

Public Question Time Responses from the Last Meeting (20th September 2023)

QUESTION 1

Mr Alan Debenham - With our new Somerset Council, much now controlled by progressive thinking Liberal Democrats and other 'progressives', surely now is the time to make as much as possible, and campaign for, serious reform in schools so-called religious education according and in line with very serious social and political developments over past decades in the behaviour of residents across society as described in the attached documents. Please could SACRE now produce a Special RE Reform Report with its 'Proposals for Change' before its next meeting with its 'Reform Action Plans 2024' clearly set out for consultation and discussion?

RESPONSE

Mr Debenham,

Thank you for submitting a question to Somerset SACRE. As Chair of Somerset SACRE, I have sought the views of our members and am able to give you the following response.

I have read your attached documents, they do not really, I feel, help with your question being seemingly created for another purpose. I fail to see how extinction rebellion is relevant to your call for "proposals for change" in your question. I also note that in the document you confusingly seem to favour both pagan beliefs of mother nature and science.

Much of the information presented is unfortunately biased, to the extent that it is incorrect and misleading. For example, in your document helpfully labelled "HUMANISTS UK LATEST ANTI-FAITH SCHOOLS REPORT", there is a link to the Humanist UK website where it says that the UN has called for "children under 16 to be given a right to withdraw from collective worship." This right has always been available to parents, it is part of the Somerset agreed syllabus guidance, which you can easily find, children themselves do not have this right as they are minors and need their parents to decide for them in all things.

On the same Humanist website, it suggests that RE is religiously biased, then discuss the situation in Northern Ireland as if this is the same in the rest of the country, you suggest that faith schools do not let students of other faiths to attend without providing a shred of evidence. It is quite true that they can use faith as a criterion, but only if they are oversubscribed, my own church school for instance has many Muslim students, who are provided a prayer room and special dispensation during the Holy month of Ramadan.

You also quote the "British Social Attitudes Survey", which I agree is reputable and has been undertaken since 1983 clearly showing changes in attitudes to a variety of questions, and which I use it regularly in my lessons. But you are no doubt aware that its sample size is only 3,000 people per year, across the whole country. If we look at the census instead, a much more reputable survey of every adult in the country, 56.9% of people self-labelled themselves as having a religion, compared to 37.2% who said they have no religion. If we further combine those who self-label as Agnostic, Atheist and Humanist, we find 56,000, this is less than those who self-label as Pagan (74,000) and there are more Wicca than Humanist. But if we further limit this to Somerset, which is the focus of this group, the highest proportion of

“no religion” in any district is at 43.7%, so in no place in Somerset is it the case that “no religion” outnumber those of religious belief.

I am not sure what you expect with regards to “proposals for change”. The powers of the SACRE are contained in the 1996 education act and are a continuation of various education acts dating back to the Butler education act in 1945 which brought in compulsory state education up to secondary school age. So, any change would require an act of Parliament. We have had on this SACRE for at least 10 years, a Humanist representative.

In terms of your reference to “so called Religious Education”. The RE teaching in Somerset and elsewhere, does not either evangelise or indoctrinate anyone, we are informing them what other people believe and invite them to critically engage with the learning. The current agreed syllabus dictates that students learn about a range of beliefs. Two in KS1, four in KS2, and three in more depth in KS4. If I were to apply your same principle to other subjects, I wonder if you would describe Science teaching as “so called Science” because they do not require children to learn about Quantum Physics, or History “so-called History” as the curriculum is British based.

We have just begun, as we do every 5 years, a review of the Agreed Syllabus to adapt to changes in society, so the syllabus is relevant to the community we serve. We are, in this meeting, organising, and discussing how this will be set up and who will take part as delegates. So can I assume that you will take this as evidence that this SACRE is meeting your request for proposals for change, fortuitously the timetable for change has corresponded with your question.

Yours sincerely,
Niel Apps, Chair