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Dear Lord Nash,

Swindon SACRE would like to thank you for your letter to SACREs dated 7th January 2015.

It is most encouraging to know that as Under Secretary of State for Schools you recognise the important role that SACREs play, that they need to function well and that local authorities have a duty to enable SACREs to fulfil their statutory duties.

We are grateful that you assert SACREs ability to contribute to improving the academic rigour of RE and supporting schools in promoting mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.

We also welcome your reminder of the importance of reviewing our agreed syllabus every five years which for us at Swindon SACRE falls in the academic year 2016 -17 and requires extra funding to be a thorough and effective review.

I include a copy of Swindon SACRE's annual report 2013-14 in which you may note that the numbers of students entered for full course GCSE Religious Studies was only 15% as opposed to 42% nationally. SACRE would appreciate the powers to investigate the reasons for this and to put pressure on schools and academies (there is now only one local authority secondary school in Swindon) to ensure that pupils in Key Stage 4 receive the rigorously academic RE to which they are entitled.

It would seem SACREs cannot fulfil their statutory duties without teeth and without appropriate funding. If the Secretary of State for Schools and the Department for Education is serious about the significant contribution that RE makes to promoting social cohesion - in the light of events in Birmingham and Tower Hamlets and the numerous incidents of young British people joining extremist groups - then it needs to ensure there is appropriate funding for SACREs. This could easily be achieved by instructing local authorities that a percentage of the Dedicated Schools Grant is ring-fenced for RE and SACREs.

In your last paragraph you state that “SACREs would not be able to exist without the advice, help and support of dedicated individuals and communities”. However, some of that support needs to be professional and not voluntary for it to be systematic, rigorous and deserving of respect by teachers and headteachers. Appropriate funding for good dedicated clerking of SACRE and agreed syllabus conference meetings needs to be safeguarded, as does the employment of a well qualified and dedicated adviser to each SACRE.

If the Department of Education is serious about the singularly significant role that RE plays in forming a future for Britain as a socially cohesive and harmonious nation then further commitment to financing SACREs is fundamental.

Yours sincerely,

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on behalf of Swindon SACRE