

# The Future of RE & SACREs

## *Extracts from the REC proposed national RE strategy:*

### **A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

The following areas of development should be pursued in a strategic way by the RE Partnership to improve the quality of RE in English schools:

#### **A. Policy development**

1. The Department has pursued a more active course in RE over recent years. This needs to be continued to help RE maintain its position in relation to the National Curriculum (both comprising the basic curriculum).
2. An inter-department liaison group should be established to ensure the DfES, Department of Communities and Local Government, Department of Culture Media and Sport and the Home Office work closer together in developing policy and initiatives related to religion and beliefs and education, in particular in relation to the role and activities of RE and of local SACREs.
3. RE should be aligned more closely with other related developments in education, particularly citizenship, personal social health education with its significance for moral education, diversity and community cohesion, and the personalisation of learning, to ensure a synergetic approach to the contribution of education to social and community issues. The Ajegbo Review points to the increasing challenge of fragmentation and diversity with implications for religion and beliefs and education. The Gilbert 2020 Vision Report has highlighted the importance of personalising learning and the need for schools to respond to the ethnically and socially diverse nature of society. Given the characteristically synoptic scope of RE, specifically the Department should consider both reports in relation to RE. A citizenship/diversity/RE liaison group should be established within the DfES and its related agencies.
4. The inclusive approach to religions and beliefs (reflected in the Framework) should continue to be the basis for government policy on RE in all schools, including faith schools, independent schools and academies, on the further development of the RE Partnership, and on the development of the work of local SACREs.
5. The dissemination and further implementation of the Framework should be vigorously pursued through the current structures of the subjects in order to make it as effective as possible in all schools; and specifically the DfES should (a) review funding agreements with academies to ensure provision of inclusive RE according to the Framework, and (b) enable RE to be able to be the lead subject in humanities specialist colleges.

6. The Department should also establish a national RE review body to consider whether the current statutory arrangements and structure for RE in England are fit for purpose. The review should consider (a) the merits of different options for the statutory basis of the RE curriculum in all maintained schools in relation to the National Curriculum, and (b) whether the statutory arrangements for RE post-16 are sufficiently comprehensive to meet the needs of the whole range of young people in education and of a diverse society. As and when it is then appropriate the QCA should look at the effectiveness and impact of the current Framework and prepare for a review of it alongside any further developments of the National Curriculum.

7. The Department should review Circular 1/94, including the implications of the above but specifically to include a) a review of the status of humanists in relation to RE, (b) a review of the role of SACREs to enable them to work with all schools and colleges, including FE colleges, in their area, (c) a review of the right of withdrawal in relation to the duties on schools to promote community cohesion, and combat racism and discrimination, (d) a review of the complaints process regarding RE, and (e) a review of its guidance on collective worship in schools. It should then issue new guidance on how schools and others can comply with their legal requirements for RE.

8. The partnership developed between the Department and the RE community through the RE Council should be continued and extended, specifically (a) to fund the RE Partnership arrangements from 2007, (b) to manage and implement a national strategy for RE 2008-11, complementary to the review of the secondary curriculum, the development of subject associations, the education outside the classroom and other curriculum initiatives, (c) to mount a public information and relations campaign to raise awareness of the agreed aims and nature of RE according to the Framework (d) to welcome the establishment of a National Centre for RE by the RE community as is currently planned for 2009-10.

9. The Department should ensure that the NSCL develops its provision to ensure head teachers and senior managers are aware not only of their responsibilities and roles concerning RE but of the consequences for young people and society when such responsibilities are not met.

## **B. Curriculum and assessment development**

Pupil under-achievement, due often to insufficiently motivating and challenging teaching, low expectations, weaknesses in planning and assessment, and curriculum incoherence, needs to be tackled. Ways and means also need to be found to reintroduce attention to spiritual and moral development, including opportunities for students to reflect critically on their own beliefs and values, and to RE as a reference point for this in all schools, sixth form colleges and FE colleges. The effectiveness of the Framework is being impeded as a mechanism for ensuring better quality in the process of teaching and learning in RE by too many variations in its use by different agreed syllabuses, in planning and assessment, and by insufficient guidance and training.

