

Thurrock Agreed Syllabus: options from RE Today

Background

The legal requirements:

- SACRE must review its RE Agreed Syllabus every five years
- An Agreed Syllabus Conference is to be set up to conduct the review

An agreed syllabus must *'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are, in the main, Christian while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.'*

Education Act (1996 Section 375 (3))/School Standards and Framework Act (1998, Schedule 19, para.5)

The need for a high-quality syllabus

The provision of a clear, well-structured, up-to-date and professional agreed syllabus is probably the single most important function of SACRE. Combined with on-going implementation training and resources, a new syllabus offers the possibility of raising achievement in RE in all local schools. It is also essential to consider how this relates to new inspection requirements, to developments in assessment and in teaching and learning, revised GCSEs, the National Report from the Commission on RE, the 'British Values' agenda, and all related educational change.

Ofsted's Subject specialist RE reports 2010 and 2013 highlight the need for syllabuses to:

- be clear about expected knowledge and understanding about religion(s) and belief(s)
- support and empower teachers to plan effectively
- offer coherent progression across the ages and key stages
- support clear and focused assessment, useful for raising standards
- encourage enquiry-based RE.

Implications of the 2019 Ofsted Framework

The 2019 Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (EIF) places great emphasis on curriculum planning. It asks schools what the thinking is behind their curriculum plan for the school – their **intent**. It then examines how they **implement** it – including a context and narrative for its implementation in the school. And then it examines the **impact** of their curriculum on pupils. An agreed syllabus needs to be able to support schools in all three. It needs to have a good rationale for its structure; it needs to be operable in diverse school settings; it needs to show schools how they can see what impact the syllabus is having on pupil achievement.

One key issue that arises from this is the need to show progression in terms of knowledge and understanding at different phases – across a single year, across a phase and across the whole school. For example, recent Ofsted reports emphasise the importance of teachers being able to articulate and justify the choices they have made for what content they study, when and why e.g.

Appendix 1

Leaders need to make sure that all subject plans provide the opportunity for pupils to apply and deepen their knowledge.

Without this support, schools face strong criticism: e.g.

The way in which a series of lessons is planned in geography, religious education, music and art does not help pupils to build on what they already know and can do.

A syllabus also needs to have coherence across primary and secondary schools, so that pupils can build on prior learning. This is essential for pupils to be able to embed learning so that they can recall what they have learnt. The Ofsted Framework defines learning:

Learning happens when there is a change in long-term memory. If there is no change in long-term memory, learning has not taken place.

It is no longer adequate for pupils to have a selection of single encounters with RE content – a single unit on one theme, or one religion, and then not to be revisited. However interesting and engaging these units might be, pupils are unlikely to be able to recall what they have learnt. A syllabus needs to enable schools to plan coherently to ensure that pupils encounter content (in the form of core concepts, for example) a number of times, through primary and secondary schools.

Commission on RE National Report 2018

Since the development of the syllabus model A (2015), the model used by Thurrock, the RE Council has published the result of a two-year commission into RE. Among its recommendations are:

- A change of name for the subject, from *Religious Education* to *Religion and Worldviews*
- The removal of the responsibility for SACREs to produce a local agreed syllabus
- Instead, to have a national statement of entitlement and national example programme of study, upon which Local Advisory Networks for Religion and Worldviews (the body replacing the reconstituted SACRE) can base local guidance and support.

The Report has had a positive response from the RE community, in general, although there remain some strong differences of opinion. Its impact on the role of SACREs is limited as yet. The Department for Education gave a lukewarm response to it, and indicated that there would be no time or inclination for any legal change for the foreseeable future. This means that SACREs retain the requirement to set up an Agreed Syllabus Conference and decide upon development of an agreed syllabus.

The RE Council is seeing this as part of a long process, however, and even though there is not any immediate structural change, the Report is having an impact on how people think about the content and purpose of RE, and may well end up having an impact on the structures of RE too. Schools are now taking notice of this and are beginning to adapt the RE that they teach.

Implications for SACREs

Appendix 1

It would be wise to consider the impact of the description of our subject as outlined in the Commission Report. Whether or not we wish to embrace the name change, there may be some adjustments (at least) that we could make to RE. On the other hand, the national conversation being held among RE professionals may not reach quickly down to the classroom. It is part of SACRE's role to mediate this impact, as it sees fit.

Decisions to take:

- There is the opportunity to make some amendments to the current model, and SACRE should consider the options below.
- There are funding implications for each of the options. It is better that these do not drive the decisions – better to decide what is the best option for the teachers and then pursue the funding!

