

**Report to:** People Scrutiny Committee

**Date of meeting:** 17 March 2025

**By:** The Chairperson of the East Sussex SACRE

**Title:** Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) Annual Report

**Purpose:** To update Members on the role and work of the East Sussex SACRE

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## **RECOMMENDATION:**

The People Scrutiny Committee is recommended to comment on and note:

**The work of SACRE in the implementation of the Local Agreed Syllabus, raising the profile and importance of religious education and supporting the high-quality teaching of Religious Education in East Sussex and academies.**

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## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 This annual report is prepared by East Sussex's Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE). It provides a picture of the support given for Religious Education and Collective Worship during 2023-24. SACRE also provides advice to the Local Authority on matters relating to Religious Education and Collective Worship. This report is a public document sent to the National Association of SACREs (NASACRE) and the Department for Education (DFE).
- 1.2 Our work this academic year has addressed the full spectrum of SACRE duties: not only embedding the Agreed Syllabus: "Faith and Belief in the 21st Century" and nurturing expertise in the teaching of religious education but also providing training to responsible bodies on Collective Worship and promoting cohesion across different communities. As schools become increasingly confident in their development and delivery of the curriculum, more members have been able to visit schools to see first-hand the impact of their work. Such visits also provide a valuable opportunity to hear from pupils, teachers and leaders from across county.
- 1.3 Strong primary and secondary subject networks remain the mainstay of our support for schools underpinned by the high-quality resources that accompany the Agreed Syllabus. Through these networks, schools are increasingly sharing their experiences and expertise to the benefit of others. Consequently, the Agreed Syllabus is not only enabling pupils to know more and remember more about religion and worldviews but also developing teachers' subject expertise.
- 1.4 SACRE meetings are well-attended by members who are unwavering in their ambition for all pupils to experience a high-quality religious education. They have been some changes in membership over the course of the year which includes welcoming our first Humanist Representative. Councillors bring with them an in-depth knowledge of the county as well as the work of the local authority in promoting cohesion across different communities. Typically, our discussions focus on strengthening the support available to teachers, providing leaders and those responsible for governance with trustworthy and reliable guidance as well as self-evaluating our own work.

- 1.5 Alongside routine review of the Agreed Syllabus and promotion of inclusive Collective Worship, we continue to reflect on our own policies and procedures, so they remain robust, up-to-date and fit for purpose. This enables members to set aside the time they need to hear the varied insights offered by visitors to our meetings – not only to hear a rich variety of worldviews but also to understand how these are being explored in the classroom.

## **2 Statutory responsibilities – The Local Agreed Syllabus**

- 2.1 The East Sussex Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education, 'Faith and Belief in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', is the statutory curriculum for all maintained schools in the county and was first taught from September 2022. It was developed with external advice from RE Today in consultation with school and subject leaders, children, young people, and their families. The curriculum also covers a second resource, 'Understanding Christianity', which was already taught by most of our schools with a Church of England designation. This has ensured the syllabus has broad appeal.
- 2.2 The Agreed Syllabus is under licence for five years for all schools in East Sussex. Costs are met by SACRE and include an accompanying programme of professional development for teachers. We are pleased to see the syllabus being adopted by an increasing number of single-academies and smaller multi-academy trusts as well.
- 2.3 'Faith and Belief in the 21st Century' is up-to-date and relevant. It focuses on the world's major religions, wider world views and the exploration of thematic, moral, and ethical questions. Teaching, learning and assessment centre on three strands: making sense of beliefs; understanding the impact; and making connections. The complementary schemes of work available to schools cover Key Stages 1 to 3 whilst a core programme of study for Key Stage 4 has been developed by our Specialist RE Advisor, Claire Ramalli, and several local teachers with support from RE Today.
- 2.4 For the second year, our programme of professional development for teachers has been delivered through the primary and secondary networks by subject experts from RE Today. Both networks attract specialist and non-specialist teachers alike, driven by the hard work and enthusiasm of our network leads who go above and beyond to maximise their reach. Despite this, the secondary network sometimes struggles to realise the same level of engagement seen in the primary network.
- 2.5 Primary Lead, Claire Rivers, and Secondary Lead, Sam Keddle, bring substantial curriculum development and leadership experience of their own, ensuring participants find the content of sessions relevant and the opportunity to come together valuable. Subject Network Meetings have been led by professionals such as Dr Kate Christopher exploring 'Islam as a Worldview'; Stephen Pett guiding colleagues through elements of 'Understanding Christianity'; and Katie Harrison sharing the benefit of her experience on delivery of Collective Worship.
- 2.6 In addition to three twilight meetings, an annual conference is held for each phase. The primary conference was attended online by fifty teachers and led by Julia Diamond-Conway, National RE Advisor, who introduced the NASACRE Subject Leader Toolkit, provided insights into how the subject is being inspected, and explored creativity when teaching Judaism. The secondary conference was kindly hosted once more by Chailey School with eight teachers in attendance. Led by Ian Nicholson, National RE Advisor, and Angela Hill, Editor of RE Today, sessions covered 'Religious Education and Literature', reviewed the Ofsted subject report and offered teachers a Dharmic perspective on the climate crisis.
- 2.7 Special schools and mainstream schools with specialist facilities or resource bases continue to be supported through the work of Executive Principal, Kirsty Eydmann, who provides members with insights into the adaptation of teaching so all pupils can access the Agreed Syllabus. We have seen how pupils with special educational needs and disabilities can access their entitlement by teaching to "stage not age" with a high degree of flexibility and creativity in

