

## **Religious Education and Collective Worship in Schools in Northumberland.**

### **Executive Summary.**

In Autumn 2018, staff in 27 schools (16% of non-fee-paying schools in Northumberland) filled in the questionnaire about RE and collective worship prepared on behalf of the SACRE. The schools that engaged with the research project were as follows:

9 firsts  
9 primaries  
3 middle schools  
1 secondary  
3 highs  
2 specials

9 of the 27 schools were faith schools (all the faith schools were Church of England. No Roman Catholic schools engaged with the research project).

2 of the 27 schools were academies but none were free schools.

1 of the 27 schools was a faith school AND an academy.

Of course, it would have been better had we secured a higher response rate, perhaps especially from community schools, but this is the first time we have attempted an exercise of this nature, some data is better than none, respondents have been very forthcoming with information and, if/when the exercise is repeated, the response rate will almost certainly improve.

### **Religious Education.**

Para 1. It might be argued that only schools which take RE and collective worship relatively seriously have responded to the questionnaire. This may be so, but schools that engaged with the research project have been very informative. Thus, even the relatively small sample reveals wide variation in the amount of time devoted to non-examined RE (and some schools admit that some pupils get no such RE). However, 31 to 60 minutes per week appears to be the most popular amount of time to devote to non-examined RE, but it is interesting/encouraging that some pupils get up to two hours of such RE per week.

Para 2. Although RE appears to be provided as a separate/discreet subject to most or all pupils in a majority of the schools that engaged with the research project, experimentation in the delivery of RE is apparent, not least with pupils in some of our first and primary schools. Such experimentation includes emphasising the cross-curricular potential of RE, something the locally agreed RE syllabus encourages.

Para 3. It is worth reminding SACRE members that the locally agreed RE syllabus is not prescriptive about the teaching and learning methods that should be used; the syllabus emphasises that schools should experiment with the methods best

suited to the pupils in receipt of the subject and the teachers responsible for its delivery. However, teachers in most of the schools that filled in the questionnaire will have no problem confirming that RE IS being taught, even where integrated approaches to subject delivery prevail. This is an important matter, given that the provision of RE is a statutory responsibility in all publicly funded schools.

Para 4. It would appear that a large number of teachers and some TAs and HLTAs assume responsibility for teaching RE, but the number of such staff who are RE specialists is very small. Although the percentage of RE specialists teaching RE nationally is of concern (nationally, about 25% of RE teachers are RE specialists), an even smaller percentage of RE teachers in Northumberland appear to be specialists (although the small size of the sample responding to the questionnaire justifies caution in relation to such a conclusion).

Para 5. This said, it is alleged that in 23 schools teachers are “very” or “mostly” confident about teaching RE, which needs to be kept in mind as further evidence emerges from the questionnaire about the need for training, etc. Even when TAs/HLTAs teach RE, a majority of them appear to be “very” or “mostly” confident.

Para 6. Where KS4 and 5 pupils study for an exam, they are in receipt of a reasonable or good amount of lesson time. Less easy to tell from the available data is how much RE KS4 and 5 pupils receive when NOT studying for an exam. However, two schools admit they do not provide ANY RE to at least SOME of their KS4 pupils, but elsewhere we learn that one school provides 31 to 60 minutes non-examined RE per week to Year 11 and over 90 minutes non-examined RE per week to Year 12. Two schools provide NO non-examined RE to their KS5 pupils.

Para 7. Data suggests that RE is in most cases as well as or better resourced than Geography and History, which may surprise some SACRE members.

Para 8. Governors are deemed an RE asset in a majority of schools, and many schools indicate that staff have recently undertaken RE CPD. This said, elsewhere schools comment on the need for additional CPD, and our data may have been positively affected by the frequency with which CE schools engage in RE CPD.

Para 9. Although it might look alarming that 8 schools say they never or rarely access the locally agreed RE syllabus to assist with planning and assessment, we should not forget that most of these schools must use the CE diocesan syllabus. That 16 schools regularly use the locally agreed RE syllabus is reason to celebrate.

Para 10. There is also reason to celebrate that 20 schools never access another locally agreed RE syllabus (primarily because it is our syllabus that community schools and a few faith schools are legally required to use), and we should take heart from the fact that some teachers access good quality resources from a variety of sources, the internet, NATRE, RE Today and the QCA/QCDA included. It is interesting that RE textbooks are not used as often as some people might

expect, although note that most schools engaging with the questionnaire are first and primary schools, schools in which textbooks have always been less popular.

Para 11. Should we worry that 11 schools never use their own scheme of work to support planning and assessment? Not if the teachers feel that the locally agreed or diocesan RE syllabus they MUST use has a scheme of work already. This said, one would expect every school to extract from the syllabus they MUST use a more focused/specific/summarised scheme of work, given that the syllabus contains far more information/advice/ideas than a school can hope to deliver to its pupils.

Para 12. Opportunities to study religions and world views other than Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism are at present very limited, although it is encouraging that in some schools change is taking place. While schools are good at encouraging in a very generalised way tolerance and respect for religions and world views that are not often or ever studied, such religions and world views are not only denied the study time that the so-called world religions enjoy; there is insufficient time/opportunity to celebrate them in the same way as the so-called world religions.

Para 13. Even accounting for the 50 pupils withdrawn from RE from a single school, the evidence implies that not many parents exercise the right to withdraw their children, which suggests that in many of our schools genuine effort is made to ensure the subject is inclusive. Some people will say that not all parents know their right to withdraw their children from RE, but we doubt this is a widespread problem, not least because for some years now a school's prospectus and/or website must clarify the right to withdraw.

