

PE1487/Y

Orkney Islands Council Letter of 4 November 2013

Response from Orkney Islands Council

Q1: What are your views on what the petition seeks and the discussions that took place at the meeting on 3 September?

Comment: The case study material, presented to support the petition, is largely a reflection of practice which does not conform to either the letter or spirit of the current (statutory) provisions. To that extent it could be argued, using the same evidence, that adherence to the law (as opposed to new legislation) would be more than sufficient to address the concerns as presented. In fact changes to the law and or guidance would not necessarily guard against similar failures in the future.

It would appear therefore that the key issue raised by the petition is the question of whether or not the law (1980 Act) is *'in accordance with the demographic of Scotland, which has changed significantly since the last review'*.

The basis of (current) guidance is that *'Scotland is a society with a longstanding Christian tradition'*.

Any future review should similarly contextualise itself in relation to contemporary religious influence as the impact of any action in response begins to describe the character of what it means to live in 21st century Scotland and, indeed, what it means to be 'Scottish'.

The petitioners appear to correctly separate curriculum 'religious education' from religious instruction (for example) but there appears to be a remaining ambiguity in relation to 'religious observance'.

The 2005 definition of religious observance, *'community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community'*, is to some extent ambiguous and detaching this practice from guidance around religious education may in fact be helpful. Events of this nature are probably integral to ensuring children and young people are enabled to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors and should always be seen as part of a healthy and holistic education process.

The petition will/should raise an interesting and contemporary debate, the outcomes of which should inform policy and practice in all our educational settings.

Q2: How many pupils do not attend religious observance in schools within your local authority as a result of their parents choosing to opt out?

Comment: The current 'opt out' rate is around 0.6%.

Q3: 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?

Comment: Schools report that provision of an appropriate alternative, based on the child/young person's learning needs and style is relatively straight forward.

Some settings say that while it has not been a problem, there would be the potential for an issue with supervision of pupils who have been withdrawn, although most are clear that (in most cases) they would have sufficient staff to cover religious observance and support appropriate learning for those who are not participating.