

North Yorkshire Council

North Yorkshire Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) –

December 2024 Update from Professional RE Adviser

1.0 Purpose of the Report

To inform Members on work undertaken by the Professional RE Adviser since the last SACRE meeting.

To provide members with local and national updates on RE

2.0 Teacher Training Autumn 2024

- 2.1 2 Primary RE Networks in the autumn term were attended by 26 RE subject leaders and Headteachers. The network focussed on implementing visits and visitors to the RE classroom.

Comments from teachers about the theme of visits and visitors and their importance in the curriculum:

- I think what you said about authenticity Olivia and for our children to get exposure to a wider world as we are such a small rural school. At the moment our LTP ensures that the children visit each place of worship once before they move onto secondary school and we also have visitors to the school.
- to expose children to other religions and cultures, in a meaningful way. Increase knowledge about diversity
- When we have had more local visitors it has been great that children have understood more about the diversity within their community and encourages positive relationships between different communities and the school
- Definitely about putting faces and places to the religions they learn about!
- important for visits and visitors to be embedded in the curriculum to allow children to engage and experience in order to appreciate worldviews.
- Also supports teachers own subject knowledge when visitors can come in and speak to classes
- The key for me has been developing and deepening my own understanding.
- Very similar to others in that we refer to children developing in 'a world community enriched by difference and diversity' and visits and visitors allow us to provide children with learning experiences both within and beyond our local community.
- Hopefully helps children cement previous learning
- I really like the bottom right comments about broadening the idea of a special place being street/ memorial etc special place
- I completely agree with the blue comment. I often use pictures from trips when reviewing learning in the years following
- Visits have worked well in my context when they are cumulative and progressive
- Love the comment about the self-esteem of pupils whose place is being visited! So important to celebrate different religious identities
- We often have visitors after a unit sometimes a year after to help and support with more thematic units to build on knowledge and to help with cemented knowledge.
- Having a quick look at our current visits planned as part of the long term we think it would be beneficial for us to include a larger place of worship e.g. York Minster and a place of worship in a different country to broaden our childrens' understanding of Christianity as a worldview. This would also apply to other religions.

- We've just watched the tour of Southwark Cathedral which would be great to recap and consolidate learning about Christianity worldview, especially symbolism and what to find in a Christian place of worship.
- Just looking at Canterbury Cathedral and the benefits of a virtual tour is you can go a bit further past the barriers for the general public visitors
- Sometimes visitors have more impact than a visit, we have a visitor coming into school soon to deepen children's understanding of their current Sikhism unit and children have prepared and shared questions they'd like answering to help focus the visit.

Feedback from teachers about the networks:

- Thank you for all the resource suggestions for supporting visits and visitors in the RE curriculum
- Thank you so much for this Olivia this has been really helpful as always.
- Thank you for all the resources. I found it really helpful as a new lead.
- The directory and update on speakers, places - very helpful. Practical ideas also
- Brilliant training today, thank you so much
- Really helpful! Thank you so much
- Really useful training, thank you, and an EYFS focus would be great. Many thanks
- These networks are the most useful CPD I have!
- Thank you. Really useful.
- This has been amazing - really practical ideas. Thank you.
- Great session - I found the virtual visits/visitors particularly helpful as our budget is so tight this year.
- It was really interesting and great to have so many resources to access especially bringing the world in to school. Thank you for your time and patience with my questions!

Feedback was taken on themes for the rest of this academic year:

- An EYFS focus would be great!
- EYFS focus would be really useful, thank you, we take from 2 years so anything which is useful for really young children through to 5 year olds would be incredibly useful
- Very excited about the next couple of network meetings, especially Early Years.

3.0 Curriculum and Assessment Review – national responses

3.1 NASACRE response

Chairs of SACREs have received correspondence from NASACRE regarding the DfE's Call for Evidence for the current Curriculum and Assessment Review. Due to the tight timescale of the call for evidence and the timings of our SACRE meetings it was not possible to meet and pull together a SACRE response. However, it is important as SACRE we engage with the ongoing conversation about the place of RE in the curriculum.

In response to the DfE's Call for Evidence for the current **Curriculum and Assessment Review**, the NASACRE Exec has put together a list of 9 points concerning RE to influence the government's thinking about the place of RE in the 21st Century curriculum. These points in summary are:

1. **NASACRE is passionate about high quality RE and seeks this for all pupils across England**, as a subject that enriches all school curriculums.
2. **NASACRE seeks to support all SACREs around the country**; evidence from [SACRE funding in England 2023](#) provides a national education picture which has changed dramatically in the last 15 years.
3. **NASACRE supports the non-statutory [National Content Standard for RE](#) as a first conversation between all education providers in England**. Through the curriculum

review, we would like the government to build upon this work in order to provide a clear framework for all schools to be held accountable for the RE they provide for their pupils.