The options for SACRE include:

- a) **SACRE renews the licence with RE Today, which includes a supplement to insert into the 2016-2021 folder, delivered electronically.** This supplement includes updates on, for example, the Commission Report, tighter requirements at KS4 and 5, assessment, OFSTED, EYFS and some additional guidance. This relicensing would include a 'relaunch' conference, to support teachers with ideas and resources.
- b) **SACRE could adopt RE Today's more recent Syllabus Model B.** This syllabus shares some DNA with the current Thurrock syllabus, but offers a more systematic approach, incorporating questions from the Understanding Christianity resource being used in many schools, and a revised assessment model.
- c) **SACRE could commission a bespoke new syllabus from RE Today.** This could reflect the Commission on RE national report recommendations closely, exemplifying its new direction for Religion and Worldviews.

Option A

Renew licence with RE Today syllabus (model A) plus supplement

The Thurrock syllabus was written by RE Today. It has been adopted by over 15 other local authorities, with very positive feedback as to its effectiveness.

This syllabus provides the minimum for a SACRE / LA to fulfil its legal requirement.

- The licence renewal would include a slight update to the 2016 syllabus – including new dates, a few corrections and potentially an updated Foreword.
- It would also include a **supplement**. This would be produced electronically, so that it can be sent around to all schools together with the updated syllabus.

The supplement would include, for example:

Syllabus Model A+

This updates Model A, including:

- Updated EYFS outcomes, in line with 2020 EYFS Profile
- Guidance on curriculum design
- Guidance on idea of worldviews (in line with CoRE - institutional/personal)
- Additional questions:

Appendix 1

- o L2.5a How do people from religious and non-religious communities celebrate key festivals? (multidisciplinary approach)
- o L2.10 How do family life and festivals show what matters to Jewish people?
- o U2.9 What can be done to reduce racism? Can religion help?
- o U2.10 Green religion? How and why should religious communities do more to care for the Earth?
- o 3 systematic units for KS3: Islam, Sikhi, Buddhism
- Expanded SEND guidance
- Revised and rewritten guidance on assessment
- Local demographic information

Appendices on:

- cultural capital
- creating a coherent curriculum
- types of knowledge (in line with Ofsted Subject Review - substantive knowledge, ways of knowing, personal knowledge)
- introduction to knowledge organisers
- keywords and core concepts
- descriptions of achievement for pupils with SEND working below national curriculum outcomes
- planning RE in special school settings

Online support including:

- Knowledge organisers
- Sample long-term plans
- Guidance on religious and non-religious worldviews (religions guide, do's and don'ts etc)

Advantages:

- All schools receive an updated digital copy of the 120+ page document, in full colour, plus the supplement
- Supplement offers useful updates and additional guidance, to enhance and promote good learning in RE.
- No difficulty with it being ready for summer 2021, depending on when SACRE make a decision, SACRE will need to re-launch conferences for the update. RE Today would run these conferences.
- There is scope for some additional unit questions to extend options for teachers
- Support materials schools have purchased already continue to be relevant
- On-going support from RE Today with potential upgrades within the 5-year review period if necessary
- Note that the units of work for the 2016 syllabus are still available for schools to purchase, if they missed out first time around.
- Feedback from local authorities using this syllabus has been very positive.

Disadvantages:

- Little involvement from local teachers or SACRE on the content and style.

Appendix 1

- Local RE is less prominent (though Thurrock can insert additional appendices if desired)
- If the Commission Report recommendations are put into action, the syllabus will not reflect its fullest extent.

Details and likely costs

Syllabus licence renewal includes cost of update and supplement

Option B

Adopt RE Today's more recent syllabus model B

In 2017, RE Today developed a new syllabus model. It has some questions that are very similar to the Thurrock syllabus, but its approach is different.

Features:

- The syllabus follows a more systematic approach to the study of religions, in contrast to the more thematic approach of Thurrock. This means that most questions address one religion at a time. For example, in each year a class will generally study two religions separately before addressing a thematic question in the summer term, allowing them to build on their learning through the year.
- The syllabus follows a coherent teaching and learning approach, with clear assessment outcomes for each unit and each phase.
- The syllabus contains additional guidance on religions and worldviews, and is accompanied by a selection of units of work that can be purchased by SACRE for its schools, or by schools themselves.
- This syllabus incorporates key questions from the Understanding Christianity resource that is currently in use in many Church of England and community schools.

This syllabus would include some of the key updates from Option A.

