

Commission on Rural Education Call for Evidence

Response from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Commission's Inquiry. We have confined our comments to issues impacting on the Jewish community in Scotland, including teaching about Judaism.

Section B – Maximising attainment and achievement through rural education

1: The Commission is examining how the delivery of rural education can maximise attainment and outcomes to give pupils the best life chances. Curriculum for Excellence is the curriculum in Scotland which applies to all children and young people aged 3-18, wherever they are learning. It aims to raise achievement and attainment for all, enabling young people to develop the skills, knowledge and understanding they need to succeed in learning, life and work.

(a) To what extent do you agree or disagree that there are particular challenges to delivering Curriculum for Excellence in rural schools?

strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree
 disagree strongly disagree don't know/not applicable

(b) To what extent do you agree or disagree that any challenges are particularly acute for small rural schools?

strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree
 disagree strongly disagree don't know/not applicable

(c) Please explain your answers to (a) and (b) and provide further detail on what you think these challenges are?

There are particular difficulties in teaching about minority faiths when there is only a small or no community in the area to provide a resource. Since, for example, there are only settled Jewish communities in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Dundee, (although there are small numbers of Jewish people living in every council area in Scotland), it is not usually possible for schools outwith these areas either to visit a synagogue or be visited by a speaker from the Jewish community. Even if there is a Jewish child in a class, it should not be presumed that he or she, or his or her parents, will wish to speak to classes about Judaism, nor that they can do so authoritatively. While some may be very happy to take on this role, others may not want or feel competent to present information about Judaism, even at primary school level, but we have unfortunately received reports of pupils being pressurised to do so, with predictable negative psychological effects.

As well as these issues relating to teaching about minority faiths, there are also issues about adequately accommodating pupils from these faiths. We have received a number of complaints about pupils being forced to participate in Christmas or Easter activities because this was deemed to be an appropriate musical or dramatic activity for the entire school or cohort. This can cause disaffection, disengagement, and alienation on the part of both pupil and parents, and needs to be addressed.

However, the problem goes beyond Christmas and Easter. There are, for example, difficulties with religious assemblies, still used by schools of all sizes for announcements and school organisation, and the teaching of music, which is often based on hymns. The concerns of a Jewish parent who objected to his daughter being made to sing "The Water of Life" during primary school music lessons were dismissed by the teacher because "it's a beautiful sentiment" and "we all worship the same God really".

(d) Do you have any suggestions for how these challenges might be overcome or addressed?

It is essential that all resources are accurate and appropriate, and we would therefore emphasise that all teaching materials about minority communities **must** be referred to an authoritative organisation or individual in the relevant community to check for accuracy. When this does not take place we unfortunately have experience of errors frequently being incorporated that may result in an inaccurate, and possibly even a negative, impression of the community concerned. In relation to teaching about Judaism, we would recommend *The Jewish Way of Life*, an online resource for use in upper primary and lower secondary schools, that provides accurate information about Judaism and reflects the diversity of the Jewish community in the UK. It has been developed with the support of Education Scotland (formerly LTS), and is available on the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities website at <http://www.scojec.org/resources/jwol/jwol.html>

Schools, particularly those in small and homogenous communities, should consider ways of responding sensitively to difference and diversity, and of avoiding situations that exclude and alienate minorities. In previous consultation responses¹ we have expressed concern that the RME curriculum creates a Christian norm and a non-Christian "other". This is objectionable, and inevitably alienates non-Christians rather than encouraging dialogue or promoting respect.

The issue of providing adequate support for pupils from minority faiths can, to some extent, be addressed in the same way as both hospitals and prisons have done with some success, by appointing part-time or honorary chaplains from these faiths to advise management and to provide counselling and support when required.

2: Do you think rural schools provide particular educational benefits to their pupils and, if so, what do you think these are?

We do not wish to comment on this question.

3: Do you think rural schools have particular disadvantages for their pupils and, if so, what do you think these are?

When things go wrong, the small size of many rural schools, and the close integration of their staff in the local community, may sometimes result in a failure to report problems due to fears of a local backlash. For example, the mother of a child in a small rural primary reported to us that her child was being taunted and bullied in the playground by children telling her that "You killed Christ". Naturally the mother approached the teacher, one of only two in the school, to discuss how best to prevent this from continuing, but, instead of the support she had expected, the teacher only shrugged her shoulders and told the mother "Well you did, didn't you".

We advised the mother to report this to the education authority, but, understandably, she refused on grounds that the teacher, who lived in the same village, was very popular, and "If I get her into trouble then who's going to speak to me?"

