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The Right Reverend Dr KW Stevenson
Bishop of Portsmouth
Bishopsgrove
26 Osborn Road
FAREHAM
Hampshire, PO16 7DQ

DRAFT: 2 July 2003

Dear Bishop Stevenson,

Proposal for a National Framework / Syllabus for Religious Education

We are writing on behalf of the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC), the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (NASACRE) and the Professional Council for Religious Education (PCfRE)] concerning your letter to Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education, dated 24 June and kindly copied to us by John Gay, Director of the Culham Institute.

The intention of our letter is to draw attention to some of the facts and arguments concerning the proposals put forward in your letter to the Secretary of State, which we believe may not have been fully taken into account.

Our basic position is that the 'route map' proposed in your letter would receive widespread support only as far as point 3, ie, the recommendation of a non-statutory framework for religious education. Our position is based, not at all on the thought that some of those we represent may '*lose local control over the RE syllabus*', but on a professional assessment of the likely implications on pupils, teachers and communities, as outlined below.

The idea of a statutory national syllabus for RE has, we believe, only superficial attractions. It is striking that wherever the idea commands support it is always with the condition that the resulting syllabus 'is a good one'. Even were such an ideal syllabus to be constructed, the cost of removing local agreement would be great. The principle of diverse local communities working together for a common and positive educational purpose, such as in the work of agreed syllabus conferences, is in our view one to be built upon, not removed.

In most, if not all cases, the agreed syllabus conference consists of SACRE members, usually informed by the contributions of working groups of teachers and others. Although it is argued that SACREs can continue elements of their work without a statutory responsibility to review the agreed syllabus, there is a very real danger that without that particular duty they will wither on the vine. It is a powerful incentive for SACRE members currently, that they have direct influence over the

syllabus being followed in local schools, and there is a powerful sense of ownership gained from such involvement.

The local agreed syllabus conferences afford invaluable opportunities for the represented communities to take an active part in designing a crucial part of the curriculum, and provide professional development for the teachers involved. The process often generates considerable opportunities for creativity which involve not just teachers, but faith groups and councillors. A recent HMI report on the work of the Devon SACRE illustrates this:

SACRE has a strong sense of ownership of the Devon Agreed Syllabus, which was created jointly in 2000 with Plymouth and Torbay LEAs. The process of creating the syllabus was exemplary, with members of all four committees on the Agreed Syllabus Conference being directly involved in the key stage writing groups or the steering group. The conference included members of each of the principal religions of Britain, and the syllabus represents a sensible balance between their individual perspectives and a national perspective provided through the SCAA working group reports. Regular consultation with teachers ensured that they felt involved in the process.

The syllabus takes account of local traditions and the difficulties of teaching pupils about religions that have little local representation, and hence few local resources.

HMI Ofsted, 2003

Of course, not every SACRE is so well supported by its LEA, but the process of agreed syllabus review presented here is one to be emulated and encouraged through guidance in a non-statutory framework, not removed from the hands of those with an investment in its success and with a direct contribution to make to pupils' learning in the subject.

That pupils are the beneficiaries of local commitment to RE is again reflected in the report on Devon SACRE:

The material for Key Stage 2 is challenging and, according to teachers interviewed, of intrinsic interest to the children. Much of the Key Stage 3 content of the previous syllabus has been moved to Key Stage 2, where its level of challenge is more appropriate. The new curriculum for Key Stage 3 is largely radical and inventive. Its focus on beliefs, ideas and ethics is likely to interest and motivate teenagers and provides a good foundation for the study of the GCSE courses recommended for study at Key Stage 4.

HMI Ofsted, 2003

There are three main points we want to make here:

1. Devon's syllabus may be a good syllabus for Devon, but it may not suit the requirements of an inner-city authority's schools because the lived experiences of pupils there will be different. From the earliest stages of schooling, religious education builds on those experiences; a child brought up in a multi-faith area may be at a very different starting point from a child elsewhere.
2. It is the *process* of syllabus development which is of just as much value as the product, engaging those who participated in it in real curriculum development, challenging them to listen to and take on board views from a variety of different cultural, philosophical, political and religious backgrounds,

and engendering real enthusiasm for, and a sense of ownership of, the resulting programmes of study.

