

The state of the nation: NASACRE Survey 2014

Introduction

From 9th September until 15th December, 2014 the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (NASACRE) held an open consultation via its website, open to SACREs who are a part of NASACRE and those who aren't. There are 152 education authorities in England; each required to have a SACRE. Of these 87 (57%) participated in the survey that consisted of twenty-two questions in all. The purpose of the survey was to see the current state and status of SACREs in England; Wales has its own national association.

The survey was in six sections:

1. About the respondent
2. About your SACRE
3. Support for your SACRE
4. Agreed Syllabus Conference
5. Your next Agreed Syllabus
6. Additional Questions

In terms of respondents: 34.5% were Advisors or consultants supporting SACREs, with 1.1% being completed by a Local Authority Officer not supporting a SACRE. A further 26.4% were completed by the Chair of SACRE and 21.8% the Clerk to SACRE. 11.5% were completed by a member of SACRE other than the Chair. 4.6% described themselves as 'Other', 50% of 'Other' was Committee Services or Administration, 25% described themselves as Observer and the one remaining respondent simply identified themselves as: X.

About your SACRE

All SACREs that responded had met at least twice during the year, 74.3% had met three times with 18.6% meeting four times in the year. Two SACREs (2.9%) met five times and a further two more than five times in the year. Of these SACREs 57.1% stated that they had sub-groups, the rest not having a sub-group in 2014. More than half of all SACREs indicated that they were involved in events with other SACREs. It is interesting to note that SACREs where an Adviser/Consultant completed the survey were less likely to be involved with other SACREs than those completed by others. Similarly, where this group responded there was an increased likeliness that they had produced the annual report (81.5%) when compared with the responses as a whole (71.4%).

Support for SACREs

86.6% of respondents stated that they had **specialist support** from an RE adviser or consultant, 13.4% having no such support. Of those advisers/consultants, 67.8% were bought in for that purpose with only 32.2% being directly employed by the Authority and 96.5% had access to and knowledge of local schools.

15% of authorities allocated 1 – 5 days for SACRE work, 23.7% allocated 5 – 10 days, 33.9% 10 – 20 days and 27.1% allocated more than 20 days per year.

SACREs were asked whether the local authority funded support for RE beyond its support for SACRE. Only 34.4% did, with 53.7% stating that the local authority didn't, 11.9% stated that they did not know.

91% of local authorities provided a clerk for SACRE, with 13.4% being bought in from outside of the authority, non-LA employees.

Financial support for SACREs varies widely. Only 65.6% of SACREs stated that they had a budget for which they could give a figure. The lowest given figure was £67 and the highest figure £40,000. The mean allocation was £8,838 with the mode allocation being £4,000 (six SACREs) followed by £5,000 (five SACREs) and £10,000 (four SACREs). The median allocation was £6,000. Significantly, 35% of SACREs that had budget received £10,000 or more per annum. Three SACREs indicated that they added to their budget by providing services to schools, such as conferences, one bringing in an extra £2,000 per annum.

Worryingly 18% stated that they did not know what the budget was and appeared to have no way of being able to identify a budget. 16.4% of respondents indicated that there was no discreet budget but that SACREs requests for support were met. Three SACREs indicated that the budget only covered adviser/consultant time and that of the clerk, with nothing else. One SACRE also stated that it had been given a sum of money some years ago that was still being drawn upon but running out. It is difficult to see how this is possible given the financial rules under which local authorities are required to work. Two SACREs made a point of recording that their budgets had been severely cut in the last year when compared to other years.