Para 14. It is excellent that schools have such good relations with their parents that at least some parents have explained why they withdraw their children from RE. But the reasons given suggest that, in some cases at least, religion and belief operate in ways that militate against inclusion and/or community cohesion by leading to the separation of pupils during RE lessons. Moreover, it is sad that some parents deny to their children an opportunity to benefit from a broad and balanced education about religion and belief.

Para 15. If some schools think that RE could still do better in terms of enabling pupils to think spiritually, ethically and theologically, part of the reason is no doubt due to the lack of specialist RE teachers, but there may also be implications in relation to CPD.

Para 16. To improve RE in schools, teachers should consider a careful examination of the locally agreed RE syllabus (perhaps the Guidance section in particular) and also liaise with nearby schools/schools in their partnership to arrange CPD to overcome gaps in knowledge, skills and understanding, perhaps especially in relation to religions and world views other than Christianity. As for resourcing the subject, schools should make greater use of the School Library Service and the NE Religious Resources Centre, or liaise with nearby schools to

build up small resource banks that a cluster of schools can share (e.g. RE resource banks that all the schools in a partnership can access).

Para 17. Suggested actions for the SACRE are interesting, to say the least. Are we too polite, with our schools as well as the government? Do we need to be more forthright with schools that fail to provide pupils with their statutory right to RE? Also note that the government has decided to do nothing about the Commission on RE's report, "Religion and World Views: the way forward" (September 2018), despite the support it has secured from stakeholders throughout the RE community nationally (see the letter sent by Damien Hinds, Secretary of State for Education, to Dr. John Hall, the Chair of the Commission on RE, in December 2018). If we have concerns about this, do they need sharing with the government?

### **Collective Worship, etc.**

Para 18. It is very reassuring that 25 of the schools say they understand the distinction between an ACW and an assembly, although some answers to follow-up questions suggest that more than 2 schools lack clarity about the matter. It is also reassuring (from the statutory point of view at least) that 18 schools say they provide a daily ACW all or most of the time. Reasons given for not being able to provide a daily ACW will come as no surprise to SACRE members, given discussions we have had about the matter in the past.

Para 19. It is reassuring (from the statutory point of view at least) that a majority of schools can point to content that will convince people their ACWs are "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character", but is compliance with the legislation being bought at the cost of rendering collective worship less accessible/meaningful/rewarding for non-Christian pupils? Are some manifestations of worship more corporate than collective? Corporate worship is unlawful in community schools, and in academies and free schools not designated with a religious character.

Para 20. There is evidence that some allowance is made during collective worship to meet the needs and aspirations of non-Christian pupils, but the evidence suggests some schools are better at this than others. Devoting an ACW a week to the British values might enhance inclusion, if such ACWs are planned with sufficient care, although would it not be more productive to identify whether there are some universal values and to discuss them instead?

Para 21. As with RE, the number of pupils withdrawn from collective worship is very small, which implies that many of our schools make every effort to render collective worship inclusive. Once again, parents ought to know their right to withdraw their children from collective worship (e.g. because of the school's prospectus and/or website), so lack of knowledge about the legislation is unlikely to explain the low figure. However, once again, there are occasions when religion and belief militate against inclusion/community cohesion because some pupils are denied access to collective worship with the great majority of their peers.

Para 22. Not for at least 20 years has a school in Northumberland applied to the SACRE for permission to suspend the requirement to provide ACWs that are “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character”. This may confirm how hard schools work to ensure that collective worship is inclusive, but it would be interesting to establish whether schools have considered the possible benefits of such an action. Additionally, because such a request has never been made, the following question is justified: what is provided for pupils withdrawn from the “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character” ACW?

Para 23. It is very heartening to see how many schools say they have updated their collective worship policy and guidelines in recent/very recent times or are doing so now, but less heartening to discover how few make use of the County’s policy and guidelines (the County’s policy and guidelines were singled out for praise when the SACRE applied for the Accord Inclusivity Award in 2017, and positive mention of the policy and guidelines was made in the report that Accord produced and circulated nationally to RE stakeholders). The “problem” with the County’s policy and guidelines may simply be that they were produced in 2006 or 2007 and, although their content has stood the test of time, we rarely celebrate their existence. Should the policy and guidelines be reviewed and relaunched and an article about them prepared for a future SACRE Newsletter? They ought to be used more often by schools.

Para 24. Some of the final comments simply confirm what we have known for some time: RE and collective worship should be taken more seriously; specialist RE teachers are in short supply; more CPD and networking are required; and small, remote and monocultural schools face particular challenges when trying to enrich RE provision/make it meaningful - but, as a general rule, most pupils thoroughly enjoy RE, especially younger ones (and they also enjoy at least some collective worship).

Para 25. Some of the real or imagined problems identified as a result of the questionnaire can be overcome if schools establish closer working relations with neighbouring schools, not all of which have to be in the same partnership. In some parts of the County, such close working relations have led to shared resources, the provision of tailor-made CPD and the utilisation of appropriate local and regional expertise. If teachers access the locally agreed RE syllabus more often, and NCC’s “Policy and Guidelines for Collective Worship in Community Schools”, they will find a lot of information addressing concerns raised in the questionnaire (e.g. where to go for good visits, who to invite to school to talk about religion and belief, how to meet the needs of all pupils during collective worship); and back copies of the SACRE Newsletter (all of which are accessible via the homepage on the NCC website) contain hundreds of examples of best practice that schools can easily customise to meet their specific needs.

Para 26. Some respondents to the questionnaire have at times been very forthright about RE and collective worship, and for this we are very grateful. Just occasionally, replies to questions have reminded us that issues to do with RE and collective worship remain sensitive/controversial, not least because of the

legislative settlement that now remains unchanged (but far from unchallenged) since 1988.

