

Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education
29th June 2022

**Report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Families and
Communities**

An Update on Key Issues

1 Purpose of Report

1.1 To present members of SACRE with a brief update on key issues that have developed or arisen since the last meeting of SACRE.

2 Summary

2.1 Members of SACRE will receive a brief report on a number of key issues. These are matters which have either been raised at previous SACRE meetings and which have moved forward or matters on which it is appropriate to brief members of SACRE.

3 Recommendation

3.1 That members of SACRE receive the report and note the contents

4 Background

4.1 Since the summer term meeting of the SACRE there have been developments in a number of areas which had previously been agenda items for SACRE or which have local or national importance for RE.

4.2 Members will be briefed on these key developments.

5 Equal Opportunities

5.1 This report has been prepared in accordance with the County Council's policies on equal opportunities.

6 Financial implications

6.1 Financial implications may be raised; These have been dealt with elsewhere or will be raised at future meetings of SACRE.

Contact Officer

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I) MEDIA RELEASE 18th May, 2022

School and government performance on religious education failing record number of students, says landmark data review

Neglecting RE leaves ‘gaping hole in the school curriculum’, says Father of the House Sir Peter Bottomley in the wake of the Government’s commitment to level up education across the country.

The number of students taking a Religious Studies GCSE in England has risen by nearly a third in the last decade despite the subject being underfunded and poorly taught in many schools across England, a new ‘state of RE’ data analysis has revealed.

Despite the increase in students taking the subject, no government money has been spent on the subject in the last five years, while many academies fail to offer the high-quality RE provision that according to Ofsted ‘affords students the opportunity to make sense of their own place in the world’.

The comprehensive review of data, carried about by a team from the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC), the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE), and RE Today Services, comes from a variety of sources, including an Ofsted subject report, public surveys, school workforce data, freedom of information requests, and interviews with teachers and students. It is the biggest ‘state of RE’ report for five years. We’ve graded the performance of schools, government and the subject itself in a review of five years of data.

The most significant findings are:

- A 50% increase in A-level entries for Religious Studies (RS) since 2003, beating Geography and History
- Higher Attainment 8 scores than average in schools with higher rates of entry for GCSE RS
- 46% of academies without a religious character have reported an increase in time to teach RE

However:

- Almost 500 secondary schools are still reporting zero hours of RE provision in Year 11
- Around 34% of academies are reporting no timetabled RE

Teaching RE is a legal requirement for all schools in England. All maintained schools have a statutory duty to teach RE while academies and free schools are contractually required through the terms of their funding agreement to make provision for the teaching of the subject.

NATRE Research Officer, Deborah Weston OBE, who led the data review, said: “With record numbers of students taking the subject, it is a great shame that RE is being neglected by the Government, and marginalised by some schools, particularly in the academy system.

In the Queen's Speech we saw the Government's commitment to "help every child fulfil their potential, wherever they live". The data has shown us that high-quality RE enables precisely this, being a key marker for both academic achievement and a vital part of young people's development in making sense of their own worldview as part of the diverse and pluralistic nature of belief in the 21st century."

"The planned changes outlined in the Queen's Speech provide a once in a generation opportunity to address most of the issues highlighted in this data. However, without a properly funded National Plan and a system of accountability for high-quality RE under the Government's academy vision for all schools, we risk denying a generation of students access to this vital subject. A high-quality education in religion and worldviews must now be part of their plans to help every young person fulfil their potential in school, society and the world of work."

In March, a parliamentary roundtable met to discuss the future of the subject, with the Father of the House, Sir Peter Bottomley, calling for a 'National Plan' for the subject.

Responding to the latest data, Sir Peter Bottomley said: "Looking at the performance data on this report card, too many young people are not getting a fair deal when it comes to religious education. In neglecting the subject, we leave a gaping hole in our school curriculum. At its best, RE prepares young people for the ethical, moral and religious debates that influence life in modern Britain and the wider world."

The report card summarising the data review can be accessed through Agenda item 7

iii) Central government funding for RE projects

In the period 2016-2021, Religious Education received no central government funding for subject specific projects. During the same period, £387 million was allocated to Music projects, £154 million to Maths projects, £56 million to Science projects, £28.5 million to English projects, and £16 million to Languages projects.

iv) Advice available to support RE in addition to NASACRE and AREIAC

Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC)

Established in 1973, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) brings together over 60 national organisations. These comprise academic and professional associations specialising in religious education, as well as individual religion and belief organisations representative of the range of communities found nationally.

[The Religious Education Council of England and Wales](#)

National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE)

NATRE is the subject teacher association for RE professionals in primary and secondary schools and higher education, providing a representative voice at national level and publications and courses to promote professional development. NATRE's Executive consists of a majority of serving teachers from primary and secondary schools who are elected for a three-year term of service.

[NATRE](#)

RE Today Services

RE Today works in the UK and internationally to give children a broad and balanced education to support them in the world they live in, through the teaching of high-quality RE in schools.

