

# How SACREs contribute to the quality and rigour of RE and its capacity to prepare pupils for life in modern Britain.

## Report on Commission Evidence collated from Delegates at the NASACRE AGM, 2017

### **Introduction**

It is obvious from reading just a few SACRE annual reports (<http://www.nasacre.org.uk/reports>), that there is a rich breadth of activities undertaken by SACREs around the country, in support of both the academic subject of RE and its capacity to prepare students for life in Britain today. To enable NASACRE to collate a sample of coherently focussed evidence in the course of an afternoon gathering, individual SACRE member delegates were asked to join one of two discussion groups formed at each discussion table. Group 1 captured the ways their SACREs resource the academic rigour and quality of the taught subject. Group 2 recorded examples of SACREs enhancing RE's capacity to prepare students for life in modern Britain by providing direct support and guidance through local faith and community links within and beyond the classroom.

We were fortunate enough to have representatives of 51 SACREs present from all regions of the country. Each group recorded examples of previous or current projects under four key headings and a free-form fifth section. This has enabled NASACRE to collate and report on their work summarised in the following 10 sections.

### **Summary from Group 1 – Resourcing rigour**

#### ***1.1 Contributing to training or development of Teachers***

SACREs cited their organising of a range of conferences, for both secondary and primary teachers. Where funding allows, these have been either independently or in partnership with other bodies, such as local teaching school alliances. Many of these have been led by professionals such as RE advisors and external consultants. SACRE members also host, as well as participate as invited faith experts, at teacher network meetings and INSET days. SACREs, in the relevant regions, are also successfully collaborating with the Learn Teach Lead RE initiative, supporting the development of the next generation of RE-Leading Teachers.

SACREs organise regular visits for groups of teachers to local places of worship, accompanied by relevant SACRE representatives. Feedback forms from teachers indicate such visits enable teachers to be introduced to local faith leaders, gain deeper first hand subject knowledge directly from faith practitioners, as well as the confidence to return with their students.

#### ***1.2 Contributing to student subject knowledge/school resources***

SACREs' feed into the ASC to ensure the Agreed Syllabus is inclusive of the diversity in local beliefs and knowledge. Many SACREs have assigned working parties and writing panels of specialist teachers dedicated to producing further school resources, including exemplar units of work. SACREs also supply schools with a regularly revised list of school-friendly places of worship and in some cases an interfaith calendar of local RE-linked events. A few SACREs have set up their own resource centre where resources are developed and held for loaning out to schools, whilst others have linked with local Ethnic Minority resource centres. SACREs also run a variety of interfaith

student activities and young people's conferences across schools, enabling students to learn about faiths through facilitated, direct encounter with fellow students from other faiths.

## **Summary from Discussion Group 1 – Supporting Quality**

### ***1.3 Monitoring quality of Teaching and/or Learning***

SACREs report on GCSE, A level and short course data annually, whilst some also collate all the RE comments made by Ofsted. Wherever funding capacity allows, SACREs have a systematic rolling program of visiting local schools. Most send out a regular survey and where funding allows, follow up with targeted visits. SACREs also take the opportunity to include monitoring the quality of RE as part of determination inspections.

Some SACREs have a policy of holding their meetings in different schools across their LA, opening with a presentation from the School's RE Department, including hearing from RE students. This was cited as a way of keeping SACRE directly connected with contemporary RE issues in the region as well as a creative way of monitoring the quality of teaching and learning for SACREs where capacity and funding has been curtailed.

Comments in this section gave a mixed picture across the country. Many SACREs highlighted the damaging impact of cuts to LA funding and/or RE Advisor expertise, on their ability to deliver this statutory duty at the levels possible previously. In contrast, well-funded SACREs listed a range of monitoring visits and activities. Another barrier identified was the sense of RE competing with core accountability subjects, leading to a reluctance of some schools in certain areas to engage with RE monitoring initiatives. SACREs described being discouraged by those schools from organising SACRE observer visits as well as receiving no response when sending out monitoring forms. SACREs expressed a wish for Ofsted to ensure formal monitoring, enabling SACREs to follow up and support the subject.