In a large urban area this issue would not have arisen. The mother could have approached the Head, and the local authority, either or both of whom would certainly

¹ See for example http://www.scojec.org/consultations/2008/08xii_rme.pdf

have disciplined the teacher, and ensured, to the best of their ability, that the situation would not be repeated, and that both child and mother would be given appropriate support. Note also that a similar situation could arise even in urban areas if the local authority is too small to be able to redeploy the teacher appropriately.

4: Getting it right for every child (also known as GIRFEC) is the Scottish Government's policy for improving outcomes for children and making sure that all agencies respond appropriately to needs and risks. The Getting it right approach is about making sure that leaders, managers and practitioners across all services work together when they need to, ensuring children and young people reach their full potential.

(a) To what extent do you agree or disagree that there are particular challenges to applying the Getting it right approach in rural schools?

strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree
 disagree strongly disagree don't know/not applicable

(b) Please explain your answer to (a) and provide further detail on what you think these challenges are?

As stated above, on occasion children and their families may not receive appropriate support in small school communities or may not feel able to seek such support for understandable reasons.

The need for such support is evident from data gathered from 167 secondary school pupils across eight rural and urban Councils in Scotland, by a group of Jewish young people as part of research project jointly sponsored by Young Scot and the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities. This revealed a worrying level of ignorance including that:

- 89% said they knew little or nothing about the Jewish religion, and
- 78% said they had learned little or nothing about Judaism in school.

When asked to describe what they thought made someone Jewish, 33% said they didn't know. Of those that did respond, the majority were ill-informed, giving responses such as "a hat and wavy dress", "believing that Jesus was a Jew", "worship in a synagogue reading the Quran", and "the hat makes someone Jewish". Other responses were stereotypical such as "the way they look" and "crazy", while some were overtly antisemitic such as "having a skullcap and a big nose", and "rich, large nose, stingy".

5: Do you have any comments or suggestions on how to ensure the viability and sustainability of rural education? You may wish to comment on the following areas:

- **attracting and retaining staff;**
- **school buildings;**
- **remote learning;**
- **use of technologies for learning.**

We do not wish to comment on this question.

Section C – The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 and its application. In Scotland, local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure the adequate and efficient provision of school education in their area. If a local authority proposes to change any part of the existing education provision then they must engage in formal consultation process. The process to be followed when a local authority is consulting on a relevant school reorganisation proposal is set out in the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, referred to here as the “Schools Consultation Act”. Under the Schools Consultation Act, there are specific provisions relating to rural schools – including factors that Councils must consider before proposing to close any rural school – and there are specific duties on Scottish Ministers in relation to scrutiny (call-in) and consent to Council proposals.

This section seeks your views on the Schools Consultation Act and its current application.

6: Under the Schools Consultation Act, a rural school is defined using statistical data under the Scottish Government’s “Urban Rural Classification”. This divides areas of Scotland into 8 types, depending on the population size of the town or settlement together with the travel time needed to get to a larger town. For the purposes of the Schools Consultation Act, schools in the three rural categories Accessible Rural, Remote Rural and Very Remote Rural are considered to be rural schools. These are all schools in settlements with less than 3,000 people living in them and with different lengths of ‘drive time’ to a bigger town or settlement of more than 10,000 people.

(a) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the definition of a rural school for the purposes of the Schools Consultation Act?

- strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree
 disagree strongly disagree don’t know/not applicable

(b) Please explain your answer or suggest any alternative?

We do not wish to comment on this question.

7: The Scottish Government’s view is that educational benefits should be at the heart of any proposals to make a significant change to a school. The Schools Consultation Act specifies that local authorities have to prepare an educational benefits statement for all consultations under the Act. Local authorities must consider:

- the likely effects of the proposal on current and future pupils of the school, other users of the school’s facilities and the pupils of any other schools in the area;
- explain how the authority intends to minimise or avoid any adverse effects of the proposal; and
- describe the educational benefits which it believes will result from the proposal and provide reasons for this.

(a) To what extent do you agree or disagree that educational benefits should be the primary consideration in making a significant change to a school?

- strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree
 disagree strongly disagree don’t know/not applicable

(b) Please explain your answer, and provide any comments on how the educational benefits statement is used or how you think it could be improved?

Although we agree that educational benefit should be the primary consideration, we urge that attention should also be given to the effectiveness of pastoral care, and to issues relating to community relations. See also our responses to 1(c) and 1(d) above.

8: Sometimes Councils will propose the closure of a school. The Schools Consultation Act requires Councils to have special regard to three factors before deciding to propose and consult on a rural school closure. These are:

- if there is any viable alternative to the closure proposal;
- the likely effect of the school's closure on the local community; and
- the likely consequences of the closure on travel and transport arrangements.

