

REPORT FOR WEST BERKSHIRE SACRE

I was asked to provide an independent report on the Locally Agreed Syllabus (LAS) “Pathways to Understanding” written by the West Berkshire Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) particularly in response to a complaint raised with respect to fairly representing a balance of religions in its content..

I looked at the following documentation:

- A draft version of the LAS,
- A proof-read version of the LAS addressing issues raised in the complaint,
- A copy of the complaint from three members of the Agreed Syllabus Conference.

In examining these documents I offer the following comments. This needs to be taken with the caveat that whilst I have extensive (30+ years) experience in the field of Religious Education including having written agreed syllabi, sat on SACREs and ACSs and on many RE national and international bodies, I am not an education lawyer.

The LAS fulfils, in my professional opinion, all the relevant law pertaining to Agreed Syllabus writing as outlaid in the introduction to the AS. This complies with the Education Act 1996 (section 375), The School Standards and Framework Act (Schedule 19) and the Education Act 2002 (sections 78 to 79).

The LAS intends a Religion and Worldviews approach (see section 2.3); and is using terminology for usage or terms such as religion, religions, worldview or worldviews that is compatible with guidance set out in the document, “Developing a Religion and Worldviews Approach in Religious Education in England” (REC, 2024).

The complaint document I saw made a number of demands, to wit:

- Content should be included as determined by the complainants,
- Corrections to errors in the syllabus should be addressed,
- The ASC be given a vote on mandatory religions to to be covered in UKS2.

To address these concerns.

As far as I am aware the content of an Agreed Syllabus is written by an author or authors commissioned by the SACRE, this is then presented to the ASC who will, on a vote, accept this and this will then be passed to the relevant section of the Local Authority for approval.

This document will then be mandatory for all local authority (LA) and voluntary controlled (VC) schools in the relevant LA and may be adapted by academy schools in the geographic area of the authority (or indeed wider).

As far as I am aware no individual or group, whilst it may petition the ACS, may demand particular content, or demand that content not be included without having being vetted by that group. Having looked at the pre and post versions of the LAS I am confident that the ASC has been collaborative in responding to questions and comments in the complaint and acted on those that were reasonable (i.e. the use of the term 'Hebrew Scripture' and not 'Old Testament' and in re-wording certain questions).

The determination of which religions and/or worldviews to cover in the construction of a LAS is always difficult and tends to steer a path between several demands. Firstly, the need to cover a range of religions, concepts, ideas, knowledges in order to introduce children and young people to the world of religion, belief and faith that will be useful and productive in their cognitive, spiritual and emotional development. Secondly, to suitably represent the range of faith and belief communities that they may encounter in their daily lives in the geographic region that the LAS covers. Thirdly, to offer a critical exploration of the world of faith and belief drawing on a range of evidence, opinions and ideas. This is a complex demand and I am happy that the LAS presented tackles this in its offering both the statutory and non-statutory sections offering a range of options, activities, questions and reflections to assist teachers from EYFS to Key Stage 5.

The mandatory content prescribed in section 4.1 of the syllabus both gives coverage which utilises the approaches above and gives options for the school to make informed judgments about content coverage suitable for themselves. It also allows for additional content should the school so choose.

It is not the role of a LAS to be confessional or to make judgements or decisions about an individual's faith journey, or to encourage or discourage such a journey. Whilst RE will inevitably touch on areas of controversy and areas that are emotionally charged which will challenge so will other areas of the curriculum such as RSHE, PSHE, English and History. If there are significant concerns from parents / guardians, including any perceived safeguarding concerns, then the option of the 'right to withdrawal' exists for RE and whilst this is always regrettable the options does exist.

I have looked also at the religious census data for the geographical area covered by the LAS and the balance of religions covered in the syllabus is a fair representation of the local religious affiliations as determined by these data.

So, my overall judgment is that the LAS is a fair and balanced document that has dealt reasonably with the demands raised, and whilst I empathise with the concerns of the group I do not judge that that there is any evidence of unfair balance.



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