
*Response to the Commission on Religious Education's Final Report,
Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward*

Paul Smalley, Chair of NASACRE

The commissioners have clearly spent a lot of time and effort, gathering evidence and seeking to reach a forward looking plan for the future of RE. They are to be thanked and commended for their efforts in producing this report on time, and making recommendations which will certainly stimulate debate.

They propose a new name to signal a new vision for RE – and propose calling it Religion and Worldviews. As I have stated before, I am ambivalent at best about name change, and this doesn't feel quite right to me. I am unconvinced by the Commissioners' definition of worldviews to be studied as 'Those which make ontological and epistemological claims' thus including humanism and atheism, but excluding consumerism and capitalism which I would suggest are the most commonly held worldviews in the UK today). I think there is scope for healthy academic debate about which non-religious worldviews are worthy of study in school and why. I think that the Commissioners are envisioning a subject based on deep knowledge of concepts, rather than thorough knowledge of individual religions (cf Barbara Wintersgill's *Big Ideas in RE* project.)

I am most disappointed by the proposal to rename SACREs to become LANRWs. Aside from a horrible acronym, there are three problems with the name:

- 1 There are already local networks which support dialogue between religions – Local Inter-faith Networks. These are very different entities, and I think there is scope for confusion.
2. A network (like a local IFN) simply shares and discusses, but a Council has much greater gravitas, giving direction and having cultural status and value. This essence is lost in the new name, perhaps unintentionally. That a SACRE is 'standing' is important as it signifies permanence and a place in the democratic structure. This too would be lost, with a more transient sounding advice network.
3. Having spent two years gathering evidence and consulting, the Commission offers no evidence for why a change is needed and despite meeting with NASACRE and many SACREs has not asked about opinions on a change of name. This is a shame.

Recommendation 8 hardly alters the actual function of a SACRE, although there are some changes to the membership, with "ITE and/or CPD providers" given one of five groups. These groups look quite amorphous, and it is difficult to see how LAs would be

able to legally constitute them in a fair and equitable way. Much more detail is really needed on this proposal.

The best part of the recommendations is the idea that the badly named SACREs would have statutory funding, ring fenced within the CSSB allocations to LAs, at a sufficient and proportional amount. I don't think anyone involved in SACREs would disagree with this, but I fear it may be an unrealistic hope.

Recommendation 4 is that there should be legislative change to remove the requirement to convene an Agreed Syllabus Conference and to develop an agreed syllabus. I have gone on record many times stating that I cannot see legislative change happening. Schools would have the requirement to follow the Local AS removed – but would have to follow the National Entitlement. The commissioners envisage a landscape where successful SACREs compete with a national body of 9 professionals and with the faith providers and academy chains, to write Programmes of Study in what looks like a market economy. They boldly hope that the DfE will fund such a national body. I think this is unrealistic. The Commissioners point to variability in pupils' experiences of RE and seem to link this to patchy provision due to local determinism. I am yet to find an Agreed Syllabus produced in the last 5 years that is poor quality and means pupils have poor quality RE. However, we do have to face the reality that many ASCs are struggling to create Agreed Syllabi, with increasing purchasing of 'off the shelf' solutions. The commissioners have suggested that (p. 43) 'strong' SACREs would be free to continue developing high quality curricula, whilst removing the requirement of 'struggling' LAs to fund and/or create a new syllabus every 5 years.

I understand that the Commissioners have taken much advice about the right of withdrawal. I am disappointed that they do not recommend removing it, but I suspect that even they felt that its disappearance is nigh-on impossible.

There is much to agree with, I feel, in the Report: the Commissioners recommend a boost to ITE and a boost to CPD, increased funding, guaranteed space for Local Study within National Non-Statutory PoS, the maintenance of the statutory nature of the subject up to the end of KS4, and a return to the obligation on Ofsted to report on compliance as part of improved monitoring recommendations. I particularly like the 'suggested timeline' in Appendix 1.(p. 69). Phases 1 and 2 can be carried out without legislative change, and carried out alone, are likely to improve the state of RE in England's schools.

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