



PE01623: Unelected church appointees on Local Authority Education Committees
Response from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland. SCoJeC advances public understanding about the Jewish religion, culture and community, by providing information and assistance to educational, health, and welfare organisations, representing the Jewish community in Scotland to Government and other statutory and official bodies, and liaising with Ministers, MSPs, Churches, Trades Unions, and others on matters affecting the Jewish community. SCoJeC also provides a support network for the smaller communities and for individuals and families who live outwith any Jewish community or are not connected with any Jewish communities, and assists organisations within the Scottish Jewish community to comply with various regulatory requirements. SCoJeC also promotes dialogue and understanding between the Jewish community and other communities in Scotland, and works in partnership with other organisations and stakeholders to promote equality, good relations, and understanding among community groups.

In relation to this response, it should be noted that in East Renfrewshire, which has the largest Jewish community in Scotland, one of the faith community representatives on the Education Committee has, for some years, been nominated by the Jewish community.

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

Minority communities and the education system

Local Authority Education Committees are the key decision making bodies governing many aspects of education in their schools, including ethos, aspects of the curriculum, and discipline. They also have responsibility to ensure compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty to promote good relations between those with protected characteristics. Consequently, there is a need for minority communities, and in particular often misrepresented religious and cultural communities, to be able to speak for themselves at the level at which these educational decisions are made.

We have evidence of these concerns in the Jewish Community of Scotland from the findings of our recent Scottish Government funded inquiries into *Being Jewish in Scotland*¹ and *What's Changed About Being Jewish in Scotland*². These explored the variety of

¹ *Being Jewish in Scotland* (Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, 2012)
http://www.scojec.org/bjis_findings.html

² *What's Changed About Being Jewish in Scotland* (Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, 2015)
http://www.scojec.org/bjis2_findings.html

experiences of Jewish people living throughout Scotland, and revealed several disturbing issues relating to the education system, many of which are likely also to be faced by other minority communities.

One parent, for example, told us:

"[I had] tensions with my children's schools because I was not content for them to engage in Christian worship – the reaction combined incomprehension and annoyance at the inconvenience. "We all worship the same god really". No, we don't; that's part of the point."

This view was echoed by another respondent who commented:

"The Scottish Government needs to understand that some of us are not Christian. ... The schools may think that assemblies in church unite the school; they don't."

We remain very concerned at the failure of some schools to understand the impact of racist bullying, and the consequently inadequate response to this, which leaves many parents feeling helpless, and unable to support their children. One parent explained:

"I went to see the Head Teacher when my son was called a "dirty Jew". The Head said 'I don't think we should do anything about it, I don't want to make it worse". We were glad he was about to leave the school. ... we went to the Head expecting some action! But what can you do?"

These findings reinforce the need for minority communities to be able to speak for themselves at the level at which educational decisions are made.

We do not, therefore, agree that the obligation on local authorities to appoint faith representatives to Education Committees should be removed, but, on the contrary, urge that it should be extended to analogous groups, and so require local authorities to appoint, in addition to a representative from each of the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church, a representative from:

- each community of which there is a denominational school in the relevant area;
- each discipline for which there is a specialist school or centre of excellence in the relevant area (e.g. music, sport, or dance);
- each minority faith and ethnic community of significant size in the relevant area (Jewish, Muslim, Chinese, Polish, etc.). Although the 2011 census puts the total ethnic minority (i.e. not "White British") population of Scotland at approximately 4%, it is important to note that that proportion is significantly higher in some areas. It is, however, also important to empower significant minorities particularly where the proportion is smaller, so we would suggest that 1% of the local population would be a reasonable level to trigger this requirement;
- each community of interest of significant size in the relevant area (e.g. Gaelic speakers).

Balance of elected and nominated representatives on education committees

While it is important that a majority – we suggest two-thirds – of the membership of local authority committees should be elected councillors, it is also extremely important, for the reasons outlined above, that a wide range of voices should be heard. In areas in which there are several diverse minority communities, and communities of interest, this majority should not be achieved by reducing the number of community representatives but, on the contrary, by increasing the number of elected councillors on the education committee.

Right to vote

We recognise that there is an argument that unelected members of education committees should not be entitled to vote. However, as we have pointed out above, it is important that minority communities, and in particular often misrepresented religious and cultural communities, are empowered to speak for themselves at the level at which key educational decisions are made.

The evidence from our *Being Jewish in Scotland* and *What's Changed About Being Jewish in Scotland* inquiries, indicates that not all schools currently appreciate what diversity really means. One school-age participant, for example, told us:

"I always have a bit of a dilemma because I'm quite musical. Most of the year I'm in the choir and in the orchestra, and then it gets to Christmas and I have to think, do I sing and just miss out the key words, do I sing and say beforehand to myself "this doesn't count"? Our school is very big on diversity. Our motto is 'we value the diversity that exists', but the diversity doesn't seem to have quite reached the music department. It doesn't occur, when they're thinking of songs, to think of songs that everyone can sing happily. They don't even think about it."

And a teacher commented:

"In my professional career, when I first started teaching, I had absolutely no problem in taking the Jewish Festivals off. ... I used to swap with someone and work her hours when I came back. And latterly, all the different heads of department all accepted that until the last one. And the last one said to me "We can't just give you special dispensation for you to come and go to suit you"."

It is important that these concerns about schools be addressed by those responsible for schools, and we therefore emphasise that, if faith representatives were no longer to have a vote, there would be a need for a mechanism formally to take account of the views of unelected members that relate to issues that directly concern their community or community of interest, whether specific only to a single community, or to a more general recognition of diversity.

Religion in Scottish Society

We have followed the various representations from the Secular Society with interest, and feel compelled to take issue with comments in relation to the census that were made by Spencer Fildes in his evidence to the Public Petitions Committee on 24 November 2016.

His statement that "we now find that more than half the population have no religion,"³ is simply incorrect. As later stated by Brian Whittle MSP⁴, the 2011 census found that 56% of the population identified themselves as "belonging to" a religion. Only 37%, a clear minority, stated that they do not belong to any religion⁵.

³ <http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10656&i=97903&c=1952964#ScotParlOR>

⁴ <http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10656&i=97903&c=1952974#ScotParlOR>

⁵ With regard to the census figures, it is worth noting also that the question was optional, and 7% of the population chose not to respond. However, even in the extremely unlikely event that none of these belonged to any religion, those stating that they do not belong to any religion would still constitute only a minority of the population. In addition, the Scottish census asked "What faith ... do you belong to?" where the English census asked "What faith ... are you?", and the number of people responding "None" was undoubtedly increased by the perceived requirement for some form of formal membership.