

ANNUAL REPORT
NORTHUMBERLAND
STANDING ADVISORY COUNCIL
ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION
ACADEMIC YEAR 2011 - 2012

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Letter from the Chair of SACRE

The work of Northumberland's SACRE has continued and 2011–12 proved to be another busy year. The hard work of a dedicated team has made it possible for the RE agreed syllabus to be made available electronically to schools, for most a much more useful format.

In some respects our focus has remained the same; monitoring Ofsted reports, looking at the work of individual schools, considering the examination results and looking at best practice here and elsewhere.

We are working in a rapidly changing educational environment; the emergence of academies and free schools and the English Baccalaureate is having an impact here as everywhere.

We share concerns over the future role of RE as it fights 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 for us.

Resources to support the work of SACRE have diminished but the commitment of all SACRE members continues. We depend very heavily 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 schools, many of them facing their own pressures.

These are challenging times. It is an absolute privilege to have served as Chair of SACRE and to work with a group of dedicated, enthusiastic and knowledgeable members. Our meetings are enjoyable and based on a 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 more diverse communities.

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

Robert Arckless, Chair of Northumberland SACRE

SACRE Meetings

The SACRE met on three occasions in the academic year 2011 - 2012, on 19th October 2011, 16th January 2012 and 9th May 2012. 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 had observer status. The Head of RE at Astley High School also had observer status, even though the school is not an academy.

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 work for approximately ten days on SACRE-related matters on behalf of the local authority.

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

The SACRE also emphasised that the current OFSTED inspection framework makes it very difficult to draw firm conclusions about the quality of RE and collective worship. Inspection of subject teaching is now much less of an issue than was once the case (although it is understood by the SACRE that "Transforming RE" has important things to say about how RE is taught nationally).

The SACRE made a few recommendations to the local authority about the training programme that might be offered to teachers in the academic year 2011 - 2012. However, the SACRE recognises that some of the most effective training now and in the future is likely to 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 who make visits to schools;
- reports from the RE Consultant following his visits to schools;
- consultations with RE co-ordinators and heads of RE departments;
- feedback from teachers attending training courses;
- examples of good 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. However, the reports contain information about Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural [SMSC] Development).

The SACRE is of the opinion that the generally high standards that have been achieved in recent years have been broadly sustained, with some specialist and non-specialist RE teachers in all phases engaging in outstanding work. It is especially gratifying that many Northumberland schools make excellent use of visits and visitors to enrich and enhance the quality of RE. Moreover, many schools raise the profile of the subject by experimenting with collapsed curriculum/enrichment days (days during which the normal timetable is suspended and, for either a year group, a key stage or the whole school, a programme of events is arranged to explore in depth a religious topic or theme) or, as in the case of secondary and high schools in particular, organising day-long RE, RS and/or Philosophy and Ethics conferences for specific year groups, the sixth form included.

To some extent confirming the trend, OFSTED inspection reports for community schools brought to the SACRE's attention for 2011 - 2012 reveal the following information in relation to SMSC Development (figures in the brackets relate to outcomes for the previous, 2009 - 2010 and 2010 - 2011, academic years when no school had an outcome of 4/Poor):

Special Schools inspected: 2 (2, 2)
1/Outstanding: 0 (2, 0)
2/Good: 2 (0, 1)
3/Satisfactory: 0 (0, 1)

First and Primary Schools inspected: 13 (16, 20)
1/Outstanding: 3 (2, 3)
2/Good: 10 (11, 17)
3/Satisfactory: 0 (3, 0)

Middle Schools inspected: 1 (10, 8)
1/Outstanding: 0 (0, 0)
2/Good: 1 (5, 6)
3/Satisfactory: 0 (5, 2)

High Schools inspected: 0 (1, 4)
1/Outstanding: 0 (0, 0)
2/Good: 0 (0, 2)
3/Satisfactory: 0 (1, 2)

For the third year running, no school secured a score/outcome of 4/Poor. Indeed, nor did a school in 2011 - 2012 secure a score/outcome of 3/Satisfactory.

Direct comparisons can be made with Anglican and Roman Catholic schools in the County because such schools are also graded on the extent to which they contribute to pupils' SMSC Development (figures in the brackets relate to outcomes for the previous, 2009 - 2010 and 2010 - 2011, academic years when no school had an outcome of 4/Poor):

Anglican First and Primary Schools inspected: 2 (12, 6)
1/Outstanding: 1 (5, 3)
2/Good: 1 (7, 3)
3/Satisfactory: 0 (0, 0)

Roman Catholic First and Primary Schools inspected: 2 (3, 3)
1/Outstanding: 0 (0, 0)
2/Good: 2 (1, 3)
3/Satisfactory: 0 (2, 0)

Anglican Middle Schools inspected: 0 (2, 1)
1/Outstanding: 0 (1, 0)
2/Good: 0 (1, 1)
3/Satisfactory: 0 (0, 0)

Roman Catholic Middle Schools inspected: 1 (1, 3)
1/Outstanding: 0 (1, 1)
2/Good: 1 (0, 2)
3/Satisfactory: 0 (0, 0)

Roman Catholic High Schools inspected: 0 (1, 0)
1/Outstanding: 0 (1, 0)
2/Good: 0 (0, 0)
3/Satisfactory: 0 (0, 0)

For the third year running, no Anglican or Roman Catholic school secured an outcome of 4/Poor. Indeed, nor did a school in 2011 - 2012 secure a score/outcome of 3/Satisfactory.

