

APPG on RE Call for Evidence on the Supply and Support for Religious Education Teachers

Response from the British Humanist Association

Question 1

This is a response on behalf of the British Humanist Association (BHA) as an organisation. We are the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. We have been involved in policy development around RE for over 60 years. We also provide materials and advice to parents, governors, students, teachers and academics. We have made detailed responses to all recent reviews of the school curriculum, and submit memoranda of evidence to parliamentary select committees on a range of education issues. In August, our Chief Executive, Andrew Copson, submitted written evidence to the RE Subject Review's expert panel as an expert witness, and last week we responded to the phase 1 consultation on that panel's report.

Below we have responded to questions 3, 4, 5 and 6.

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Areas of evidence

3. Good RE, which must include Humanism, should:

- extend pupils' spiritual development by encouraging them to explore beliefs, religious or otherwise, which inform their perspective on life;
- contribute to moral development by increasing pupils' ability to recognise the difference between right and wrong;
- encourage social development by enabling pupils to use of a range of social skills in different contexts, including working and socialising with pupils from different religious, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds; and
- increase cultural development by increasing pupil's understanding and appreciation of the wide range of cultural influences that have shaped their own heritage.

The quality of teachers' qualifications and training will greatly affect the quality of RE delivered in the classroom. Teachers need confidence, skills, and knowledge in their subject area to ensure effective learning takes place. They require not just solid teaching techniques but subject-specific knowledge. Where Humanism has been included in teacher training and development, teachers are better able to cover non-religious beliefs and values ensuring they are able to deliver an inclusive, broad and balanced curriculum for all pupils.

4. RE teachers are often unaware of where to go to find information on what should be covered within RE (especially in local authorities where the Agreed Syllabus states that secular world-views,

such as Humanism, should be covered ‘where appropriate’, and does not expand on this point), how the curriculum should support pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC), and how to ensure that teaching materials they use are high quality and unbiased.

Some teachers would also benefit from a greater understanding of how to teach controversial issues in the classroom and how the law supports this. For example, the content of the curriculum is excluded from discrimination law as stated explicitly in the Equality Act 2010. However the way in which a school provides education – the delivery of the curriculum – is explicitly included. Excluding the content of the curriculum ensures that schools are free to teach the full range of issues, ideas, and materials in their syllabus, and to expose pupils to thoughts and ideas of all kinds, however challenging or controversial, without fear of legal challenge based on a protected characteristic.

5. We are concerned about the variability in the approach of SACREs to Humanism. Over recent years, it has become well established that non-religious beliefs and values should be taught about alongside religious beliefs. This is as surveys such as the 2003 Citizenship Survey found 46% of 11-15 year olds not having a religion (44% were Christian);¹ while a 2004 Department for Education report found 65% of 12-19 year olds are not religious.² It is reflected in the 2004 national framework and the 2010 non-statutory guidance on RE, both of which recommend that Humanism is taught.

Most SACREs now include a Humanist Representative, and most agreed syllabuses now include material on Humanism or recommend teaching about Humanism, but a significant number still exclude non-religious beliefs, often due to hostility towards the non-religious, or the widespread misconception that humanists oppose education about religion in schools. In addition, some SACREs focus on Christianity to much too great an extent. Birmingham SACRE, who previously campaigned to have non-religious worldviews removed from the 2010 guidance entirely, has a syllabus called ‘Faith Makes a Difference’, which actively promotes religious faith as a virtue, to the marginalisation of non-religious pupils.

Further national support for the teaching of Humanism within religious education, making explicit links to SMSC is needed, in order to overcome lingering problems such as these.

6. As schools are less dependent on their local authorities for the provision of training and support RE teachers may be working in greater isolation, and schools need to have greater assurance of the quality of CPD and INSET they receive from providers.

We are developing a training programme for humanist volunteers who are able to work with teachers to help them to plan and deliver lessons and activities that include humanist beliefs and values. Schools will be able to request support from these volunteers to add value to the classroom, either as speakers in planned activities, or to help signpost resources, information, and ideas for lessons. Recently, this approach has been trialled in primary school where volunteers worked with a teacher who has recently been appointed RE coordinator at the school. Following a conversation with the teacher and recommendations of resources it was agreed that we would provide speakers to run two sessions on the day, and that the teacher would do some prep-work with the children to

¹ Christine Farmer, ‘2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey: Top-level findings from the Children’s and Young People’s Survey’ (Home Office and Department for Education and Skills, 2005), p. 37: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/452490.pdf>

² Alison Park, Miranda Phillips and Mark Johnson, ‘Young People in Britain: The Attitudes and Experiences of 12 to 19 Year Olds’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2004), pp. 10-11: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR564.pdf.pdf>

get them thinking about questions they might want to ask. In Year 2 the activity focused on 'what makes us special' and in Year 4 on ceremonies.

This approach ensures that the planned activities fit in with the school's existing plans and overall ethos, and that teachers have ownership of the activity, increasing the likelihood that they will use or adapt the approach in future lessons or activities. The close working relationship between humanist volunteers and teachers also gives teachers more confidence in talking about topics that are challenging, and about beliefs that may be different to their own.