The right to withdraw from RE

The parent of a pupil at a community, foundation or voluntary school has the right to request that the pupil be excused from all or part of the RE provided. Schools should ensure that parents who want to withdraw their children from RE are aware that RE is taught in an objective way that is relevant to all pupils and respects their own personal beliefs. They should be made aware of the RE syllabus learning objectives and what is covered in the RE curriculum and should be given the opportunity to discuss this, if they wish. The school may also wish to review such a request each year, in discussion with the parents. However, the right of withdrawal does not extend to other areas of the curriculum when, as may happen on occasion, spontaneous questions on religious matters are raised by pupils or there are issues related to religion that arise in other subjects such as history or citizenship.

The use of the right to withdraw should be at the instigation of parents (or pupils themselves if they are aged 18 or over), and it should be made clear whether it is from the whole of the subject or specific parts of it. No reasons need be given. Parents have the right to choose whether or not to withdraw their child from RE without influence from the school, although a school should ensure parents or carers are informed of this right and are aware of the educational objectives and content of the RE syllabus. In this way, parents can make an informed decision. Where parents have requested that their child is withdrawn, their right must be respected, and where RE is integrated in the curriculum, the school will need to discuss the arrangements with the parents or carers to explore how the child's withdrawal can be best accommodated. If pupils are withdrawn from RE, schools have a duty to supervise them, though not to provide additional teaching or to incur extra cost. Pupils will usually remain on school premises. Where a pupil has been withdrawn, the law provides for alternative arrangements to be made for RE of the kind the parent wants the pupil to receive (Section 71(3) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998). This RE could be provided at the school in question, or the pupil could be sent to another school where suitable RE is provided if this is reasonably convenient. If neither approach is practicable, outside arrangements can be made to provide the pupil with the kind of RE that the parent wants, and the pupil may be withdrawn from school for a reasonable period of time to allow them to attend this external RE.

Outside arrangements for RE are allowed as long as the LA is satisfied that any interference with the pupil's attendance at school resulting from the withdrawal will affect only the start or end of a school session. If the school is a secondary school and parents have withdrawn a pupil from RE provided at the school and asked for alternative RE to be provided in accordance with the tenets of a particular religion or denomination, then the LA must either: provide facilities for the alternative RE to be given at the school unless there are special circumstances which would make it unreasonable to do so, or agree to outside arrangements being made as long as no financial burden falls on the LA or school as a result of these arrangements. In the case of a pupil at a maintained boarding school where a sixth former, or the parents of a pupil below the sixth form, requests that the pupil be allowed to receive RE in accordance with the tenets of a particular religion or denomination outside school hours, the governing body must make arrangements to give the pupil a reasonable opportunity to do so. This could involve making facilities available at the school, but any such arrangements cannot be funded out of the school's budget or by the local authority (LA) (Section 71 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998).

The intention of giving a right for withdrawal was so that pupils could be provided with an alternative form of Religious Education (eg: Catholic, Jewish, etc). Current concerns with radicalization, extremism, and the worrying rise in Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance means that Religious

Education has increased in importance. It is the main vehicle for confronting these issues in order to prepare pupils for life in our multi-cultural society: life in modern Britain. Although parents may legally request withdrawal from RE and not have to give a reason it nonetheless should be a matter of great concern to the school. It would be reasonable for the school to seek a discussion with the parents in order to explore the reasons behind the request and ask what alternative provisions for appropriate Religious Education parents wish to provide or seek to be set in place.

Somerset SACRE would like to offer the following suggested course of action when parents request that their child be withdrawn from Religious Education Lessons.

1. Ask to see the parents on an individual basis.

2. Gently explore the reasons behind the request for withdrawal from Religious Education. While the parents have a right to refuse to give their reasons, this is not an unreasonable question if appropriate alternative arrangements are to be made.

3. Explain why Religious Education is important in preparing pupils for life in the UK today. Is the real reason for the request for withdrawal that the school has failed to adequately communicate this to parents?

4. Explain the importance of the role of studying other faiths in encouraging tolerance and confronting extremism and explore the parents' views about this.

5. Do they wish their pupils to be withdrawn from part of the RE provision or the whole of it?

Hopefully by this point some parents may have changed their mind, or the school may discover a wider issue that they need to address.

6. Should the parents still wish for their children to be withdrawn from RE a discussion can then follow as to what alternative Religious Education provision they wish to put in place. This was the intention behind provision of the right to withdraw. They may be withdrawn, for instance, because they belong to a religious group who will be willing to provide their own materials.

7. Explain that the school has a duty to supervise pupils who are withdrawn, but not to provide additional teaching or to incur extra costs.