

**ANNUAL REPORT**  
**NORTHUMBERLAND**  
**STANDING ADVISORY COUNCIL**  
**ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**  
  
**ACADEMIC YEAR 2014 - 2015**

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## Letter from the Chairperson of the SACRE

The work of Northumberland's SACRE has continued and 2014-15 proved to be another busy year. I am pleased to report that the Locally Agreed RE Syllabus, last revised in 2011, continues to be popular with all the schools using it, and that teachers have found it helpful to access it electronically via the SACRE webpage on the Northumberland County Council website. However, it was during this academic year that the SACRE and the Agreed Syllabus Conference turned their attention to revising the existing Agreed Syllabus, which they intend to have ready for schools to use from September 2016.

In some respects, our focus has remained the same: monitoring Ofsted reports, looking at the work of individual schools, considering the exam results at GCSE, AS Level and A Level, and reflecting on best practice in the County and elsewhere.

We continue to work in a rapidly changing educational environment. The increase in the number of academies and free schools, and the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), have had an impact in Northumberland as everywhere else. We share concerns over the future of RE in our secondary and high schools as the subject struggles to remain relevant outside the EBacc.

Northumberland continues to be hard hit in the very difficult financial climate faced by local authorities, more so since challenging financial settlements are nothing new to us.

Resources to support the work of the SACRE have diminished, but the commitment of all SACRE's members continues. We depend on the goodwill of a very small central team who have an impact way beyond their numbers. The same is true of those working in our schools, many of them facing their own pressures.

These really are challenging times.

It is an absolute privilege to have served as Chair of the SACRE and to work with a group of dedicated, enthusiastic and knowledgeable members. Our meetings are enjoyable and constructive, and based on shared commitment to the continuation of the best possible provision of teaching and learning. We work in an atmosphere of mutual respect and celebrate what we can learn from each other in reflecting our increasingly diverse communities.

I want to thank all those who have helped us during the last year, and particular thanks go to my colleagues who make this task so worthwhile.

Robert Arckless,  
Chairperson, Northumberland SACRE.

## **SACRE Meetings**

The SACRE met on three occasions in the academic year 2014 - 2015, on 15th October 2014, 14th January 2015 and 3rd June 2015. On each occasion the SACRE was quorate. A majority of SACRE members were able to attend all or at least two SACRE meetings, thereby ensuring continuity and progression from one meeting to the next. To sustain links with the academies, the Head of Philosophy, Theology and Ethics at Bede Academy, Blyth, had observer status.

## **Advice Offered**

The SACRE advised the local authority that, in order for the SACRE to fulfil its responsibilities adequately, consideration should be given to (a) allocating an agreed budget for the financial year, and (b) ensuring that the part-time RE Consultant is given an appropriate number of days per annum to meet his various responsibilities. Regarding the budget, the SACRE received assurances that all reasonable costs would be met centrally. Regarding the part-time RE Consultant, it was agreed that he would be remunerated for a maximum of eight days on SACRE-related matters on behalf of the local authority for the financial year ending 31st March 2015.

The SACRE advised the local authority about schools where good or excellent work is undertaken in relation to RE and collective worship, and about schools where there is still room for improvement.

The SACRE also emphasised that the current OFSTED inspection framework makes it almost impossible to draw firm conclusions about the quality of RE, collective worship or Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) Development. For some years now, inspection of subject teaching has been much less of an issue (although the SACRE appreciates that "RE: realising the potential", published by OFSTED in 2013, has important and instructive things to say about how RE is taught nationally).

The SACRE made a few recommendations to the local authority about training that might be offered to teachers in the academic year 2014 - 2015. However, the SACRE recognises that some of the most effective training now and in the future will be provided to staff in individual schools, or to RE teachers in specific partnerships working through continuing professional development (CPD) programmes which they shape themselves.