Para 27. Because of the data, ideas and opinions the questionnaire has generated, there are matters that the SACRE and the local authority can usefully consider, even if nothing changes at the national level for some years to come (see the letter sent by Damien Hinds, Secretary of State for Education, to Dr. John Hall, the Chair of the Commission on RE, in December 2018).

## **The Full Report.**

### **Introduction/Context.**

In Autumn 2018, staff in 27 schools (16% of non-fee-paying schools in Northumberland) filled in the questionnaire about RE and collective worship prepared on behalf of the SACRE. The schools that engaged with the research project were as follows:

9 firsts  
9 primaries  
3 middles  
1 secondary  
3 highs  
2 specials

9 of the 27 schools were faith schools (all the faith schools were Church of England. No Roman Catholic schools engaged with the research project).

2 of the 27 schools were academies but none were free schools.

1 of the 27 schools was a faith school AND an academy.

Of course, it would have been better had we secured a higher response rate, perhaps especially from community schools, but this is the first time we have attempted an exercise of this nature, some data is better than none, respondents have been very forthcoming with information and, if/when the exercise is repeated, the response rate will almost certainly improve.

It might be argued that we have heard only from schools in which knowledge and understanding about RE and collective worship are good, and in which RE and collective worship practice are better than average (to put it another way, we have not heard from schools where RE and collective worship leave much to be desired). We will let you to be a judge of this based on the evidence below.

### **Religious Education.**

#### **How much time is spent teaching non-examined RE in each year group (zero minutes per week)?**

Reception in a first  
Reception in a primary  
Years 7 to 13 in a secondary  
Year 8 in a high  
Year 10 in a high  
Years 10 to 13 in a high

#### **How much time is spent teaching non-examined RE in each year group (up to 30 minutes per week)?**

Reception in 3 firsts  
Reception to Year 4 in a first

Reception in 3 primaries  
Year 1 in a primary  
Year 8 in a high  
Year 9 in a high  
Reception to Year 6 in a special

**How much time is spent teaching non-examined RE in each year group (from 31 to 60 minutes per week)?**

Every school except two firsts and one special identified this as the most popular amount of time to devote to non-examined RE per week, with some first, primary and the three middle schools indicating that ALL pupils had this much RE per week.

**How much time is spent teaching non-examined RE in each year group (from 61 to 90 minutes per week)?**

Three firsts, five primary, three middle, one secondary, one high and two special schools said that NONE of their pupils got this amount of non-examined RE per week, but many or all pupils in two first and two primary schools got up to 90 minutes per week, as did individual year groups in three first, two primary and two high schools. 61 to 90 minutes per week appears to be the second most popular amount of time to devote to non-examined RE (after 31 to 60 minutes per week).

**How much time is spent teaching non-examined RE in each year group (over 90 minutes per week)?**

Reception in a first  
Year 2 in a first  
Year 2 in a primary  
Year 5 in a primary  
Year 8 in a high  
Year 12 in a high

**Comment.**

It might be argued that only schools which take RE and collective worship relatively seriously have responded to the questionnaire. This may be so, but schools that engaged with the research project have been very informative. Thus, even the relatively small sample reveals wide variation in the amount of time devoted to non-examined RE (and some schools admit that some pupils get NO such RE). However, 31 to 60 minutes per week appears to be the most popular amount of time to devote to non-examined RE, but it is interesting/encouraging that some pupils get up to two hours of such RE per week.

**Is RE taught separately or as part of another subject/course?**

The most common response from schools was "separately" (16 schools said this, either for most or all pupils).

One first said RE was taught as "a combination - linked to cross-curricular topics with some stand-alone teaching".

One first said some RE lessons were taught "discreetly, some as part of History and Thinking Skills".

One primary said RE in Reception was taught “as part of whole topic planning”.  
One primary said RE in Reception was taught “through topics”.  
One primary said RE was taught “separately, unless it fitted in with the topics”.  
One primary said RE was “integrated” at Early Years Foundation Stage.  
One middle said RE was taught “separately in KS3 and Year 5, as part of topics in Year 6”.  
One middle said “No”, which we take to mean RE is NOT taught separately.  
One secondary said at KS3 RE “is taught as part of a core Humanities topic which comprises of distinct History, Geography and RE units”.  
One high said RE was “only taught as part of GCSE”.  
One special said RE was taught “as part of our creative curriculum”.

### **Comment.**

Although RE appears to be provided as a separate/discreet subject to most or all pupils in a majority of the schools that engaged with the research project, experimentation in the delivery of RE is apparent, not least with pupils in some of our first and primary schools. Such experimentation includes emphasising the cross-curricular potential of RE, something the locally agreed RE syllabus encourages.

It is worth reminding SACRE members that the locally agreed RE syllabus is not prescriptive about the teaching and learning methods that should be used; the syllabus emphasises that schools should experiment with the methods best suited to the pupils in receipt of the subject and the teachers responsible for its delivery. However, teachers in most of the schools that filled in the questionnaire will have no problem confirming that RE IS being taught, even where integrated approaches to subject delivery prevail. This is an important matter, given that the provision of RE is a statutory responsibility in all publicly funded schools.

### **How many teachers teach RE in your school?**

Only 13 schools responded to the question. “All teachers” derived from 8 schools. These schools had 2 to 15 teachers responsible for RE. But one academy said, “Approximately 56, including 3 HLTAs regularly and 3 HLTAs occasionally”. One secondary school said, “13 teachers teach RE at KS3 and 2 at KS4 and 5”. Where a considerable number of teachers teach RE, the ability/capacity of the RE subject leader (if there is one) must be severely tested to ensure continuity, progression and the high quality of teaching and learning.