lesson delivery. We encourage such schools to integrate religious education with other subjects, perhaps focusing on accessible aspects such as festivals and celebrations to provide a meaningful and enriching subject offer which pupils can link to their real-world experiences.

- 2.8 In a recent survey of primary phase teachers, all respondents felt well supported in the implementation of the Agreed Syllabus. Similarly, all respondents felt more than satisfied with the training and professional development on offer to them. Teachers reported the Agreed Syllabus being more relevant to the children and young people in their schools, enabling pupils to share confidently their own experiences when learning about the world's major religions and diverse worldviews.
- 2.9 Respondents felt the syllabus addresses the diversity of religious beliefs and practices in their school communities. Schools with a Church of England designation felt that the syllabus offers a good balance between Christianity and other faiths. The 'spiral' structure supports pupils in solidifying their understanding of complex issues by revisiting and retrieving sticky knowledge. Having said that, several teachers have commented that some theological teaching points can prove too challenging for too many pupils at present. Some teachers commented the syllabus supported their other curriculum design work by articulating clearly the 'end points' for what is to be learnt by the end of each key stage.
- 2.10 Two areas for further development have been identified: firstly, adaptation of teaching so that all pupils can access their entitlement, and secondly, development of effective assessment approaches. Both areas will be explored in greater depth over the coming year. Additionally, Specialist Leader in Education (SLE), Lois Burton, plans to support several schools in the planning and delivery of 'Understanding Christianity'. The Specialist RE Advisor also provides bespoke support to schools.
- 2.11 Secondary schools were similarly positive about the Agreed Syllabus. Whilst the number of secondary academies taking it up as their means to deliver statutory religious education has increased, engagement with the secondary network remains limited. Five schools regularly participate in twilight sessions: Claverham Community College, Heathfield Community College, King's Academy Ringmer, Priory School Lewes and Rye College. Infrequent attendance by other schools may reflect greater subject expertise in the secondary phase despite a shortage of specialist teachers in the sector. To attract the widest range of participants possible, sessions are held online and face-to-face at the same time as an extensive bank of resources is being built up for schools to access through 'Padlet'.
- 2.12 Members have undertaken several 'Good Practice Visits' over the course of the year to positively re-enforce the work undertaken by schools; support universal adoption of the Agreed Syllabus in all maintained schools and more widely; identify expertise and facilitate school-to-school support through the Subject Network Meetings; and recognise and celebrate good practice in curriculum development and delivery. This year, visits have taken place to Blackboys Church of England Primary School, Grovelands Community Primary School, Hazel Court (Special) School, Priory School Lewes, Robsack Wood Primary Academy and Willingdon Community School.
- 2.13 Accompanied by the Specialist RE Advisor or a Network Lead, members engage in a range of activities including headteacher meetings, lesson visits, collective worship drop-ins, pupil voice activities and discussions with subject leaders on the quality of support available to them. We have been struck by the high levels of engagement from teachers, the passion they have shown for the subject and their commitment to a thoughtfully designed curriculum that is accessible to all.
- 2.14 The Local Authority provides SACRE with entry and attainment data annually. Given the challenges of recent years, we are pleased to see the take-up of full-course GCSE in summer 2023 rise to 22% of the cohort. Although this remains below the national average, it is the first rise in take-up for four years. Whilst attainment rose above the national average for 9–4 and

9–5 in summer 2022, this year it has fallen below. This may reflect a wider ability range as the cohort size increases or uneven patterns of disruption to education during the pandemic.