## **Religious Education**

The SACRE has been able to monitor the quality of RE by various methods, including:

- public exam results (in particular, those at GCSE and A Level);
- feedback from individual SACRE members following visits to schools;
- reports from the RE Consultant following visits to schools;
- consultations with RE co-ordinators and heads of RE departments;
- feedback from teachers attending training courses;
- examples of good or best practice described in the SACRE's termly Newsletter;

- the albeit limited information deriving from OFSTED inspection reports (OFSTED inspection reports no longer offer comment on the standards of teaching and learning in RE).

From September 2012, OFSTED began to use a new inspection framework and, as a result, inspection reports assumed a character and an appearance markedly different to the period up to that point. Up to August 2012, every inspection report contained a table in which different aspects of a school's work were assigned a grade. One aspect of a school's work assigned a grade was SMSC Development. Because RE had not benefited from inspection for a number of years, the grade for SMSC Development was, in nine cases out of every ten, the only light that OFSTED inspection reports shone on RE, albeit indirectly (insofar as SMSC Development is a whole school issue, although the SACRE accepts that RE has a special and perhaps unique contribution to make to such development).

From September 2012, only four aspects of a school's work have been assigned grades in an inspection report: achievement of pupils, quality of teaching, behaviour and safety of pupils, and leadership and management. Consequently, SMSC Development is no longer assigned a grade. This means that, since September 2012, inspection reports do not readily provide insights into SMSC Development, let alone RE. It is true that SMSC Development often secures a comment or two in an inspection report, but inspection teams do not comment about it in every report. Moreover, as was discovered when an officer engaged in a trawl through some of the inspection reports for September 2013 to July 2014, the most that you find are comments such as "Students' SMSC is promoted well in lessons" or "SMSC is addressed superficially". In consequence, OFSTED inspection reports no longer provide the means to draw reliable conclusions about the quality of SMSC Development within a local authority. The monitoring role of the SACRE has therefore been made even more difficult than it was prior to September 2012.

### **The Locally Agreed RE Syllabus**

A revised Locally Agreed RE Syllabus was ready for use in schools from September 2011. Decisions about what would be revised were shaped, to a considerable degree, by the outcomes of a questionnaire circulated in 2008 to all schools using the Agreed Syllabus. However, the content of the "Non-Statutory National Framework for RE", "Transforming RE" and "Religious Education in English Schools: non-statutory guidance" helped determine the decision-making process. As a result, changes were not made to the units of study themselves (RE teachers believe that the existing units of study allow for sufficient breadth, depth and flexibility, and therefore almost unanimously petitioned for their retention), but to the introductory and the guidance components which establish the broader context for RE in the contemporary era.

Needless to say, most of the very little continuing professional development (CPD) provided in the academic year 2014 - 2015, and the great majority of school-based and electronic (email) consultations, were undertaken with the view to ensuring that schools and RE teachers were in a better position to successfully implement the revised Agreed Syllabus.

## Standards in RE

Above, we discuss how difficult it now is to comment in an informed way about the quality of RE and SMSC Development in Northumberland schools because of the latest inspection framework and the inspection reports which derive from it. Here, we concentrate on results in public exams. A word of warning, however: the figures below are the unvalidated results and subject to amendment when the validated results are available. Moreover, the figures derive from two printouts with differing unvalidated figures. The figures for AS Level differ considerably.

### RE GCSE Full Course

In 2015, 1435 students sat the RE GCSE Full Course. 96.6% secured A\* to G grades and 62.7% secured A\* to C grades (unvalidated results, two).

The comparable figures for earlier years are as follows:

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| 2008: | 788 students, 98.6% (A* to G) and 66.2% (A to C) |
| 2009: | 470 students, 99.8% and 79.8%                    |
| 2010: | 532 students, 99.8% and 75.8%                    |
| 2011: | 565 students, 100% and 79.5%                     |
| 2012: | 872 students, 96.6% and 54.2%                    |
| 2013: | 794 students, 94.6% and 58.2%                    |
| 2014: | 863 students, 94.6% and 55%                      |

The number of entrants in 2015 was an enormous improvement on the figures for every earlier year identified above, but, as will soon be revealed, only because it would appear that no students were entered for the RE GCSE Short Course. Results for A\* to G grades in 2015 demonstrate a slight improvement on the outcome for 2014 and are in line with those for 2012, but remain lower than for the years 2008 to 2011. Results for A\* to C grades in 2015 are notably higher than for the years 2012 to 2014, but significantly lower than for the years 2009 to 2011.