### **How many teachers teaching RE are RE/RS specialists?**

Only 11 schools responded to the question. While most schools replied that they had “None”, four said they had one RE/RS specialist each.

### **Overall, how confident are RE, etc. teachers when teaching the subject?**

Very = 4 (2 first, 1 middle, 1 high)  
Mostly = 19  
Slightly = 3 (1 first, 1 primary, 1 high)  
Not = 1 (1 special)

### **How many TAs/HLTAs teach RE in your school?**

19 = none

2 first = 1  
2 first = 3  
1 primary = 1  
1 primary = 2  
1 primary = 6  
1 special = 4

**Overall, how confident are TAs/HLTAs in teaching the subject?**

Very = 1 (1 primary)  
Mostly = 13  
Slightly = 5  
Not = 8

In the 8 schools where TAs/HLTAs teach RE (see the question above), TAs/HLTAs are “very” confident in 1 case, “mostly” confident in 4 cases, “slightly” confident in 2 cases and “not” in 1 case (a special).

**Comment.**

It would appear that a large number of teachers and some TAs and HLTAs assume responsibility for teaching RE, but the number of such staff who are RE specialists is very small. Although the percentage of RE specialists teaching RE nationally is of concern (nationally, about 25% of RE teachers are RE specialists), an even smaller percentage of RE teachers in Northumberland appear to be specialists (although the small size of the sample responding to the questionnaire justifies caution in relation to such a conclusion).

This said, it is alleged that in 23 schools teachers are “very” or “mostly” confident about teaching RE, which needs to be kept in mind as further evidence emerges from the questionnaire about the need for training, etc. Even when TAs/HLTAs teach RE, a majority of them appear to be “very” or “mostly” confident.

**Who plans the RE syllabus?**

Head of RE/RS department/RE co-ordinator/RE subject lead = 16  
Head of RE/RS department/RE co-ordinator/RE subject lead working in collaboration with other staff = 6  
Each class teacher = 2  
SMT with each class teacher = 1  
Two schools said:  
*RE subject lead from the CE diocesan syllabus*  
*We use the NCC RE agreed syllabus*

**At Key Stage 4, which exam board syllabus do you teach?**

AQA = 3  
Edexcel = 1

**At Key Stage 4, how much time is given to examined RE lessons per week?**

5 lessons of an hour a fortnight  
1 hour per week  
2.5 hours per week  
*KS4 are part of the whole school RE days*

**At Key Stage 4, does your school provide RE to all pupils (examined or not)?**

Yes = 2

No = 2

**At Key Stage 5, which exam board syllabus do you teach?**

AQA = 1

OCR = 2

N/A = 1

**At Key Stage 5, how much time is given to examined RE lessons per week?**

5 hours per week

5 hours per week

*4.5 hours per week, but the Year 12 are not studying for an exam this year - not enough pupils wanted to study RE/RS*

*Our sixth form are part of the whole school RE days*

**How well resourced is RE compared to other Humanities subjects?**

Better resourced = 5

On a par = 17

Less well resourced = 5

**What provision, if any, has been made by the school for your professional development in RE?**

Every school said that it had had some recent training/consultations, with the annual SACRE conference, the CE diocese, the County's part-time RE consultant and the SACRE meetings mentioned as ways in which their professional development needs have been met. A course called "Understanding Christianity" was mentioned on five occasions.

3 schools said RE CPD (continuing professional development) opportunities are provided regularly/when required, 3 schools said the recipient of RE CPD "cascades" information to all the staff, and one school said it had recently arranged CPD about collective worship that has impacted beneficially on RE. CE schools seem to make regular use of CPD offered by the diocese.

**How effective is the role of governors in relation to RE?**

Although 5 schools thought governors were not very effective or were "unsure", a majority thought they did a good job and words such as "effective", "supportive" and "positive" were used to summarise their contribution. Some governors made visits with an RE focus and/or met with the RE subject lead. One teacher said "I have never met a governor responsible for RE" and another said "Governors don't currently have a role in RE".

**Comment.**

Where KS4 and 5 pupils study for an exam, they are in receipt of a reasonable or good amount of lesson time. Less easy to tell from the available data is how much RE KS4 and 5 pupils receive when NOT studying for an exam. However, two schools admit they do not provide ANY RE to at least SOME of their KS4 pupils, but elsewhere we learn that one school provides 31 to 60 minutes non-examined

RE per week to Year 11 and over 90 minutes non-examined RE per week to Year 12. Two schools provide NO non-examined RE to their KS5 pupils.

Data suggests that RE is in most cases as well as or better resourced than Geography and History, which may surprise some SACRE members.

Governors are deemed an RE asset in a majority of schools, and many schools indicate that staff have recently undertaken RE CPD. This said, elsewhere schools comment on the need for additional CPD, and our data may have been positively affected by the frequency with which CE schools engage in RE CPD.

