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**POLICY ON
RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE
IN
EILEAN SIAR SCHOOLS**

**CONSULTATION DOCUMENT
OCTOBER 2011**

Roinn an Fhoghlaim is Seirbheisean Chloinne

The Comhairle welcomes any written or electronic submissions on this policy, which may be submitted to schoolconsultations@cne-siar.gov.uk or to the Director of Education and Children's Services at the Comhairle Offices, Sandwick Road, Stornoway, by 5.00pm on Thursday, 22 December 2011.



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INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Many school communities are characterised by a diversity of religious beliefs and practices reflecting a range of religious and other stances. It is important that all pupils and staff can participate with integrity in the forms of Religious Observance devised by their school without compromise to their personal faith stances. This can best be guaranteed by involving a range of people from the school and community in the preparation, planning and the presentation of the assembly or other gathering. Pupils should have a key role in this process.
- 1.2 One implication of this diversity is that the forms of Religious Observance may differ from school to school. Schools are therefore encouraged to make decisions based on local needs and circumstances. Full consultation should take place with all interested parties on how Religious Observance can be implemented. The unifying principle behind the different approaches to Religious Observance will be the aims set out in this paper.

DEFINITION AND AIMS OF RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

- 2.1 The aims of Religious Observance are:
 - To promote the spiritual development of all members of the school community
 - To express and celebrate the shared values of the school community.
- 2.2 The report of the Religious Observance Review Group defines the term for use in schools in Scotland as:

'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.'
- 2.3 Regular assemblies or other gatherings for Religious Observance provide opportunities for the school community to reflect on, and develop, a deeper understanding of the dignity and worth of each individual and the shared values of the school community
- 2.4 Many schools would identify and promote values such as 'honesty, liberty, justice, fairness and concern for others' as common shared values in our society. It is also true that different communities hold values that are particular to their own tradition. These values should be acknowledged, the right of people to hold them should be respected and pupils should be encouraged to reflect on these values and the life stance which they represent.
- 2.5 Within the context of a school community, shared values give a sense of belonging and help to underpin all aspects of its life. The process of understanding and developing the shared values should involve pupils, staff, parents, churches, other faith communities and the wider community in which the school is set. Participation in the process is an essential element in terms of ownership of the agreed values.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE AND WORSHIP IN SCHOOLS

- 3.1 The Religious Observance Review Group provides the following guidance in relation to religious observance and worship in schools;

"Where the school community, whether denominational or non-denominational, is continuous with a faith community, that community's faith in the focus of worship, may be assumed and worship may be considered to be appropriate as part of the formal activity of the school. Where, as in most non-denominational schools, there is a diversity of beliefs and practices, the Review Group believes that the appropriate context for an organised act of worship is within the informal curriculum as part of the range of activities offered for example by religions, non-religious groups, chaplains and other faith leaders."

ASSEMBLIES AND RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

- 4.1 The Scottish Government's February 2011 Guidance states;

"In recognition of Scotland's Christian heritage, schools are encouraged to use the rich resources of this tradition when planning religious observance. Many school communities contain pupils and staff from faiths other than Christianity or with no faith commitment. This should be taken fully into account in supporting spiritual development. It is of central importance that all pupils and staff can participate with integrity in forms of religious observance without compromise to their personal faith stances."

- 4.2 At present school assemblies are the most common vehicle for delivering Religious Observance. A clear distinction has to be drawn between assemblies devised for the delivery of Religious Observance and assemblies which support other purposes. Communicating day-to-day administrative arrangements and information about extra-curricular activities at an assembly is important for the life and work of the school. However, this should be kept separate from occasions that are specifically set aside for Religious Observance. It is important for those organising and leading Religious Observance that its overall integrity and purpose are kept distinctive and not compromised by the inclusion of routine administrative announcements. However, such administrative announcements may be made in a clearly defined separate section of the assembly event; either preceding or following on from the act of religious observance.

FREQUENCY OF RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

- 5.1 The Scottish Government's February 2011 Guidance states;

"Religious observance needs to take place sufficiently frequently to have an impact on the spiritual development of the school community. It is, however, the quality of such occasions which is of greatest importance."

