

Agenda Item 10 (ii)

Response from the REC to Secretary of State's initial reaction to the Commission on RE's proposal.

The Religious Education Council (REC) is disappointed by The Secretary of State for Education's initial reaction to the Commission on RE's proposals. His response fails to grasp the urgent need for reform of Religious Education to better prepare young people for life in modern Britain, the broad consensus in support of the Commission's recommendations, and the excellent opportunity to strengthen the subject that the Report's publication represents.

The Secretary of State's response stresses the need for stability for schools and to avoid further changes to the curriculum for the time being. Yet he also acknowledges the Commission's work in highlighting the urgent issues that RE faces. RE is in a critical condition: increasing numbers of schools are failing to teach the subject. 33% of schools offered no RE at all at Key Stage 4 in 2016, up from 22% the year before. These are schools that appear to be in breach of the law: it is a real cause for concern that the Government is unwilling to act to address the significant and growing problems. The Secretary of State acknowledges RE's role in fostering "mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs". By failing to engage with the Commission's recommendations the Government misses the opportunity to strengthen schools' work in this area.

The REC shares the Secretary of State's concern not to unduly increase any teacher's workload but notes that the Commission's recommendations have widespread support from teachers: the report has been welcomed by the National Education Union (NEU), the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE), and the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT).

While the REC is pleased that the Secretary of State has announced welcome funding for subject knowledge enhancement (SKE) courses, and an increase in bursary provision for people to train to become RE teachers, we note that the bursary provision does not yet match that of other shortage subjects as recommended by the Commission. Moreover, the REC is disappointed that the response has not addressed the full range of recommendations made by the Commission, including recommendations for the improvement of primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) by guaranteeing a minimum of 12 hours of contact time in RE, and the development of a new modules to support teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) in RE throughout their careers.

The REC is disappointed that the Secretary of State has no plans to review current school accountability measures, despite the clear evidence provided by the Commission of the damage that these have done to the uptake for exam courses in Religious Studies. It is worrying that he is untroubled enough to claim that GCSEs in Religious Studies "remain popular" despite the drop in entries of over 10% last summer, alongside a decline of 23% in entries for the A-level.

It is also a concern that the Secretary of State believes that the Commission was recommending "making statutory the inclusion of 'worldviews'". The Commission did not ask for a legal change that would require including any new worldviews in RE. The law is already clear regarding the inclusion of both religious and non-religious worldviews in RE following a judicial review on this matter in 2015. It appears that the Secretary of State has

misunderstood the Commission's new vision for the subject, which is to offer pupils an academically rigorous study of how all human beings make sense of their lives using religious and non-religious worldviews. This lack of understanding is underlined by his incorrect description of the suggested renaming of the subject as "RE and worldviews" instead of "Religion and Worldviews" as recommended by the Commission.

While the Secretary of State's response is disappointing, the REC notes that his reservations about legislating are limited to "this Parliament" and that he concludes that "now is not the time to begin these reforms". The REC notes that the Commission did not recommend legislating straight away, and that the phased programme that it recommended could well mean legislating in the next Parliament. In addition, we recognise that much of what the Commission recommended does not require legislative change, and we therefore look forward to working closely with the Government, and the many organisations that have already indicated their support for the Commission's recommendations, to ensure that the necessary policy changes and improvements are able to take place as soon as possible.