**How often do you access resources to support planning and assessment from the locally agreed RE syllabus?**

Regularly = 16

Occasionally = 3

Rarely = 5

Never = 3

**How often do you access resources to support planning and assessment from a locally agreed RE syllabus other than Northumberland's?**

Regularly = 0

Occasionally = 3

Rarely = 4

Never = 20

**How often do you access resources to support planning and assessment from schemes/units of work other than those in Northumberland's locally agreed RE syllabus?**

Regularly = 0

Occasionally = 5

Rarely = 7

Never = 15

**How often do you access resources to support planning and assessment from your diocesan or faith community syllabus?**

Regularly = 9

Occasionally = 0

Rarely = 2

Never = 16

**How often do you access resources to support planning and assessment from a different diocesan or faith community syllabus?**

Regularly = 3

Occasionally = 1

Rarely = 4

Never = 19

**How often do you access QCA/QCDA resources to support planning and assessment?**

Regularly = 0

Occasionally = 9

Rarely = 8  
Never = 10

**Do you use a scheme of work devised by the school itself to support planning and assessment?**

Regularly = 13  
Occasionally = 2  
Rarely = 1  
Never = 11

**Do you use resources devised by NATRE or RE Today to support planning and assessment?**

Regularly = 2  
Occasionally = 12  
Rarely = 5  
Never = 8

**Do you use web-based resources to support planning and assessment?**

Regularly = 13  
Occasionally = 11  
Rarely = 3  
Never = 0

**Do you use textbooks to support planning and assessment?**

Regularly = 5  
Occasionally = 9  
Rarely = 4  
Never = 9

**Do you use any other resources?**

13 schools responded to this question. Although "Understanding Christianity" was mentioned on 4 occasions, other responses included:

*DVDs and books from the School Library Service (SLS)*

*Resources from the NE Religious Resources Centre*

*Discovery RE*

*A range of artefacts and parents, when relevant*

*People of faith visiting the school, children on trips into the community*

*RE:Online*

*Barnabas in Schools*

*Films, regular visits to different denominational houses of worship*

**Comment.**

Although it might look alarming that 8 schools say they never or rarely access the locally agreed RE syllabus to assist with planning and assessment, we should not forget that most of these schools must use the CE diocesan syllabus. That 16 schools regularly use the locally agreed RE syllabus is reason to celebrate.

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from the fact that some teachers access good quality resources from a variety of sources, the internet, NATRE, RE Today and the QCA/QCDA included. It is interesting that RE textbooks are not used as often as some people might expect, although note that most schools engaging with the questionnaire are first and primary schools, schools in which textbooks have always been less popular.

Should we worry that 11 schools never use their own scheme of work to support planning and assessment? Not if the teachers feel that the locally agreed or diocesan RE syllabus they MUST use has a scheme of work already. This said, one would expect every school to extract from the syllabus they MUST use a more focused/specific/summarised scheme of work, given that the syllabus contains far more information/advice/ideas than a school can hope to deliver to its pupils.

**During RE lessons, how does the school meet the needs of individual pupils who subscribe to a religion or world view not often or ever studied in the school, e.g. the Bahai Faith?**

While about 8 schools said they referred to religions subscribed to by all their pupils to encourage tolerance, respect, harmony and religious literacy, it would appear that reference is rarely made to religions other than Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism, or to secular world views such as Humanism. But by referencing pupils' religions, one school said the pupils "felt comfortable and happy".

Of some interest are responses such as "We don't have any yet", "N/A", "We do not have any pupils with different religions or world views" and "We do not have any pupils who subscribe to these religions, but we study world religions other than Christianity", but equally interesting are the following:

*We cover the statutory religions for each key stage and are beginning to look at some secular world views*

*One of our Muslim boys requested more coverage of Islam before the major unit in Year 7, so I designed an extra unit about Islam for Year 6*

**Do pupils get the chance to study expressions of religion and belief NOT described as world religions (e.g. the Bahai Faith, Humanism, etc.)?**

10 schools responded with a "No". Other schools said things such as:

*Sometimes, although limited*

*Yes - Humanism*

*We focus on Rastafarianism linked to a Year 8 text studied in English and discuss Humanism*

*As of 2019, our Year 8 will study Humanism and some New Age Movements*

*Occasionally, where appropriate*

*We are beginning to look at these. I would like to develop this further*

**How many pupils are withdrawn from RE always or occasionally?**

20 schools said no pupils ever withdraw from RE. In the other 7 schools, the number of pupils who withdraw varied from 1 to 50, although in all but one case the number of children withdrawn did not exceed 10 (50 pupils withdraw from RE in a high school).

**When parents exercise their right to withdraw their children from RE, is a reason given? If yes, what reason is given?**

Interestingly, parents have willingly given reasons for withdrawing their children from RE, although the law does not require that one has to be provided.

The reasons were as follows:

*Jehovah's Witnesses. Withdrawn from some RE but not all of it*

*Yes - their own faith. The only time it has happened is if parents are Jehovah's Witnesses*

*Not wanting to confuse the child's understanding of their own strict beliefs*

*The children currently withdrawn are withdrawn for faith reasons - Islam. The parents prefer the children not to take part because of this*

*They don't want pupils to learn about other religions, Islam in particular*

*They want children to study only Christianity and Judaism, so withdraw children from RE when other religions, etc. are studied*

*Not of interest and withdrawn so children can focus on other subjects*

*The child hates the subject (not surprised, considering what most teachers teach) or is badly behaved, and parents use the excuse identifying lack of engagement*

**Comment.**

Opportunities to study religions and world views other than Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism are at present very limited, although it is encouraging that in some schools change is taking place. While schools are good at encouraging in a very generalised way tolerance and respect for religions and world views that are not often or ever studied, such religions and world views are not only denied the study time that the so-called world religions enjoy; there is insufficient time/opportunity to celebrate them in the same way as the so-called world religions.

The school that provided the Muslim pupil with an extra unit of work about Islam in Year 6 deserves some comment. First, it is excellent that a teacher was willing to devise and then provide the pupil with the extra unit of work - such effort, etc. is commendable. However, and this is the second point, the boy will learn a lot about Islam from his family and when attending the mosque, so should he have been encouraged to learn about other religions and world views instead of Islam? The extra work he was provided with ran the risk of merely reinforcing knowledge and understanding about what he already knew best and would learn most about in the future - unless the teacher revealed through the unit of work some of the incredible diversity of belief and practice that exists within Islam.

