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From: The Community Relations Council  
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**Issue: EQIA on the Proposals for a Revised Core Syllabus for Religious Education**

The Community Relations Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the EQIA on the 'Proposals for a Revised Core Syllabus for Religious Education'.

There are a number of guiding principles which we measured the proposed syllabus against. Firstly what is the aim of the statutory curriculum? According to DENI *"it is to develop young people as individuals and prepare them for life. This includes a young person's spiritual and moral development, where RE plays arguably the most important role. RE also has a role in promoting tolerance and mutual understanding among the different groups in society"*.<sup>1</sup> Therefore it is essential to have in place an inclusive, respectful and diverse core syllabus.

Shared Education is a priority area for A Shared Future and two of its main objectives are *"Developing opportunities for shared and intercultural education at all levels – nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary; and all schools should ensure through their policies, structures and curriculae, that pupils are consciously prepared for a life in a diverse and intercultural society and world"*.<sup>2</sup>

More importantly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) lists key protections for children, and guarantees a child to *"the right to a primary education, the right to practice their religion, the right to respect their own and other cultures, and the right to learn and use the language and custom of their families, whether these are shared by the majority of people in the country or not"*<sup>3</sup>. The UK and Northern Ireland ratified the UNCRC on December 1991, and therefore the government has to make sure that every child is guaranteed these rights.\*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Equality Impact Assessment, DENI, P 4.

<sup>2</sup> A Shared Future, 2005, P 24.

<sup>3</sup> UNCRC, Articles, 2,14,28,29,30.

<sup>4</sup> \*Except the two they have reservations about (articles 10 & 37)

The Community Relations Council feels that the proposed core syllabus will impact on certain section 75 categories. Northern Ireland is facing a growing problem of racism, as well the ongoing problem of sectarianism. DENI has to ensure that any new Religious Education syllabus is developed with these issues at its core.

*Representation on working/steering and advisory groups.*

Firstly, we are uneasy with the consultation process. We feel that the most appropriate, meaningful and beneficial way forward in the development of a syllabus in Religious Education is through a partnership approach, and that the partnership should be made up of representatives from the various faith groups, including the Christian religions. We are concerned at the objectivity to date of the body responsible for devising the core syllabus. Smaller denominations have been excluded from membership on the various working groups and we believe that their absence has had a negative impact on the final proposals, most notably within Learning Objective 4 (World Religions). CRC believes that DENI should have ensured a wider representation of denominations on the steering, working and advisory groups and should therefore put in place a mechanism that allows smaller denominations to contribute in an equal manner to the syllabus, and in particular Learning Objective 4.

*Extension of Learning Objective 4.*

Unfortunately, racism and sectarianism is widespread and these difficult issues must be acknowledged by all and measures put in place to challenge them. It is the responsibility of everyone in Northern Ireland to work towards a diverse and inclusive community, and the education system will be a key player.

6.7 states that "The Department could ask the Churches' Leaders to revise their proposals to extend Learning Objective 4: World Religions to Key Stage 2 and/or 4. The new religious curriculum needs to be embedded with respect, inclusion and equality. Whilst there are many positive examples of the core syllabus promoting these principles, Council feels that children need to embrace our changing society, they need to learn, understand and appreciate other cultures, traditions and faiths, and consequently we feel it is necessary to extend Learning Objective 4 (LO4) throughout the syllabus. In order to achieve this, the department needs to facilitate further discussions among key experts and those with an interest and knowledge in LO4, in order to achieve the desired outcome of a truly inclusive core syllabus.

The need for this extension of LO4 is further necessitated by Paul Connolly's research '*Too Young to Notice? The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3-6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland*'. This research counteracts the widely held belief that young children have no sense of cultural differences and showed for the first time the significant affect that cultural and political influence has on the awareness and behaviour of 3-6 year-olds in Northern Ireland. The report also demonstrates the increased likelihood of children to identify with a particular community as they grow older and significantly, to make sectarian statements or take actions accordingly. This links in with initiatives such as the Media Initiatives for Children – introduced to children from the age of 3, and currently in all voluntary pre-school clubs. This program is helping to develop positive attitudes

towards diversity from an early age, and it is essential that this good work is mainstreamed throughout the educational system.

### *Language*

A number of concerns were raised regarding the type of language used throughout the syllabus. There are various sorts of school in Northern Ireland, many of them faith based. This core syllabus must be able to speak both to people within faith traditions and outside them. In order to achieve this CRC would suggest revising some of the more confessional language of the Learning Objectives, so as to avoid the appearance of exclusion. It would also be useful to avoid the use of the term 'main churches' as it implies smaller faith groups are inferior and therefore not as important within the core syllabus. Furthermore it is also important to underline that morality is not the sole preserve of Christianity.

### Conclusion

The Religious Education Core Syllabus should:

- have respect for all religions and for people of all faiths and none.
- have room for other religions as well as Christian.
- promote knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the wider world.
- guarantee a minimum and mainstream 'world religions' throughout the core syllabus.