### ***1.4 Help raise profile/improve understanding of RE in schools***

The attitude of a school's SLT to RE, impacts on its allocation of time and resource so SACRE Chairs & Advisors work to keep RE on their agenda. This is achieved by presenting at LA Council, Governors' and Head Teachers' meetings, through the diversity of contacts on the different committees of SACREs. Many SACREs also publish newsletters to schools, briefings to governors and guidance for parents. SACREs improve understanding of RE by working with teachers in liaising with parents who may be raising issues and concerns about RE.

Some SACREs are raising the profile of RE in schools through lobbying local councils for funding for additional CPD, whilst another SACRE initiative is encouraging more Farmington fellowships for the same reason. The review and launch of an Agreed Syllabus is cited as another opportunity to contact and train school RE co-ordinators. As these are often new and/or non-specialists in primary, it enables RE subject leaders to not only refresh/update their knowledge but crucially, be invigorated into promoting and advocating for excellent well-trained RE teaching, on their return to school.

### ***1.5 Other Examples for impacting quality and rigour of Academic RE***

Most SACREs support quality of RE by running expert-led Teacher sessions working specifically with the Locally Agreed Syllabus. This empowers teachers, often non-specialists to develop

schemes of work from it, as well as understand how it transfers into classroom practice. Some of the better funded SACREs have also successfully encouraged independent schools and academies to follow their locally Agreed Syllabus and access the associated SACRE resources and events.

Another strategy links SACRE with local faith groups to run courses on core beliefs and developing classroom resources. Many SACREs are working towards raising the skill set composition on SACRE, including seeking more teacher members. This is challenging in areas where schools are less supportive of RE and increasingly reluctant to allow teachers time out of school to attend. Some SACREs have changed their meeting time to after school to be inclusive of teacher members. This is yielding positive results. On the positive side, where funds are available, SACREs have been able to support school funding for REQM awards as well as run local mini-conferences on RE for feeder schools, helping integrate the RE across key stages.

## **Summary from Group 2 – Linking School/RE with contemporary world of faiths and beliefs**

### ***2.1 Connecting with Faith speakers or places of worship***

There was a rich collection of innovative and expert practices across SACREs in this section. SACREs do recommend, and often facilitate, for schools seeking appropriate local speakers or places of worship. SACREs are continuously monitoring fair representation and will seek out members of new communities moving into an area as the demographic patterns change over time, as well as non-religious worldview representatives to join the SACRE. Where SACREs have one, their RE Advisor runs training for faith representatives in how best to support SACREs and schools. Other examples of links include SACREs making contact with, as well as recommending additional local faith resources and organisations. One SACRE has successfully set up a (now self-funding) Faith Centre accessed by 600 schools. SACREs also described a range of exciting events under this section. Some SACREs have set up local 'faith trails' accompanied by 'school-friendly' practitioners. Other SACREs publicise appropriate faith exhibitions, as well as organise inspirational SMSC/British Values-linked RE events, exemplified by one SACRE's highly successful annual 'Celebrate Faith' day, open to all local schools.

RE Conferences designed by SACREs specifically to connect schools with the faith communities around them, such as a 'Dealing with Diversity' conference, incorporating SACRE members leading 'meet a local faith leader' workshops offer further links for schools to the contemporary world of faiths and belief.

Another example cited of SACREs working to improve the connection between schools and local places of worship was developing guidance on protocols, clothing etc., empowering teachers and students in knowing what to expect and how to be 'a considerate visitor' to a known local place of worship such as a synagogue or mandir. Knowledge of such protocols is increasingly being seen in wider society as part of religious tolerance, literacy and contemporary global citizenship.

