
*Response to the Commission on Religious Education's Final Report,
Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward*

NASACRE Executive

The Commission on RE has made 11 recommendations as part of their plan for the future of RE in England. These are to be considered by interested parties, including politicians and policymakers. Legally, this report does not change anything: each local authority with responsibility for education must establish a SACRE and an ASC, who must fulfil their statutory duties. Each maintained school must provide RE to all pupils, except where withdrawn by their parents.

The NASACRE Executive has met and considered each recommendation in turn. We offer the following thoughts, primarily so that SACREs can be engaged in an informed debate about the future of RE, but also so that we can represent member SACREs views to the RE Council of England and Wales and the DfE. Feedback is therefore welcomed from SACREs.

We feel some disappointment that, though good RE is mentioned (¶10, ¶29) the report paints an overwhelmingly negative picture of the current state of RE. We feel there should have been more celebration of the great RE that happens in many schools, in many authority areas up and down the country, that helps to make our RE the envy of the rest of Europe, if not the world.

The first Recommendation is that the name of the subject should be changed to Religion and Worldviews. We do appreciate the need for the subject to be inclusive, and recognise that the subject has a number of different names within schools. The concept of 'Worldviews' is contested and we feel this name is not quite right, running the risk of appearing to dilute the importance of the study of religions. We will read the following recommendations assuming the subject is called RE, without affecting the substance of the recommendations.

Recommendation 2, the National Entitlement (NE) is in many ways the centrepiece of the report. In principle we welcome the idea of a Statutory Entitlement – one already exists in the current legislation. However, we reject the recommendations at 2a, b, and c. We note the variance in language: "will" at 2a but "should" in regard to Academies at 2b. If it is possible to renegotiate every Academy Funding agreement, they could be simply made to follow the local Agreed Syllabus (AS).

We suggest there are problems with the text of the entitlement. No answer is given to the question of what it means to be religiously educated. In fact, there is no sense of what the purpose of RE is. The statement is not child-centred, rather it lists knowledge that ‘must be taught’, but in a rather vaguely phrased way, resulting in something that cannot easily be used to hold schools to account. There appears to be little space for reflection, ultimate questions, spirituality or awe and wonder. RE’s current significant contribution to the promotion of pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is missing.

That ‘worldview’ is used as a catch-all for all belief systems may lead many to miss the importance of the study of religions. We, of course, approve of the statements about teaching being open and inclusive, and that pupils deserve teachers who have secure subject knowledge, but wonder if it is realistic for a primary non-specialist teacher to be required to have a “critical understanding of developments in the study of religion and worldviews”.

On Recommendation 3, we query the make up and opacity of the proposed REC-board nominated and DfE appointed National standing Body to create non-statutory Programmes of Study (PoS). That the DfE would fund this, in perpetuity, seems an unrealistic ask, when other subjects have their National Curriculum documents written without the need for an on-going financial commitment by governments that are likely to change. The report also does not make a sufficiently strong case to justify why a scenario with a variety of competing PoS is preferable to a variety of AS

We reject Recommendation 4, which removes the requirement for an Authority to convene an ASC. We do not find the report to give a convincing rationale for why the requirement should be removed. We are not aware of any ‘poor quality’ AS produced in the last few years. We do not see whole LA areas where there is poor RE provision in schools. We feel that some of the evidence presented has been chosen to put one view forward, that of a centralising curriculum narrative, without local democratic checks and balances in place. If national coherence is the objective of this reform, then a NE could be used to audit and inform AS developments.

On Recommendation 5, regarding examinations, we feel the issues at GCSE are much wider than coherence with a NE. Compliance, curriculum time and staff expertise are all issues in need of resolution, as the Report points to in other places. We note that there is little mention of Special Schools, PRUs and EYFS in the report.

We wholeheartedly agree with Recommendation 6, regarding urgently needed improvements in ITE, particularly primary. We do have a reservation about who will produce the modules mentioned in 6d. That no ‘compulsory modules’ appear to exist for any other curriculum subject may make this recommendation problematic and may take away academic freedom and rigour. We also wonder if 12 hours RE training for a primary School Direct trainee is a realistic expectation. The Commission appears to have not recognised that in some state maintained schools teachers are highly qualified or that in some primary schools RE is delivered – along with some other subjects – by teaching assistants.

We welcome Recommendation 7 and support any improvement in CPD provision (although not necessarily tied to a NE). We note it is rare for government to fund a five-year project and are unsure that this needs to be overseen by a 'national body'. We suggest that the CPD aims could be met by SACREs if funded properly.

We are disappointed with Recommendation 8, to rename and reconstitute SACREs to become Local Advisory Networks. Having spent two years gathering evidence and consulting, the Commission offers little evidence why a change is needed and despite meeting with NASACRE and many SACREs it did not ask for opinions on a change of name or status. This is a shame. There are already local networks which support dialogue between religions – local inter faith organisations. These are very different entities to SACREs, and there is scope for confusion. A network (like a local inter faith body) simply shares and discusses, but a Council has much greater gravitas, giving direction and having cultural status and value. This essence is lost in the new name, perhaps unintentionally. That a SACRE is 'standing' is important as it signifies permanence and a place in the democratic structure, which makes it accountable. This too would be lost, with a more transient sounding advice network. There appears to have been little thought given to how an LA constitutes these networks (¶108), or how they would be accountable for their work. If currently LAs are struggling to do this it is not clear how a larger body would improve things. We are not intrinsically opposed to some reform of the make up of groups that make up SACREs or the committees of an ASC, but the make up proposed appears to severely weaken the contribution of the significant religious bodies in the locality, professional and elected local representation, thereby weakening local democracy.

The Commission deliberately set out to not consider Collective Worship (¶100). SACREs have statutory duties regarding Collective Worship and particularly determinations. It is not clear whether the Commission envisages a dual system of Standing Advisory Councils on Collective Worship, or if these functions would also be carried out by the 'LANs'. Currently SACREs are the only body with the statutory duty and expertise to advise about CW and determinations. Academies seeking a determination often receive confusing advice from other bodies, and the DfE frequently defer to a local SACRE's advice on these matters.

The REC deliberately limited the Commission to considering the situation for RE in England. However, the legislation regarding SACREs for both England and Wales is the same (cf the 1988 Education Reform Act and 1993 Education Act). A change to this legislation would affect the Welsh SACRE system and they do not appear to have been consulted. In both these examples (CW and Wales) the Commission appears to be making recommendations outside of its remit.

The final part of Recommendation 8, suggesting ring fenced funding, is welcomed; this alone, would hugely improve the ability of many SACREs to carry out their duties and improve the future of RE.

We welcome Recommendation 9, and support anything that increases the accountability of schools. Ofsted currently appears to have no appetite for monitoring compliance. In the past when it did monitor compliance it significantly improved RE in

schools. An adoption of recommendation 9a (without reference to the NE) would immediately bear fruit.

We also welcome Recommendation 10, and its adoption would see immediate results. We welcome Recommendation 11, regarding withdrawal, but would like to draw attention to the excellent guidance on withdrawal produced recently by our Welsh colleagues at WASACRE.

Given that any legislative change is highly unlikely, we are disappointed that the Commission did not make recommendations which strengthen the existing statutory framework. The fundamental issues facing RE are dealt with by the recommendations around ITE, CPD, funding and accountability. If the DfE met these recommendations we are sure that the future of RE would be even better than it currently is.

NASACRE Executive Committee
September 2018