

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

**At a Meeting of Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE)**  
held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Thursday 3 November 2022**  
at **1.30 pm**

**Present:**

**P Welch (Chair) In the Chair**

### **Church of England**

Canon L Burton, K Passmore, H Tait

### **Other Religious Denominations and Faiths**

S Baker - Roman Catholic  
F Johnson - Methodist Church  
C Spencer - Bahá'í Faith  
D Van der Velde - Judaism

### **Teachers Associations**

A Hartley - NASUWT

### **County Council Representatives**

Councillors C Varty and M Walton

### **Co-opted Members**

S Walker - Humanist

### **Specialist Inspector (Religious Education)**

P Hodgson, Education Durham

## **1 Introductions, Welcome and Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from B Dunn, V Bain, W Gray, C Weir, M Turner and Councillors D Haney and S Townsend.

## **2 Minutes of the meeting held on 9 June 2022**

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 June were confirmed as correct record and signed by the Chair.

## **3 Declarations of interest, if any**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **4 Matters Arising**

P Hodgson, Education Durham provided an update on progress regarding an amendment to the Constitution to allow for a Co-opted Member to become a full voting member. He advised Cabinet would consider the report at its meeting in December.

## **5 Chairs Comments**

The Chair added that on behalf of SACRE he wished to congratulate K Passmore on her recent appointment to Regional Lead, for the new RE Hubs project. He added that her role as Lead would provide an excellent opportunity for Durham SACRE to engage with various RE networks and felt that it was a really positive outcome for Durham and raising the profile of SACRE.

In thanking the Chair, K Passmore provided an insight into the intended aims of the hub, noting that the tentative project was supported by a number of funders, and its first task was to develop and populate a well-resourced and up to date Regional Hub website, facilitating information and knowledge exchange which would provide a kite mark for speakers of faith on a national level which was something that hadn't been offered before.

The Chair went on to highlight that it was well acknowledged that there were insufficient RE specialists to meet demand in schools and recruitment targets were falling well short in this area both locally and nationally. He therefore respectfully asked members of SACRE to write to government regarding the supply of RE teachers and the lack of initial teacher training bursaries for trainee teachers of RE in order to lobby government to review this matter.

Linked to the above the Chair noted a recent debate which had taken place in parliament brought forward by Martin Vickers MP, regarding RE in Modern Britain. His speech which was available to view in full at [www.ukpol.co.uk](http://www.ukpol.co.uk) and called for a national plan for RE to ensure that government money was spent on RE projects.

### **Resolved:**

That the Chairs update be noted.

## **6 Education Durham Report to SACRE**

The Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education considered a report of P Hodgson, Education Durham which provided an overview and update of support provided since the last meeting (for copy see file of Minutes).

D Van der Velde in noting the networks and training schedule, suggested that the spring session for 'Judaism explored in the primary classroom' planned for 3 February, conflicted with preparations for Sabbath and questioned how this was going to be delivered. P Hodgson advised that he would take this back and provide a response following the meeting.

L Burton raised a query regarding the survey and asked would be delivering this. She further asked whether data from secondary schools would also be sought to determine whether the picture in Durham was reflected nationally. P Hodgson advised that, that was indeed the intention, however whether those schools would respond was unknown.

Councillor Varty asked whether the training offered was for teachers only or whether Governors could also attend. P Hodgson advised that whilst the training was open to governors, it was specifically designed for practitioners and focused around secondary school teaching. The Chair noted that HIAS delivered RE training which reached those primary networks referred to by Councillor Varty.

K Passmore added her thanks to P Hodgson for the comprehensive report and following a comment made regarding GCSE results in Religious Education, P Hodgson circulated details of provisional data on GCSE results in Religious Studies across County Durham schools, noting the size of cohorts of students taken through to exam and how the results compared with the national average. He explained that the data provided some interesting reading where lower attaining schools were achieving above level 4, which highlighted the quality of teaching in those classes.

L Burton noted that she was aware that in some secondary schools RE was provided for far less than other core subjects making reference to Durham Johnston Comprehensive School as an example. P Hodgson suggested that he could provide some more meaningful narrative around these figures for the next meeting.

**Resolved:** That the content of the report be noted.

## **7 Working Group Report on Religion & Worldviews**

The Chair advised that in B Dunn's absence the item would be deferred until the next meeting.

## **8 Community Cohesion**

The Chair noted that this was intended to be a standing item moving forward as raised and suggested by W Gray at a previous meeting.

He went on to advise that he had been contacted by Joni Stidwell, Education Equalities Team Leader, DCC requesting SACREs support in producing some short guidance for schools around the possible dates families may be granted time off school for religious observance.

Following discussion on this topic and noting that some guidance may already exist within NASACRE, H Tait and C Spencer put their names forward to represent SACRE and assist with the development of this area of work.

L Burton asked whether national perspectives on this topic had been gathered and also suggested that other SACREs in the North East should be contacted to see what they were doing in this regard. P Welch noted that whilst he could see some value in this, the area of work was not a traditional function of SACRE and therefore that information may not be available.

K Passmore noted that Harrow SACRE had produced guidance for Headteachers and Governing Bodies on Authorising Pupil Absence for Religious Observance which may be useful to review and agreed that NASACRE could potentially offer further support. In conclusion she noted that she agreed that the local authority did have guidance that they were able to share with schools.

**Resolved:**

That H Tait and C Spencer be nominated to take part in the work and agreed to report back to a future meeting.