- 2.15 Across the county it is evident that some secondary schools use full- or short-course qualifications as their means for delivering statutory religious education at Key Stage 4 whilst others offer the full-course qualification as an options subject. Data suggests the number of schools that use the full-course qualification for all pupils to access statutory religious education has increased whilst the number of pupils taking it as an options subject remains stable. As well as wanting to align attainment with the national picture, we continue to endorse the full-course qualification as the optimal solution for statutory entitlement at Key Stage 4.

### **3 Statutory responsibilities – Collective Worship**

- 3.1 SACRE monitors schools' statutory responsibility to hold Collective Worship. Whilst there are many schools across the county that offer impactful Collective Worship, we recognise there is some inconsistency in the system, sometimes driven by inexperience or a lack of confidence in delivery.
- 3.2 Collective Worship has therefore been a focus of our work this academic year. In the spring, two training sessions for governors and responsible bodies were held online covering the legal requirements; responsibilities of governors and headteachers; purpose of determinations; principles of withdrawal; and celebrating the positive purposes of this special time of the school day. In total, more than fifty schools participated, and bespoke support was provided in terms of further follow-up to some. Additional guidance has also been made available to schools. SACRE members have made Collective Worship a feature of their Good Practice Visits.
- 3.3 Parents have a statutory right to withdraw their children from Collective Worship. Guidance on good practice and protocols for withdrawal are made available to schools; the Specialist RE Advisor can also offer further support if needed. SACRE recognises parents' legal right to withdraw but would like to see all children and young people have access to rich and stimulating Collective Worship.
- 3.4 No complaints were made to SACRE during the year about Collective Worship.
- 3.5 There were no requests for a determination to vary statutory requirements. SACRE's Determinations Policy was updated in line with NASACRE guidance and approved in March 2023. The next date for review is June 2025.

### **4 Links with other organisations**

- 4.1 East Sussex SACRE continues to stay connected with national events and activities. Members keep up to date through NASACRE termly briefings and regular attendance to online training. The Chairperson and Specialist RE Advisor also report on local, regional and national issues. Our previous Chairperson was a member of the NASACRE Executive and played an active role in their discussions.
- 4.2 Training accessed this year by Members includes: 'Convening an Agreed Syllabus Conference – legalities and processes'; 'Dealing with beliefs and practices about loss & death in your Agreed Syllabus'; 'Using data effectively as a SACRE'; and 'How may SACREs effectively monitor schools?'.
- 4.3 Our Specialist RE Adviser attends Southeast Central Regional SACRE meetings, engages with good practice from around the region and reports back to members. She is also an executive member of the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants and keeps up to date with research linked to Religion and Worldviews. She also engages with the work of the RE Hub for the Southeast area and promotes their events.
- 4.4 SACRE continues to work closely with RE Today on implementation of the Agreed Syllabus. We also draw on resources from the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) – the subject's professional association, dedicated to supporting and empowering professionals in the field of Religious Education.

## **5 Other areas of work**

- 5.1 East Sussex SACRE was successful in our bid for a Westhill Endowment. The fund is designed to engage schools and local communities in 2-year projects that promote diversity in religious education and collective worship. Co-ordinated by Claire Ramalli, we aim to produce a short film that sees children and young people understanding how different faiths are practiced by visits to places of worship across the county. Venues include a local Synagogue and Mosque as well as a Humanist naming ceremony. Once complete, the film will be used to support the teaching of the Agreed Syllabus.
- 5.2 Given international events, Members have been concerned about the potential for antisemitism in schools. Synagogues are aware of an increasing number of discriminatory incidents reported by families. SACRE was reassured to hear that such incidents are reportable and therefore tracked by the Local Authority. At the time of the query, there were no reported antisemitic incidents in schools.
- 5.3 SACRE has increased awareness of our activities and the range of support on offer through the 'Virtual Schoolbag' (VSB). Not only does this provide an opportunity to promote the training available through the networks but also celebrate good practice and the hard work of colleagues involved across the county. We endorsed several wider opportunities including a visit to the Synagogue in Hove described as "magical" by those that attended. Virtual visits remain available to schools.
- 5.4 In June, our ambition for a Pupil Conference was realised when a debating day was held at Ratton School, Eastbourne, facilitated by Year 12 who ran several debates for pupils from the three schools in attendance. The event was sponsored by AQUINAS Church of England Education Trust, a local multi-academy trust.

