



The Right Honourable Charles Clarke MP
Secretary of State for Education and Skills
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
Westminster

The Bishop of Portsmouth
Chairman
Board of Education

30 April 2003

Religious Education

When you met some of us with the Bishop of Blackburn before Christmas, one of the matters touched on was the place of RE in the school curriculum. We welcome your commitment to the subject by including it in your own ministerial portfolio, supported by Baroness Ashton of Upholland. We understand that, in a subsequent discussion with the Bishop of Blackburn, you stressed your wish to strengthen RE.

Against that background, we welcome the publication of the QCA report of a feasibility study on a non-statutory framework for religious education. We consider it a clear statement of the many benefits to be derived from moving to a more consistent practice in RE across the country. A non-statutory framework would support teachers and their trainers, inspectors and those responsible for training them and moderating their work, publishers, the media and, above all, pupils. It would also have a positive benefit from the point of view of the churches we represent and the faith communities in Britain. All that is indicated in the report.

A non-statutory framework would, however, only be advisory. Its impact would ultimately depend on autonomous Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs) in each Local Authority. The described benefits would therefore only be derived patchily. Against that, it is sometimes suggested that local agreed syllabuses can be sensitive to local circumstances. Even if the national picture had not changed a good deal since the introduction of ASCs in 1944, we would not consider such local sensitivity to outweigh the potential benefits of a national syllabus.

We are writing, therefore, to offer a more far-reaching solution than a non-statutory framework. What we would like to propose is the development of a new national statutory RE syllabus. For the purpose of framing this new national RE syllabus, we recommend the establishment of a national standing conference, to bring together representatives of the

churches and faith communities with RE professionals (teachers, teacher trainers, inspector and advisers) and government.

While this proposal would spell the end of local authority agreed syllabuses for RE, and therefore the end of ASCs, we would, however, see a continuing purpose in local authority Standing Advisory Councils for RE (SACREs): they would still bring together representatives of the local churches and faith communities with teachers and the local authority to support the quality of RE; and they would still consider determinations about collective worship. SACREs would also continue to have an important place as a forum for local inter-faith dialogue and activity and thus would continue to contribute to the government's community cohesion agenda.

We are not proposing a change in the law on RE in schools with a religious character, though some may choose to implement aspects of the framework and to derive other benefits from it. For this reason, and because the route for approving the syllabus would differ from that for other subjects, RE would not become part of the national curriculum but would continue to make up with the national curriculum the basic curriculum for schools.

We hope you may be interested in our proposal. We look forward to discussing the issue with you at an early opportunity when we would offer views about the make-up of the national standing conference. We would be very willing to do all that we can to support the implementation of our proposal.

The Right Reverend Dr Kenneth Stevenson
Bishop of Portsmouth
Chairman, Church of England Board of Education

also on behalf of

Kathleen Wood
Education Officer
The Methodist Church

Gillian Wood
Education Officer
The Free Churches



The Rt Hon Charles Clarke MP
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The Bishop of Portsmouth
Chairman
Board of Education

25 June 2003

RE/LC

National Framework / Syllabus for Religious Education

Further to our recent correspondence and talk on the possibility of a national syllabus for RE, my officers have been holding discussions with various interested individuals and organisations. It is clear that some will need more time to digest the proposals and are nervous about a possible grand slam strategy. Accordingly, we have given thought to a route map for a more evolutionary stepped approach. It is as follows:

1. The development of the framework, as set out in the QCA report, is given the go ahead. A national framework committee, led by QCA and to include professionals and representatives of the Churches and faith communities, is established to take this forward.
2. The framework is presented to the SoS for approval.
3. Assuming an acceptable framework is developed and approved by the SoS, the framework is then formally recommended to the local SACREs and Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs).
4. At the same time as recommending the framework, development of a national syllabus begins. A national syllabus conference, representing as before the range of interests in RE, is established to do this.
5. The syllabus is presented to the SoS for approval.
6. Assuming approval, the national syllabus is then recommended to all SACREs/ASCs for adoption.
7. The final stage of changing legislation to make the syllabus a statutory requirement would follow eventually in order to:
 - i. deal with what would hopefully be only a very small number of LEAs which had not adopted the syllabus;
 - ii. formalize in legislation what had already become the de facto position.

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The adoption of this approach, we believe, has the following advantages:

1. By breaking down the process into self-contained stages, it does not require a final outcome to be prejudged.
2. It delays legislative change until the last step.
3. It offers the best chance of achieving consensual development within the RE world.
4. It is likely to be politically safer than going for a grand slam.
5. It still retains the likelihood of achieving the main goal of a statutory national syllabus.

This strategy has been discussed with Gillian Wood (Education Officer for the Free Churches), Kathleen Wood (Education Officer for the Methodist Church) and Peter Humfrey (National RE Adviser for the Roman Catholic Church). All agree that it represents a realistic way forward and commend it to you for consideration.

Our initial assessment of current reactions to the national syllabus proposal is that there is strong reluctance on the part of some of the LEA RE advisers and members of SACREs to lose local control over the RE syllabus although there is also a recognition on their part that something needs to be done to raise the standards of teaching and learning in many schools. However, our own discussions confirm OFSTED's quoted evidence that the large majority of those teaching RE would prefer a national syllabus. There are similar supportive views coming from the Orthodox Church, the Jewish and Hindu communities and the British Humanist Association. Owing to their absence at a key meeting, we have not yet been able to sound out Muslim, Sikh and Buddhist views although on the evidence of the other smaller groups they too are likely to find it easier relating to one national syllabus body than to 150 local ones.

There has been some criticism that a national syllabus would have a constraining and centralizing effect. Our view is that such a syllabus should include plenty of choice allowing teachers maximum scope for taking account of local circumstances and pupil needs. We believe it is the teachers who are best placed to make the choices, not the local authority.

On the assumption that a good syllabus is eventually produced, we have already agreed that it should form the baseline for RE teaching in Church of England schools.

We see local SACREs continuing to play a key role in supporting and developing RE. We would also recommend that their increasingly significant work in inter faith dialogue and community cohesion be added to their formal brief. It is only the Agreed Syllabus Conferences which would cease to have a role and they are only at present required to meet when the five yearly syllabus review is needed.

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As you know, RE's biggest success story recently has been the phenomenal increase in the proportion taking RE/RS at GCSE level, now 50% of all students. Furthermore, RE exam scores are the third highest of all subjects. Most significantly, this is the one area where RE is taught according to a national exam board syllabus.

We are clear that a move to a national syllabus, framed in the same way as other curriculum areas, would be of major benefit to primary and non-specialist secondary RE teachers and would have the strong support of RE specialists and teacher trainers as well. Overall we see it as being the best strategy for raising standards and improving the quality of teaching and learning in RE.