

Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education
6th July 2016
Report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Families and Communities

Publications for SACRES to consider

1 Purpose of Report

1.1 To present SACRE members with a selection of suggestions as a result of the NASACRE conference.

2 Summary

2.1 Throughout the 2016 NASACRE conference, keynote speakers and NASACRE executive committee members made suggestions that SACRES might consider adopting in their meetings:.

3 Recommendation

3.1 That members of SACRE receive the suggestions. That members use this as an opportunity to reflect on good practice.

4 Background

4.1 It is good practice for SACRE's to self-review and consider suggestions for future actions. This is reported on annually in the annual report.

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 There are no immediate financial implications

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Educational Excellence Everywhere: the implication for SACREs

Chair of NASACRE, David Hampshire writes:

In March 2016 the government published the White Paper: *Educational Excellence Everywhere*. The White Paper sets out the government vision for schools which, if the proposals become law, will have an impact on SACREs and Agreed Syllabus Conferences.

Firstly, there is the intention that every school will become an Academy by 2022. As agreed syllabuses do not have to be used by Academies, the question arises as to whether a local authority will need to review its agreed syllabus as required by the 1996 Education Act and the Statutory Instrument 1304 (1994). Similarly, SACREs were established to advise the local authority on RE and collective worship. If local authorities have no schools for which they are responsible, will they need advice on these two areas of school life?

Secondly, the White Paper indicates that the government will reconsider the role of local authorities and their functions. It is not clear whether this includes SACREs or not. If they are to be reformed, on what basis would this happen? Or, will they simply be abolished? The White Paper is silent on this issue.

Thirdly, statements on the National Curriculum in the White Paper are significant. The government seeks to set a standard that Academies will be able to go beyond in the National Curriculum but no Academy will have to follow it. Will the government seek to establish a national standard for RE given that no locally agreed syllabus would have to be followed? What is strongly indicated in the White Paper, is that Multi Academy Trusts will have responsibility for curriculum and therefore, what will be the requirements placed upon them for religious education and, further, collective worship? The issue of funding agreements is significant here, especially as all existing Academies (without a specifically religious foundation) have the current definition of RE and collective worship written into those agreements – which cannot be retrospectively changed – and a clear reference to Agreed Syllabuses.

Finally, it is important to focus on the current situation. Many White Papers have proposed changes that have not come about. However, certain things are clear:

1. For the time being, the current law remains in place. Local Authorities have to appoint and maintain a SACRE as set out in statute and statutory instruments.
2. Agreed syllabuses have to be reviewed at least every five years and a revised syllabus published on the recommendation of an Agreed Syllabus Conference.
3. These functions have to be maintained even in authorities that currently have no schools to which an agreed syllabus or SACRE's advice applies.
4. SACREs have to report annually to the Secretary of State on the advice they have given and the response to that advice.

It is also the case that Local Authorities are legally responsible for the education, training and recreation of all children and young people up to the age of 19 (and in some cases, 25 as a consequence of the Children Act 2004). This responsibility includes the religious education of pupils in whatever educational establishment they might be in, whether within or beyond the boundaries of the Authority. Hence, SACREs have a clear role in ensuring that the quality of religious education and collective worship is high for all children whether they are in a maintained community school or not.

All Party Parliamentary Group on RE report

Paul Smalley, Vice Chair of NASACRE provides a report of the APPG on RE meeting held in January 2016

Combating extremism, and promoting community cohesion and character development: the contribution of Religious Education to schools

The first meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Religious Education since the election was held on 19th January 2016. Fiona Bruce MP, Chair of the APPG, welcomed around 80 people including a number from the NASACRE Executive and local SACREs to Committee Room 10 of the Houses of Parliament. The speakers were mainly drawn from the Birmingham SACRE, with Nigel Genders giving a CofE perspective and David Hampshire, Chair of NASACRE able to bring some wider national thinking.

First to speak were Ron Skelton and Adiba Khan Head and Head of RE from Broadway school in Birmingham. Their school was held up as an example of good practice as they use faith and interfaith work to ensure they have 'rounded' pupils: promoting British values and developing character in RE. Their (mostly Muslim) pupils visit different places of worship, such as a synagogue, and are encouraged to discuss controversial issues, such as jihad.