4. **NASACRE supports RE continuing to make a vital contribution to statutory requirements for schools to promote SMSC development and community cohesion.** RE, along with other curriculum subjects, can provide helpful experiences, knowledge and understanding of diversity and difference within a local community, and regionally, nationally and globally in terms of religious literacy.
5. **NASACRE is concerned about the local funding of SACRE's work and its impact on syllabus development.** NASACRE would like to see ring-fenced funding for the support for RE and SACREs. The [2023 FOI report](#) provides evidence of SACREs not being funded, nor given adequate professional support in order to review and publish an Agreed Syllabus.
6. **NASACRE is also concerned about how a SACRE's work can be limited through a lack of budget to provide local high quality CPD** around implementing the agreed syllabus and engagement with local communities.
7. **NASACRE has concerns from its analysis of SACRE annual reports** about LAs meeting the legal requirement to submit their annual report to the DfE.
8. **NASACRE is working well in partnership with [RE Hubs](#)** and this is improving our ability to bring SACREs together.
9. **NASACRE looked at how SACREs function and what could be improved through its 2022 report [Still Standing](#).** NASACRE would want to see the 1988 / 1996 legislation reviewed to ensure it is fit for purpose in a 21st century education system.

3.2 Religious Education Council of England and Wales response

The Religious Education Council's Board responded to the Curriculum and Assessment Review on behalf of its member organisations by addressing significant challenges and opportunities within Religious Education in England.

The evidence submission begins by identifying the persistent issues facing RE, such as inconsistent curriculum delivery, the diminishing role of local authorities, and the impact of policies like the exclusion of RE from the EBacc. The removal of the GCSE short course from performance measures and the broader academisation agenda have further marginalized the subject, leading to disparities in provision across schools.

Despite these challenges, the REC Board highlights areas of resilience, such as stable entries for GCSE and A-level RE. Where local authorities have the capacity to support Standing Advisory Councils on RE (SACREs), schools benefit from guidance on curriculum development, teacher training, and best practices. However, such support is increasingly rare due to resource constraints. The REC emphasizes the need for greater investment and accountability to ensure equitable access to high-quality RE.

A key recommendation is the revision of the subject's curriculum and assessment frameworks. Both GCSE and A-level subject content, as defined by the Department for Education (DfE), and assessment objectives set by Ofqual, require updates to align with contemporary educational needs and priorities. The REC also advocates for the Government to use the Religious Education Council's National Content Standard for RE, ensuring consistency and rigour across schools while respecting local and community-specific contexts.

Another critical issue is the misuse of the parental right of withdrawal from RE. The REC Board notes that some parents withdraw their children for reasons unrelated to the original intent of the legislation, often to prevent exposure to diverse religious and non-religious perspectives. This misuse undermines RE's role in promoting inclusion, community cohesion, and adherence to the Equality Act. The REC supports calls to review this right, citing recent legislative changes in Wales as one possible route.

The evidence submission highlights the importance of professional development for RE teachers. With many schools struggling to recruit and retain qualified RE staff, investment in teacher training and resources is crucial. The REC Board underscores the need for

Subject Knowledge Enhancement (SKE) courses, bursaries, and ongoing support to ensure teachers can deliver a high-quality curriculum.

The REC Board stresses the importance of RE in preparing students for life in a diverse, multi-faith and belief society. The subject helps foster critical thinking, mutual respect, and understanding of complex religious and non-religious worldviews. The REC Board calls for policy changes to elevate RE to the same status as core National Curriculum subjects, ensuring it receives adequate funding, time, attention, and accountability. Finally, the evidence submission points to recent achievements, such as the Religion and Worldviews Project, which produced valuable resources like the Handbook for syllabus writers. These initiatives provide practical tools for designing inclusive, pluralistic curricula aligned with modern educational priorities.

The REC Board concludes with a call for collaborative efforts among policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to address systemic challenges and secure the future of RE in England. By implementing these recommendations, RE can better serve students, schools, and society as a whole.

3.3 NATRE Response

NATRE has submitted a response from the National Executive to the Curriculum and Assessment Review. What follows is an executive summary of that response.