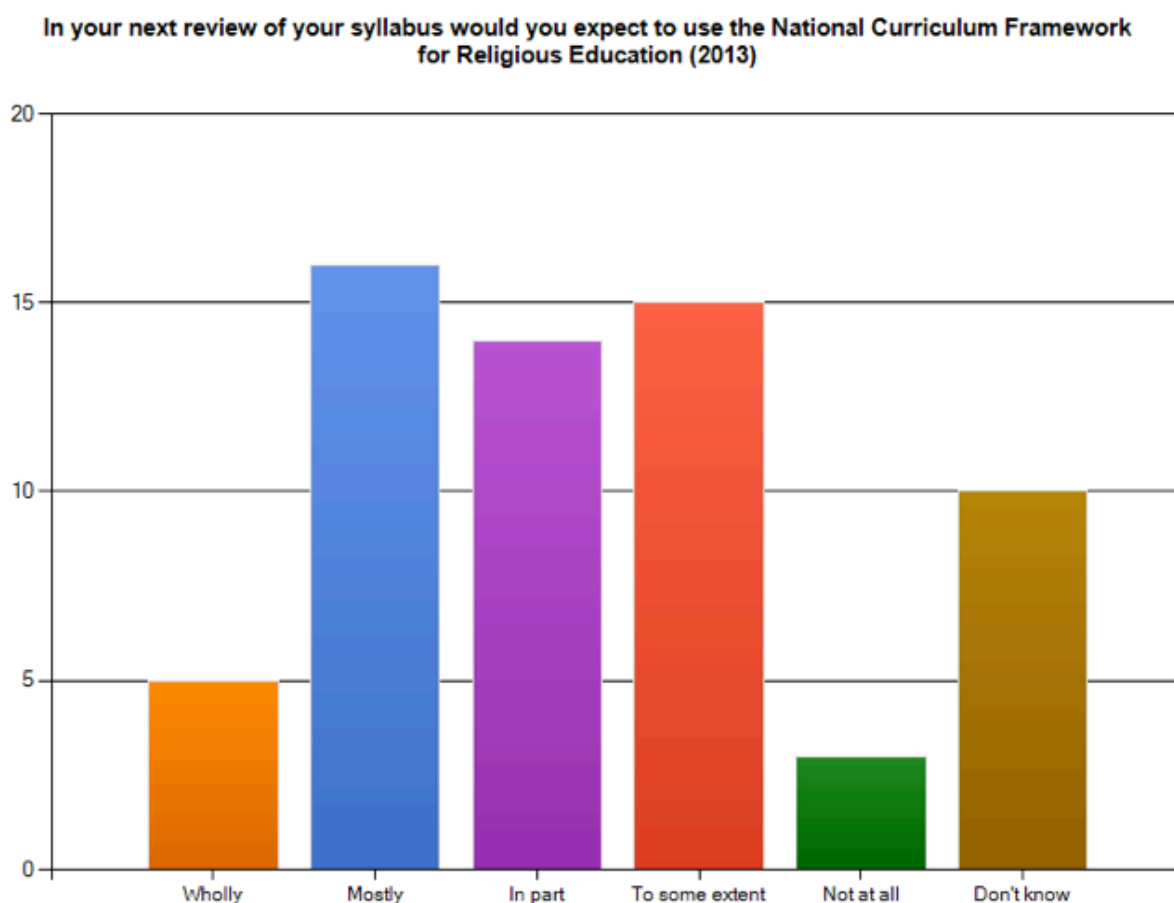
Agreed Syllabus Conferences and the Agreed Syllabus

61.9% of local authorities had reviewed their Agreed Syllabus in the last two years (2013 and 2014) with 34.9% expecting to review their syllabus in the coming year (2015). 4.8% of respondents stated that their syllabus was overdue in terms of a review. 46% of respondents stated that their syllabus would be reviewed in 2015 or 2016, 19% in 2017 and 17% in 2018 and a further 17% in 2019.

In terms of current syllabuses 52.4% had not used the National Curriculum Framework for Religious Education (NCfRE) (2013) to inform the development of their syllabus, this is not surprising given that most syllabuses were written before its publication. 12.7% of Agreed Syllabus Conferences, though, had used the NCfRE wholly or mostly where they had reviewed the syllabus in 2013 – 2014. In contrast 34.9% of Agreed Syllabus Conferences had used the National Framework for Religious Education (NFRE)(2004) wholly or mostly, with a further 33.3% using it in part.