1. QCA should provide guidance for local authorities on the effective use of the Framework in reviewing an agreed syllabus;
2. QCA should provide more explicit guidance, exemplification and case study material to support the effective implementation and use of the Framework, in primary and secondary schools' planning and assessment of teaching and learning, including exemplar units of work and assessment tasks (this to be done alongside work with the current primary strategy and national roll out of the secondary curriculum).
3. QCA should produce guidance on how the Framework may be most effectively used to support RE syllabuses in faith school settings.

### **C. Qualifications development**

The nature, relevance and quality of qualifications in RE and related areas needs to be examined, extended and improved, particularly to ensure they are inclusive, relevant, accessible through life long learning. Achievement at Entry level, GCSE, AS, A Level, AEA provision, needs to rise in many secondary schools. The popularity of AS, A and AEA Level RS as reflected in the increasing take-up rate in recent years needs to be recognised by the provision of this as a course option in all 16-19 education institutions, including FE colleges.

Religion and belief play a very significant role in many workplaces and occupations, including health, tourist, catering, social work and law enforcement. In addition, many thousands of people are employed, directly or indirectly, in a paid or voluntary capacity, full or part time in aspects of religious and/or charitable activities and communities. The contribution of RE to enhancing achievement in these areas needs to be much more fully developed, so other means of accrediting a beliefs and values dimension of vocational education in these same institutions should be developed.

1. QCA should bring Entry Level, GCSE, AS, A and AEA qualifications in religious studies into alignment with the Framework.
2. QCA should review the merits or otherwise of linking qualifications in RE with other related areas, e.g. citizenship as recommended by the Ajegbo report.
3. QCA should develop vocational routes for the provision and study of religion and beliefs, and qualifications to accredit such study.

### **D. SACREs Development**

The capacities for local Standing Advisory Council on RE to support and monitor RE locally should be strengthened. Provision should be made to assist with the recruitment and training of those who serve on SACREs, especially those from faith communities and humanism. The feasibility of extending their brief to include the maintained system in its

entirety - including all faith schools, foundation schools, specialist academies, trust schools and FE colleges - should be pursued as a matter of urgency.

1. More detailed guidance on the role and effectiveness of SACREs should be developed by government departments involved with religion, education and the community jointly, and issued to local authorities, specifically on linking the work of SACREs with the work of local authorities, school improvement, inter-faith and community cohesion initiatives in local areas.
2. The Department should work with its partners to increase the effectiveness of SACREs locally, particularly in relation to community cohesion, diversity and citizenship, and specifically (a) to ensure minority faith community and humanist representation is fully recognised and effective, (b) to promote better training, support and advice for members, (c) to ensure liaison and effective working relationships with local inter-faith, citizenship and other local authority community cohesion groups, and (d) to arrange access to existing and new data on standards in RE.
3. A campaign should be implemented to raise awareness of the role and work of SACREs, and specifically to recruit a fuller and more inclusive representation on them, including humanists, following the model trialled by the REC over the last six months.
4. A national training course for new members of SACREs should be established for regional delivery, again along the lines of the REC pilot, plus refresher courses for established members.
5. Guidance should be issued by QCA and Ofsted specifically on how SACREs can monitor their work, and on how they can best monitor the standards of RE in their schools. This should take account of pilot work done by the National Association of SACREs with support from the REC.

## **E. Professional development**

### **1. Improving Teacher supply**

Steps have been taken in recent years by Department and TDA to maintain target figures for secondary RE, during a period when those for other subjects are falling. These should be continued and extended so as to address the overall lack of qualified specialist strength in the subject, and to consolidate teacher supply. Attention should be given to ensuring that those recruited to become primary teachers have the opportunity to train as primary RE co-ordinators or subject leaders.

### **2. Improving Teacher training (ITT/ITE)**

All providers of primary teacher education and training – HEIs, SCITTs and ERBs – need to include appropriate grounding in RE for all students within their courses. Provision needs to be made for subject conversion courses to supplement Subject Knowledge Booster Courses for students recruited to train as secondary RE specialists, but who lack academic depth in the subject from their undergraduate studies.

