

Consultation on the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill

Evidence submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) for Stage 1 scrutiny of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill.

About you

Organisation: Religious Education Movement Wales

1. The Bill's general principles

1.1 Do you support the principles of the [Curriculum and Assessment \(Wales\) Bill](#)?

Yes

1.2 Please outline your reasons for your answer to question 1.1

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 1500 words)

The basic principles of the Bill represent a long-awaited reform of the curriculum in Wales. The four purposes identified for education provide a sound basis for teaching and learning. Organising the curriculum into six areas of learning, rather than the historic subjects, will enable teachers to provide more coherent and integrated learning programmes. Whilst identifying only three cross-curricular skills may prove to be limiting, it is right that their delivery and acquisition should permeate the whole of the learning process. However, the manner in which the Bill treats Religion, Values and Ethics is a matter of concern.

Religion is an unavoidable phenomenon that has played, and continues to play, a very significant part in moulding the world in which we live. Whether or not one identifies as religious, understanding and evaluating such perspectives on the world and human experience are critical to every individual's personal and societal development.

Values and ethics function differently. All areas of human experience are coloured by an individual's framework of values and ethics. These may be religious but, increasingly, they tend to be non-religious. The third purpose of the curriculum rightly implies that the consideration of values and ethical issues should permeate the whole curriculum. To

function effectively in society, young people need to develop their own frameworks and to understand that their values and ethics may not be shared by others.

The period since Education Reform Act 1988 has seen very substantial progress in ensuring that religious education in Wales appropriately and significantly “promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and of society”.

Unfortunately, the Welsh Government Consultation Document Curriculum for Wales: Religion, values and ethics did not appear to recognise that reality. In evoking the European Convention on Human Rights, that consultation document seemed to give credence to the popular misconception that curricular religious education could be equated with religious instruction (or indoctrination). An analysis of current Welsh agreed syllabuses reveals that they already require the subject to be linked with wider ethical and philosophical considerations. In these syllabuses, religious belief is treated as a phenomenon that is to be explored in an open and pluralistic manner.

The Bill proposes what is essentially a humanistic curriculum. It is wholly consistent with that vision for education that learners should have the opportunity to engage with religious understandings of the world and human experience. A genuinely pluralistic curriculum would safeguard learners’ right to consider religious, as well as non-religious, perspectives on life. Religion, values and ethics all have their place in the school curriculum. However, values and ethics should pervade all six areas of learning and experience, in a manner that the study of religion cannot. The consideration of religion in the wider context of values and ethics is a reasonable proposition, already embodied in Welsh agreed syllabuses. The replacement of religious education with an entity called ‘religion, values and ethics’ would be counterproductive in the quest for a genuinely pluralistic curriculum because it would inevitably lead to a further reduction in the already minimal religious content currently encountered by most pupils in Wales.

Regrettably, religious education has suffered, especially at secondary level, since the Education Reform Act 1988 and the introduction of the National Curriculum. Although the subject remained a statutory requirement within the basic curriculum, religious education has been squeezed to the margins, as schools have focussed on the higher profile National Curriculum subjects.

At the same time, significant resources have been committed, nationally, to support improvements in teaching and learning in the National Curriculum subjects. This has not happened to the same extent with religious education, which has been locally determined. In each local authority, a local Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education and Agreed Syllabus Conference has been responsible for the subject. At a time of

considerable pressure on education budgets, no additional central funding has been designated for these local authorities to undertake the necessary curriculum development or to support teachers its delivery.

The Bill makes unnecessary changes to Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education and Agreed Syllabus Conferences. These are not lobby groups promoting religion within the curriculum. Religious representatives form only one of the three groups that constitute both the standing council and the conference. The other two groups provide representation for the teaching profession (through the unions) and the wider community (through the local authority). This ensures an appropriate balance of interests, religious and non-religious, when addressing religion in the curriculum. In producing locally agreed syllabuses, the responsibility for drafting them is usually delegated to professional practitioners, including teachers, education advisers and consultants. These consult within the local authority and further afield. What they draft is scrutinised, amended where necessary, and adopted by the Agreed Syllabus Conference. The proposed change to the names of these bodies is unnecessary and inappropriate. Existing legislative arrangements are fit for purpose.

To make the advisory councils and conferences responsible for values and ethics (which should be addressed across the curriculum) as well as religion would be unreasonable. Indeed, it may unhelpfully reinforce a view that values and ethics should be restricted to the humanities area of learning and experience.

Schedule 1 of the Bill proposes wording that suggests a change in status for the agreed syllabus in respect of the school curriculum. Teaching and learning in schools will have to be designed "having regard to the agreed syllabus", rather than "in accordance with" it. This, too, may be prompted by another misconception about the nature of agreed syllabuses in Wales. The consultation document on the legislative proposals for religion values and ethics stated, "This change allows schools some discretion to depart from the Agreed Syllabus." By and large, they do not prescribe content. Their purpose is to clarify what the nature of appropriate religious education should be at each stage of learning. In doing so, they very often provide exemplar content to aid teachers' curriculum planning. The reality is that, especially at secondary level, very few schools in Wales without a religious character provide enough curriculum time to deliver the requirements of current agreed syllabuses.

1.3 Do you think there is a need for legislation to deliver what this Bill is trying to achieve?

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words)

Clearly, something has to be done to amend current legislation.

2. The Bill's implementation

2.1 Do you have any comments about any potential barriers to implementing the Bill? If no, go to question 3.1

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words)

There are financial and resource implications.

2.2 Do you think the Bill takes account of these potential barriers?

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words)

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3. Unintended consequences

3.1 Do you think there are there any unintended consequences arising from the Bill? If no, go to question 4.1

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words)

See comments under 1.2 above

4. Financial implications

4.1 Do you have any comments on the financial implications of the Bill (as set out in Part 2 of the [Explanatory Memorandum](#))? If no, go to question 5.1

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words)

Greater resources than at present need to be provided for Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education and Agreed Syllabus Conferences.

5. Powers to make subordinate legislation

5.1 Do you have any comments on the appropriateness of the powers in the Bill for Welsh Ministers to make subordinate legislation (as set out in Chapter 5 of Part 1 of the [Explanatory Memorandum](#)). If no, go to question 6.1.

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words)

No.

6. Other considerations

6.1 Do you have any other points you wish to raise about this Bill?

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 1000 words)

Our submission has been deliberately restricted to matters relating to religious education.

The arrangements for schools with a religious character would subject their curriculum to an unreasonable pressure.