When asked whether Agreed Syllabus Conferences would use the NCfRE (2013) for the development of future syllabuses the most common response was: *Mostly*, see Graph 1 below:

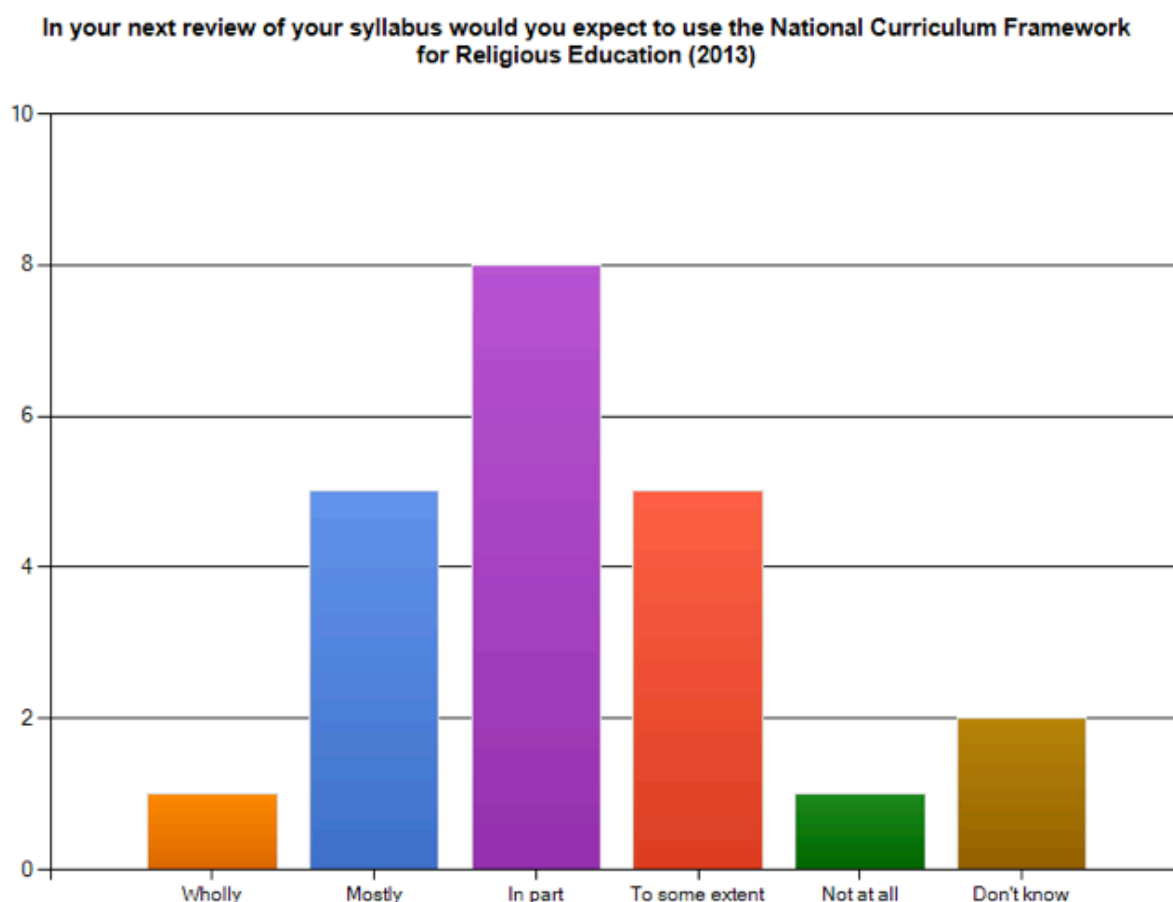
Graph 1: all respondents, figures by respondent:



Naturally the longer that the NCfRE is about, the more likely it is to be used but it is interesting at this stage to note that 4.8% of respondents clearly indicated that they would not use it at all. It is interesting to note that among this 4.8% of respondents there was no significant commitment to using the NFRE (2004) either, with 66.7% stating that they had used this document 'to some extent'.