Although in Northumberland the number of students who sat the Full Course rose by about 60% while nationally the figure was only 5.3%, the results themselves compare unfavourably with the national outcomes. Nationally, 71.9% of students secured A\* to C grades, but only 62.7% of students secured the highest grades in Northumberland. Moreover, while the number of students securing the highest grades nationally has fluctuated only 2.2% over the last eight years, in Northumberland the fluctuation has exceeded 25% (compare 2009 with 2012). Taken long-term, Northumberland's results for A\* to C grades indicate that performance needs to improve, despite the encouraging outcomes in 2015.

This said, among Northumberland schools with a significant number of entrants for the Full Course (40 or more), stand-out results derived from:

Hexham Queen Elizabeth High (52 entrants), where 92.3% of entrants secured A\* to C grades.  
King Edward VI High (303 entrants), where 74.3% of entrants secured A\* to C grades.

## RE GCSE Short Course

When this report was drafted (late December 2015), data suggested that no Northumberland students had been entered for the RE GCSE Short Course in 2015. If this is, indeed, the case, the transformation in only twelve months is remarkable. This said, in 2015, the number of entrants for the RE GCSE Short Course declined nationally by 26.8% to less than 87,000.

Just for the record, the outcomes for the RE GCSE Short Course for 2008 to 2014 are as follows:

2008: 1445 students, 94.5% (A\* to G), 37.8 (A\* to C)%  
 2009: 1467 students, 94.5% and 30.6%  
 2010: 944 students, 92.4% and 26.7%  
 2011: 901 students, 91.3% and 36.6%  
 2012: 656 students, 80.0% and 25.9%  
 2013: 635 students, 88.1% and 32.2%  
 2014: 312 students, 93.8% and 63.9%

2015's unvalidated figure of 1435 for the total number of entrants for the RE GCSE Full AND Short courses returns us to the overall situation that existed in 2013 (see below). However, the total number of entrants for an RE GCSE exam in 2015 is still far below the figures for 2008 and 2009, and this long-term downward trend may prove to be of greater significance than the encouraging news associated with 2015 (i.e., that the number of students entered for the more demanding RE GCSE Full Course has risen substantially, and that the total number of entrants for RE at GCSE in 2015 is significantly higher than it was in 2014).

2008: 2233 students  
 2009: 1937 students  
 2010: 1476 students  
 2011: 1466 students  
 2012: 1528 students  
 2013: 1429 students  
 2014: 1175 students

We conclude that RE GCSE remains in an insufficiently healthy condition in many (but not all) Northumberland secondary and high schools, although, when we compare some statistics in the County with the situation nationally, perhaps we have a few reasons for optimism. Firstly, the number of students taking the RE GCSE Full Course nationally rose by only 5.3%, but in the County the number of entrants rose by about 60%. Secondly, the total number of students taking an RE exam leading to qualifications at GCSE declined by 4.5% nationally, but in the County the number of such students rose by about 20%. It will be interesting to see if the momentum in the County is sustained in the academic year 2015-16.

While the insufficiently healthy condition of RE GCSE in the County as a whole to some degree reinforces the remarkable achievements at Hexham Queen Elizabeth and Morpeth King Edward VI High Schools, the following questions must be asked. Firstly, why has the popularity of RE GCSE declined with such rapidity since 2009? Secondly, what arrangements are made by the County's secondary and high schools to ensure that students not studying RE for an accredited GCSE

course are benefitting from their statutory entitlement to an RE programme of study shaped by the content of the locally agreed RE syllabus?