The NATRE response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review highlights the challenges and opportunities in Religious Education (RE) across England. It emphasises the subject's critical role as an academic subject, in fostering respect, understanding, and critical thinking in a multi-religious and multi-secular society while addressing the negative impact of recent government policies.

One major concern highlighted in our response is the exclusion of RE from the EBacc, which has devalued its status. Additionally, the decline in local authority capacity has limited the ability of Standing Advisory Councils on RE (SACREs) to support schools effectively. The absence of accountability measures for academies, coupled with outdated GCSE and A-level content, has further contributed to inconsistencies in the delivery and quality of RE.

Despite these setbacks, NATRE acknowledges positive developments. GCSE and A-level entries have remained relatively stable in England, showing the enduring interest in RE. Innovative projects, such as the Religious Education Council's Religion and Worldviews Project, have developed resources like the Handbook for Syllabus Writers, which guides curriculum development. Other initiatives, like NATRE's Spirited Arts Competition, encourage creative engagement with RE and provide examples of good practice. NATRE identifies the misuse of the parental right of withdrawal as another key issue. Sometimes this right is misused to prevent their children from learning about diverse worldviews, or to make time available for other activities, e.g. literacy/numeracy interventions, undermining the subject's inclusivity and compromising the principles of the Equality Act. NATRE supports reviewing this right, citing the Welsh model as one for consideration, where the right to withdrawal has been removed.

The response advocates for several key recommendations. These include updating GCSE and A-level content to reflect modern religious and non-religious perspectives, implementing national standards for RE to ensure consistency, and enhancing accountability measures for academies. NATRE also emphasises the importance of teacher professional development, calling for increased access to Subject Knowledge Enhancement (SKE) courses and bursaries to address teacher shortages and ensure high-quality delivery.

Insights from pupil feedback reinforce the importance of improving RE. Primary pupils expressed a strong interest in learning about different religions, visiting places of worship, and engaging with people from various beliefs.

One pupil noted, *"It's exciting to learn about things I've never heard of before,"* while another highlighted the importance of visiting places of worship to *"see what others do."* Secondary students valued discussions on philosophical and moral questions, with one stating, *"Debates in RE make us think about what's right and wrong."* whilst commented, *"My RE lessons make me think hard about life. It is challenging in a good way because we have to think hard about the subject and look deeply into it."*

These responses align with NATRE's vision of an engaging and inclusive RE curriculum. By addressing current challenges and implementing these recommendations, NATRE

envisions a National Plan for RE that would help secure a future where RE is consistently high-quality, relevant, and integral to preparing young people for life in a diverse and interconnected world.

NATRE's response articulates the complexities of RE in its place in the curriculum and highlights the need for further, meaningful engagement with teachers of RE in the next steps in the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

3.4 Culham St Gabriels response

Imagine...

You are a 14-year-old pupil about to choose your options...you are wondering whether to study GCSE religious studies... You have had a mixed experience of the subject so far. You attended a Primary Academy in Key Stage 1 where you learned primarily about Christianity and Judaism. At Key Stage 2 your parents moved house to the neighbouring county and the state maintained primary school you attended followed the locally agreed syllabus. This syllabus specified that pupils would start learning about Judaism at Key Stage 2 so you ended up learning about all the things you'd done in Key Stage 1 all over again. However, you had to learn very quickly about Islam as you hadn't learned about that before yet everyone else in the class had. On top of that RE was often on a Friday afternoon (maybe so Ofsted wouldn't look at it?) and sometimes your teacher just 'ran out of time' for the lesson. You felt disadvantaged.

You were looking forward to joining a secondary academy which is part of a large MAT. You hoped things would improve. However, as everyone had done something different in RE in the primary phase (some had followed an agreed syllabus, some a MAT curriculum, some came from schools with a religious character), the curriculum did repeat some things you had done before. Your teacher is not qualified to teach RE either, they are a geography teacher who has some spare time on their timetable apparently. You like the religion and worldviews approach though which focuses on real lived experience of believers. You're puzzled that friends who have gone to different secondary schools don't have the same experience. One friend said they didn't have RE at all but had a few lessons on religion in life skills. Another said the way their religious practice was presented in the classroom didn't reflect her own experience. Another was more positive saying they had three lessons a fortnight to learn in depth and everyone was required to do GCSE Religious Studies. You really want to know how different people live in and view the world but are not sure you're prepared for a GCSE based on your experience, but sadly your school doesn't offer statutory non-examined RE. You wonder why there is so much inconsistency and incoherency in the RE curriculum. It all feels rather unjust and unfair to you...