3. The alternative, as suggested in the 'route map', of placing the responsibility for this sort of exciting development in the hands of individual schools and, in some cases, individual RE teachers within schools, could easily become another bureaucratic burden for the hard pressed teacher rather than an opportunity for joined-up local thinking and innovation, as in the Devon model.

While it is clearly far from the case that little is being done under current arrangements about raising standards of teaching and learning in RE, the question implicit in your letter to the Secretary of State is: 'How are the 'worst' SACREs and schools to be brought up to the level of the 'best'?' It is our belief that the current inspection of SACREs being undertaken by HMI should provide criteria to be included in full LEA inspections by Ofsted, and that this is the already established mechanism for bringing LEAs to account for poor performance.

We would also like to offer a perspective on the success of the GCSE short course, which is often used as an argument for a national syllabus for RE. In our view, the success of the course depends as much on the progress being made by pupils following agreed syllabus RE in Key Stages 1-3 as on the national specifications on offer. In any event, of course, there is not one national GCSE short course syllabus, but a range of specifications provided by the examination boards, based on a national framework, known as the subject cores.

In short, a non-statutory framework for RE is the preferred option. It has already achieved a remarkable degree of unanimity amongst RE professionals, as illustrated in the QCA feasibility study. There was considerable surprise across the RE community that an alternative proposal had been put forward, and dismay that it came from so exclusive a constituency, just at the time when such agreement had been achieved. It is regrettable that the action was taken so precipitously and without reference to other interested parties.

Proposals for a statutory syllabus should be indefinitely postponed. The most beneficial way forward is for there to be a non-statutory framework for RE which provides guidance for LEAs on the functions of SACREs and the processes and quality assurance measures to be undertaken by agreed syllabus conferences. This will help LEAs to make judgements about sufficient funding for these bodies (see DFE Circular 1/98, para. 117) and Ofsted to make judgements about an LEA's relative strengths and weaknesses in relation to support for its SACRE.

We would be pleased to have the opportunity to discuss these issues further.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Grove
Chair AREIAC

Deborah Weston
Chair PCfRE

Marion Agombar
Chair NASACRE

Cc: Charles Clarke MP, Secretary of State for Education and Skills
Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury

Text of letter from the Bishop of Portsmouth to Secretary of State - 24 June 2003

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.

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.

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.

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Letters
The TES
Admiral House
66-68 East Smithfield
London E1W 1BX

13 July 2003

Dear Editor,

Church backs atheism lessons, but who backs a national RE syllabus?

In choosing the headline, 'Church backs atheism lessons' (TES, 11 July 2003), the TES misses the point of the current debate about the future direction of RE. Existing syllabuses already provide opportunities for pupils to consider non-religious as well as religious beliefs and values. The issue is, who backs a statutory national syllabus for RE organised by a central committee?

The fact that some senior figures in the education department of the Church of England are wooing the Humanists in support of a centrally organised national syllabus for religious education is unsurprising in that both groups would expect to be part of the committee that would devise such a syllabus. But how will it be decided who sits on this committee and who does not? And how is the hard won local agreement to be preserved when minority faith groups feel marginalized and professionals are not consulted?

The idea of a nationally set syllabus is only superficially attractive. Such an arrangement would stifle the flexibility and local relevance currently accorded RE through its local agreed syllabus conferences. These conferences afford invaluable forums for the represented communities to take an active part in designing a crucial part of the curriculum, providing opportunities for creativity for all, as well as professional development for teachers. The construction of locally agreed syllabuses also holds the local SACRE accountable to the community for the RE in its schools.

Proposals for a statutory syllabus should be indefinitely postponed. The best way forward is for there to be a non-statutory framework for RE which provides guidance for LEAs on the functions of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) and the processes and quality assurance measures to be undertaken by agreed syllabus conferences. A QCA feasibility study has already achieved a remarkable degree of unanimity amongst RE professionals on the proposal for a non-statutory framework. Only a non-statutory framework will build on the energies already harnessed in support of an RE which addresses local as well as national and global issues and brings concomitant benefits for pupils, teachers and communities.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Grove
Chair of the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants