

Response to Scouts consultation on the revised Fundamentals of Scouting

31 January 2013

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The Consultation

We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scouts consultation on the revised Fundamentals of Scouting. We very much welcome the Scout's decision to revise the Fundamentals and review its policy of excluding people without a religious belief.

The Fundamentals

We consider the proposed revision to fundamentals to be a positive step in the right direction. We particularly welcome the proposal to actively include members who are non-religious, not only in removing the duty to God, but also in removing 'sharing in prayer and worship'. We believe the revision will not only make scouting more relevant to today's members, but will also be helpful in attracting people from different backgrounds into Scouting. We very much welcome these changes.

The Promise

We very much support the introduction of a version of the Promise that is suitable for people who have no religious belief, or have a principled objection to making the Promise.

From the large volume of correspondence we have received from our own members and members of the public, we are convinced that the religious element of the Scout Promise acts as a barrier to the non-religious joining the scouts or adults participating as much-needed volunteers. At present the non-religious either have to make a hypocritical and dishonest statement or risk being refused full membership.

The Scout Association is widely regarded as an excellent organisation that does valuable work. However, the absence of a secular Promise, or at least a non-religious version of the Promise, deprives many young people of an honest access to scouting activities and deprives the Scouts of people who would be good leaders working as part of the organisation as volunteers.

Independent research has revealed that two thirds of 12–19 year olds do not regard themselves as belonging to any religion¹. If the Scout Association wishes to continue to evolve so that it remains relevant to communities across the UK, it is essential that it introduces either one secular oath for all, or a version of the Promise that is suitable for people who have no religious belief.

¹ <http://fairplayforchildren.org/pdf/1224545128.pdf>

We note that in the communication of this consultation², there was a tendency to concentrate on the word "atheist" rather than 'non-religious' or a similar term. Studies show that many non-believers do not self-identify as atheists and we consider it likely that even fewer young people will do. We therefore urge caution in the use of language to ensure that Scouting is welcoming not only to atheists, but also the religiously unconcerned.

What might need to change?

The Scout's 'Religious Policy' will need complete revision and the Equal Opportunities Policy will need to be amended to ensure that the avowed absence of religious belief is no longer a bar to appointment to a leadership position. Such outdated, unfair and discriminatory policies completely inconsistent with claims made even recently that the Scout Association is an open and inclusive organisation. All roles in Scouting should be open to all adults, irrespective of their beliefs, as long as they are committed to the (revised) Fundamentals of Scouting.

We fully appreciate that the Scout Association wishes to remain a values-based Movement. We are supportive of the revised 'Values of Scouting' and hope you will share our contention that there no need to contextualise them in a religious framework. If exploring faiths, beliefs and attitudes is to be a key element of the Scouting programme, some careful thought will need to be applied to how the non-religious are accommodated in the communication of those values. If scouting is to open itself up to non-religious youngsters and adult volunteers, it may be appropriate to place less emphasis on religion to ensure scouting is a religiously neutral environment for youngsters to explore their attitude to religion and belief. It would not be appropriate, for example, for non-believers to be required to attend church parades³, or suffer any detriment (such as loss of points) for not doing so.

About us

The National Secular Society is Britain's only organisation working exclusively towards a secular society. Founded in 1866, we campaign for the separation of religion and state and promote secularism as the best means to create a society in which people of all religions or none can live together fairly and cohesively.

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² <https://members.scouts.org.uk/newsandviews/module/31/729/scouting-launches-consultation-on-considering-welcoming-atheists-as-full-members/cat/428>

³ <https://billingscouts.org.uk/cubs/church-parades/>