The Locally Agreed Syllabus

A revised Locally Agreed Syllabus for RE was ready for use by 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 which used 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" also 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 almost unanimously petitioned for their retention), but to the introductory and guidance components which establish the broader context for RE in the contemporary era.

Needless to say, most of the training provided in the academic year 2011 - 2012, and the great majority of school-based and electronic (e-mail) 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, various comments have been made about the quality of RE and SMSC Development in Northumberland schools. Here, we concentrate on results in public exams.

RE GCSE Full Course

In 2012, 872 students sat the RE GCSE Full Course. In 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011, 788, 470, 532 and 565 students sat the exam respectively. The number of entrants in 2012 is therefore a significant improvement on the number of entrants sitting the exam in any of the four previous years. In 2012, 96.6% secured A to G grades and 54.2% secured A to C grades. The comparable figures for 2008 were 98.9% and 66.2% respectively, for 2009 they were 99.8% and 79.8% respectively, for 2010 they were 99.8% and 75.8%, and for 2011 they were 100% and 79.5% respectively. Results for A to G and A to C grades in 2012 are therefore the poorest in the five year period.

Among the schools with a significant number of entrants (40 or more), stand-out results derive from Bede Academy where 60.4% of entrants secured A to C grades, Hexham Queen Elizabeth High where 84.4% of entrants secured A to C grades, and St. Benet Biscop RC High where 62.8% of entrants secured A to C grades. The results from these schools are very good. St. Benet Biscop RC High entered 218 students for the exam, a remarkable figure.

RE GCSE Short Course

In 2012, 656 students sat the RE GCSE Short Course. In 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011, 1445, 1467, 944 and 901 students sat the exam respectively. The number of entrants in 2012 is therefore significantly down on the numbers for 2010 and 2011 (which are themselves significantly down on the numbers for 2008 and 2009). In 2012, 80.0% secured A to G grades and 25.9% secured A to C grades. The comparable figures for 2008 were 94.5% and 37.8% respectively, for 2009 they were 94.5% and 30.6% respectively, for 2010 they were 92.4% and 26.7% respectively, and for 2011 they were 91.3% and 36.6% respectively. Results for A to G and A to C grades in 2012 are therefore the poorest in the five year period.

Among the schools with a significant number of entrants (40 or more), stand-out results derive from James Calvert Spence College where, of 69 entrants, 68.1% secured A to C grades, and from Berwick Academy where, of 128 entrants, 39.1% secured A to C grades. Cohorts in excess of 120 were entered for the exam at Berwick Academy, Ashington High and The Duchess's Community High (the latter entered the largest number of all, 156).

RE AS Level

In 2012, 38 students sat the RE AS Level. In 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011, 25, 36, 47 and 34 students sat the exam respectively. In 2012, 94.7% of entrants secured A to E grades and 21.1% secured A to C grades. The comparable figures for 2008 were 84% and 61.2% respectively, for 2009 they were 85.7% and 56.4% respectively, for 2010 they were 83% and 57.4% respectively, and for 2011 they were 88.2% and 44.1% respectively. The number of students taking the RE AS Level is too small to allow for meaningful discussion about trends.

RE A Level

In 2012, 88 students sat the RE A Level. In 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011, 104, 107, 106 and 101 students sat the exam respectively. The number of students sitting the RE A Level in 2012 has therefore dropped after a succession of years during which the figure has been more or less stable. In 2012, 98.9% of entrants secured A to E grades and 43.2% secured A to C grades. The comparable figures for 2008 were 100% and 81% respectively, for 2009 they were 100% and 71% respectively, for 2010 they were 99.1% and 61.3% respectively, and for 2011 they were 100% and 65.3% respectively. Results in 2012 indicate a significant decline in the number of students securing the highest grades.

It is heartening to note that, in 2012, the number of entrants for the RE GCSE Full or Short Course exceeded the number of entrants in 2011, but 2012's encouraging figure of 1528 does not approach the number of entrants in 2008 or 2009.

