

PE1487/V

City of Edinburgh Council Letter of 23 October 2013

Consideration of Petition PE1487

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 by making Religious Observance (RO) in public schools an “Opt-In” activity rather than an “Opt-Out” one.

The Public Petitions Committee has written to the Chief Executive of Edinburgh City Council to seek responses to three questions. Our responses are detailed below.

1. What are your views on what the petition seeks and the discussions that took place at the meeting on 3 September?

In 2011, the City of Edinburgh Council produced Headteacher Guidelines outlining the Scottish Government’s requirement for religious observance as stated in their letter of February 2011. The guidelines, now known as Position Paper 16, were produced by a working party comprising headteachers from primary, secondary and special sectors as well as leading practitioners. The City of Edinburgh Council, in their Key Priorities Document issued to headteachers in **March 2011** and **April 2012**, stated the expectation that all primary and secondary schools would comply with the legislation by August 2013.

A comprehensive survey was issued to the headteachers of all primary and secondary schools in June 2013 to ascertain the extent to which the requirements were in place. This information forms the evidence base for the responses to questions 2 and 3 below.

The survey did not address the question outlined in the petition. There has been no consultation within the City of Edinburgh’s public schools as to whether religious observance should be an “opt-in” activity rather than an “opt-out” one.

2. How many pupils do not attend RO within your local authority as a result of their parents choosing to opt out?

The figures stated below correspond to data collected from headteachers in June 2013.

2.1 Primary sector

2.1.1 There are 87 schools in the primary sector.

- 2.1.2 60 individuals in 13 primary schools opt out of religious observance.
- 2.1.3 A further 14 individuals in three primary schools opt out when the religious observance takes place in the local church but not when it takes place in school.
- 2.1.4 There are seven families in three primary schools who opt out of religious observance. Actual numbers are not stated.
- 2.1.5 In 68 primary schools, there are no pupils who opt out.
- 2.1.6 There are 14 denominational primary schools, one of which is included in 2.1.2 above and one in 2.1.3 above.

2.2 Secondary sector

- 2.2.1 There are 23 schools in the secondary sector.
- 2.2.2 A total of 3 individuals in three separate secondary schools opt out of religious observance.
- 2.2.3 In 20 secondary schools there are no pupils who choose to opt out of religious observance.
- 2.2.4 In two schools, the programme of RO includes identified “opt out” assemblies. Until the dates have been overtaken, it is not possible to quantify the number of pupils who will choose to opt out and follow the alternative programme for that period.
- 2.2.5 There are three denominational secondary schools in the city.

2.3 Nursery sector

- 2.3.1 The nursery/early years sector is excluded from the legislation.

2.4 Special sector

- 2.4.1 There are 14 special schools in the city. These schools were not asked to complete a return for the local authority in 2013.

3. What provision is made for an alternative activity for pupils who do not attend religious observance in schools within your local authority, and what issues prevent a suitable alternative activity being provided?

In the sample of schools asked to detail the provision made for an alternative activity for pupils who do not attend religious observance in schools, the headteachers have described progressive programmes of work based on developing literacy and numeracy skills. These alternative activities are led by a learning assistant.

No headteacher has put forward any issues which prevent a suitable alternative activity being provided.

The City of Edinburgh Council **agree** to this response being made public.