### **RE AS Level**

In 2015 (unvalidated results, one), 28 students sat the RE/Philosophy and Ethics AS Level. 85.6% secured A\* to E grades and 46.4% secured A\* to B grades (unvalidated results, two: 165 students sat the exam. 80.6% secured A\* to E grades and 29.1% secured A\* to B grades. But we suspect the figures on unvalidated results, two are incorrect, based on evidence from earlier years. See below).

The comparable figures for the three years before 2015 are as follows:

2012: 38 students, 97.5% (A\* to E) and 25% (A\* to B)

2013: 45 students, 83.7% and 14%

2014: 44 students, 68.2% and 13.6%

The unvalidated results, one indicate a pronounced short-term upward trend in terms of performance at the higher end, but an unwelcome decline in the number of entrants. This said, the number of students sitting the RE/Philosophy and Ethics AS Level is probably too small to allow for meaningful discussion about trends (unless unvalidated results, two are accurate).

### **RE A Level**

In 2015, 95 students (unvalidated results, two) sat the RE/Philosophy and Ethics A Level. 100% secured A\* to E grades and 35.8% secured A\* to B grades. From 2008 to 2014, the number of students who sat the RE/Philosophy and Ethics A Level were 104, 107, 106, 101, 88, 70 and 71. The number of students who sat the RE/Philosophy and Ethics A Level in 2015 was considerably higher than for 2013 and 2014 and not far below the best years for which data exists, 2008 to 2011.

The comparable figures for the three years before 2015 are as follows:

2012: 88 students, 98.9% (A\* to E) and 43.7% (A\* to B)

2013: 70 students, 100% and 34.8%

2014: 71 students, 100% and 33.8%

While the percentage of students securing A\* to E grades is consistent over the 2013 to 2015 period, those securing the highest grades in 2015 still does not match the figure for 2012. Nationally, 54.5% of students who sat the RE/Philosophy and Ethics A Level in 2015 secured the top grades. Much therefore needs to be done to close the gap between the percentage of students securing the top grades at A Level in the County (35.8% in 2015) and the percentage of students securing the top grades at A Level nationally (54.5% in 2015).

Some of the concerns expressed by the SACRE about the well-being of RE in our secondary and high schools for the last two to three years seem to be confirmed by these trends.

## **Methods of Teaching, Choice of Teaching Materials and Professional Development**

The Locally Agreed RE Syllabus does not prescribe what teaching and learning methods teachers should use (although it does reflect on the variety of methods that teachers might utilise). Consequently, teachers select the methods they deem to be most appropriate, given the content addressed and the needs and the learning styles of the pupils and students concerned. Needless to say, as the children get older, more mature and more sophisticated in their outlook, and as greater emphasis is placed on learning from rather than learning about religion and belief, teachers in middle, secondary and high schools experiment with less didactic and more open-ended and exploratory teaching and learning methods, ones designed, above all, to create independent learners able to engage with the evidence in a dispassionate and rational manner. However, some OFSTED inspection reports, and anecdotal evidence deriving from SACRE members and others, reveal that some of the most innovative teaching and learning methods exist in our first schools where every effort is made to approach the study of religion and belief in a cross-curricular manner. Such cross-curricular approaches emphasise that, for large numbers of people, religion and belief impact on many, if not all, aspects of life.

Again, the Locally Agreed RE Syllabus does not prescribe what teaching and learning materials should be used, but the non-statutory guidance highlights a wealth of printed and electronic material which teachers may find useful. Moreover, the Agreed Syllabus contains advice about good resources that have come on stream since 2004. The SACRE termly Newsletter and RE CPD training sessions are used to up-date teachers about more recently produced teaching and learning materials.

RE teachers can access training about RE from at least five possible sources:

- contacting the Northumberland CPD College to arrange in-house RE training for an individual school, for a cluster of schools, or for RE co-ordinators/subject leaders in a partnership;
- contacting the part-time RE Consultant;
- contacting the North East Religious Resources Centre (NERRC);
- attending training events arranged by neighbouring local authorities offered to teachers, etc. beyond their boundaries;
- joining the RE Teachers' Support Group, co-ordinated by staff at Kenton School in Newcastle, which can be accessed by teachers in Northumberland and all the Tyne and Wear local authorities except Sunderland.

