Dear Members of the Public Bill Committee,

Re: Proposed amendment to the Children’s and Social Work Bill – New Clause 11.

Written Evidence submitted by the Jewish Community Council of Gateshead

1. In our capacity as a representative body for the Gateshead Orthodox Jewish Community we should like to express serious concerns in connection with the proposed amendment to the Children’s and Social Work Bill.

2. It is apparent to us that there has not been an appropriate degree of consultation with respect to the tabled amendment, disallowing the ability for salient arguments including those directly associated with religious values which are fundamentally important to many communities, to be put forward.

3. We work very closely with the independent school sector within this community, most recently completing a representative submission in respect to the Government’s consultation on Independent & Faith schools (‘Schools that Work for Everyone’). In that context it was clear that the Consultation process was predicated on seeking the views of as wide a range of contributors as possible, in order to negotiate shared challenges.

4. By contrast it is clear to us that the tabled amendment is most likely to result in a situation that will certainly ‘not work for everyone’ – and which will in fact find itself in direct opposition with the religious values and cultural sensitivities of a wide range of school governing and parental bodies across the UK, for whom the teaching of SRE is subject to prescribed religious and cultural guidelines designed to create a balance between the importance and sensitivity of the subject matter, and the background, age, maturity and understanding of the students.

5. The teaching of SRE can never be a ‘one size fits all’ concept. To impose an obligation upon a school that its parent body is not prepared to accept, will create division and mistrust that can only damage the successful delivery of a balanced and effective education.

6. It is a well documented fundamental tenet of Jewish Law & Practice that respect for fellow humans is of universal importance. This imperative towards tolerance and respect to all individuals extends equally to those who do not share the same religious and cultural values associated with Orthodox Judaism. A line must be drawn however at actively instructing and advising pupils in respect to alternative lifestyles that are Biblically and Halachically proscribed.
This would be a boundary beyond which Orthodox Jewish Day schools could not cross without eroding their own fundamental ethos and placing themselves in direct conflict with their parent body.

7. The proposal to include the compulsory education of SRE in the tabled amendment will actively detract from these aims, as schools become obligated to instruct pupils in areas that contradict the fundamental ethos of the school, the overwhelming will of the parent body, and the religious and cultural nature of the catchment community or communities – or more likely all three. This can only create damage, dissent and mistrust from within and beyond those faith and other communities who consistently endeavour to embed fundamental teachings of tolerance and respect in other, effective, enduring and proven ways.

8. Consequently may we respectfully urge the Committee to consider the perspective of those communities across the UK for whom compulsory SRE in the manner proposed will create enormous ongoing challenges and the consequent risk of serious harm. It seems unfortunate yet inevitable that if the proposed amendments are passed, the relevant school communities will find themselves in direct opposition with the Ofsted Inspectorate on an ongoing basis.

9. For the avoidance of doubt – it is a foregone conclusion that the fundamental imperative to safeguard and promote the welfare of children is of paramount importance and lies at the heart of everything that takes place within the school setting. Extensive regulation already prescribed by the D of E and closely monitored by Ofsted exists to ensure that appropriate standards are rigorously maintained, and that the school educational environment is safe, stimulating and effective.

10. It is our belief that the rejection of the tabled proposals is in fact an affirmation that the commitment to the welfare and needs of the individual student are overriding. To require all school pupils in the UK to receive the same mandatory approach to SRE as each other represents a lack of recognition that individual needs are different - but no less important.

11. Whilst we understand the thinking behind the proposal for Clause 11, and the serious issues that may require a new approach, nonetheless we feel it is vitally important that clearer guidance be provided for religious schools such as Orthodox Jewish schools in order to be able to opt out of compulsory SRE where there are cogent and compelling reasons for doing so.

Yours faithfully,

David Schleider, Trustee
For and on behalf of JCCG