
*Response to Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead “A New Settlement
Revised: Religion and Belief in Schools”*

Paul Smalley, Chair of NASACRE

NASACRE Patron, Charles Clarke and Professor Linda Woodhead have launched a revised version <http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Clarke-Woodhead-A-New-Settlement-Revised.pdf> of their 2015 pamphlet *a New Settlement*. This reworking has involved researching and sounding out many of the proposals in the 2015 booklet <http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/A-New-Settlement-for-Religion-and-Belief-in-schools.pdf>. On behalf of NASACRE I have been involved in some of this research, and SACRE responses to the *Big NASACRE Survey 2017* <http://www.nasacre.org.uk/file/nasacre/1-488-evidence-submitted-on-behalf-of-nasacre-to-the-commission-on-re-by-paul-smalley.pdf> have fed into Charles and Linda's thinking.

The recommendations fall into three areas:

1. RE and Curriculum
2. Collective Worship
3. Faith Schools.

The last of these, Faith Schools, is of no direct concern to NASACRE and SACREs.

On Collective Worship it has considered the frequent way in which the law (to hold a *daily* act of collective worship of a broadly Christian nature [or other nature if a SACRE determination is granted]) is widely disregarded. Yet to be published research which I have worked on with Linda and others suggests that about a third of all schools self-declare that they are in breach of the law. However, many teachers we have spoken to do not wish to see the legal requirement abolished altogether as curricular and examination pressures on schools might lead to the end of assembly time, which is still widely valued. The recommendation is to change guidance to read:

‘All pupils in attendance at maintained schools and academies shall take part in a regular assembly or act of collective worship in keeping with the values and ethos of the school and reflecting the diversity and character of the school community.’

This seems a sensible move to me, and will of course mean, for SACREs (and the DfE in the case of academies), that they no longer would need to consider determinations.

It is on RE and the curriculum that the most radical changes are proposed, with even the name being changed to “*Religion, Beliefs and Values*”. This is something which I have always been ambivalent about: no one suddenly liked peanuts, when *Marathon* bars became *Snickers*!

They suggest that “*the RE curriculum in schools should be determined nationally rather than locally, as now, by a newly created national “Advisory Council on Religion Belief and Values”.*”

Our research <http://www.nasacre.org.uk/file/nasacre/1-488-evidence-submitted-on-behalf-of-nasacre-to-the-commission-on-re-by-paul-smalley.pdf> shows that SACREs are divided on the issue of a National RE syllabus. It is true that in many areas the limited capacity of some SACREs has led to widespread adoption of non-local syllabus solutions. The pamphlet acknowledges diversity of opinion with SACREs and practitioners, but sets out a number of challenges to those who still support a local syllabus for every SACRE. Charles and Linda are convinced that a “*local SACRE system of syllabus-setting will not succeed in meeting the challenge of developing RE.*” (p15) The proposed Advisory Council would consist of 12-15 practitioners and curriculum experts appointed by the Secretary of State. Faith communities may be consulted but would not have a role in setting the curriculum. It is understood that this is key in enabling another recommendation: *The right of parents to withdraw their children from the Religion, Belief and Values part of the curriculum should be removed.* There has been much written recently <https://theconversation.com/parents-are-pulling-children-from-re-lessons-so-they-dont-learn-about-islam-95235> about how withdrawal from RE and Collective Worship is still relatively rare, but does allow parents to prevent their children from being prepared for life in a religiously plural society. The right so withdraw children from an Act of Collective Worship, within the ‘values and ethos’ of the school is retained in the proposals.

They recommend that “*The “Religion, Belief and Values” syllabus should be required in all state-funded schools. Schools with a religious character could complement the requirement with additional provision as required by their religious designation.*” The pamphlet suggests that academies, independent schools and schools with a religious character should all follow the national syllabus – something widely supported by SACREs in the *Big NASACRE Survey 2017*. This would be enacted through legislation similar to that requiring PSHE and RSE to become compulsory, something which I suggested some time ago (See for Example *RE Today* 2018, 35(2):11)

The recommendations that “*OFSTED should ensure that all schools properly fulfil their duty to teach the nationally agreed RBV curriculum*” and that “*At Key Stage 5, after the age of 16, the legal requirement for RE, should be removed*” I think will be widely supported by SACREs and the wider RE community. Although no firm proposals are made about key stage 4: “*At Key Stage 4, consideration should be given to modifying the current legal requirement for RE to a requirement for all pupils to study contemporary religious, spiritual, moral, ethical, social, and cultural values*”, there is potential that RE (or RBV) might largely disappear after key stage 3.

The major recommendations to which SACREs will want to give due attention are recommendations 8 and 9:

Local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) would be consulted about the development of that curriculum and asked to assist in its local delivery and implementation. SACREs should be reconstituted and properly resourced in order to assist in developing, and then delivering, the faith aspects of the government's approach to community integration and cohesion.

The authors “*identify three main roles for SACREs in response to the changes [they] propose:*

a) to assist in the local delivery of the new RE (or RBV) curriculum, and to be consulted about the development of that curriculum

b) to assist in strengthening links between RE (or RBV) and FE and HE institutions, and between RE (or RBV) local religion and belief

c) to assist in developing, and then delivering, the faith aspects of the government's approach to community integration and cohesion.” (Page 29)

Somewhat frustratingly there is little detail about what statutory frameworks would be in place to ensure that SACREs are “properly resourced”, how they might be “reconstituted”, or to what extent schools (and the proposed Advisory Council) would be free to ignore SACREs ‘assistance’ and advice. My recent (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) blog post for the Theos Think Tank

<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2018/07/02/religious-education-brought-to-you-by-g4s-re-futuregazing> hinted at some of the possible dangers of reconstituted SACREs and a possible sense of disenfranchisement that educationalists may feel if given wider community integration responsibilities. However SACREs are very positive about having a wider inter-faith, community cohesion role if properly resourced.

Overall these are a very interesting set of proposals about the future ‘Settlement’ for RE. I commend SACRE members, and all those interested in Religious Education in schools to carefully read and consider the proposals. Please let NASACRE know your SACREs thoughts. It will be interesting to see how these proposals correlate with the Commission on RE’s recommendations when they publish their final report in September.

It is worth remembering that these are simply proposals, well thought out and carefully researched, but still only proposals. It will take confident political leadership to take any legislative change regarding RE through Parliament, and I am not optimistic that this is likely to occur any time soon.

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