During the academic year 2014-15, schools where training/in-depth consultations were undertaken included:

2 first schools  
2 middle schools  
1 high school.



Issues addressed during school-based training/in-depth consultations included:

- The content of the Locally Agreed RE Syllabus;
- Revising RE long-term plans to better reflect the demands of the Agreed Syllabus;
- RE and Assessment for Learning;
- Ensuring feeder middle schools in a partnership teach the same topics to the same year groups;
- Good visitors and places to visit.

Discussions with the NERRC suggest that no Northumberland teachers were able to attend any of the RE-related courses provided by the Centre.

### **Complaints Concerning RE**

During the course of the year, no formal complaint relating to RE was received by the local authority.

### **Collective Worship**

NCC's most recent Policy and Guidelines for Acts of Collective Worship (ACWs) was formally launched in September 2006.

No formal complaint relating to collective worship was received by the local authority. Nor was the SACRE required to make a determination about the appropriateness, for either a school or a group of pupils or students in a school, of collective worship which is wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character.

Taking the County as a whole, there are very few recorded instances of pupils or students withdrawn from RE or ACWs. We take this as confirmation that most schools are therefore providing RE and ACWs which take full account of the rich diversity of religion and belief that presently exists in Northumberland. In other words, RE and ACWs are provided in ways that are in sympathy with the needs and aspirations of the whole school community.

### **Links with Other Agencies**

*National:*

Membership of the National Association of SACREs (NASACRE).

*Local/Regional:*

Close working relations exist with the NERRC

Close working relations exist with the region's Free Church denominations and other religious and faith communities, some of which are represented on the SACRE (e.g. the Hindu/ISKCON, Jewish and Sikh communities)

Close working relations exist with the Anglican and the Roman Catholic dioceses, which are

represented on the SACRE

Close working relations exist with the North-East Humanists, who are represented on the SACRE. Individual SACRE members sit on other SACREs in the region, or are asked to attend other SACREs' meetings to contribute to discussions and debates.

## **SACRE Arrangements**

### *Staff*

The local authority has a School Improvement Partner with ultimate responsibility for RE and Collective Worship, but such responsibility is merely one among many. Consequently, the local authority employs part-time (8 days per annum in 2014-15) a Consultant to assist with matters relating to RE and Collective Worship. Democratic Services provides the SACRE with a clerk who not only minutes the meetings and fields correspondence, but also engages in a host of tasks designed to ensure that the SACRE can conduct its business in an enviably efficient and cost effective manner.

### *Finance*

Regarding a budget, the SACRE has received assurances from the local authority that all reasonable costs will be met centrally.

### *Any Other Business*

The SACRE continues to publish a termly A4 Newsletter which varies in length from 4 to 8 pages. The Newsletter keeps teachers, governors and others informed about the latest developments relating to RE and ACWs; highlights best practice within the County; notifies about training options; provides early warning about important festivals and national and international events that schools may wish to discuss during RE lessons or ACWs; and alerts teachers about the most up-to-date RE resources. We are pleased to note that a few other SACREs in the region (e.g. Darlington, North Tyneside, Gateshead) have found it beneficial, either in the past or the present, to experiment with similar exercises designed to promote best practice.

Every 3 to 4 weeks during term time, the RE Consultant sends approximately 60 colleagues across the County an email containing useful information about RE, ACWs, community cohesion and a host of equality and diversity matters.

During the academic year 2014-15, the SACRE continued to work its way through its action plan (which was last up-dated in January 2012) to ensure its work has structure and coherence (the action plan can be found in Appendix 2). Two or three years ago, the NASACRE singled out the action plan as one worthy of emulation. The action plan will be renewed at some point next academic year.

The SACRE has a designated webpage (accessible via the Northumberland County Council website) where schools, teachers and governors can access the Locally Agreed RE Syllabus, the Policy and Guidelines for Acts of Collective Worship and copies of all the SACRE newsletters,

among other things.

