

Cllr Dr Eleanor Jackson - Ward Councillor's Statement to Full Council

25 February 2025

The purpose of this statement is to draw Council's attention to a most unfortunate situation in which the Council could potentially be breaking the law, and if no financial remedy is found, almost certainly will be, despite the hours and hours of time dedicated to the SACRE by volunteer representatives of different faith communities and RE teachers' representatives in Bath and North East Somerset.

Secondly it is most regrettable that an award winning body with a national reputation should be placed in such a situation, losing the gold standard ability to deliver services. Whatever councillors' personal beliefs or allegiance to religious or philosophical organisations, this 'fall from grace', if I may use a theological term, does not enhance the reputation of the whole Council.

The requirement to have Religious Education and Collective Worship in schools dates back to the 1944 Education Act, and no doubt was inspired by the community debates around Religion and Life and the need for a Welfare State 1941 onwards. Every subsequent Education Act or Children's Act has continued this, but requiring unitary authorities to create and pay for a monitoring body, the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) only emerged in the 1980s. The most important matter was the representation of the Council on the body, and for representatives to be drawn from local faith communities. It was heavily weighted in favour of the Church of England and in Scotland, the Church of Scotland, which in different ways, legally, are 'established', Now this has gone, and the representatives are local, and there are also representatives of the teachers' unions. Of all the tasks, drawing up an Agreed Syllabus and Guidance on Collective Worship are the most important duties in law.

The Council, as I told the Scrutiny Panel, found it has a shortfall. An Agreed Syllabus review is due, and as part of it, there needs to be a complete update in consultation with schools. Our Advisor is not paid the hours to do this work, and the legally required monitoring of school practice. Support to schools will be limited.

Recently, very recently, we discovered that by law 2 per cent of the Central Schools budget should be paid for SACRE. For the last few years this has not been done. We calculate that on average £5,000 per annum went missing. We also find in the revised SACRE annual accounts a carry forward sum which we do not think was ever paid. If this were corrected, if only from 2022, we could fulfil all legal requirements. Legally, a SACRE is an 'associated body', not an 'outside' body. External funding, for example from the Westhill Trust, or the St Luke's Trust, are for specific optional projects we have undertaken. We have won Wider Inclusivity in RE awards for our excellent schools but none of these pay the running costs, as it were.

So please make this happen. Close the gap!