Of those planning to review the agreed syllabus in the next year their commitment to using the NCfRE is set out in Graph 2, see below. As can be seen 4.5% (1 respondent) believed that the NCfRE would be wholly used and the same percentage stated that it wouldn't be used. 81.8%, though, were expecting to use the NCfRE in some way. Interestingly, though, where an adviser/consultant filled in the survey of those who are expecting to review the syllabus in 2015 77.7% stated that they would use the NCfRE in part or to some extent. No adviser/consultant stated that the NCfRE would not be used. How the NCfRE will be used, though, remains to be seen as 77.3% of respondents who stated that they would adapt their current syllabus when they review it in 2015.

Graph 2: respondents who expect their syllabus to be reviewed in 2015



Of the five respondents who answered 'Other' to the question (18) about how they would approach the review of the syllabus in 2015 one stated that they did not know at this stage and two that they were unlikely to make big changes. The other two responses were interesting in that they both cited the issue of financial and other support being critical issues. One stated that they would like to change the syllabus but financial constraints may stop them doing so. The other respondent stated:

We are at a very early stage and our organisation is in a state of flux following the retirement of our previous adviser. We are struggling to be heard at the Council where there has been a huge loss of advisory staff. We are going to be buying in adviser support from the local diocese under an SLA – if the authority ever gets the SLA sorted out. For this reason, its difficult to know how we will approach anything – including the number of days our adviser will be available to support us.

Worryingly, when all respondents are taken into account 22.2% responded 'Other' and 28.6% of these stated they were uncertain due to changes in the local authority and/or the lack of financial clarity or support.

Slightly more than half of respondents stated that their Agreed Syllabus was only available online (50.8%). For those who responded stated that the agreed syllabus was only available online 14% also stated that schools had to purchase access to the syllabus. Given that syllabus reviews and agreed syllabuses themselves are publicly funded it is difficult to understand why this is the case under local government rules about 'double payment' for services.

Priorities for SACREs

Respondents were asked to identify three priorities for their SACREs in order of importance. Responses were coded and put into categories.

Priority 1

Seven clear themes emerged as the top priority for 2015. The most frequent response concerned SACREs own structures and management (27.3%). This included relationships with the local authority, especially Group D of SACRE, increasing and broadening membership as well as ensuring SACREs profile with schools and the broader community. This included engagement with the Prevent Agenda.

The next most frequent theme was support for teachers of RE (21.8%). This included providing support for new leaders of RE, helping teachers to produce high quality RE and networking RE teachers. There was also concern that teachers needed links to resources based in their communities, such as faith contacts.

The review of the syllabus (16.3%) and support for a newly adopted syllabus (14.5%) were the next two most common themes.

The next themes, both 7.3%, related to collective worship and direct work supporting pupils. The least frequent theme was monitoring RE in the authority (3.63%).

Priority 2

As with Priority 1 seven clear themes emerged but they weren't identical with those in Priority 1, although there was natural overlap.

The top second priority was support for teachers of RE (29.6%). A significant number of these responses focussed on ensuring that teachers had access to high quality training that appeared to be organised through the SACRE. A few responses also mentioned producing materials for teachers to use and others networking teachers.

The second most significant theme focussed on relationships with the local authority (24%). It was clear that there was disenchantment with the local authority in many cases. One issue that a number of responses focussed on was that of monitoring standards in RE and how the local authority needed to provide the means to do this. Two respondents noted the need for an Annual Report to be produced, indicating that the local authority was not helping this process. In one response it appears that the local authority has an RE adviser who works with schools but not with SACRE and that this needs to change.

The agreed syllabus was also a prominent theme. 12.9% citing the need to review the syllabus, although one indicated that this could only happen if the local authority was minded to support the process with a budget. 7.4% saw supporting the current agreed syllabus as a priority.