Even accounting for the 50 pupils withdrawn from RE from a single school, the evidence implies that not many parents exercise the right to withdraw their children, which suggests that in many of our schools genuine effort is made to ensure the subject is inclusive. Some people will say that not all parents know their right to withdraw their children from RE, but we doubt this is a widespread problem, not least because for some years now a school's prospectus and/or website must clarify the right to withdraw.

It is excellent that schools have such good relations with their parents that at least some parents have explained why they withdraw their children from RE. But the reasons given suggest that, in some cases at least, religion and belief operate in ways that militate against inclusion and/or community cohesion by

leading to the separation of pupils during RE lessons. Moreover, it is sad that some parents deny to their children an opportunity to benefit from a broad and balanced education about religion and belief.

### **How effective is RE in enabling pupils to think spiritually, ethically and theologically?**

11 schools said RE was effective or very effective in enabling pupils to think spiritually, ethically and theologically, and 2 of the 11 schools referred to recent Ofsted reports for external validation of their opinion. The remaining schools felt this was a work in progress where further improvement is required/possible. Some schools predicate future progress on remodelling their RE schemes of work. One of the most perceptive comments was this:

*We are trying to provide a coherent and challenging curriculum for teaching RE to raise pupils' religious literacy and to help pupils consider the impact of faith*

### **How could RE be improved in your school?**

Understandably, respondents said:

*more time should be devoted to RE lessons*

*more visits should take place to houses of worship*

*more visits to school should take place by people subscribing to different religions and beliefs*

*there should be more CPD, especially at KS1 and 2*

*there should be more knowledge and understanding among teachers about religions and beliefs other than Christianity*

*there should be more RE-specific resources*

However, schools also said:

*There should be better links between the SACRE and the Diocese for Voluntary Aided schools*

*We need to provide a range of activities and resources that encourage pupils to think theologically, express ideas, debate, probe and challenge generalisations*

*We have seen our numbers drop due to factors beyond the control of the school and the SACRE, e.g. RE is excluded from the EBacc, it is not a facilitating subject at KS5*

### **What could the SACRE do to support the work of RE teachers across the County?**

Understandably, attention was drawn to the provision of additional CPD (perhaps especially for KS1, 2 and 3), improving opportunities for teachers to network, sharing best practice and SACRE members undertaking visits to schools (e.g. to help with lessons, workshops, conferences, etc.), but schools also said:

*Tell the government to do its job better and speak to people on the ground who are not dinosaurs in relation to RE*

*Ensure the KS3 syllabus prepares pupils for GCSE and arrange Countywide RE competitions, e.g. essay competitions*

*Artefact boxes should be assembled for loan to small schools because they are expensive to put together*

*Continue to provide quality CPD and facilitate opportunities for RE co-ordinators to meet*

*Insist RE is taught*

### **Comment.**

If some schools think that RE could still do better in terms of enabling pupils to think spiritually, ethically and theologically, part of the reason is no doubt due to the lack of specialist RE teachers, but there may also be implications in relation to CPD.

To improve RE in schools, teachers should consider a careful examination of the locally agreed RE syllabus (perhaps the Guidance section in particular) and also liaise with nearby schools/schools in their partnership to arrange CPD to overcome gaps in knowledge, skills and understanding, perhaps especially in relation to religions and world views other than Christianity. As for resourcing the subject, schools should make greater use of the SLS and the NE Religious Resources Centre, or liaise with nearby schools to build up small resource banks that a cluster of schools can share (e.g. RE resource banks that all the schools in a partnership can access).

Suggested actions for the SACRE are interesting, to say the least. Are we too polite, with our schools as well as the government? Do we need to be more forthright with schools that fail to provide pupils with their statutory right to RE? Also note that the government has decided to do nothing about the Commission on RE's report, "Religion and World Views: the way forward" (September 2018), despite the support it has secured from stakeholders throughout the RE community nationally (see the letter sent by Damien Hinds, Secretary of State for Education, to Dr. John Hall, the Chair of the Commission on RE, in December 2018). If we have concerns about this, do they need sharing with the government?

### **Collective Worship.**

#### **Is the school familiar with the distinction between an act of collective worship and an assembly (an ACW is a statutory requirement and an assembly is optional)?**

25 schools said they knew the distinction between an ACW and an assembly, but 2 said they were unsure. Of the unsure schools, 1 is secondary and 1 special.

#### **Although legislation requires that schools provide ALL pupils with a daily ACW, it is not always possible to do so. In a typical week, how often are ACWs provided?**

11 schools said they managed to provide daily ACWs. 6 schools said they managed to provide 3 or 4 ACWs a week and 1 school said ACWs were provided "90% of the time". Comments from other schools included the following:

*Not very often*

*2 assemblies a week and prayers said every lunchtime*

*Please enquire with the SMT - the HT and DHT deliver our assemblies*

*We tend to have more assemblies than ACWs*

*We have assemblies every day of the week, although very few are religious in nature*

*In all honesty, I do not know*

*They don't provide daily ACWs and I don't think they should. It becomes overkill and pupils are supported in other ways, e.g. pastoral support*

**For what reason or reasons is it not possible to provide a daily ACW?**

Because 11 schools said they provided daily ACWs, responses to this question derived from only 16 schools. Lack of time and sudden changes to the daily routine were reasons given by 6 schools, and others referred to:

*Sometimes we have a special curriculum week (in which normal routines are dispensed with), or we are on a school trip or we have to do SATs*