Ranjit Singh Dhanda of the Nishkam Schools Trust, also based in Birmingham, suggested that faith inspires 'character' and therefore all children need to learn RE and to explore their own faith wherever they are at school. He spoke of how the Sikh tradition of respecting all faiths underpins the trust's schools. He wanted to ensure that existing legislation is upheld and put into practice to empower local SACREs and local authorities.

Marius Felderhof co-author of the book: *Teaching Virtue - The Contribution of*

Religious Education, explored the way Birmingham SACRE had been used by the authority after the Trojan Horse affair. He advocated a strengthening of inter-faith networks and suggested that 'RE and collective worship are essentially about character development'. He also recommended that all SACREs should be properly funded, that GCSE RS be included in the EBacc, RE teachers better trained in 'character' development, and increased funding for research.

David Hampshire, chair of NASACRE, focused on challenging the contemporary understanding of all extremism as being evil, and argued that extreme pacifism (as exemplified by the Quakers) or generosity (such as that of St Anthony) should be celebrated in schools. He stated that RE cannot change the world in an hour a week, but offers the opportunity to look at countervailing narratives, so that pupils can critique the totalising narratives of violent extremism – remembering that even our narrative about extremism itself is unfairly linked to Islam. He noted that the CORAB report alleges that there is too much positive spin on religions and yet there is a Christian heritage of dissent and protest. He questioned why, if RE has an important role to play in combatting extremism (as the Secretary of State suggests) it is not in the EBacc and not mentioned as part of the Prevent agenda.

Nigel Genders Chief Education Officer for Church of England asked 'What is RE for?' and suggested that viewing RE primarily as a means to an end risks distorting its primary purpose: of promoting theological enquiry and religious literacy. He said RE can make a contribution to combatting extremism, or developing community cohesion and character building, but we need to keep some separation between Prevent and RE. RE should focus on the impact of faith in the lives of believers, and provide the tools to answer the big questions, such as the source of identity that so many young people are searching for. He wants the whole curriculum used to develop SMSC and character.

Professor James Arthur, Director of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue at Birmingham University, ended the presentations by giving a short history of the development of character education, an area he claims has consensus across all main political parties and for which interest is expanding globally. He thinks that education is more than simply examination success and schools should be value driven, involved in teaching intellectual, civic, moral and performance virtues.

There were a number of questions from the floor, including questions about the purpose of RE, the training of RE teachers and whether a National RE Curriculum or greater accountability measures are the best way to improve the subject's standing.

Fit for purpose?

A critique of the Purpose of Study and Aims of the REC's 2013 Framework for RE

NASACRE's Treasurer- Michael Metcalf shares a personal perspective on the RECs Framework for RE

Disclaimer: This article represents the views of the writer only. It should in no way be taken as reflecting the views of NASACRE or Staffordshire SACRE.

Recent reports charting the present fragmentation of RE envisage a national syllabus in RE, as part of the way forward. More recently still, the government appears suddenly to be taking steps to tackle the situation. Currently, the REC's proposed **National Curriculum Framework for RE** (2013) is at the forefront of the stage. It is therefore a matter of acute urgency and gravity to consider whether the Framework is fit for purpose, before it is too late and the Framework - or something very similar - is adopted and imposed by default, whether we like it or not.

A few months ago, I found myself heading up the re-writing of Staffordshire's Agreed Syllabus, as Chair of Staffordshire's SACRE and Agreed Syllabus Conference. To set the ball rolling, I started to look more closely at the Framework. I took particular interest in the opening sections, on the Purpose of Study and on the Aims of RE, which provide the rationale for the whole Framework. I discovered that I was experiencing some quite strong negative reactions to the text. This article is accordingly an attempt to articulate those reactions cogently and coherently, in order to test them out with colleagues, and to stimulate serious and urgent debate.

