



Lord Nash

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools

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Dear colleague

I am writing to you as Minister responsible for faith schools. I have recently had many conversations about the important role SACREs and local authorities have in supporting this area, which have encouraged me to write.

I would like to emphasise the importance of good teaching of religious education and the central role of SACREs and local authorities. All pupils benefit from good quality religious education teaching. RE makes a significant contribution to pupils' academic and personal development. It also plays a key role in promoting social cohesion and the virtues of respect and empathy, which are vitally important in our diverse society. The recent events in some schools in Birmingham have highlighted the importance of promoting the crucial values of respect and tolerance in our schools.

The role of a SACRE is to support the religious education curriculum and collective worship within schools. Local authorities have a duty to enable SACREs to fulfil their statutory responsibilities in these areas. They should assure themselves that the SACRE is functioning well and holding regular meetings. It may also be appropriate for the local authority to support the SACRE's work to provide teacher training in RE and collective worship training.

It is vital to continue to improve the academic rigour of RE in schools so that pupils develop their knowledge and understanding of this subject. The last Ofsted review of the subject found that the potential of RE was not being realised in many schools. The introduction of the new and more demanding national curriculum makes the importance of improving religious education even clearer.

The recent events in Birmingham schools have also highlighted the importance of all schools promoting the fundamental British values of the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. In some schools in Birmingham, inappropriate religious education teaching and a distorted school ethos served to undermine those fundamental British values. We have recently publishing guidance for all schools to make clear their responsibilities in this area, and have introduced new legislation for independent schools, academies and free schools to actively promote fundamental British values. The guidance is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-the-smsc-development-of-pupils-in-independent-schools>.

Good progress has been made recently to improve religious education. All students studying a GCSE in religious studies will now be expected to study two religions along

with textual analysis, or philosophy and ethics, which will broaden their knowledge and understanding. We have also taken measures to ensure we have sufficient high-quality religious education teachers, who have detailed subject knowledge and expertise. We have introduced a new bursary scheme for the recruitment of high-quality RE teachers in 2015/16. Trainees who hold a 1st class degree qualify for a £9,000 bursary, and those with a 2:1 £4,000.

SACREs are well placed to contribute to this important work through their development of appropriate and demanding RE syllabuses, and their support to schools on the effective teaching of RE, including continuing professional development for RE teachers.

It is inappropriate for any school, whether they are a faith school or not, to offer their pupils a narrow interpretation of religious education. All schools should ensure their pupils are aware of the tenets of all the major faiths represented in Great Britain. SACREs can support this through their development of locally agreed RE syllabuses, and their advice to schools on collective worship and on effective RE teaching. I would encourage SACREs to consider the ways in which their locally agreed syllabus helps pupils to develop an understanding of Christianity, whilst also learning about the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.

As part of their responsibilities, SACREs must provide an agreed syllabus to support the religious education curriculum in schools, which must be reviewed every five years. A report must also be produced annually outlining the activities of the SACRE. All SACREs are encouraged to submit their annual reports to NASACRE for inclusion on their website to enable members to showcase the important work that is going on around the country, share knowledge and learn from best practice. The Department intends to commission a review of SACRE annual reports to identify good practice, and ensure that all SACREs are fulfilling their statutory duties.

SACREs would not be able to exist without the advice, help and support of the many dedicated individuals and communities, who work together to fulfil their many and varied roles. I understand that many members offer their time and expertise voluntarily, and they continue to offer professional and personal support to schools and communities in an increasingly complex and demanding environment. I would like to offer my sincere thanks to everyone who serves the pupils in their area in such a way.

Yours sincerely



JOHN NASH