- TDA should establish a review group to look at the provision and quality of RE training for new primary and secondary teachers and make recommendations for improvement.

### **3. Improving Teacher training (CPD)**

Provision should be made to ensure that every teacher who is engaged in RE is appropriately supported so that they are both competent and confident in working with pupils on this subject area. Over a five year period this should be achieved for every primary class teacher. Without direct support in working with the different equations of belief, it is unrealistic to expect every class teacher to be wise in this respect. Similarly, provision should be made to support secondary teachers wishing to teach RE but with no relevant formal qualification. For those employed in a limited amount of teaching of RE basic skills training should be available. For those wishing to become specialists, RE training courses should be provided. Comparable provision should also be extended to Teaching Assistants, both primary and secondary, as appropriate. As for other priority concerns, delivery of provision should be regionally coordinated for maximum outreach.

(a) The RE Partnership should work to increase the role and effectiveness of ASTs, lead practitioners and specialist humanities colleges in RE.

(b) The TDA, working with the REC and other stakeholders, should (a) establish a set of standards for different levels of CPD in RE with related guidance, (b) develop proposals for a coherent programme of CPD opportunities for teachers of RE at different levels of expertise, and (c) pilot projects on supporting non-specialist teachers and co-ordinators of RE, based on the Framework.

(c) A programme of CPD (both on-line and face to face) should be put into place from 2008-11, to be funded jointly by the RE Partnership, SACREs and other stakeholders, including schools. Any programme would need to have agreed arrangements for national administration and a combination of regional and local delivery. The opportunity should be taken to ensure that HEI provider strengths for RE are mutually reinforcing for both CPD and ITT.

(d) Courses to equip teachers to become middle and senior managers should be strengthened in the attention they give to RE. This should not be confined to familiarity with legal requirements, but extend to the substance of RE, and the consequences of non-provision. Provision should become the norm both from within the NCSL and in more local provision.

### **F. Research and Development**

The strong research tradition which is now an established part of the DfES annual operation should be extended to include more direct attention to RE. This should be pursued on aspects, which are currently most underdeveloped or in greatest contention, including:

1. **16-19** - the current nature and extent of provision for extending and deepening religious and moral understanding on the part of students in the FE context as compared with the rest of 16-19 provision, and including case studies;

2. **Student Councils.** - the potential contributions both of Schools Councils and Young People's SACREs to inter-cultural understanding and community cohesion.

### ***Extracts from the Ofsted Long Report ' Making sense of religion'.***

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made to bring about improvements to religious education.

The Department for Education and Skills (DFES) should:

- review whether:
  - the current statutory arrangements for RE, including those for post-16 provision, are effective
  - the Framework could become the statutory basis for locally agreed syllabuses, allowing for some local determination of specific content to reflect local circumstances
  - the Framework could become the basis for the inclusion of RE within the National Curriculum
- consider ways in which SACREs might be enabled to play a stronger role in promoting the priorities of community cohesion and educating for diversity.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) should:

- develop further guidance to support the effective use of the Framework in constructing agreed syllabuses
- provide further opportunities for SACREs to share good practice
- extend the range of accredited courses for RE to ensure that the needs of all students are met
- secure greater continuity and progression in RE for the 11 to 19 years age group by aligning the assessment criteria for accredited courses with the attainment targets and levels in the Framework
- ensure that accredited courses place greater emphasis on enabling pupils to understand the changing social significance of religion in the modern world

- when reviewing the Framework, consider whether the two attainment targets for RE are an effective basis for planning and assessment.

Local authorities, in partnership with their SACREs, need to:

- consider ways in which SACREs can be better supported to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities effectively
- use the Framework rigorously in reviewing their agreed syllabus, and thoroughly assess the impact of their existing syllabus on standards and the quality of planning and assessment
- consider how the work of SACREs might support further the promotion of community cohesion and educating for diversity.

Secondary schools should:

- improve the quality of curriculum planning and assessment, particularly at Key Stage 3
- use their locally agreed syllabus more systematically and effectively to improve provision for RE.