## **6 SACRE arrangements**

- 6.1 There were three SACRE meetings during 2023/24. All were held in a hybrid format that allow in-person or online attendance making sure they were quorate.
- Meetings were held:
- 16 November 2023 Attendance: 76%
  - 29 February 2024 Attendance: 76%
  - 18 June 2024 Attendance: 50%
- 6.2 The Annual General Meeting (AGM) was also held on 29 February 2024. Roy Galley was reappointed Chairperson and Peter White reappointed Vice Chairperson. All meetings are open to the public and minutes available online.
- 6.3 We continue to have fair representation from a range of faiths and those of no faith. Representatives include the Church of England incorporating representation from the Diocesan Board of Education as well as Muslim, long-serving Unitarian, Bahai and Jewish Members.
- 6.4 East Sussex SACRE has five of the fifteen representatives from 'Other Christian denominations and other Religions' (Group A); three of the four representatives from 'The Church of England' (Group B); six of the six representatives from 'Teacher Associations' (Group C); and five of the five representatives from 'The Local Authority' (Group D - appointed in conformity with the political balance).
- 6.5 Following local elections in May 2024, Cllr. Roy Galley stepped down as Chairperson following his appointment as Chairperson of East Sussex County Council – a role that made him ineligible to chair any other council committees. In June 2024, SACRE welcomed Felicity Harvest, East Sussex's first Humanist Representative. At the same time, our long-serving clerk, Julie Stevens, retired. Whilst we remain keen to expand our membership to reflect the diversity of faith and belief across the county, recruiting new members continues to be a considerable challenge.
- 6.6 This is the first year of a new three-year development plan which is tightly aligned to the five sections of our self-evaluation. Whilst we have actions in each of the five sections, SACRE

has identified our key priorities to be the 'standards and quality of provision of Religious Education', 'Collective Worship' and 'contribution to promoting cohesion across the community'. We continue to improve our own work through rigorous self-evaluation and robust review of policies, procedures, and protocols.

- 6.7 SACRE has determined a five-year forward plan to ensure effective running of the committee into the future. This enables Members to focus on understanding the quality of support being offered, developing trustworthy advice and guidance for schools and increasing the amount of direct work they undertake such as Good Practice Visits and provision of an annual pupil conference.
- 6.8 Through SACRE's page on the Local Authority's website, we aim to provide authoritative and trustworthy resources for schools. This year we have published two pieces of guidance: "Fasting in Ramadan" and "Including pupils of faith in school life". Both have been welcomed by schools for their clarity and conciseness.
- 6.9 We continue to encourage a range of visiting speakers to attend meetings whether representatives from a diverse range of faith groups as part of "My World, My Faith", or teachers and leaders involved in the delivery of the Agreed Syllabus, so we better understand their work and how we might best support them to improve the quality of religious education.
- 6.10 Each meeting has a budget update and closes with consideration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion. An updated 'Code of Conduct' and 'Induction for New members' have been considered and adopted over the course of the year. All other documents are on a two-year review cycle to ensure Members discharge their statutory duties effectively. Members have also reviewed the Ofsted subject report for religious education entitled: "Deep and meaningful?"
- 6.11 SACRE receives a budget of £10,000 which sustains our main activities – though this would need to be reviewed when we hold the next Agreed Syllabus Conference. Given the licence fees for the current Agreed Syllabus have been paid, the budget covers the costs of the accompanying training package from RE Today, engagement with NASACRE including attendance to their annual conference, as well as the provision of a Specialist RE Advisor and two Subject Network Leads. SACRE is also supported by a Children's Services Representative and an experienced Clerk.

## **7 Advice to the Local Authority**

- 7.1 SACRE is legally obliged to produce an Annual Report and it is best practice for this to be considered by the County Council. The following advice is given by SACRE to the Local Authority:
  - Support SACRE in sustaining and diversifying representation of Members to better reflect the wide range of faith and belief across the county.
  - Anticipate the additional financial support needed when we hold the next Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) in spring 2027.
  - Continue to promote the work of SACRE as part of the school-led system.

**Councillor Colin Belsey**  
**Chair of SACRE**