Like many individuals, schools and organisations, I am currently working with colleagues to submit our evidence to the curriculum and assessment review. As we look deeply at the evidence from over the last 10 years a key theme has come through strongly.

Inequity

- The weak position of RE within the basic curriculum means that its vulnerability leads to inequity of pupils' experience.
- The provision of RE curriculum is inconsistent, this means some pupils are not receiving their entitlement to the subject thus leading to inequity.
- There are no common curriculum standards for RE, meaning that expectations of pupils in terms of outcomes are inequitable.
- There is a lack of consistency and continuity of content in relation to RE, thus pupils' experience of the subject is inequitable.

This inequity means that some children and young people are inadvertently being disadvantaged. Currently inequality, lack of diversity (e.g. within worldview traditions, cultural representation) and injustice are built into the system in terms of the curriculum for religious education. Many, if not all, of these inequalities are not intentional. I don't think anyone who is involved with the subject sets out to bring inequality, but this is increasingly how it plays out in practice. I think it is time to say the status quo is not acceptable for our children and young people. It is time to restore an established entitlement to the religious education curriculum for all pupils in all schools.

However, this is extremely challenging, because for RE, the curriculum is bound up with structures. To call for RE to go into a new National Curriculum, for example, means that the whole religion and worldviews community will have to come together for the common good. This will mean humility of approach, service to others, building consensus and seeking

resolutions together; this is crucial if we are to bring justice. It will not be easy, but I do believe it is possible.

I also think it is vital. If the new national curriculum is to be applied to all schools (including academies), then as a religion and worldviews community we need to ask ourselves what would happen if RE is not part of a new national curriculum? Provision is already at crisis point, recruitment and retention of teachers of RE is hugely challenging and funding of the subject by previous governments has been inadequate. If the subject is not part of a new national curriculum, it could be further side-lined; it is I believe an existential moment for the subject.

So I offer a brief summary of the key points of our submission to the call for evidence. It sets out why we believe the only solution to the four areas of inequity is for RE to be in a new national curriculum. The RE community would need to work out what this meant in practice, but the National Content Standard for RE in England provides a very good starting point.

The issues:

Position: The subject has a vulnerable place in the basic curriculum. In addition, its position as a compulsory subject is not valued and the introduction of the EBacc has impacted negatively on the subject. Sitting outside a new national curriculum which would apply to all schools, including academies would place the subject in an even more vulnerable and inequitable position.

Provision: The amount of time given to the RE curriculum is inconsistent. In some cases RE is not taught in certain year groups or key stages. Some schools are not familiar with the current legal framework. Some curricula require all pupils to study GCSE religious studies to meet the current statutory requirement, whilst others do not. There is an evidenced correlation between studying GCSE Religious Studies and a better overall Progress 8 points score, particularly for those who are socio-economically disadvantaged but some pupils do not receive this opportunity. Some pupils are epistemically disadvantaged by not receiving a quality RE curriculum, leading to educational and social injustice.

Standards: There is no national benchmark for the subject leading to inequity in terms of standards. This means there is inconsistency in terms of expectations, pupil outcomes and therefore standards. There are over 100 different agreed syllabi, plus syllabi developed by MATs and providers of schools with a religious character. This makes it difficult to hold schools to account. It raises questions about effective progression and assessment when there is so much variation. There is often repetition of content leading to low standards, lack of knowledge and skills.

Content: There is inconsistent religious education content across all types of school due to the variety of syllabi (e.g over 100 agreed syllabi, numerous MAT curricula). This leads to poor sequencing, weak progression and diversity of pupil experience in terms of developing religion and worldview literacy. Pupils who move from one school to another or in/out of alternative provision, are from a transient community or whose parents are in the armed forces are particularly disadvantaged. The lack of consistency means there is no coherent progression between key stages. There is too much, and out-dated content at GCSE, which does not reflect the lived religion and belief landscape, nor different disciplinary lenses. Pupils (and teachers) are often unable to see themselves in the curriculum.

Restoring Equity- a proposed solution

After much discussion and consideration, there is only one way forward which adequately addresses all four equity issues. This is for RE (religion and worldviews education) to go into a new National Curriculum because it will confirm the status of RE as an equal subject to others and ensure it is not disadvantaged by weak resourcing and curriculum time. The National Content Standard for RE in England (2023) published by the RE Council of England and Wales provides an important way forward, a starting point for discussion, a place for negotiation to begin.

Position: This proposed solution addresses the issue of inequity of position by placing RE alongside national curriculum subjects. Parity is restored.

