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Diana Johnson MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0870 0012345 dcsf.ministers@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk

Ms Teresa Deasy
Clerk to the Portsmouth SACRE
Portsmouth City Council
Floor 3, Core 2 Civic Offices
Guildhall Square
PORTSMOUTH PO1 2AL

17 August 2009

Dear Ms Deasy

Thank you for your correspondence of 31 July, addressed to Jasmin Samson at Sarah McCarthy-Fry's constituency office, enclosing a copy of the Minutes of the Portsmouth Sacre's meeting and questions about Religious Education. Your email has been forwarded to me for a response as I have ministerial responsibility for this area of policy.

Thank you for supplying a copy of the minutes and also questions which were raised at the meeting held on 12 July. I am sorry that I cannot attend the SACRE meeting on 18 November, but I hope the following information will help.

RE has held a special place in the school curriculum since 1944 when the current division of responsibilities between Government, local authorities, faith communities and individual schools was established. I believe we have the right balance of responsibility in local and national partnerships; local authorities are close to and accountable to their communities – they are best placed to design an RE syllabus that reflects the needs and traditions of their community. The national role fulfilled by Government is to provide guidance and support on quality standards for effective provision.

The updated RE guidance has three central purposes. Firstly it contains an up to date explanation of the law as it applies to the provision of RE in schools, reflecting in particular changes in the types of school since 1994. However there is no change to the law on RE.

Secondly it sets out the Government's views on the importance of RE in the early 21st century. It reflects the multi-ethnic and multi-faith nature of our society, the notions of tolerance and mutual understanding, and the Government's emphasis on community cohesion which schools have a new duty to promote. In doing so it reaffirms the Government's commitment to the principles set out in the non-statutory RE Framework which emphasise the importance of learning about religion and belief.

Thirdly, the guidance is intended to help key stakeholders, including local authorities, Standing Advisory Councils on RE (SACREs), schools, headteachers and governing



**department for
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bodies carry out their functions effectively. It does this by reminding them of these functions, by suggesting the issues they should consider in exercising them, and by offering presenting case studies of effective practice.

In response to your specific questions, I have set out the bullets below in the order of your original set of questions:

- Agreed Syllabuses

Syllabuses are and will remain a matter for local determination and we have no plans to make RE a National Curriculum subject. RE is already statutory part of the basic school curriculum and we believe that it is important that RE provision in schools reflects the diversity and traditions of the local community. This is the strength of the current arrangements in which local SACREs set the syllabus for RE, taking account of national guidance. We are in the post consultation phase and are assessing and considering the responses which have stemmed from that consultation.

- RE Curriculum

The guidance is non-statutory and it is not intended to be prescriptive, but to support – within the parameters of existing legislation - the provision of high quality religious education (RE).

- Curriculum Review

We have reviewed the primary curriculum as a whole. RE as part of the basic curriculum is integral to the importance of SMSC which underpins the whole curriculum.

- Collective Worship

The legislative status of collective worship remains unchanged. We are not at present reviewing the guidance on Collective Worship.

- Membership of SACREs

The law and our updated draft guidance are clear that formal membership of SACRE committees is restricted to Christian or other religious denominations. Local authorities and their SACREs are free to co-opt input that is relevant to informing an effective RE syllabus.

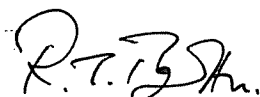
- Funding and support for Interfusion

T This is a matter for local decision. However, you may want to suggest

to Interfusion that they
consider approaching NASACRE on this matter. It may also be worth
contacting the local
adult interfaith forum, who might be interested in working more closely
with Interfusion and with
Portsmouth SACRE.

In terms of whether SACREs should have youth membership, this is again a matter
for local decision.

APPROVED BY THE MINISTER
AND SIGNED IN HER ABSENCE

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Johnson'.

DIANA JOHNSON MP