Primary schools should:

- improve the quality of teachers' RE subject knowledge
- focus on RE in the course of whole-school development work, where appropriate.

All schools should:

- ensure that RE contributes strongly to pupils' understanding of the changing role of religion, diversity and community cohesion.

Providers of ITT should:

- strengthen the arrangements for selecting and training RE subject mentors to ensure that trainees receive high quality training.

## **Part B. Religious education in context: its future in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

### ***Are the current statutory arrangements constraining development in religious education?***

1. Despite the positive features noted earlier, lack of clarity about continuity and progression in the curriculum, and weaknesses in the way pupils'

progress is defined and assessed, contribute significantly to the slow pace of improvement in RE. These raise questions about the quality and effectiveness of agreed syllabuses.

- Do the agreed syllabuses provide an effective basis for planning and assessing RE?
  - Does the national Framework help to resolve some of these problems?
  - Do the current statutory arrangements serve RE well?
  - Are the current arrangements for producing agreed syllabuses effective in driving improvement and responding to wider educational changes?
2. Current statutory arrangements derive from legislation in 1944 and 1988, but there have been many changes since, the most recent being the publication of the Framework and the emerging proposals for a national strategy for RE. At the same time, there have been changes in the relationship between local authorities and schools, an increasing emphasis on school self-determination and school self-evaluation, and lighter-touch inspections. Other changes are also having an impact on the religious education of children and young people in England, including more diverse faith schools and the introduction of faith-based academies and trust schools.
  3. The proposals of the recently published report of the teaching and learning in 2020 review group have significant implications for personalising learning and curriculum flexibility. Those with responsibility for RE need to be in a position to respond quickly to these developments.<sup>1</sup>
  4. Ofsted's evaluation of the work of SACREs in 2004 questioned the capacity of many local authorities to undertake their responsibilities for developing and reviewing their locally agreed syllabus. The report noted:

'All agreed syllabuses seen meet statutory requirements, but their quality varied considerably. Very few syllabuses seen were of high enough quality throughout to make a consistently sound basis for good planning, teaching, learning and assessment.'<sup>2</sup>
  5. The Framework and the plans to introduce a national strategy for RE are significant moves towards providing a national basis for planning and assessing RE.<sup>3</sup> Developing and publishing the non-statutory Framework in

---

<sup>1</sup> *2020 Vision: Report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group* (DfES 04255), DfES, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> *An evaluation of the work of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education* (HMI 2269), Ofsted, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Following a feasibility study carried out by the QCA in 2002 into the prospect of a national framework for RE, the DfES commissioned the QCA to prepare a non-statutory framework, along



2004 involved high levels of cooperation between the QCA and the DfES, and also with the major faith communities and professional associations for RE in England; all were part of the development work and endorsed the Framework. In February 2006 the leaders of the major faith communities signed a joint statement committing their schools to use the Framework, leading to the possibility that, before long, all maintained schools in England, whether faith-based or not, will link their RE to nationally agreed standards.

6. The Framework provides a coherent basis for planning and assessment. Each element contributes to continuity and progression within and between the key stages and the elements are integrated with each other. For example, the 'knowledge, skills and understanding' and the general descriptions for Key Stage 3 are designed to enable most pupils to achieve level 5 and above. Similarly, the 'breadth of study' prescribes the themes to be taught, the experiences and opportunities for learning, and the Christian and other religions and world views that form the context for pupils' learning at Key Stage 3. Even so, the Framework's effectiveness in improving the quality of agreed syllabuses and of RE in schools depends to a large extent on the action taken by local authorities, agreed syllabus conferences and SACREs.
7. During 2006, HMIs evaluated how the Framework was used in constructing syllabuses and its impact on provision in schools. Although the evaluation focused on agreed syllabuses which were produced soon after the Framework was published, the initial findings raise some concerns.<sup>4</sup> Overwhelmingly, agreed syllabuses were being designed to take some account of the Framework. In some cases, almost all the main elements of the Framework were incorporated into the agreed syllabus and this ensured overall coherence. These examples, however, were the exception.
8. Agreed syllabus conferences did not use the Framework in a consistent way. Many used it as a resource: some elements were selected, others ignored and some merged with other material. Most syllabuses incorporated the eight-level scale from the Framework, but not always in ways which supported effective planning and assessment.
9. A small number of local authorities adopted an agreed syllabus which did not follow the Framework's structure. In some local authorities, often those with a high level of support from RE advisory staff, this led to innovative

---

the lines of a National Curriculum subject booklet, for RE. This was to be used primarily to guide the development of agreed syllabuses in England, to improve their quality, and to bring more commonality to them.