A theme not seen in Priority 1 that emerges in Priority 2 is that of working with faith communities and ensuring good relations, community cohesion. This included guidance for schools. 11.1% of SACREs saw this as a second priority which involved opportunities for interfaith conferences, dialogues and a 'Faiths Day' in the local authority.

7.4% of SACREs had working directly with pupils/young people as a second priority and 5.5% collective worship (including Determinations).

Priority 3

Not all SACREs had three priorities. Whilst 89% of SACREs did have a third priority this does mean that the comparison with the percentages above needs to be taken into account. The percentages presented here are for all of the 89% of those who responded to this priority question.

The overwhelming concern, as a third priority, was the relationship between SACRE and the local authority (44.9%). High on this was ensuring high quality and broad membership, especially elected members. One SACRE stated that its elected members did not attend SACRE rendering it inquorate most of the time. Raising SACRE's profile with the local authority, schools, academies and the community were also prominent. One Chair of SACRE responded simply by writing: surviving the cuts.

Work with schools (20.4%) and providing CPD for RE teachers (16.3%) were also significant themes. This included, by name, the RE Quality Mark in 30% of those respondents who had supporting RE in schools as their third priority.

12.2% had a third priority focus on interfaith work and 33% of this group specifically mentioned Trojan Horse and 'its aftermath'.

The two smallest themes in this priority were collective worship and working with pupils, both 2%.

What can be seen is that there is currently a significant body of concern about the relationship between SACREs and the local authorities that appoint them. SACREs are indicating that there is a significant amount of stress in that relationship and the inward looking nature of this context restricts the work that SACREs should be doing. Nevertheless there is a significant desire to work with schools, support teachers and ensure high quality CPD for RE teachers. Interesting collective worship does not figure highly in SACREs priorities as a whole, whilst still being a priority for some. Interfaith work and work with pupils/young people are also important themes for SACREs as they faced 2015.

Priorities respondents identified for NASCRE

At a national level

The most comment priority identified could be classed as advice and support, especially via the website – although one respondent identified an issue for the website in relation to partially sighted/sight disabled readers. 41.6% of respondents saw the informative role of NASACRE as key to supporting their work – whether that was guidance on how to respond to national developments or providing strategic guidance and advice.

The second largest number of responses related to NASACRE's role with the government, especially, and local authorities. 35.4% saw this as NASACRE's chief priority. Much of this was about the status of RE in the curriculum, the importance of supporting local determination and SACREs in areas that have schools which do not teach RE and no one challenges them. One respondent put it:

By successfully lobbying DfE for proper support for RE, by offering clear and compelling campaigning tools for SACREs to use with their authorities, by working increasingly effectively with other national RE bodies in common cause of promoting RE.

Of course the latter sentiment depends on other national bodies believing that SACREs still have an important function to fulfil. This theme was the major issue in relation to NASACRE's role in relation to local authorities.

6.6% saw that NASACRE's the national priority should be about the curriculum, RE's status in it at a national level, at a school level but also in terms of the International Baccalaureate. 2% saw NASACRE as having a specific role with Academies. Other respondents saw NASACRE having a role in the recruiting of SACRE members, analysing SACREs' annual reports – in light of the government not doing so – and collective worship.

At a local level

The majority of respondents (51.2%) saw NASACRE's local priority as supporting SACREs in light of what was happening to them in relation to their local authorities. 33.3% specifically wanted NASACRE to help them secure the appropriate support for SACREs with a further 24% specifically mentioning the lack of budget and the need for financial support. 28.6% of this group wants NASACRE to support SACREs by setting out what the statutory requirements are for SACREs and local authorities responsibilities. One respondent specifically mentioned working with the Local Government Association to help clarify the situation for their members.