## **9 SACRE Self Evaluation Process**

Following on from discussion on SACREs self-evaluation at the previous meeting, the Chair requested that the meeting split in to 4 smaller groups, to look in more depth at the following areas of evaluation, with a view to feedback being used to inform and develop a medium-term plan as to what SACRE do well and what could be improved going forward;

- Strengths
- Weaknesses
- Opportunities
- Threats

The group reconvened and reported upon their finds as followings:-

### **Strengths**

The Chair explained the findings from his group as follows:

- Good working relationships, active and work in meetings and between meetings.
- Meetings are quorate and well attended with County Councillor representation.
- Renewed connections with the Local Authority, senior officer.

- Colleagues who report back to faith communities & who they represent (two-way dialogue).
- Involvement in Humanist representation
- Actively reviewed and evaluated SACRE.
- Keeping up to date with contemporary changes in RE – Religion & Worldviews
- Support the LA (e.g. School absence and religious observance)
- Clerking support & Education Durham support.
- Access to NASACRE and LA training and support.
- Well represented by Academies on SACRE (not official).
- Offer support schools with faith speakers, places of worship, networking opportunities.
- Agreed Syllabus / Agreed Syllabus Conference, quality. Impact – other LA's.

Past strengths:

Involvement in Interfaith Conferences with the LA & training.  
Survey new teachers in RE (primary)

### **Weaknesses**

L Burton outlined her groups findings as follows:

- Attendance at meetings was poor and dissatisfied with meetings almost being unable to proceed due to quorum rules and legal advice. Suggest a review of the meeting timings and whether it could be held in a hybrid way would possibly improve attendance.
- Quality data was also considered to be a current weakness, although there was collective appreciation for the tremendous input that P Hodgson had offered since he had started to attend the meetings.

The Chair noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had not helped with the continuity of meetings and attendance, however he did note that it had already been agreed that future meetings would be reviewed before the diary was set by Durham County Council for 2022/23 meetings.

In response to the issues surrounding data, P Hodgson explained that primary school data was always harder to obtain, however he did suggest that there may be future opportunities for the Student Council to be invited to attend a meeting to discuss their experiences in the classroom.

Further discussion took place regarding initiatives that could be made available but a lack of funding for Durham SACRE meant that options were limited. K Passmore noted that funding was available nationally for SACRE led initiatives, however a clear plan and direction would be required in order to access it.

### **Opportunities**

S Walker outlined her groups findings as follows:

- Chance to become more inclusive and open, especially with rewrite of constitution to review membership to be inclusive of other groups.
- Emphasis on worldviews
- To be informed in a more practical and meaningful way and updates from P Hodgson will assist with this
- Induction training for new members would be beneficial
- Should seek to publicise Durham SACRE online and via social media
- Seek to share best practice and utilise the LA to better effect to communicate with schools.

## **Threats**

C Spencer detailed her groups findings as follows:

- The biggest threat to SACREs (including Durham SACRE) would be RE being added as a national curriculum subject, but since we all serve on SACRE because we value RE, this threat does not concern us.
- Lack of religious diversity in Durham is a threat to the strength and vibrancy of SACRE because it makes it hard to recruit active Faith members who live locally and can serve more easily. (The lack of diversity also probably affects the ease with which teachers can develop varied visits and Faith encounters).
- Lack of authority / opportunity to collect information on the teaching of RE and implementation of the Agreed Syllabus in schools is a threat to the ability of all SACREs to do what they are legally supposed to i.e. to advise the Local Authority on RE teaching and on what to do about it. Instead, SACRE is dependent mostly on the Local Authority for information, and we are grateful for the efforts made by P Hodgson to share available data. There is even less data on primary schools than on secondary.
- Financial constraints (lack of direct budget for SACRE and increasingly tight school budgets) mean that it is difficult for teachers to get time and permission to attend SACRE meetings, leading to a further reduction in our knowledge of RE teaching and issues in schools. Financial constraints can also limit the ability of SACRE to establish conferences where pupils and teachers can meet and share with people from a range of Faiths and other world views to learn more about how Faith affects daily life.
- Constraints / changes within Education Durham, which have led to the loss of a full-time Inspector for RE mean that the departments resources, including time, are much more restricted when it comes to revising the Agreed Syllabus, giving less opportunity for SACRE members to input to the process. We do appreciate that it has been revised and acknowledge that it remains a well-respected syllabus used in many areas, not just Durham.
- The COVID-19 pandemic is still a threat to SACRE (and to the teaching of RE) because it disrupted the launch of the Agreed Syllabus, which eventually took place virtually. It has been suggested that Durham could follow Sunderland and relaunch the Syllabus now that face-to-face events are possible again. This could be of benefit but does have financial implications.
- The increasing proportion of schools which are now academies is a threat to SACRE as there is no formal role for SACRE to be involved with them

(unlike with Maintained schools), however are aware that several local academies do still use the Durham Agreed Syllabus, and some have links to SACRE.

P Hodgson suggested that there may be ways for SACRE members to be more involved with those teachers who attend network meetings, whether in person or virtually as they currently do both to enable more teachers to attend.

In conclusion the Chair thanked all present for their input, noting that the working group would continue to meet to discuss self-evaluation and assessment would be ongoing.

## **10 Date of the next meeting**

Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2023.

## **11 Any other business**

D Van de Velde asked whether there were any communications to be issued by DCC around Holocaust Memorial Day. P Hodgson advised that he would follow this up with the team responsible after the meeting.