



# Cumbria Humanist Group

[www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk](http://www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk)

(Affiliated to the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society)

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## 'Focus Group' for CCC Equality & Diversity Project. 17 June 2009. (FAO Joel Rasbash)

1. *What do you think are the main issues facing agnostics, atheists and non-believers in Cumbria?*

Education (see below): most of our concerns are within this field and many of our members are or have been teachers and academics.

Health and social care services: providers of contracted-out services who may have a faith base must not be allowed to proselytise to service users.

Community organisations such as scout groups which have a religious bias tend to exclude non-religious individuals. We realise that these may be nationally run organisations, but they do receive LA funding and so should be warned of extreme prejudice.

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2. *What do you consider to be the main issues relating to schools and education?*

- *How non-religious beliefs are integrated into the syllabus, assemblies and the school culture.*
- *How non-religious pupils, families and staff are treated in Religious schools.*

Iain Paterson, our Chair and an HMI, represents us on the Cumbria SACRE. The BHA recently campaigned successfully to have Humanism added to the schools RE syllabus. (BHA website - <http://www.humanism.org.uk/education/education-policy> )

But under present (national) policy, Iain can only be a **co-opted** member and therefore cannot hold office, although he had been proposed as Vice-Chair. We had understood that this was to change and non-religious individuals could stand as full members of SACREs, but the latest guidance from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) [http://www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk/CHG/DCFS\\_Guidance.pdf](http://www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk/CHG/DCFS_Guidance.pdf) (Ch.5, pp 21-29) does not provide for this. Iain's letter to Ed Balls [http://www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk/CHG/IainPaterson\\_DCSF\\_May09.pdf](http://www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk/CHG/IainPaterson_DCSF_May09.pdf) has the full support of the Cumbria SACRE Chair and other members. The BHA is campaigning nationally to challenge the policy, and we ask you please to note this in the context of the Cumbria situation.

Obviously we support the anti-faith schools campaigning of both the BHA and NSS (<http://www.secularism.org.uk/>) and we are seriously concerned about the academies in the North East. Although the Richard Rose Academy in Carlisle does not appear to have this religious bias at this stage, we would hope for a strong ongoing monitoring of its policies and those of any similar academies in Cumbria.

We have reports of parents applying for their eleven-year-old children to go to Trinity School being asked if they are regular churchgoers. Although we realise that Trinity has an historic

association with the cathedral, such criteria are totally unacceptable now. We have no reports of rejection for parents who are non-believers, but this proves nothing.

Again an outcome of national policy, the continuing requirement for daily religious assemblies in schools causes us concern. Many school heads manage to 'secularise' these with no significant problems and we would hope the LEA would support this, or at least not penalise it.

We've had some anecdotal reports from people who have felt threatened in their employment because of their non-religious stance – mainly in education – but we have no hard evidence.

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3. *Do you think there is a greater role for registrar services in meeting the needs of agnostics, atheists and non-believers?*

- *Role of celebrants in weddings and civil partnerships.*
- *Civil funerals.*

BHA-accredited celebrants / officiants (<http://www.humanism.org.uk/ceremonies> , also on our website [www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk](http://www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk)) conduct non-religious wedding, civil partnership and funeral ceremonies. In Scotland they now have registrar status with such weddings, so they can conduct the legal formalities as well as the ritual and ceremonial part. We understand that there are no plans to implement this in the rest of the UK – apparently Harriet Harman (in what capacity??) has ruled against this. Two of our members are BHA celebrants, one living just over the border.

Carlisle Bereavement Services do offer a non-religious funeral, but apparently the structure is more rigid, more in line with the traditional committal service, than the humanist option which offers total personal choice to the dying person and the bereaved, in celebration of the life. Perhaps the Bereavement Services office could offer contact details for the humanist celebrants. Our website address is on the Carlisle CC and some of the DC websites, but not everyone will use this source.

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4. *Thinking of health and social care, can you say how you would want your beliefs to be respected if you lost capacity to make decisions?*

Non-religious beliefs should be noted in both medical and social services records. Some members had been asked for this information but many had not, so consistency would be desirable. We hold mixed views about contracted-out services, but accepting that this is the norm now, we would ask that third sector providers who may have a religious identity should refrain from proselytising. Service users should not be able to identify a faith base in the providers or their employees, and standards of care should reflect that offered when LASSD was the direct provider.

Living wills should also be kept securely with medical and social service records

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5. *Can you say what you would expect from care services if you were in care at the end of your life? Can you say if there are any issues around your beliefs that services would need to consider?*

Living wills again, as above. Respect for non-religious convictions of both the individual and their friends and family. No proselytising. In the case of terminal illness where the patient and those close to them are aware of the prognosis, the professional carers could help them to liaise with a humanist celebrant to make plans, but we would not necessarily support the idea of a humanist 'chaplain', as has been proposed by some campaigners. Generally the idea of emulating the faith

groups in such a way is against our convictions, whether in the fields of health and social care or in the criminal justice system.

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6. *If a religious organisation was contracted to provide any public service, would you have any advice as to how an equal service could be provided to agnostics, atheists and non-believers?*

- *Are there monitoring or contract management clauses that you would like to see?*
- *Is there anything relating to training or involvement?*
- *Is there any scope for the involvement of the Cumbria Humanist Group (BHA / NSS ?) in liaising with such services?*

The religious stance of the service provider should not be identifiable to the service user. (See 4 above.) Staff training should include the necessity to acknowledge and respect the religious or cultural stance of the client, and not to proselytise or promote their own views. This should be specified in LA contracts with faith-based service providers.

At least one of our members does sit on a school appeal board and we would encourage others to be involved in this way, to challenge any religious bias in admissions procedures. (Trinity School reference in 2 above.)

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7. *If you were to summarise the three most important issues for agnostics, atheists and non-believers what would they be?*

(Educational issues are probably our main concern.)

1. Non-religious representatives should be entitled to full membership of SACREs and similar decision-making bodies in the field of education.
2. There should be no religion-based criteria for schools admission decisions; parents (and governors) should be encouraged to report any suspicions of such prejudice.
3. In the fields of health and social care, especially with vulnerable clients, non-religious and secular views should be recorded and respected. Contracts with faith-based service providers should emphasise this.