting subjects a long time ago and now focus on themes such as preparing

pupils for life in modern Britain. We know that there will be an increasing focus on a 'broad and balanced curriculum' but are far from convinced that this will mean a return to subject inspections or even that curriculum will be assumed to subject siloed. We understand there are hopes that the guidance to inspectors might be adapted to reflect this but our concerns about the practicality of this still stand. For Section 48 inspectors this is more possible as they will have such subject expertise but at this level of detail it will skew the one day inspection.

Ofsted may well be willing to monitor RE as part of a broad and balanced curriculum but not to this level of pedagogy; it runs counter to their general inspection approach which focuses on outcomes for pupils and we expect will focus on the way the school has developed its own curriculum.

3. A national plan to improve teaching and learning in RE

There are some very sensible ideas in this section. The challenge is whether it can be sufficiently funded. It should be noted that traditionally much funding in RE comes from church college trusts. Has the commission consulted these trusts and considered if the entitlement statement meets their stated objectives?

4. A renewed and expanded role for SACRE

This is open to a lot of further consultation but the suggestion being made here is that the SACRE role expands to become a 'duty to advise on all matters related to religion and belief in school'. Our concern here is this could add further to the national inconsistency around RE in all but a few well-resourced SACREs.

Our long, deep and current involvement in SACREs leads us to recognise that a review, reimagining and reorganisation of the SACRE system is now needed. We know that several SACREs remain beacons of excellence and innovation in RE but that the majority are struggling. The model suggested by the commission makes the potential role of SACRE vast and could change it considerably. We would be cautiously supportive of a reorganisation of the role of SACRE on the lines suggested but would need to be reassured that there is the funding to follow it through. To keep the situation and the people but change the role could be the worst of both worlds.

Appropriately the report makes no comment on the role of SACRE in supporting and monitoring collective worship (as this was outside the scope of the commission) however at any reorganisation of the role and structure of SACRE this should be considered.

Whatever the final shape of a new SACRE system it should now include clear accountability lines and a clarification of its civic and classroom roles. It will be essential that a tight role description, the recognition of the need for an adviser, sufficient funding and that there is a code of conduct in place for members.

One of the greatest strengths of the subject is its committed teachers drawn from an increasing range of academic disciplines Theology, Sociology, Philosophy as well as Religious Studies. Many would approve of a name change to reflect the modern nature of the subject but few would identify themselves as 'worldview teachers'.

If we are to rename the subject the 'Religion and Belief' would be our preferred option.

The right of withdrawal from RE

We still consider the continuation of a right of withdrawal from RE to be an unhelpful hangover from the concerns of another age. It undermines the credibility of the subject and is a common excuse for inaction

by those in education at all levels. There is a glaring contradiction between the promotion of the British values of 'tolerance and respect for those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith' and the right of withdrawal from the very subject best placed to deliver this strand of that requirement. It undermines teaching in the classroom and is increasing wasting vast amounts of teacher time and adding unnecessarily to the workload of busy teachers. This 'right' is increasingly being exploited by a range of campaign groups with less concern for education than with their own agendas.

Our Primary teachers are on the front line of this. They are concerned about selective withdrawal. *'It should not be a menu that people can pick from'* They have raised concerns about safeguarding issues e.g. *'parent could be indoctrinating child'*. *'The failure to ensure that children learn about other religions and worldviews would breed ignorance and racism...therefore it is a sign of neglect'*

The development of an effective statement of entitlement would ensure that RE is objective, critical and pluralistic and so remove the need for pupils to be withdrawn. We accept however that this is a complex area of law in which there is differing legal advice. The end of the right of withdrawal would be contested and it would or could be individual schools and teachers that would be dragged through the courts and we reluctantly accept the duty of care that we have to both schools and teachers in this regard and so accept the current situation may have to remain. To enable a more informed discussion on this topic we would like the commission to call for research into what is perceived by many as a growing problem with a focus on the extent of its impact on social cohesion.

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