

## Submission from National Secular Society to the National Curriculum Review - Call for Evidence

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The National Secular Society is Britain's only organisation working exclusively towards a secular society. It promotes the separation of religion and state, and seeks a society where law and the administration of justice are based on equality, respect for Human Rights and objective evidence without regard to religious doctrine or belief.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this review. We will limit our comments to questions that fall within the remit of our work.

### **Q 6 b) What do you think are the key things that should be done to improve the current National Curriculum?**

#### **Religious Education**

Our principle recommendation is for Religious Education (RE) to be included within the scope of this review with a view to bringing the reformed subject into the National Curriculum, ideally with a much wider remit and under a different subject name.

The latest non-statutory guidance claims that "Religious education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong, and what it means to be human"<sup>1</sup>. The implication that these are exclusive or even mainly religious concepts is both misleading and to some pupils potentially offensive. In practice we understand from parents that Christianity is often taught as fact rather than what Christians believe. This is unacceptable. Philosophy and Citizenship would comfortably fit within an expanded subject.

We maintain that the current poor provision of RE is short-changing pupils and that the current arrangements result in it falling far short of being a serious and rigorous academic subject. We therefore call for its inclusion in this review, or for a separate review to be set up to specifically look at the current provision of RE.

Religion is clearly an important political and ideological phenomenon and the NSS can appreciate the potential value of a serious academic subject that teaches a variety of worldviews, including ethics. We do not share the Government's view that the RE syllabus needs to reflect local circumstances. We see no reason why such a subject cannot be arranged as a national programme of study as part of the National Curriculum.

<sup>1</sup> <http://education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-00114-2010>

The NSS has long opposed current arrangements for RE provision that make it a compulsory subject, outside of the National Curriculum, with a curriculum determined by Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASC) and monitored by Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs).

We maintain that any syllabus for a subject that covers religion and belief should be taken out of the hands of the religious establishment. Religious groups and representatives should have no privileged input and any syllabus should be nationally determined by independent educationalists without a confessional religious agenda.

SACREs do not require any non-religious representatives. Where non-religious representatives are members of the SACRE, they are the only representatives denied the power to vote. Such a system facilitates a covert objective of RE – to promote the belief systems of the individual members of the SACREs.

In voluntary aided schools and academies with a religious character, the RE syllabus is permitted to be confessional. This means that such schools are free to teach their own denominational syllabus in accordance with the tenets of the faith of the school, which need not even mention the existence of any other denomination or belief. This permission to proselytize clearly demonstrates that RE should not be regarded as an objective academic study and in itself provides a compelling reason to review and reform this subject.

The current arrangement for RE has resulted in patchy provision. The 2010 Ofsted Report *Transforming Religious Education*<sup>2</sup> criticized the quality of RE provision at both primary and secondary levels. RE was rated as “inadequate” in one in five secondary schools in England. Ofsted also suggested many teachers were unsure of what they were trying to achieve in the subject. The Report recommended a ‘review of the current statutory arrangements for the local determination of the RE curriculum, to ensure that these provide the best means of promoting the high quality and consistency of RE in schools’.

In 2005 a report by the QCA<sup>3</sup> found that – in terms of breadth and balance – only a third of schools had a ‘good’ RE curriculum.

The 2007 Ofsted report *Making sense of Religion*<sup>4</sup> recommended that the RE syllabus should explore the “social reality of religion”. However, the latest non-statutory guidance offers no such advice. The Ofsted report recommended that “We should dispense with the notion that we should encourage pupils to think uncritically of religion as a ‘good thing’. Religion is complex and its impact is ambiguous. Pupils are aware of this ambiguity and must be given the opportunity to explore the issues openly”.

**We therefore urge the Advisory Committee to include RE in the curriculum review with a view to including the radically reformed subject in the National Curriculum.**

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/Transforming-religious-education> June 6th 2010

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=2174430>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Education/Curriculum/Religious-education/Secondary/Making-sense-of-religion>

### **Q11 a) Science**

**What knowledge do you regard as essential to include in the Programme(s) of Study for science? Please also set out why this is essential and at what age or key stage.**

Evolution is one of the most important ideas underlying biological science. It is therefore hard to understand why it is currently not a compulsory part of the science curriculum in primary education.

In a letter to the Rt Hon Ed Balls MP, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, on 27 July 2009<sup>5</sup>, a number of leading scientists and educators, including three Nobel laureates and NSS honorary associate Richard Dawkins stated that “evolution is a key concept that children should be introduced to at an early stage so as to ensure a firmer scientific understanding when they study it in more detail later on.

“The wealth of new resources on evolution available for children of primary school age clearly demonstrates their ability to grasp its central concepts.”

**We therefore urge the Advisory Committee to consider the inclusion of Evolution at all key stages.**

In the teaching of evolution, the difference between a theory and a hypothesis should be made clear. (Anti-evolution groups often use ‘theory’ to discredit evolution.) When teaching about evolution, as well as the Big Bang, the origins of the universe and the age of the earth, it should be made clear that science is not an ‘alternative’ or that there are not other ‘truths’ of equal value. Equally, the concept of ‘teaching the controversy’ has no place in science as this undermines evolution and scientific methodology.

Critical methods for evaluating claims, beliefs and evidence should be taught in an age-appropriate way, beginning by introducing younger children to the difference between a fact and a belief.

If the subject of creation or intelligent design is raised by pupils, teachers should point out that these are faith-based, not science/evidence based and belong in RE. As the Secretary of State for Education has stated, teaching creationism is at odds with scientific fact<sup>6</sup>.

**15 a) Citizenship is currently a compulsory National Curriculum subject, with a statutory Programme of Study, at Key Stages 3 and 4. In future, do you think citizenship should continue to be a National Curriculum subject?**

The NSS is committed at the present time to retaining Citizenship as a National Curriculum subject.

Citizenship is currently the only subject in the national curriculum that teaches about the way democracy, politics, the economy and the law work. In a society where religion, even within our education system, is becoming a marker of difference and separate identity and is the basis for discrimination and prejudice, statutory citizenship education can play a vital role in ensuring that all children receive the knowledge that is essential to develop politically literate, responsible and active citizens who can make a positive contribution to our communities and democratic society.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.humanism.org.uk/uploads/documents/BHA-Scientists-letter-to-DCSF-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/mar/21/free-schools-creationism-department-education>