

LONDON BOROUGH OF LEWISHAM

Minutes of the Lewisham Agreed Syllabus Conference

which was held on Tuesday 13th September 2016
at the Church of the Good Shepherd, Handen Road, SE12 8NR

Present:

GROUP A	Rev Carol Bostridge (Free Church – Baptist)	Joan Goldberg (Judaism)
	Dr Mehdi Dabestani (Baha’i’)	Layo Afuape (Pentecostal)
	Luke Donnellan (Humanism)	Rt Rev. Monsignor Nicholas Rothon (Roman Catholic)
	David Hutchens (Humanism)	Gurbakhsh Singh Garcha (Sikhism)
GROUP B (The Church of England)	Shaun Burns (Deputy Chair)	Revd Juliet Donnelly
GROUP C (Teachers)	Karen Hansen (NUT)	Judith Purkiss (Lewisham Headteachers & Deputies)
	Pamela Phillips (NAS/UWT)	
GROUP D (The Local Authority)	Councillor David Britton	Dinah Griffiths (School Governors Primary; chair)
	Kate Bond (representing the Executive Director of Education)	
Others Present:		
	Stephen Sealy (SACRE clerk)	

The meeting begun at 7.12pm

Cllr Britton announced that the timings on the agenda would be brought forward by 20 minutes meaning that the meeting should end at 8.30pm.

1 Minutes of previous meeting

With regard to the paragraph beginning “Luke commented that there were quite a few places where the word....”, Luke stated he wouldn’t have used the word ‘faith’ and advised that this section be corrected to reflect this.

Cllr Britton advised that his name had been wrongly spelt with an ‘e’ instead of an ‘o’throughout.

Subject to these changes, the minutes were agreed as an accurate record of the previous meeting.

2 Election of a vice chair

Juliette reported that she was overloaded and therefore wasn’t in a position to consider standing as a vice chair of the conference.

Cllr Britton explained that were she to stand as vice chair her duties wouldn't extend much beyond covering the meetings if he was unable to do so. Dinah added that if the responsibility became too much, she could always then stand down. Juliette acquiesced.

Gurbakhsh nominated Juliette, seconded by Dinah. Juliette accepted this position.

3 Agreed Syllabus plan of action

Cllr Britton commented that most of the action on the 'Overview for Lewisham Agreed Syllabus revision' document appeared to be Denise's and proposed that this point was deferred until the next ASC discussion.

Luke suggested that members look through the document before the next meeting.

Kate encouraged teachers who explore faith and ideas etc on a daily basis to look at this document as they needed to be involved in constructing it.

Councillor Britton added that the members should be looking to see which parts should be replaced.

Monsignor Nicholas commented that he didn't agree that the word 'weddings' should replace marriage, adding that this reflected wider issues.

Cllr Britton agreed that marriage and wedding were two different things.

Monsignor Nicholas commented that 'wedding' was a way of opening the discussion about marriage.

Joan asked for clarity on what was being asked, to which Cllr Britton explained that he was asking everyone to read through the overview document, considering what contribution each and their faith group could make to inform teachers.

Dinah acknowledged that the synagogue was particularly active in educating the community about the Jewish faith.

At 7.23, Dr Dabestani arrived.

4 KS 2 Weddings Unit – possibilities for changing this unit

Cllr Britton surmised that Luke would comment that there was nothing about non-religious ceremonies or about single-sex relationships.

Luke commented that his initial observation was the absence of humanist or non-religious weddings. He added that this unit also presented an opportunity to introduce children to same-sex marriages and civil partnerships.

He volunteered to either add to the unit or put together a section on the humanist view.

Kate Bond replied that she would welcome this, but also reiterated the need for sensitivity to be exercised for kids whose parents' marriages hadn't worked. While acknowledging that there was a sentence about this on this first page, she opined that there should be more added.

Luke added that marriage wasn't an essential component of positive relationships.

Kate suggested that the unit be called something different, of which wedding/marriages would be a subset.

Juliet questioned whether this then repositioned the theme in Personal Health and Social Education.

Shaun commented that focus was needed and that this unit was a look at relationships marked by faith.

Cllr Britton added that there were many reasons for single parent families and that the members needed to be clear about these reasons

Dinah commented that she was chair of a school none of whose children probably had traditional families, and added that the approach taken needed to be open to these families.

Monsignor Nicholas further commented that while the committee was looking at weddings from a faith perspective, there was also a legal one in that weddings represent a legal contract.

Cllr Britton invited any teachers present to comment on the experience of teaching this unit.

Karen responded that in her school they had focussed on ceremonies like baptisms but remarked that there was new guidance that is being introduced.

Judith explained that her focus in delivering this unit is on commitment so that even when families detach the commitment to the child and each other is still emphasised.

Kate suggested that, in view of this, maybe the unit was more accurately packaged as an understanding of commitments, including weddings.

Monsignor Nicholas remarked that, for a child, this was also linked to parenthood. Cllr Britton added that, through this unit, children may also discover that they're adopted.

Kate suggested that maybe the document needed to be more explicit about encouraging teachers to raise these questions.

Councillor Britton suggested that the unit be renamed 'families'. Love and commitment, Juliet furthered. Joan suggested commitment.

The comment was made that family needed redefining as a question often asked in schools was, 'what is family?'

Dinah remarked that the progression from the first syllabus she was involved in (which started with the theme of 'wedding/marriage' and moved from that to become more inclusive) to this discussion was an interesting one.

Kate concluded that this unit would need an addition, rather than a re-write. She added that this could also open up discussions about commitment to peers, British values and the PREVENT agenda, if teachers so wished.

Carol asked if the committee envisaged keeping the sections on the different religions, adding that she considered the Christian part particularly narrow. Cllr Britton replied that this would depend on how the discussion develops.

