

Under the terms of the 1988 Education Act, local authorities are required, as a statutory duty, to set up a committee representative of the local authority and local religious or faith communities and world views, devise an appropriate syllabus for their area, and monitor its delivery. It also has responsibilities with regard to collective worship, and under more recent legislation, the school ethos and 'British values'. This is because since the passing of the 1944 Education Act, the spiritual and moral development of a child, and their awareness of ethical issues such as care for the environment, are considered as important as their ability to do mathematical calculus or learn a foreign language.

Since 1944 also, parents have had the right to withdraw their children from Religious Education and Collective Worship, though in fact very few do. It is also required by law that parents are advised clearly of their rights. More recently there is a move to establish the converse, children's right to RE or its equivalent. This is vitally important because we live in a multi-faith, multi-cultural country, and children need to know how to relate to those of other traditions. Well taught, RE should be an antidote to racial prejudice, which is why I am currently engaged in writing a Level 4 module on black religious experience, which in my view should be treated on a par with Hindu or Muslim traditions and appreciated for its contribution to Christian traditions. It is of course entirely up to the school whether they wish to offer Religious Studies GCSE or A Levels, but the former is very popular, so the work of SACRE in helping train RE specialists is important.

If this Council is serious in its professed diversity and equality policies, then it should be backing its SACRE to the hilt.

I spend quite a bit of time in the SACRE monitoring of compliance. We check websites offered by our local schools on the one hand to see if they comply with the law, and on the other, what they say about the subject matter, and how they follow our Agreed Syllabus

I find it deeply shocking that the Council's own website is not compliant, in that there is no explanation of our work, which is as much a part of the Council's statutory work as the Planning Committee, or the Children, Young Adults and Health Scrutiny Panel, and on the other, parents choosing a school cannot easily obtain the information they might value.

I am asking this panel to investigate and find out why this is so. Is the council ashamed of its exemplary work?

I am afraid I have compounded the problem because I have just written a chapter for a book the World Council of Churches is publishing this summer which contains a paragraph on our SACRE – now I discover that any international scholar or church person wanting to find out more about our work has been misdirected, because I just gave the council website address.

Can you not get the correct links authorised? Devon County Council does – why not us?

Dr Eleanor Jackson, LEA representative on the Bath and North East Somerset Council's Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education.