<sup>4</sup> At the time of the survey, eight agreed syllabuses written to the new Framework had been inspected.

thinking about the subject. In others, selected features were carefully integrated with elements from the previous syllabus. Schools which had a high level of professional support to implement the new syllabus were able to use it effectively to improve their planning and assessment. Overall, the picture was one of considerable inconsistency.

10. For most local authorities, adopting the entire Framework would require a major revision of the existing agreed syllabus. Early indications are that some conferences are not willing to do this. This reflects resistance by some teachers on agreed syllabus conferences who wish to keep the existing content as far as possible. Reluctance to write new schemes of work or buy new resources may be understandable, but it prevents much needed review.
11. Partial adoption of the Framework often leads to confusion. One local authority used the text of the Framework at each stage, followed by the units of work from the previous syllabus with minor changes, in an attempt to bring them into line. On the whole, these units were unrelated to the Framework sections, so teachers were either continuing to teach the old units, unaware of the significance of the insertions from the Framework, or confused at the juxtaposition of what they saw as two quite different syllabuses and unsure of which to focus on in their planning.
12. In some syllabuses the match of content to assessment requirements was confused. In one case, an agreed syllabus included the key stage sections of the Framework and stated that the units of study matched the requirements of the eight-level scale. But the content and activities in the syllabus did not reflect the breadth and depth of study implied in the Framework because the units were narrowly focused.
13. In another case, the syllabus provided programmes of study that were virtually independent of the Framework; teachers found it difficult to relate the main syllabus strands to the levels derived from the Framework. One agreed syllabus had produced a 'pupil-speak' version of the levels, but this did not provide comprehensive coverage of the level descriptions. The result was that the definition of standards did not match that which was recommended nationally.
14. Early findings suggest that pupils will find it difficult to reach the standards in the Framework because they are not being taught precisely enough the 'knowledge, skills and understanding' and/or encountering the 'breadth of study' which is designed to match these standards.
15. Given the strong consensus about the Framework, the question is raised about whether it should be statutory, in its present or any revised form.

Currently, local authorities must review their agreed syllabus for RE once every five years. The response to national developments is therefore often slow. Possible ways forward include the following:

- further guidance could be developed to help agreed syllabus conferences to use the Framework more effectively and coherently
  - the Framework could become the statutory basis for locally agreed syllabuses, leaving space for some local determination of specific content to reflect local circumstances, such as religious diversity
  - the Framework could become the basis for the inclusion of RE within the National Curriculum.
16. Although controversial in some respects, the last suggestion would have the support of many SACRE members, teachers and other professionals in RE. Many teachers, often supported by senior managers, argue that local determination weakens RE and contributes significantly to its low status in the curriculum.
  17. In the absence of a statutory national syllabus, publishers find it difficult to decide how to focus their publications and other resources, so much of the published material is too general. If the Framework were to become a nationally agreed syllabus, it would provide a secure basis from which publishers could develop materials. The publication of the Framework has helped, but it has not given them the confidence to produce innovative new materials.
  18. In schools with sixth forms, post-16 core RE remains a problem. Some sixth forms provide good opportunities for students to extend their study of religion through, for example, general studies sessions or day conferences. Many schools, however, do not meet the statutory requirements. The current anomaly that statutory requirements apply to RE in sixth forms but not in further education colleges is difficult to justify. With the increasing number of students in sixth forms taking accredited courses in religious studies, the major priority for RE at post-16 level would seem to be developing examination provision in further education colleges, rather than enforcing the statutory requirement in sixth forms.