Provision: This proposed solution addresses the issues of inequity of provision. All schools would be required to follow a new national curriculum for the subject. I am aware consideration would need to be given to EYFS and to non-examined Key Stage 4 and 5

provision. In our submission we make suggestions for the latter relating in relation to preparedness for work and engagement in a complex, global society.

Standards: This proposed solution addresses the issues of inequity of standards by providing a common benchmark for all schools. There is already consensus among the religion and worldviews community around the National Content Standard for RE in England. Expectations of pupils would be the same regardless of what type of school pupils attended. Having a common benchmark would enable the subject to be compared to other curriculum subject standards more appropriately and would support bodies such as Ofsted to hold schools to account.

Content: This proposed solution addresses inequity of content by providing as a minimum a National Content Standard (2023). In addition, there should be a move towards a religion and worldviews approach, considering the lived religion and worldviews landscape, including the diversity in and between different worldviews. There should be a move away from a world religions paradigm. Steps should be taken to build an inclusive curriculum where pupils are able to see themselves within it. A new GCSE, or equivalent, should consider the real religious landscape, disciplinary knowledge and different ways of assessing (including oracy) pupils' substantive knowledge. There should be a focus on the educational intent of the curriculum for RE.

In addition, in our submission we have raised the following points which we believe contribute to ensuring equity for all pupils in all schools in relation to religious education. We are advocating for all these elements of a religion and worldviews education to become part of a new national curriculum.

The importance of:

- the contribution of religion and worldviews education to positive community relations
- the contribution of religion and worldviews education to preventing Antisemitism, Islamophobia and Far Right Extremism
- the contribution of religion and worldviews education to promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief as a human right
- religion and worldviews education for positive mental health and well-being
- religion and worldviews education in preparedness for work and for university readiness
- a hermeneutical approach to religion and worldviews education for development of critical thinking and resilience
- the local dimension, including a role for local or regional advisory groups similar to those found in other humanities subjects.

I believe it is time for the religion and worldviews community to come together for the common good of all children and young people. Culham St Gabriel's vision is to seek a broad-based, critical and reflective religion and worldviews education contributing to a well-informed, respectful and open society. We have a unique, once in a generation opportunity to move towards realising this vision.

Kathryn Wright
CEO, Culham St Gabriel's
November 2024

This is the view of Culham St Gabriel's staff and a significant majority of the Culham St Gabriel's trustees.

4.0 Theos Think Tank Report – Why RE Matters

The UK is becoming more religiously diverse than ever, yet provision for religious education is often inadequate. Theos Think Tank have compiled a short case for why RE matters in a modern world.

Where can young minds reflect critically on their own assumptions about the world, and better understand the different worldviews of those with whom they live and work? Where can they engage academically with the most pressing ethical issues facing society, while also finding resources to develop their personal spirituality? Where can they gain confidence and familiarity with the key texts, ideas, and rituals that have historically shaped (and continue to infuse) UK culture, while also understanding the influences at the deep roots of other cultures?

Religious education offers all these possibilities and more – and fostering such vital skills has arguably never been more important. Faith and belief are significant elements in many of today’s biggest headlines across the world, while higher levels of immigration to the UK have brought far greater religious diversity at home. At the same time, levels of religious affiliation are declining among the existing population. It is now much more likely that you will have a profoundly different worldview from the person sat next to you – whether on the bus, in the office, or in the classroom – than it was even ten years ago. It is also increasingly likely that an understanding of what it means to have a religious worldview at all will need to be taught somewhere outside the home.

And yet, religious education is a subject facing serious challenges. While some schools provide excellent RE, others neglect it in the school timetable: provision suffers from the lack of an agreed body of learning for the subject and, as of November 2023, 15% of English secondary schools did not teach any RE at all in Year 11. The most disadvantaged pupils often receive the worst deal. So too, the numbers of students opting to study religious studies or theology beyond school-level are dwindling – which in turn limits the availability of subject specialists to teach the emerging generation.

The confluence of all these trends risks a disastrous deficit of religious literacy in the UK. Conversely, securing consistent and high-quality RE for the next generation will bear fruit not only in the formation of individuals and communities, but in the building of a more humane, compassionate, and understanding society. This short publication, accompanied by a series of reflections on the importance of RE from a range of key public thinkers, makes the case for a bold and enthusiastic embrace of religious education as a priority area in our educational landscape.

I would encourage member to read the report and consider what it means for our role as a SACRE. You can read the full case [here](#).

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Background documents: NASACRE report