The figures above are perhaps best understood in relation to the exam statistics for RE in England as a whole. In England as whole, 17% more students sat the GCSE Full Course in 2011 than in 2010, but 8.1% fewer students sat the GCSE Short Course in 2011 than in 2010. In 2011, 199,752 students sat the Full Course and 233,998 students sat the Short Course. In 2012, 216,373 students sat the Full Course (up over 16,000), but 211,269 students sat the Short Course (down over 22,000). In England as a whole, 4.3% more students sat the A Level exam in 2011 than in 2010. In 2011, 18,463 students sat the A Level exam. In 2012, 18,950 students sat the A Level exam (an increase of just under 500).

At first sight, these statistics are quite encouraging, but the Religious Education Council (REC) is of the opinion that the full impact of RE's exclusion from the EBacc will not be felt until 2013. Moreover, there are already worrying indications that the number of entrants for Geography and History is on the increase, while this year's figures for RE at GCSE indicate that a slow decline in the number of entrants has begun. While the REC feels compelled to ask the question, is RE "precariously placed?", it points out that RE is still the 10th most popular subject at GCSE and the 15th most popular subject at A Level. But for how much longer will this be the case?

Methods of Teaching, Choice of Teaching Materials and Professional Development

The revised Locally Agreed Syllabus for RE 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 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 of middle, secondary and high school pupils and students 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, OFSTED inspection reports, and more 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 revised Locally Agreed Syllabus for RE 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 revised Agreed Syllabus contains up-dated advice about good resources that have come on stream since 2004. The SACRE termly Newsletter and RE Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training sessions are used to update teachers about more recently produced teaching 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/heads of RE in a partnership;
- contacting the part-time RE Consultant or the School Improvement Adviser with Responsibility for RE;
- contacting the North East Religious Learning Resources Centre (NERLRC);
- attending training events arranged by neighbouring local authorities which are offered to teaching staff beyond their boundaries;
- contacting the North East Consortium of LEAs (NECLEA).

During the academic year 2011 - 2012, schools where training/in-depth consultations were undertaken included:

- 5 first schools
- 1 primary school
- 2 middle schools
- 1 high school.

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

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

Discussions with the NERLRC and the NECLEA suggest that no NCC teachers were able to attend any of the RE-related courses provided by the two bodies.

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 2007. During the academic year 2011 - 2012, the SACRE termly Newsletter reminded schools about the sound advice the document contains. A few schools revised their in-house policies for ACWs to take account of the NCC Policy and Guidelines.

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 withdrawing 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 SACRE.

Local/Regional:

- Close working relations exist with the NERLRC and the NECLEA, both of which provide RE-related training
- Close working relations exist with the region's Free Church denominations and other religious and faith communities, many of which are represented on the SACRE
- Close working relations exist with the Anglican and 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 Adviser with ultimate responsibility for RE and Collective Worship, but such responsibility is merely one among many. Consequently, the local authority employs part-time (approximately 10 days per annum) a RE 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 as efficiently and cost effectively as possible.

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 school-based colleagues informed about the latest developments relating to RE and ACWs; highlights best practice across 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) have found it beneficial to engage in similar exercises designed to promote best practice.

Every 2/3 weeks during term time, the RE Consultant sends approximately 60 colleagues across the County an e-mail containing useful information about RE, ACWs, community cohesion and a host of equality and diversity matters.

During the academic year 2011 - 2012, the SACRE continued to work its way through its action plan (which was up-dated in January 2012) to ensure its work had structure and coherence (the up-dated action plan can be found in Appendix 2). The NASACRE singled out our action plan as one worthy of emulation.

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

In May 2012, the SACRE sent a representative to attend the NASACRE AGM. The 2012 AGM was, perhaps, the best for some years, notwithstanding the challenges facing RE and collective worship.

Schools were encouraged to consider applying for the very worthwhile Accord Inclusive Schools' Award. Moreover, one of the SACRE's most comprehensive discussions revolved around the issue of what sort of relationship the SACRE should sustain with the growing number of academies.

The SACRE Members, 2011 - 2012

(a) Representatives of Other Churches and Faiths

Baptist Church*	Represented by the United Reform Church
Methodist Church	Mr. D. Fenwick
Roman Catholic Church	Mr. J. McVay
United Reformed Church*	Reverend E. 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. B. Hedley
 Mr. D. Johnson
 Mr. P. Rusby

(c) Representatives of the Teachers' Associations

Mrs. L. G. Atkinson
 Mrs. S. J. Brett
 Mr. T. Nicholls
 Mrs. H. Shaw

(d) Representatives of the Local Authority

Councillor G. R. Arckless (Chairman)
 Councillor A. H. Murray
 Councillor J. E. Smith
 Councillor R. Styring

(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.”

The SACRE Action Plan

Appendix 3

Distribution List:

All Schools in Northumberland
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
4 MPs for Northumberland
All Northumberland County Councillors
The CE and RC Diocesan Authorities
Karenza Passmore, North East Religious Learning Resources Centre
Rowena Francis, United Reformed Church, Northern 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