(a) Do you have any comments on how these factors have operated in practice?

(b) Do you have any suggestions for improvements or alternatives to the existing process?

We do not wish to comment on these questions.

9: Councils have to balance their duties under the Schools Consultation Act with their responsibilities for efficient management of the school estate. There is Scottish Government guidance on some aspects of this, for example, assessing and reporting Condition and Suitability ratings. Thinking about how Councils do this, do you have any comments on how they:

(a) make decisions about the school estate, including assessments of condition or suitability and how investment in school building is prioritised?

(b) assess the capacity of primary and secondary schools?

(c) manage and measure local information such as projected population numbers and pupil rolls?

We do not wish to comment on these questions.

10: The consultation process Councils must undertake is set out in the Schools Consultation Act.

(a) How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the statutory consultation process currently applied by Councils under the Schools Consultation Act?

- very satisfied satisfied neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
 dissatisfied very dissatisfied don't know/not applicable

(b) How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the informal consultation sometimes undertaken by Councils in advance of statutory consultation under the Schools Consultation Act?

- very satisfied satisfied neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
 dissatisfied very dissatisfied don't know/not applicable

(c) Do you have any comments on consultation under the Schools Consultation Act or how it could be improved?

We do not wish to comment on these questions.

11: The Schools Consultation Act requires Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), who are now part of the Scottish Government agency Education Scotland, to be involved in the consultation process. They are required to prepare and submit to the Council a professional and independent report on the educational aspects of the proposal being consulted on.

(a) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the role of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education under the Schools Consultation Act?

- strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree
 disagree strongly disagree don’t know/not applicable

(b) Do you have any comments on how this requirement has operated in practice or how it could be improved?

We do not wish to comment on this question.

12: Under the Schools Consultation Act, Scottish Ministers have powers to decide whether to “call in” or review a Council’s decision to close a school. This can be applied where it appears to Scottish Ministers that the authority may have failed in a significant regard to comply with the requirements in the Schools Consultation Act or to take proper account of a material consideration relevant to the decision. When Scottish Ministers call in a proposal, they can then decide whether or not to allow the closure to go ahead.

(a) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the role of Scottish Ministers’ and their call-in powers under the Schools Consultation Act?

- strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree
 disagree strongly disagree don’t know/not applicable

(b) Do you have any comments on the call-in process or how it could be improved?

We do not wish to comment on this question.

13: There is statutory guidance issued to local authorities, by the Scottish Government, intended to assist those who are involved in overseeing the consultation and decision making processes around proposed changes to their schools, as required in the Schools Consultation Act:

(a) Are you satisfied with the guidance to local authorities under the Schools Consultation Act?

- strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree
 disagree strongly disagree don’t know/not applicable

(b) Please explain your answer, and provide any comments on how the support and implementation of the Schools Consultation Act could be improved?

We do not wish to comment on this question.

Section D – Funding issues surrounding rural education

Under the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, Councils have a statutory duty to make arrangements to secure Best Value. They must carry out their overarching duties on delivery of all council services, including responsibilities for managing the school estate in accordance with the Best Value duty. The Commission is also considering the funding issues

surrounding rural education, including the relationship between the Best Value duty and the Schools Consultation Act.

- 14: Do you have any comments on how Councils deliver their Best Value requirement alongside the delivery of rural education and their responsibilities under the Schools Consultation Act?**

We do not wish to comment on this question, except to note that “Best Value”, especially in the context of policies of “localisation”, can result in small populations such as minority faiths being overlooked. This point is developed further under Q.16 below.

- 15: Do you have any other comments on the funding issues around delivering rural education?**

We do not wish to comment on this question.

Section E – Links between rural education and the preservation, support and development of rural communities

Part of the Commission’s remit is to examine the links between rural education and the preservation, support and development of rural communities and to make recommendations on how these links might be strengthened if necessary.

- 16: Do you have any comments on the links between rural education and the preservation, support and development of rural communities?**

By their very nature, there are unlikely to be significant numbers of any minority community in most Council areas, so they will not be regarded as a spending priority at local level. At best, a local education authority may fund an umbrella "minority community initiative" in their area, but this can be little more than a tick-box exercise. The fundamental point is that there is no such thing as a single homogenous "minority community" – indeed even some individual communities may not be homogenous. Rather there are many distinct minority communities each with individual, diverse, and sometimes even conflicting needs. A recent migrant from Poland, for example, has as little in common with a Muslim teenager of Pakistani descent as with the indigenous majority. Some, such as the Jewish and Sikh communities, have both ethnic and religious facets to their identity, whilst others may depend only on ethnicity or religion. A generic approach to education of and about minority communities cannot but fail to meet the needs of those that are minorities even among the minorities; failure to take account of the diversity of diversity must inevitably condemn any project to failure.