### ***2.2 Building awareness/improving understanding of RE amongst parents/wider community***

Part of RE's challenge cited by RE teachers and others, has been the misconceptions and linked disrespect for the subject from those outside of the professional education community. This is increasingly encountered from parents, the media and wider society. As views and vulnerabilities around religion and society are part of daily news, this is an area of SACRE work that may become increasingly important. The composition of SACREs has allowed them to model as well as help

promote understanding and awareness of RE at this level, SACREs are already acting as a 'bridge' between education and wider local community in a number of the initiatives cited.

SACREs offered examples of creating RE competitions and awards for schools, themed to be of wider local interest such as a 'Peace Award', raising the profile of both RE and of SACREs as a community resource. Some SACREs make a point of regularly featuring RE events in the local paper, as well as putting on community events such as a 'Celebrating RE' Day in the Town Centre. Other SACREs cited linking with local interfaith groups and promoting RE at their interfaith meetings. Their aim was to disseminate understanding of RE across as many faith communities as possible. Further examples of such projects are available under the NASACRE-Westhill Awards section on the NASACRE website (<http://www.nasacre.org.uk/westhill-nasacre-awards>).

Another interesting example was a collaboration with school support service colleagues (e.g. music) to showcase RE, and other often undervalued subjects to parents and the community. That another SACRE described schools where parents were objecting to Yr 6 RE Homework and requesting more Maths and English, highlights an important piece of the solution where a well supported SACRE can help. Fortunately in the case cited, a supportive head teacher and school policy allowed the SACRE to get involved in talking to the parents in support of RE.

SACREs take the opportunity of promoting RE whenever a revision to the Agreed Syllabus is published. These were described as high profile launch events, with inspirational RE speakers, refreshments and the presence of as many parents, SLT, councillors, MPs, press etc. as possible to appreciate the value that both the subject and the syllabus bring to a school community.

## **Summary from Group 2 – Faith-linked advice in school on Pastoral support.**

### ***2.3 Support with background knowledge regarding specific students from a faith background***

SACREs are often near the front line of support to schools in this area. Together with an RE advisor, they offer a range of relevant CPD opportunities for teachers, as well as on-call and on-going pastoral support for specific cases as needed. SACREs also cited work done in producing a range of guidance documents on matters such as absence due to religious reasons, fasting, especially during exam weeks, and other FAQs linked to the wearing of articles of faith, prayer rooms & determinations, to name a few!

### ***2.4 Support for teachers dealing with any faith or belief related challenges/incidents in school***

SACREs cited being called on to support schools dealing with complaints and queries linked to sensitive issues such as safeguarding, the prevent agenda and the right to withdraw. Some highlighted that it was the work of facilitating successful partnership between professionals and faith communities that was the key. This enhanced both the quality of sensitive and supportive advice around such incidents in schools and its being implemented through careful liaising and collaborating with teachers, heads and RE Co-ordinators. This was particularly emphasised by SACREs covering inner-city, multi-faith regions.

### ***2.5 Other Examples of evidence of preparing young people for life in Modern Britain***

This final section enabled SACREs to tell us about other ways their work prepared young people for life in Modern Britain. The Agreed Syllabus review was cited as crucial in ensuring, in these fast moving times, that RE was kept up to date and reflected life in Modern Britain as it evolves.

SACREs felt that the syllabus must underpin a contemporary RE that includes developing the knowledge, skills and dispositions appropriate to living in a plural open society.

Other work included fostering links with the Police and organisations such as 'Tell MAMA', advising on how schools can raise student awareness of hate-crime. Supported by committed local secondary teachers, some SACREs have begun to facilitate running of 'Young SACREs'. These are led mainly by the young people, exploring through themed events and discussions with peers, their concerns and questions around religiosity, with depth and skill.

### **Conclusions**

This report adds detail to the landscape highlighted by survey findings presented by our chair Paul Smalley at the commission's latest evidence hearing. It summarises a sampling from the insights and contributions of current SACREs. As the commission reflects on barriers and enabling factors for excellent RE, it is hoped that this evidence of the local dimension, stimulates collaborative solutions that reinforce national strength and accountability for RE, whilst resourcing the crucial local need in modern Britain, for responsiveness and sensitivity.