34.1% of respondents focussed around NASACRE's role in providing advice and guidance. This was quite broad but sharing good practice and networking was prominent in these responses, as was helping SACREs construct an agenda. One respondent asked for specific guidance that they could use with school in light of the proposed GCSE changes.

Other respondents mentioned helping SACREs with capacity building, public relations, advice on working with academies, and feedback on annual reports in the absence of government performing this role.

Working with other parts of the RE community

The majority of responses (52.6%) wanted NASACRE to work positively with other named organisations in the RE community (REC, NATRE, AREIAC, RE Today). The theme of a coherent and consistent message about RE was seen to be important in these responses. These responses (55% of this group) indicated that NASACRE working with others would or should have a greater impact at 'breaking down barriers' facing RE. One respondent stated that NASACRE should be working with AREIAC and Head Teacher associations to change the law on collective worship. 25% of these respondents clearly indicated that NASACRE with others should be lobbying the DfE to ensure RE has a place in the curriculum and that it is appropriately supported. One respondent wanted NASACRE to support non-specialist teachers in their RE role. Another respondent simply asked the question: How do SACRE's adapt to new world of education?

Only 5.2% of respondents mentioned NASACRE working with faith communities but 10.2% mentioned working with faith communities and teacher associations to assist SACREs in getting members for their Groups A and C. A further 10.4% saw the website as key but 7.9% of respondents continued to see local determination of RE as important and one respondent emphasised that NASACRE should only collaborate with others if it was for the good of SACREs.

Other

Respondents were given the opportunity to identify another non-specific priority for SACRE, 19.4% of respondents chose to do so. Of these 41% believed that NASACRE should be proactive in its work, especially through the 'excellent' website. Newsletters were high on the agenda but so was the professional development and recruitment of RE teachers. Community cohesion was also mentioned by these respondents and how that might be used to support the importance of RE in schools.

It was also felt by these respondents that support for SACREs working with academies, especially how this can be accommodated in terms of SACRE membership, and guidance on the RE curriculum were also key, along with responding to current issues. Again guidance was an important theme for these respondents. 11.7% of these respondents mentioned the annual report, the need for a new template and the need to have an overall picture of what is going on in SACREs across the country.

It was not all doom and gloom. One respondent mentioned that the local authority had appointed an RE adviser, and some SACREs noted the excellent support they got from their local authority.

Conclusion

The picture from SACREs is mixed. Some appear to receive outstanding support from their local authorities whilst others seem to be losing support rapidly in the new context in which those local authorities find themselves. As a result of this many SACREs seem to have gone into 'survival' mode and key priorities for them devolve around their relationship with the LA, its support in terms of clerking and advice, and finance. It is felt by many that local authorities are not doing right by SACREs and not fulfilling their statutory duties, meaning that SACREs cannot fulfil theirs either. The DfE doesn't seem to be helping and hence they are looking to NASACRE to advocate on their behalf with the government.

Nevertheless, SACREs are also concerned about what is happening to RE in the classroom. There is a recognition that RE is absent in many academies and they feel powerless to do anything about it – hence they are looking to NASACRE to help. The concern about the quality of RE is high on the agenda of SACREs but how to monitor RE is a theme which came up time and again across responses.

It is clear that SACREs want NASACRE to advocate on their behalf with government but also with local government and one way forward might be to produce a briefing paper with the LGA for local authorities to consult. In the spirit of the survey responses NASACRE could work with the REC and other professional bodies and interested parties to achieve this, giving weight to the advice from across the RE spectrum.

It is obvious that some SACREs are struggling to remain quorate or functional with a need to recruit members, ensure that local authority members attend meetings and to have appropriate clerking support. Surely, the DfE and the DCLG have a role in this as the guardians of the legal framework in which SACREs are situated.

What also clear is that NASACRE's newsletters, guidance and website are highly valued by those who responded. Naturally, to access the survey one would have had to have gone to the website so that may be no surprise. But, in that it was mentioned so frequently is a testament to the hard work of Sharon Artley as the webmistress and those who have produced materials for the website.