It supports teachers in ALL types of schools through publishing high-quality RE publications, offering consultancy services, curriculum development and by providing professional development opportunities for RE professionals.

[RE Today](#)

v) How does Ofsted Report on the School Curriculum?

What are the implications for RE?

Extracts from Ofsted inspections undertaken in 2021 and 2022 indicates Ofsted's concern for subjects, including RE, that are taught in a way that results in the subject content not being appropriately sequenced. Consequently, the approach adopted fails to help pupils to build on what they already know or effectively prepares them for future learning. Ofsted is also critical of curriculum plans which for particular subjects do not clearly identify the knowledge and skills pupils will learn. Ofsted also criticises schools for having limited opportunities for pupils to revisit prior learning or undertake assessment which identifies gaps in pupils learning or content that is misunderstood.

It is recognised these criticisms as ones which apply to RE – the example of Easter was cited, e.g. pupils learn about Easter and this often takes place in the Spring term to coincide with the celebration of the festival. However, often little or none, of the knowledge and ideas associated with Easter are revisited or reinforced for 12 months which leads to most of the taught content being forgotten.

The consequence of this is that pupils do not gain secure knowledge on which teachers can build. Progress thus in lower KS2, upper KS2 and in KS3 is consequently limited because pupils do not have secure knowledge or understanding which can be built on so they may advance to a higher level

vi). Westhill Legacy project- Explore, Engage, Reflect (EER) in conjunction with Youth Net. Summer Term 2021 report.

SACRE have funded this project from the 2021-2022 budget through commissioning the Entrust Minority Ethnic Achievement Service- MEAS- to deliver workshops in conjunctions with Youth Net.

Providing SACRE are willing to release money from its budget, this project will resume in the autumn in October 2022 and continue until December 2022, utilising the 2022-2023 budget.

Update on Christianity the Big Picture conference in conjunction with Youth Net

This project is aimed at key stage 3-years 7, 8 and 9 in High schools.

This conference has been designed to give an overview of Christianity and it covers Worship, Prayer, the Bible, Church, Jesus and Big Questions. It gives KS3 students a

chance to explore, reflect and engage with some of the core themes of Christianity through experiential learning.

This experiential learning is supported with an introduction looking at 'Who is God' and then an opportunity for a Q and A session at the end.

Only one school asked for the RE mini conference and that took place on the 3rd Feb at King Edward's school with Year 8 (108 students). To allow the whole year to access this resource, the conference was delivered twice.

This is a feedback quote from a Humanities teacher

'Very interactive and engaging, lots of places and spaces to reflect, think, provoke thoughts and ideas. It allowed students time to consider their own beliefs and ideas and perhaps challenge preconceptions or misconceptions they may have about the Christian faith.'

Reflections from Youth Net •

We were able to offer a mix of activities to suit visual, kinaesthetic and audio learners. We did this by using videos, work sheets/puzzles, artefacts and matching activities in a lot of the stations.

The event was not without challenges, but we are confident that it was a good opportunity for the students involved. We believe that with a few adaptations it could be even more beneficial to schools.

- Whilst some students struggled with the independent learning (this year group has had a very disrupted few years because of Covid), others really benefited from the chance to explore the themes in a new way and asked lots of questions to further their learning.
- Two of the zones were lighter on interactive material - church and worship. In the future we would combine these 2 zones to create more space and make sure students have enough to engage with in each zone.

Feedback from one of the teachers stated

'It was hard to manage 60 students in the space at one time. This meant that the spaces could be crowded at times and that there were moments where behaviour was hard to manage or students were distracted by each other.'

In the future we feel it would be better to offer the conference for single classes (approx. 30 students) over a single period. This has several advantages:-

schools may be more willing to have the conference if it offers less disruption to the curriculum (i.e. having to take students out of a single lesson rather than a double).

Students will benefit from staff/volunteers being more available to answer questions and offer guidance with the material.

Although students may not be able to make their way through the whole of the booklet, they will be able to move around the zones more freely and less likely to miss out

vii). Continuous Professional Development

Mary Gale continues to support RE leaders in several schools through email, virtual meetings and face to face meetings. This has involved supporting schools in understanding *greater depth* in RE assessment, whole class reading through RE texts, planning and preparation for Ofsted '*deep dives*'.

In addition, Mary continues to support a school to work through the Agreed Syllabus and how Understanding Christianity can dovetail into the AS.

Planning support is needed most. Mary has re written some of the planning to support schools. One topic that needed a refresh was learning about *Sacred Texts* in year 5.

Church of England schools have also asked for support with preparation for their next SIAMS inspection. Mary Gale has facilitated this.

Entrust have approached Mary Gale to run face to face courses in the autumn and spring terms to provide network support for teachers either at the central training centre or in individual schools.

Governors through the Governor Information Pack continue to receive updates on RE in Staffordshire, the status of the AS and the process for the review. They have been encouraged to work in their link governor roles to discuss the impact of the current AS. This information has reached 300 plus schools and over 200 leaders from these school have joined an update webinar where RE was discussed as part and parcel of the information provided. This is unique to Staffordshire as having discussed this at a recent national NASACRE conference it is apparent that many SACRES do not have this avenue to engage so readily with their stakeholders.

viii). Association of Religious Education Inspectors and Advisors and Consultants (AREIAC) and the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) Meetings.