5 Humanism in an Agreed Syllabus

Luke delivered a presentation on humanism and started by offering a working definition of what humanism was. He introduced the case for including it, projecting the argument that it needed to be included in the syllabus in the same way that other non-Christian views were.

Using a PowerPoint presentation he explained that humanism wasn't anti-religious but that its belief was that society should live in a secular state that entitles freedom of religion and belief.

He explained that it was a positive philosophy. He acknowledged that many humanists are atheistic or agnostic but that many have positive beliefs beyond just not believing in God or gods.

He explained that the word 'humanism' has changed over time but that the thought is at least 2500 years ago, and was around in ancient Greece and China. Its goals, he added, are often the same as those of religions, despite the differences being usually highlighted.

He cited a judgement whereby three families took the state to court over the absence of an option to study a non-religious worldview in the new RS GCSE syllabuses, which the families won on human rights grounds. He explained that Paragraph 39 of the High Court Judgement means that if a syllabus includes the study of religious beliefs it should also include the comparable study of non-religious beliefs. Non-religious beliefs should be treated with equal respect.

He reported that the document, which the government had recently released, was a statement of policy, rather than the law. It is the SACREs responsibility to act in accordance with the law, not government policy.

Luke referred to the annual British Social Attitudes survey, in which those claiming no religions constitute about 50% of those surveyed. He declared that if RE was to be relevant to children from these families then humanism needs to be part of the syllabus.

He added that, casting the demographics and percentages to one side, even if there were no humanists or people with no religion in the UK, there are plenty in the world who are.

He added that the arguments for teaching about humanism were the same that non-Christian religions would have argued to support the inclusion of their own beliefs.

He commented on the influence that non-religious views have had in the UK, before stating that inclusivity and relevance, opportunity and entitlement, and social cohesion and mutual respect were the most important arguments.

He added that humanism can contribute greatly to SMSC but that the consequence of humanism only being included in a piecemeal way was children thinking that the belief wasn't coherent or as worthy of study.

He informed the committee that there was a growing resource of humanist material and services at the BHA.

Cllr Britton questioned if Luke was talking about secular humanism or the strand of humanism based on Christ's teaching, questioning whether there shouldn't be a distinction between secular and faith-based humanism, as humanism runs throughout Christian teaching.

Luke responded that he believed the correct term was humanist, and that humanists may not welcome the title of secular humanist. However, he added that he thought that this should be open for discussion in the classroom.

Joan commented that RE in schools is about diversity and that she had no issue with teaching that everyone has different views. Luke countered that the syllabus didn't reflect that inclusivity.

Judith remarked that the purpose of RE was to teach about religions and that she didn't consider 'no religion' as a religion to be studied.

Luke replied that today, RE is no longer just about religion, and that when one asks questions about morality etc, they can't just ignore the non-religious perspectives.

Judith added that she wouldn't call it a religion and added that a lot of parents would be offended if humanism was taught alongside religious faiths. Luke replied that a lot of parents are offended that it isn't.

Kate encouraged the committee to reflect on their inclusion of non-faith views about marriage and suggested that the same inclusivity should apply to the idea of including humanism in the syllabus. She reminded the committee that it was just an advisory body.

Luke reiterated his concern about the DfE's position of not being under any obligation, especially guidance from the BHA (with regard to widening the syllabus).

Juliet expressed her concern that while she agreed with diversity, she felt proselytised and lamented the seeming labelling of all non-faith groups as humanists. Luke responded that that wasn't his wish. He commented that the government's guidance was about their policy but that it was the decision of the SACRE to decide what they think schools should be doing.

Gurbakhsh remarked that the government was confused about the whole thing. He suggested that most faiths believed in God, who has been defined as virtuous. However, he stated that no faith had yet persuaded its adherents to reflect this and that if humanism projected this value then it was a good thing.

David suggested that given humanism's great presence in society, and there being limited time to teach religion, this time should be dedicated to the religions that one otherwise wouldn't encounter.

Dr Dabestani opined that humanist values were handed down from the religions, stating one's primary purpose to be a human, with religion a secondary purpose. Luke suggested that religions have come from non-religious perspectives rather than the other way around. He reiterated the view that if humanism isn't taught it would not be considered as important, defined or valuable as the religions/faiths.

Cllr Britton concluded this section by making reference to a Peanuts cartoon in which a character had remarked "I love humanity. It's just the people I don't like".

It was suggested that the committee's strapline of 'Learning together through faith' be extended to include the words 'and belief'.

6 Working Party arrangements for KS 3 including consultation with schools / teachers

Cllr Britton commented that KS3 is now half of year 7, year 8 and in some cases year 9. He suggested that this point be prioritised for the following meeting, as well as members' responses to the wedding discussion.

Carol asked what action the members were to take in view of the evening's discussions. Cllr Britton replied that this would be decided in the arrangements, which was deferred until the next meeting.

Kate reminded the group of its role in providing a rich resource of information etc for schools to decide what to teach.

Cllr Britton agreed that the resources should be inclusive. However, he cautioned that teachers wouldn't teach optional subjects that they're frightened of, and exhorted Luke to package humanism in the way that the established faith communities have their faiths.

For clarity, Shaun reminded the committee that they couldn't agree that there will be comparative units on humanism in this discussion. Cllr Britton concluded that the committee will give it a fair saying in the syllabus, in principle. He stated that the guiding principles were agreed but that how it will look remains to be seen.

At 8.38 Kate left.

7 Date and venue for the next meeting(s)

It was agreed that Monday 7 November was the date of the next meeting, at 6.30pm in the Emmanuel Church on Lee High Road.

Cllr Britton commented that he'd received a text from Nigel Desborough apologising for his absence.

At this point the meeting was closed.