*Funding, time - and I also do not believe it should be mandatory*

*A class ACW will be led by children when the hall is in use*

*There is a lack of space for everyone to meet collectively*

*We do not have a time to meet collectively*

*An overloaded timetable means something has to give*

**Are ACWs provided to pupils in year groups, key stages, class groups or for the whole school?**

10 schools said all ACWs were provided for the whole school, 7 schools had a combination of whole school and class ACWs, 1 school provided ACWs for year groups, 2 schools provided a combination of year group and key stage ACWs, and 1 school provided a combination of whole school and key stage ACWs. 1 school had daily ACWs in classes supplemented by two whole school ACWs a week. Other schools said:

*N/A*

*The SMT will know - I don't*

*If they are done, they will be done by year group*

**Legislation requires that an ACW must be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character". Can you describe ways in which the school meets this requirement?**

17 schools said they met this requirement through discussion about God, Jesus and Christian values; singing Christian songs; saying Christian prayers and the Lord's prayer; examining Christian festivals and Christian imagery; telling Bible stories; using Trinity candles and visits by the local clergy. From the other schools, responses included:

*Worship is wholly Christian in content and character*

*Our assemblies (sic.) tend to be PSHE-themed*

*I am never in an ACW to verify what is done*

*Contact the SMT to find out about this*

*We don't comply with the legislative requirements and I'm glad we don't. We have a limited number of faiths in the school, but many pupils are not religious and they have a deep disdain for religion via primary/middle schools*

**What allowance/arrangements are made during ACWs to meet the needs and aspirations of pupils who are not Christian?**

6 schools referred to the right parents have to withdraw their children from ACWs that are "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character". 6 schools said that non-Christian pupils attending the ACW were not made to say prayers or sing hymns - they had the opportunity to sit or stand in silence. 1 school referred to a prayer room that non-Christian pupils could utilise. 6 schools referred to using some ACWs every year to examine non-Christian religions and/or festivals. Schools also said:

*We do not have any at present (non-Christian pupils, presumably)*

*We have not needed to make any allowance - we have children who are not Christian, but, as our RE includes a range of faiths, parents have not raised any concerns*

*One ACW a week is based on the British values*

*N/A*

*I am not sure, but any arrangements will be made by the pastoral team*

### **Comment.**

It is very reassuring that 25 of the schools say they understand the distinction between an ACW and an assembly, although some answers to follow-up questions suggest that more than 2 schools lack clarity about the matter. It is also reassuring (from the statutory point of view at least) that 18 schools say they provide a daily ACW all or most of the time. Reasons given for not being able to provide a daily ACW will come as no surprise to SACRE members, given discussions we have had about the matter in the past.

It is reassuring (from the statutory point of view at least) that a majority of schools can point to content that will convince people their ACWs are “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character”, but is compliance with the legislation being bought at the cost of rendering collective worship less accessible/meaningful/rewarding for non-Christian pupils? Are some manifestations of worship more corporate than collective? Corporate worship is unlawful in community schools, and in academies and free schools not designated with a religious character.

There is evidence that some allowance is made during collective worship to meet the needs and aspirations of non-Christian pupils, but the evidence suggests some schools are better at this than others. Devoting an ACW a week to the British values might enhance inclusion, if such ACWs are planned with sufficient care, although would it not be more productive to identify whether there are some universal values and to discuss them instead?

### **While parents have the right to withdraw their children from an ACW, they cannot withdraw them from an assembly. How many pupils are withdrawn from ACWs?**

16 schools said that no pupils were withdrawn from ACWs. For the other schools, the number withdrawn varied from 1 to 10, although 1 or 2 pupils withdrawn from each school was far more common than any other figure. The school that had the most pupils withdrawing from ACWs said “Estimated 10, depending on the season”.

### **When parents exercise their right to withdraw their children from ACWs, is a reason given? If yes, what reason or reasons are given?**

The reasons given for withdrawing from ACWs are as follows:

*Atheism or lack of engagement*

*Their faith (Jehovah’s Witnesses)*

*Religious preference (Jehovah’s Witnesses)*

*Reasons of faith*

*The ACWs conflict with the pupils’ own religious beliefs*

*Muslim*

*The ACWs are not part of their faith  
I do not know*

**Has the school ever applied to the SACRE for permission to suspend the requirement to provide ACWs that are “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character” for any group of pupils?**

25 schools said “No”. One school said only the SMT would know the answer to the question and another said “I do not think so”.

**Comment.**

As with RE, the number of pupils withdrawn from collective worship is very small, which implies that many of our schools make every effort to render collective worship inclusive. Once again, parents ought to know their right to withdraw their children from collective worship (e.g. because of the school’s prospectus and/or website), so lack of knowledge about the legislation is unlikely to explain the low figure. However, once again, there are occasions when religion and belief militate against inclusion/community cohesion because some pupils are denied access to collective worship with the great majority of their peers.

Not for at least 20 years has a school in Northumberland applied to the SACRE for permission to suspend the requirement to provide ACWs that are “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character”. This may confirm how hard schools work to ensure that collective worship is inclusive, but it would be interesting to establish whether schools have considered the possible benefits of such an action. Additionally, because such a request has never been made, the following question is justified: what is provided for pupils withdrawn from the “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character” ACW?

**When was the last time the school referred to NCC’s “Policy and Guidelines for Acts of Collective Worship in Community Schools” to find out how the content of ACWs can be made so inclusive that there is little or no need for parents to withdraw their children from collective worship?**

5 schools did not answer the question (because some/all the schools are not community schools) and 4 said N/A (the 4 that said N/A are all faith schools. 3 schools said “Never” and 2 said “Not sure”).