The “localisation” agenda, which envisages the withdrawal of central funding in favour of block grants to Councils, fails to take account of this situation. The localisation of budgetary decision-making, in education as in other services, would impact disproportionately on minority communities, and in particular isolated individuals from those communities, especially those living in rural areas, and, in consequence, may contribute to, rather than address, much less prevent, negative social outcomes.

National networks and initiatives, and national funding of those networks and initiatives, are, therefore, the only means by which minority communities can receive

appropriate services and support throughout Scotland. Activities, whether national or local, that could not take place if not funded nationally, must be funded nationally.

17: Do you wish to highlight any sources of evidence in relation to this area of the Commission's work that you think they should consider?

We are not aware of any studies relating specifically to the experiences of Jewish people and rural education in Scotland, but it may be presumed that these are reflected in more general studies. In recent years the number of reported antisemitic incidents throughout the UK has increased² and the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is often the first port of call for isolated Jewish people living outwith any settled community, often in rural areas, who have either been the victim of an incident, or else are apprehensive that they may become a victim.

In October 2011, the Institute for Jewish Policy Research published a survey of Jewish students throughout the UK. Scotland was only singled out for one comment: *"Regionally, respondents in Scotland are the most likely to report having experienced some form of antisemitism – over half (52%) have witnessed and/or been subjected to antisemitism. By contrast, a third (33%) of respondents studying in London has experienced antisemitism."*³

The Scottish Government has recently published statistics for religiously aggravated charges⁴ that seem to show low numbers for conduct offensive to Judaism. In fact, however, the 16 offenses are out of all proportion to the relative sizes of the faith communities, and the Government has now published this comparison in response to a Parliamentary Question from Stewart Maxwell MSP.⁵ Expressed as charges per 10,000 members of the relevant community, the figures are: 2, 3, and 5 respectively against Protestantism, Islam, and Catholicism, and a disproportionate 25 against Judaism.

ACPOS has stated *"fear of hate crime escalates dramatically in those who share with an immediate victim, the same group identity that has made a victim a target. ... any victim of crime can suffer symptoms of depression, anger, anxiety and post traumatic stress ... [but] whereas victims of non-biased crime can experience a decrease in these symptoms within two years, victims of bias, or hate crime, may need as long as five years to overcome their ordeal."*⁶

Although it is statistically unlikely that any individual Jewish person in Scotland will be the direct victim of an antisemitic incident, there is, undoubtedly, a heightened level of apprehension. Typical comments from people who were not themselves victims of

² *Antisemitic Incidents Report 2010* (Community Security Trust)
<http://www.thecst.org.uk/docs/Incidents%20Report%202010.pdf>

³ Home and away: Jewish journeys towards independence: Key findings from the 2011 National Jewish Student Survey http://www.jpr.org.uk/downloads/NJSS_report%20final.pdf

⁴ Religiously Aggravated Offending in Scotland 2010-11
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/362943/0122956.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28877.aspx?SearchType=Advance&ReferenceNumbers=S4W-04247&ResultsPerPage=10>

⁶ ACPOS Hate Crime Guidance Manual 2010
http://www.acpos.police.uk/Documents/Policies/ED_ACPOS_HateCrimeManual_Sept2010.pdf

abuse have recently included that “*it’s quite a dangerous thing to say that you’re Jewish, especially because of what’s happening in Israel*”, and “*I think very carefully before deciding to tell someone I’m Jewish.*”

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is currently carrying out an inquiry into *Being Jewish in Scotland*.⁷ This has been funded by the Scottish Government, to learn more about the experiences of Jewish people throughout Scotland, and we expect to publish our findings in summer 2012.

Section F – Any other comments

18: Please tell us if you have any other comments on the delivery of rural education that you would like the Commission to consider?

We do not have any further comments.

Note: The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland comprising Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Dundee as well as the more loosely linked groups of the Jewish Network of Argyll and the Highlands, and of students studying in Scottish Universities and Colleges. SCoJeC is Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation SC029438, and its aims are to advance public understanding about the Jewish religion, culture and community. It works with others to promote good relations and understanding among community groups and to promote equality, and represents the Jewish community in Scotland to government and other statutory and official bodies on matters affecting the Jewish community.

In preparing this response we have consulted widely among members of the Scottish Jewish community.

⁷ http://www.scojec.org/news/2011/11_bjis/pw/11ix01_pr.html and http://www.scojec.org/news/2011/11_bjis/jewish_in_scotland.html