### ***Is there a future for SACREs?***

19. SACREs watch the current debate about the statutory basis of the RE curriculum carefully. Many SACRE members fear that increased centralisation of the curriculum may threaten their future. Many local authorities claim to find it very difficult to provide their SACRE with the necessary level of professional support to function effectively and respond to change. Furthermore, the increased emphasis on school self-determination and self-evaluation raises questions about the role of SACREs

in monitoring provision. The current arrangement in which each local authority and SACRE tries to develop and implement its own syllabus is inefficient and may not serve the subject well. Garnering limited resources and focusing them on developing national guidance might prove more effective.

20. There are, however, powerful arguments for retaining SACREs. They reflect the continuing importance of religious and non-religious beliefs in the lives of individuals and communities. It is essential that local faith communities are confident that what is taught is accurate and balanced. Parents, whether involved in faith communities or not, need to be assured that their child's school respects diversity, understands the importance which belief and commitment play in developing personal identity, and supports the growth of community cohesion. Enabling the representatives of this diversity to meet is important. Only a very small proportion of parents exercise their legal right to withdraw their children from RE so, in part, this may reflect the confidence of those of faith or no faith in a curriculum that has been 'agreed' by their representatives.
21. With agreed syllabus conferences, SACREs provide diverse religious and non-religious communities with a unique opportunity to contribute to the curriculum and gain insights into issues in English education.

'All members of SACREs... acknowledged that their membership had significantly increased their understanding and appreciation of other faiths. They also recognised the unique role of religious education in promoting mutual understanding in a multi-faith community, and this recognition had been written into most agreed syllabuses. Individual SACREs had produced outcomes of work in this area, such as a calendar of festivals in the local community or a poster of children's drawings reflecting on the destruction of the World Trade Centre.'<sup>5</sup>

22. In a climate where dialogue between religious communities, community cohesion and respect for diversity are important, the opportunities provided by SACREs should not be underestimated. Involving teachers at a local level can be particularly advantageous: their representatives bring professional expertise to SACREs and agreed syllabus conferences and give teachers a say in what they teach. Although the number of teachers involved in developing agreed syllabuses is often small, those involved benefit from close contact with members of faith communities, bringing fresh ideas for joint work.

---

<sup>5</sup> An evaluation of the work of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (HMI 2269), Ofsted, 2004.

23. The present arrangements benefit RE by stimulating creative thinking and innovative ideas locally. The opportunity for teachers and faith communities to work together can have a very positive impact. Recently, a number of innovative agreed syllabuses have helped to advance thinking about the subject. Greater centralisation might endanger this creativity.
24. The range and effectiveness of the work of SACREs have increased in recent years. Many have been innovative in providing opportunities to support, celebrate and encourage good RE through lively initiatives. SACREs have supported the development of resources on local faith communities, enabled visitors from faith groups to work in schools, organised arts competitions focused on RE, run local student parliaments of religions, and sponsored exhibitions and lecture programmes linked to RE.
25. Regardless of whether the RE curriculum is locally or nationally devised, SACREs are necessary to give faith communities and other local interests confidence that schools provide a broad and balanced RE curriculum that meets legal requirements.
26. Many SACREs are not focused sufficiently on raising achievements in RE and improving the quality of teaching and learning. They are not integrated sufficiently into the professional structure and priorities of their local authority, and do not receive sufficient support.
27. In a context of increasing school self-determination, SACREs are in a good position to advise on self-evaluation; they are also well placed to draw from schools' self-evaluations in RE and, in that role, well placed to gather intelligence about RE in their local area. It is a matter for individual SACREs, in partnership with their local authority, to decide whether and how to link their monitoring process to school self-evaluation. Monitoring by the SACRE should evaluate the agreed syllabus and identify trends in standards, pupil achievement and provision.
28. Some SACREs already intend to ask for information from a sample of schools' self-evaluation processes. Where capacity allows, SACREs supplement such information with monitoring visits to schools and feedback from teachers' meetings and support groups.
29. The strength of SACREs lies in their multi-faith, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural composition. Some have responded very effectively to the current priorities of community cohesion and diversity, for example by developing links with local inter-faith networks or introducing youth faith forums. These achievements suggest a widening of the defined role for SACREs to reflect these priorities.