Mary Gale attended a virtual Midlands AREIAC group meeting on 15th March 2022. Items discussed

The story of Harry Potter. Does it have a religious message?

It was suggested that perhaps the best book available which explores the religious ideas, and particularly the Christian values and beliefs which feature in J K Rowling's "Harry Potter" books is, "*How Harry Cast His Spell: The Meaning behind the Mania for J. K. Rowling's Bestselling Books*" by John Grange (Tyndale House Publications). John Granger argues that major religious themes in the books are:

- a) the books places young readers in a universe where there is a conflict between good and evil, and the books are firmly on the side of morality. However, as Christianity affirms being moral isn't easy as it may involve risk, danger and sacrifice. This same idea is evident in the Harry Potter books, e.g. "You have to face the choice between what is right and what is easy". Albus Dumbledore
- b) over the course of the story Harry Potter undergoes spiritual growth, or stages of transformation.
- c) the books explore the evils of prejudice as reflected in the "pure-blooded" wizards superior and hostile attitude towards "half-breeds" and "muggles"

- d) Harry Potter is involved in a struggle that involves having two natures. This mirrors the ideas of Christ the God-man in Christianity
- e) Harry Potter volunteers himself for sacrificial death which he faces as a human unaided by magic the outcome of which is a victory over evil and death – an analogy which mirrors the beliefs of many Christians about Christ’s death on the cross
- f) The books offer evidence of a world of things unseen
- g) Harry Potter’s attitude to life is not driven by greed, power, wealth or fame (e.g. he destroys the elder wand) counters the attitudes and materialism of our times

Also under discussion was Religion and Worldviews in the classroom – the ongoing discussion – see Agenda item 7

Two recently published academic articles were discussed. One of these articles was written by Emma Salter has the title, “*A critical reflection on the Commission on Religious Education’s proposed National Entitlement to Religion and Worldviews in England and Wales*”.

The other article, written by Lynn Revell and Kate Christopher, has the title, “*Worldviews and diversity: freedom of expression and teaching about the mosque.*”

Discussion about Emma Salter’s paper focussed on the concerns of primary teachers of RE. Salter argues that research indicates that a criticism primary teachers have regarding the “Religion and Worldview” approach to the subject is the belief that it would require them to teach about too many traditions and worldviews and this would lead to content overload, confusion and poor learning. Another related concern was about being expected to teach about “too much diversity too soon” resulting again in poor learning and pupils becoming confused. A third concern that primary teachers expressed was that they found it difficult to see a clear distinction between RE as they understood it and the proposed “Religion and Worldviews” approach.

Discussion about Lynn Revell and Kate Christopher’s article views focussed on the criticism they make about religious education. They claim that RE tends to minimise differences that exist within a religion and so presents an “*essentialised*” version of each religion. Religious education they claim fails to recognise diversity but instead promote “sameness” and that this is evident RE teaching resources. This may be demonstrated, it is claimed, by downloading resources from the TES website which are intended to help teachers explore “The mosque” as an RE topic.

Revell and Christopher claim resources available from this source are all very similar and tend to focus on key features like minarets, mihrabs, minbars, domed roofs and shoe racks, etc. This material, it is suggested, supports the view that RE tends to promote sameness as the resources the TES provides do not give any impression that there is any diversity within Islam with respect to what mosques look like, or that there is any diversity within Islam with respect to the practices, attitudes or beliefs of the Muslims that use a particular mosque. This criticism of RE was challenged at the meeting. The view was expressed that teaching pupils so that they learnt about typical features often found in mosques like minbars, mihrabs, minarets, etc. was appropriate but that this would only serve as an introduction to a topic about the mosque. If naming and labelling of parts was all that was taught this would be recognised by most teachers of RE as simply being RE that was poorly undertaken.

Revel and Christopher argue that the “Religion and Worldview” approach would acknowledge diversity in Islam.

In addition, Mary attended a local meeting of the NATRE group held as a combination of virtual and face to face meeting in Chadsmead Primary Lichfield in late Spring 2022 at 4.30.. Discussion centred around the AS – see AS section, and updates on resources.

ix). Update on RE Quality Mark application- St Chad’s Pattingham.

The school received the SACRE grant to enable them to apply for this quality mark. They are very grateful. The RE lead is working her way through the requirements collecting evidence for the assessment. Due to Covid-19 this could be a virtual assessment and not a face-to-face assessment. They are awaiting more information.

Mary Gale will visit the school to ensure they have a strong evidence base before the assessment. They have recently had an Ofsted inspection with a good outcome. The report states that the school has been working on a broad and balanced curriculum and especially made a reference to their work on diversity by using appropriate texts and reading books. The school was praised for highlighting Black History month in its curriculum. This bodes well for a future positive assessment of the REQM.