Other schools said:

*The last RE conference touched on the policy*

*Recently, as this is currently an area of development in the school*

*September 2018 - the start of the school year*

*Some pages in the policy are reflected in our school policy and practice*

*We have just completed training on ACWs which covered the legal aspects of collective worship and how to make it inclusive for all pupils*

*I don’t know - our pastoral programme is not written by our RE department*

*Only the SMT will know*

*Not in my time as the head (12 months)*

*2017*

**When was the last time the school updated its policy and guidelines on collective worship?**

5 schools said they did not know/were unsure and 2 schools admitted that it was a long time ago (five or more years). 3 schools said the policy and guidelines are updated/reviewed every three years and 2 schools said documentation was currently being updated. 4 schools said updating had been completed in Summer or Autumn 2018 and 2 schools said reviews were undertaken annually. Other schools said things such as “Only the SMT will know” or “not in my time as the head (12 months)”.

### **Comment**

It is very heartening to see how many schools say they have updated their collective worship policy and guidelines in recent/very recent times or are doing so now, but less heartening to discover how few make use of the County’s policy and guidelines (the County’s policy and guidelines were singled out for praise when the SACRE applied for the Accord Inclusivity Award in 2017, and positive mention of the policy and guidelines was made in the report that Accord produced and circulated nationally to RE stakeholders). The “problem” with the County’s policy and guidelines may simply be that they were produced in 2006 or 2007 and, although their content has stood the test of time, we rarely celebrate their existence. Should the policy and guidelines be reviewed and relaunched and an article about them prepared for a future SACRE Newsletter? They ought to be used more often by schools.

### **Is there anything else you would like to share with us about the opportunities and challenges of providing RE and collective worship at the present time?**

8 schools supplied responses:

*I feel very strongly that collective worship and RE should be given a status in line with other subjects in the school, which they do have in ours. They are a great opportunity to develop SMSC and to embed the British and Christian values. One challenge is ensuring that teachers have the knowledge and understanding required to teach the subject*

*The lack of expertise is a difficulty in teaching RE. We are making connections in the local community in an attempt to work alongside people who have expertise in this area. Networking could be very useful in moving forward and developing our RE curriculum*

*We appreciate the links that we have with other schools. We have developed an RE transition project with two other schools to assist the transition of our pupils to high school. This has involved setting aside time for RE co-ordinators to liaise to plan and refine the project*

*Rural, monocultural and monofaith environments can make it challenging to make other faiths “real” and have an unfortunate bi-product of us and them. Opportunities to link with the local community are great*

*The main challenges for daily ACWs are the fact we do not have opportunities to meet daily and our form time is taken up with other activities, which mean that we cannot have collective worship in classrooms, which would get around the problem This is a time of great change with the new syllabus (in CE schools) with lots of challenges for Church schools*

*It would be nice to have more RE training days and lots of decent resources. It would also be nice to have a link with a school with an RE department as it’s quite*

*difficult to know whether what we do is right, especially in a school with no RE specialists*

*Children are generally very open to learning in RE. There remains the challenge of overloaded timetables, but gaps in skills for integrated curriculum planning for learning are being targeted. There is minor resistance and lack of confidence/motivation among staff, but we are constantly aiming to fulfil completely the National Entitlement for RE*

### **Comment.**

The comment about a national entitlement for RE is interesting. Many people now wish there was a national entitlement. For good or ill, the government has taken against the idea, for now at least. Perhaps the person who wrote the last comment really refers to a local entitlement, which would be found in the County's locally agreed RE syllabus or the RE diocesan syllabi deriving from the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church.

Some of the final comments simply confirm what we have known for some time: RE and collective worship should be taken more seriously; specialist RE teachers are in short supply; more CPD and networking are required; and small, remote and monocultural schools face particular challenges when trying to enrich RE provision/make it meaningful - but, as a general rule, most pupils thoroughly enjoy RE, especially younger ones (and they also enjoy at least some collective worship).

Some of the real or imagined problems above can be overcome if schools establish closer working relations with neighbouring schools, not all of which have to be in the same partnership. In some parts of the County, such close working relations have led to shared resources, the provision of tailor-made CPD and the utilisation of appropriate local and regional expertise. If teachers access the locally agreed RE syllabus more often, and NCC's "Policy and Guidelines for Collective Worship in Community Schools", they will find a lot of information addressing concerns raised in the questionnaire (e.g. where to go for good visits, who to invite to school to talk about religion and belief, how to meet the needs of all pupils during collective worship); and back copies of the SACRE Newsletter (all of which are accessible via the homepage on the NCC website) contain hundreds of examples of best practice that schools can easily customise to meet their specific needs.

This said, even the questionnaire reveals examples of good practice that many schools might benefit from.

Some respondents to the questionnaire have at times been very forthright about RE and collective worship, and for this we are very grateful. Just occasionally, replies to questions have reminded us that issues to do with RE and collective worship remain sensitive/controversial, not least because of the legislative settlement that now remains unchanged (but far from unchallenged) since 1988. Moreover, it is now very unlikely that the legislative settlement will change for some years to come (see the letter sent by Damien Hinds, Secretary of State for Education, to Dr. John Hall, the Chair of the Commission on RE, in December 2018). In part at least, this may be an unintended consequence of Brexit.

Because of the data, ideas and opinions the questionnaire has generated, there are matters that the SACRE and the local authority can usefully consider, even if nothing changes at the national level for some years to come.

For reasons of reliability, it would have been better had we secured a response rate from non-fee-paying schools of 25% to 33% rather than 16%, but we now have a benchmark in terms of data, ideas and opinions, and justification for building on what has proved a most worthwhile endeavour.

Our thanks go to everyone who helped devise the questionnaire and, more importantly, who filled it in. It is obvious that some respondents devoted a lot of time and thought to the questions posed. As a consequence, there is much on which the SACRE and the local authority can reflect and take action.