My main initial reaction had been one of disappointment and a feeling of anticlimax. Could this really be the document which would attract, motivate, and inspire the next generation of RE teachers, subject leaders and advisers? Where was the sense of enthusiasm for Religious Education, and a proper recognition of the "buzz" and the enjoyment that good RE can generate among pupils? A torrent of worthy but pedestrian prose smothered the presentation like the proverbial wet blanket. Perhaps I was being unfair; the text of the Framework had hardly been devised to "sell" RE to the world at large, but at least it might have made more effort to be upbeat about RE.

My further reactions are arguably much more serious. The first of these is that the Framework appears to be uninterested in what pupils bring with them into the school situation from their homes and communities, and how this interacts with their work in RE. The Framework states right at the start that RE sets out to "provoke challenging questions..."; but it does not apparently set out also to respect and recognise pupils' existing identities, their emerging faith, or the communities they may already belong to. The pupil is conceived of as an individual without any roots, who must be helped to find

their lonely way in the world without reference to anything already there for them beyond the school gates.

This individualistic and arid ideology is compounded by an excessive emphasis on rational skills and processes, at the expense of adequately appreciating the affective element in religion, and indeed in life itself. According to the Framework, religion is there to be "explained", "analysed", "appraised", "evaluated". The awkward fact that there is a non-rational dimension to religion (even maybe to non-theistic stances also) is quietly swept under the carpet. In consequence, the Framework appears to be biased in favour of a quite aggressive rationalistic stance over against religion, all religion, and to be promoting – consciously or unconsciously - a secularist critique of religion as such.

One factor which may be at work here is the pressure to ensure that RE is academically rigorous and respectable, and can robustly defend its corner in comparison with other subjects. This is a fair concern, but only up to a point. There is an inescapable tension between the academic study of religion, and the inclusive character of Agreed Syllabus RE, a tension exemplified by the problems that arise for schools and Agreed Syllabuses as they seek to cater for Key Stage 4 pupils.

It seems to me that the Framework has too much of an eye on GCSE performances and programmes, and on the hoops exam pupils will have to learn to go through, and not enough of an eye on the needs, capabilities and interests of the general pupil. Is a GCSE course really the most appropriate strategy or model for every pupil, to build on what has gone before? Does not the GCSE goal distort the essence of RE, and introduce an unwanted emphasis on rationally manipulating religious data and knowledge, to satisfy some external arbiter?

So, is the Framework "fit for purpose? No, it is not, as far as its underlying philosophy is concerned. Can it be rescued and re-jigged? Not without much hard thinking and reflection. It's not a simple matter of modifying the text here and there. Who's going to do this work? You and I. If we don't engage with the task now, it may be too late. The Framework is already there, warts and all, in the forefront of the stage.

To the Chair of the APPG on Religious Literacy

Submission from Rev Prebendary Michael Metcalf

Preliminary note: I am making this submission in a private and personal capacity. However, my experience and context include the following: Chair of my local SACRE for around 15 years; Treasurer and Officer of the National Association of SACREs (NASACRE) since its beginning in 1993; Chair of Stafford and District Friends of Faith (affiliated to the IFN(UK)); NASACRE representative on the IFN Council and active contributor to IFN proceedings. I am a retired Anglican priest and educationist.

The term “religious literacy” can be given several meanings, and be pressed into use for various agendas. For me, religious literacy is a concept similar in meaning and significance to the concepts of literacy and numeracy, and modelled on them: it comprises **a core of practical, insightful knowledge together with a range of social, inter-personal skills essential for living successfully in today’s world**, within the specific context of the diversity of religious and non-religious presences locally and nationally/ internationally. “Religious literacy” therefore is applicable to everyone. It is an inclusive and neutral term, and it conveys rightly the sense that religious literacy is a vital and even mandatory element in each person’s proper self-development for today’s world.

However, this does not mean that each person has to become a walking encyclopaedia of knowledge about religion and religions (and non-religious stances). On the contrary, religious literacy is always going to be a “work in progress”; it is just as important to be aware that there is much that one does not yet know as it is to have achieved a sound basic core of knowledge, insight and skills. Equally, it is more important to foster an attitude of purposeful receptiveness towards new insights than it is simply to accumulate “facts”.