- 5.2 There is a need to balance the frequency, which would make a positive impact on children and young people with the need to ensure that the experiences are valuable and inclusive. This will require careful planning by schools. Every school should provide opportunities for religious observance at least six times in a school year, in addition to traditional celebrations central to the life of the school community, and preferably with greater frequency. We recognise that many primary schools value weekly religious observance as part of their regular assembly programme and will wish to continue with this. The school community should be involved in making decisions about frequency.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

- 6.1 In order to ensure that Religious Observance is of a high quality those planning and leading it should consider the following -

Location: A communal location within the school is the most suitable venue for Religious Observance. All schools have areas such as assembly halls or gymnasias which have potential for being appropriate locations for Religious Observance. It is important that every attempt is made to ensure that pupils can participate comfortably in the Religious Observance. Seating, ventilation, lighting and sound are important considerations in ensuring that pupils can give their full attention to what is being presented. In addition, to take account of the fact that Religious Observance may at times be organised on a group basis, schools should also look to have a smaller area available for Religious Observance. This space could also be available for organised acts of worship or private reflection.

Leading: The Headteacher, staff, chaplains, pupils and visitors from the community or organizations can all make effective contributions to Religious Observance. Sharing the leading brings many benefits such as offering a range of perspectives on a variety of issues for pupils to consider. Good planning and clear expectations are important to ensure that the experience appeals to pupils and engages their interest.

Sensitively Exploring Issues: Religious Observance should invite pupils through an interesting and appealing stimulus to consider and reflect on a range of issues that relate to their experience. As in good teaching the stimulus for reflection should look to draw on:

- Incidents which occur in the life of the school or in the local, national or international communities,
- A programme of values which the school wishes its pupils and staff to reflect upon
- The annual cycle of religious festivals.

An Open and Reflective Atmosphere: Good Religious Observance happens in an atmosphere where pupils feel relaxed and open to learn from what is being said and done. In order to achieve a mood of respectful attentiveness, assembly leaders should consider the appropriate use of music, presentation, media and sensitive lighting, and procedures for entering and leaving the area. Silences can be powerful and offer a space for individual pupils to begin their response to what has been shared.

CHAPLAINS

- 7.1 The Scottish Government's February 2011 Guidance states;
- 'Scottish Government Ministers value the important and varied contributions that chaplains and other faith group leaders make to the life of the school, for example in their involvement in religious observance, acts of worship, religious and moral education and a broader pastoral role. Headteachers are encouraged to engage in full discussion with chaplains and other faith group leaders in the planning and the implementation of religious observance. In supporting religious observance, their own religious beliefs should be respected and they should not be asked, or expected, to compromise them'.
- 7.2 The discussion between Head Teachers, Chaplains and other faith group leaders must be based on the premise that the way in which Religious Observance in schools is implemented should be justifiable on educational grounds. The role of the chaplain should be made clear and be regularly reviewed in discussion with the Headteacher. Chaplains and other faith group leaders can only work in school at the invitation of the Headteacher and so it is important that expectations are clear and explicit. Proselytizing is not acceptable within whole school Religious Observance.
- 7.3 Schools may have chaplaincy teams which could include representatives from a range of traditions who co-operate with other members of staff and pupils in the planning, preparation and presentation of acts of Religious Observance. Each member of the chaplaincy team will be able 'to draw on the rich resources of their own religious tradition. These resources can be used by the group responsible for Religious Observance as stimulus material relevant to the school community's experience and understanding'.

THE RIGHTS OF PARENTS

- 8.1 There is a statutory provision for parents to withdraw children from participation in religious observance. This right should always be made known to parents and their wishes respected. Parents should be provided with sufficient information on which to base a decision.
- 8.2 Scottish Government Ministers consider that religious observance complements religious education and is an important contribution to pupils' development. It should also have a role in promoting the ethos of a school by bringing pupils together and creating a sense of community. Schools are therefore encouraged to inform parents of this without applying pressure to change their minds.
- 8.3 Where a child is withdrawn from religious observance, schools should make suitable arrangements for the child to participate in a worthwhile alternative activity (further guidance will be issued to schools detailing appropriate alternative activities but consideration should be given to activities focusing on aspects of moral education). In no circumstances should a child be disadvantaged as a result of withdrawing from religious observance.

NURSERY SCHOOLS

- 9.1 There is no formal requirement for Religious Observance in nursery schools and classes. However, there are many opportunities to help children develop an early awareness of different religious and cultural groups and their traditions. By marking significant religious celebrations and exploring shared values as well as matters of common concern, children can build up a sense of their own uniqueness. In this way their journey of spiritual development begins. Such activities provide important foundational experiences for young children on which primary and secondary school can build.

EQUALITY ACT 2010

- 10.1 Central to this policy is the principle of respect for others. Religious, cultural and personal characteristics permeate and enrich the life and work of our schools. This diversity of belief and tradition provides an ideal context in which pupils can learn what is important in the lives of others. The approach to Religious Observance in this policy recognises and welcomes diversity and promotes respectful understanding. This policy will be implemented ensuring compliance with the Equality Act 2010.