Advantages:

- The systematic approach is more in sympathy with a knowledge-rich curriculum, and its spiral curriculum reflects the contemporary emphasis on embedding pupils' knowledge and understanding in their long-term memory. This idea of curriculum coherence ties in well with new Ofsted emphases.
- This syllabus is a substantial move forward for RE for pupils and for teachers.
- Many schools using Understanding Christianity would be delivering the agreed syllabus as they use it; and schools who have not discovered Understanding Christianity would benefit from the structural coherence of the study of Christianity in the syllabus.
- RE Today have received trust funding which means that community schools can attend 3 part training on the Understanding Christianity resource at an amazingly low cost and community schools attending this training will have the resource at no cost to them.
- The syllabus includes additional scope for the examination of non-religious worldviews, in line with the Commission Report 2018.
- Syllabus is ready for summer 2021 launches.
- On-going support from RE Today with potential upgrades within the 5-year review period if necessary.

Appendix 1

- Feedback from local authorities using this syllabus has been very positive.

Disadvantages:

- A substantial change of syllabus may not be welcomed by schools, who are just getting used to the current one, even though the syllabus Model B has been greeted very positively by schools in other LAs.

Option C: Bespoke review

SACRE could fulfil statutory duties by requiring a local review of the agreed syllabus.

This would involve a process something like this:

- an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) set up, over-seeing the review;
- a survey of teachers;
- initial drafts by the adviser / a consultant;
- teacher working groups to feed into the process of reviewing the drafts;
- re-writing by adviser;
- approval from ASC, SACRE and the Local Authority;
- design and production of text and/or online version.

This would need to be launched with either a schools conference day or a series of hub CPD sessions, to provide training and resources to enable teachers to implement the syllabus in their schools. A syllabus with strong implementation training plus support will be far more effective than one with no training.

The production of support materials can extend the value of the revised syllabus. A good syllabus can provide the drive, coherence and context for RE, with sample or full units of work exemplifying the syllabus. They are not an alternative to the statutory syllabus but can enhance teaching and learning by providing teachers with additional suggestions and guidance.

The key reason to consider this would be if SACRE believes that it should create a syllabus that reflects the description of the subject of Religion and Worldviews from the 2018 Commission Report.

Relevant recent examples:

RE Today Services have had recent involvement with SACREs and Local Authorities in, for example, Sandwell, Bedford, Bedfordshire and Luton, and Gloucestershire, who have used RE Today to develop a bespoke syllabus. No one else has yet written a syllabus based on the 2018 Commission Report, so this would be ground-breaking.

Advantages:

- Involvement of local teachers strengthens the commitment to the syllabus, maybe resulting in greater buy-in for the revised syllabus
- The process is a form of professional development for those involved, who can then support local schools in the implementation process.
- The syllabus can reflect the local area closely.
- The syllabus could set the standard for post-Commission syllabuses, with national impact

Appendix 1

Disadvantages:

- Costs are considerably greater than options a-b.
- Duplication of work with other local SACREs.

Likely costs must include:

- Establishing, managing and supporting the review process,
- Running teacher consultations, including supply cover for teacher working party
- Setting the parameters for writing review materials, and developing local applications of national materials; writing time, drafting and redrafting services
- Production supervision
- Supply cover
- Production costs: editorial, design, print.

Likely costs: In our experience, bespoke syllabus writing can cost between £20-30,000

Potential timeline

Summer Term 2021	Agreed Syllabus Conference convened to begin the process of reviewing the syllabus SACRE survey of primary, secondary and SEND teachers
Autumn term 2021	Survey results analysed Principles agreed Draft of SACRE generated pages presented to SACRE; amended after comments Agreed Syllabus Conference comment on draft pages Agreed Syllabus Conference approve and recommend to Thurrock Council Thurrock Council approval sought
May/June 2021	Design and production process
Late June/ Early July 2021	Agreed Syllabus launch conferences, primary and secondary Local group support
September 2021 onwards	Agreed syllabus implemented in schools On-going local group support

Licence

Total costs £8,279

Summary - Total costs for renewing Model A + syllabus:

	Cost
Syllabus licences 51 @£65=3315+vat £663	£3,978
Schemes of work – primary/special 39@£47	£1,833

Appendix 1

Schemes of work – secondary12@39	£468
Syllabus training delivery	£2,000
Totals	£8,279

The licence includes:

- **Permission for each school to use the syllabus** – including photocopying within school for classroom use
- The syllabus will be **provided to schools as a PDF, via a password protected area** of the RE Today website. The syllabus cannot be made available for public access – this is a breach of the licence conditions. It is the responsibility of the SACRE to ensure all licences schools are compliant.
- **Licences are per school**, not bundled per academy chain, for example
- A **hard copy** of the syllabus will be provided for each school if you choose to adopt model B
- A **hard copy** of the supplement will be provided for each school if you relicence model A
- A **summary document will be supplied as a PDF** to the SACRE/LA to host as a publicly available document on their website
- Licence also includes **essential updates from RE Today** during the five-year licence period. These will be available electronically, not in print.
- The syllabus remains the copyright of RE Today.