While this “sound basic core” will be largely similar for every member of our society, the paths by which it is achieved will vary according to the point and context from which each individual starts. The journeys towards such a core will be different, for instance, for a Christian, a Muslim, a Hindu, a Humanist or someone who is personally indifferent about religion. Indeed, one part of becoming religiously literate is to gain a wider understanding and awareness of the religious tradition one may have inherited oneself, including divergent expressions and divisions within that tradition.

Literacy and numeracy are primarily impersonal in the manner in which they are acquired and used. In contrast, religious literacy engages with the personal as part of its very essence, in two ways. First, it involves a measure of self-awareness and self-understanding concerning who one is, where one belongs, and with whom one has close allegiances. Secondly, it calls for the development of values, skills and inward dispositions appropriate to living with the reality of religious diversity in a plural and open society, including the confronting of bias and prejudice wherever this may occur, in oneself or others, and being sensitive to what might cause deep offence or outrage to others.

In a perhaps crude and simplistic but graphic way, religious literacy may be depicted as being about “Them”, “Me”, and “Us”. “Them” are the people who are different from me religiously: who are they, and what do I need to know and understand about them? “Me” is about my self-awareness: how do I perceive myself and express my identity? What are my fundamental values, beliefs, allegiances and aspirations? “Us” is the challenge of shaping a society which enables “Them” and “Me” to come together and live harmoniously and inclusively side by side, so that “Them” and “Me” become “Us”. The “Them” corresponds, in the above discussion, to the core of insightful knowledge. The “Me” stands for self-awareness and self understanding. The “Us” relates to the development of appropriate shared values, inter-personal skills, and inward dispositions.

Questions 3 and 4.

One important extension of the concept of Religious Literacy applies to institutional culture. In a plural society, it is vital that all major institutions foster and embody a **culture of religious literacy** throughout the institution: government and governmental departments; the media; public services of all kinds, e.g. the health service, schools and universities, the police. Institutionally, it is utterly inadequate, potentially even disastrous, to delegate all the

responsibility for religious literacy on to some “religious affairs” representative or specialist department. Rather, all senior appointments in major institutions should include religious literacy as part of their job specification. The promoting of religious literacy should likewise be an integral part of a shared corporate vision. (This paragraph applies also to Questions 5 and 6.)

In the school context, Religious Education is the obvious channel through which Religious Literacy can be mediated. However, if the school is indeed fostering an institutional culture of religious literacy, this will permeate the whole life of the school. In such a case, religious literacy will be embedded in school events and assemblies, and in the visual ambience of the school in general. It will be given a sharper focus within RE, but will require for its realisation a collegial effort involving SMT, all staff, and the whole governing body.

I quote from a **draft** version of the new Staffordshire Agreed Syllabus in RE, currently in preparation.

The role of Religious Education in schools is to help prepare and equip all pupils for life and citizenship in today's diverse and plural Britain, through fostering in each pupil an increasing level of religious literacy.

In consequence, the Aims of RE within the Staffordshire Agreed Syllabus are that pupils should acquire:

(1) *an increasing core of insightful knowledge concerning religions and beliefs, both in Britain and in more global terms;*

-By exploring religious beliefs, teachings and practices –
so acquiring knowledge and understanding of religious stories, sacred texts, lifestyles, rituals and symbolism that offer insight into religious experience and living within a faith community.

(2) *a developing capacity to engage with ultimate questions and to formulate their own sense of identity and values;*

-By engaging with fundamental questions –
so appreciating the human and religious questions that are raised by life and its experiences, and through which meaning, significance and value are forged, and by expressing and evaluating their personal responses to such questions- so gaining skills to be able to relate the things studied and discussed, to their own experience.

(3) *a growing range of the social, spiritual and emotional skills and dispositions appropriate to living well in a religiously plural and open society;*

-By reflecting
on the reality of religious diversity and on the issues raised by living in a diverse world - so developing skills of analysis and discernment in relation to prejudice, discrimination and bias, together with skills of self-awareness, moral judgement and responsible choice.