Twice, discussions took place to consider how best to revitalise the SACRE membership to replace representatives who will be resigning for reasons associated with retirement or career progression.

Schools were encouraged to consider applying for the highly worthwhile Accord Award for Inclusive Schools, and attention was also drawn to the RE Quality Mark and the Farmington Fellowships for headteachers and teachers of RE/RS. Moreover, one of the SACRE's most comprehensive discussions revolved around the issue of what sort of relationship should the SACRE sustain with the growing number of academies and free schools.

Members of the SACRE played a key role in the County's first Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) commemoration in January 2015. The commemoration was such a success that the will exists to ensure that an HMD commemoration is now held annually.

The SACRE is much heartened to find how many Northumberland schools organise visits for pupils and students to houses of worship and other facilities reflecting the religious, ethnic and cultural diversity of contemporary Britain, even though, in a County as large as ours, such visits often involve considerable expense and long-distance travel. The success of many such visits is shared with a larger audience via the SACRE's termly Newsletter.

## Appendix 1

### The SACRE Members, 2014 - 2015

#### (a) Representatives of Other Churches and Faiths

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Baptist Church         | Represented by the United Reformed Church |
| Methodist Church       | Mr. D. Fenwick                            |
| Roman Catholic Church  | Ms. J. Cousin                             |
| United Reformed Church | Reverend E. H. Marley OBE                 |
| Hinduism               | Bhakti Rasa Adhikhara                     |
| Judaism                | Mrs. D. Van Der Velde                     |
| Sikhism                | Harpal Singh                              |

#### (b) Representatives of the Church of England

Mrs. E. Bainbridge  
 Mr. C. Hudson (from May 2015)  
 Mr. P. Rusby  
 Rev. J. Scott (from April 2015)

#### (c) Representatives of the Teachers' Associations

Mrs. L. Atkinson (up to July 2015)  
 Miss F. Gannon  
 Mr. T. Nicholls  
 Mrs. H. Shaw  
 Mr. A. Duffield (from October 2015)

#### (d) Representatives of the Local Authority

Councillor Mr. G. R. Arckless (Chair)  
 Councillor Mr. A. H. Murray  
 Councillor Mr. B. Pidcock  
 Councillor Mr. J. E. Smith

#### (e) Co-Opted Member

Mrs. C. Butterworth      North-East Humanists

#### Terms of Reference

Terms of reference as per Circular 3/89, Circular 1/94 and legislation such as the 1988 Education Reform Act and the 1996 Education Act:

*“To advise the Authority upon such matters connected with religious worship in County schools and the religious education to be given in accordance with an agreed syllabus as the Authority may refer to the Council or as the Council may see fit.”*

**Appendix 2**

**The SACRE Action Plan**

### Appendix 3

#### Distribution List:

All Schools in Northumberland  
 Director of Education and Skills/Head of Children's Services, Northumberland County Council  
 Department for Education  
 University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne  
 University of Northumbria at Newcastle  
 County Library Service, Northumberland County Council  
 Northumberland's four MPs  
 All Northumberland County Councillors  
 The CE and RC Diocesan Authorities  
 Karenza Passmore, North-East Religious Resources Centre  
 Rev. Liz Mullen, United Reformed Church Synod Office, 4 College Lane, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, NE1 8JJ  
 Rev. L. Osborn, Chairman of District, Methodist Church  
 Mr. D. Lennox, Secretary of the Baptist Union, North East Region Interfaith Group in Newcastle  
 North-East Humanist Association  
 Harnham Buddhist Monastery, 2 Harnham Hall Cottages, Belsay, Northumberland, NE20 OHF  
 The Board of Deputies of British Jews  
 The United Hebrew Congregation, Newcastle  
 The Newcastle Reform Synagogue  
 Muslim Council of Britain, PO Box 57330, London, E1 2WJ  
 Sikh Council for Interfaith Relations UK, 43 Dorset Road, Merton Park, London, SW193EZ  
 NASACRE