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Inclusive SACREs: findings from the 2017 Accord Inclusivity Award

Introduction

Launched in 2010, the Accord Inclusivity Award has operated every year since. Until 2017, the annual Award sought to highlight schools in England and Wales that worked hardest at boosting the growth of inclusion, cohesion and mutual understanding between those of different religions and beliefs. In so doing it sought to inspire other schools by raising awareness about the excellent and innovative practices identified¹. For the 2017 Award judges decided to do something different. Although the focus of the Award's judging criteria² remained the same, in 2017 only nominations for SACREs were invited.

Religious Education (RE) has always been of key importance for Inclusivity Award judges, who have consistently rewarded schools for excellence in the subject³ (and often due to recommendations from SACREs). Given the too often lack of appreciation of the work of SACREs, the important role SACREs have in motoring RE and assemblies, and their potential to help promote respect, empathy and social cohesion through local schools, changing the focus of the Award from schools to SACREs was an obvious experiment. It was also an uncertain one.

Though SACREs are required to submit annual reports on their work to central Government, there is a shortage of third party information on the work SACREs undertake. With a backdrop of local authority funding restraint, combined with many schools opting out of local authority control through academisation, it was not clear if or to what extent judges would be presented with innovative practices to adjudicate. The results were however pleasantly surprising.

A number of SACREs responded to appeals to submit for the 2017 Award and indicated that, in frankness, they were not where they should be. This was worrying and suggests some SACREs are in a weak position and that there is need for much wider investigation into the work of SACREs across the board. However, the judges were presented with a strong field of applicants, with 23 SACREs submitting a nomination. This reports draws upon the wealth of information that the 2017

¹ All Award winners have obtained national media coverage for their success. More information on the 2017 Award can be found at <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/inclusivity-award-2017/>.

² <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/inclusivity-award-2017/#criteria>

³ The first placed school in the 2013 Award, Little Heath School in Redbridge, won [strong praise](#) from judges for its approach to RE which was later [highlighted](#) by Ofsted as an example for other special schools to follow. Newbury Park Primary School in Ilford came first [in 2014](#) for its 'Ambassadors of Faith and Belief' scheme that was supported by its SACRE and which served to help improve pupils understanding of the nature of faith and belief as a real life experience. The 2016 Award winner, the Chestnut Grove Academy in Balham, [stood out](#) for the way its RE extended pupils' knowledge and understanding of religion and belief, while simultaneously dealing with a range of controversial issues.

Award judges collected. It highlights that many SACREs are undertaking inspiring, inventive and thoughtful work that others may take inspiration from.

Other SACREs let Accord know they had considered applying for the Award, but did not submit as they thought they were probably not in a strong enough position to be recognised by the judges. This, combined with the self-selecting nature of the Award, gave Accord greater confidence that the work of the 23 nomination SACREs reflects some of the best practice currently being undertaken.

The 2017 Award judges

Previous Award judges have included former Secretary of State for Education, Lord Baker of Dorking; the Chair of the House of Commons Education Select Committee, Neil Carmichael MP; the Bishop of Buckingham, The Rt Revd Dr Alan Wilson; and journalist Polly Toynbee. Joining Accord's Chair - Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain MBE - on the panel of 2017 Award judges were another diverse and respected panel of experts:

- former National Lead for Religious Education within Ofsted, Alan Brine
- member of Parliament's Joint Committee on National Security, Baroness Kishwer Falkner
- Chief Executive Officer at the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, Rudolf Elliott Lockhart
- Anglican Priest and broadcaster, with interests in interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution, the Reverend Ruth Scott

The results

As in previous years, the 2017 Award judges decided to award a 1st, 2nd and 3rd place. Judging panels have also been able to issue a Special Commendation for particular noteworthy work, though none have previously done. The 2017 judges decided to issue a Special Commendation to the Suffolk SACRE for its '[Teaching Controversial Issues Toolkit](#)'⁴.

The aim of the SACRE's Toolkit was to provide local teachers with a useful resource that would help give them greater confidence and practical guidance in delivering controversial issues linked to:

- schools and teachers Prevent duty to stop people being drawn into terrorist-related activity
- schools obligation to promote pupils' Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural development (SMSC)
- the requirement on schools to teach Fundamental British Values (of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs)

The toolkit was produced with support from Suffolk County Council's Localities and Partnerships team who secured Prevent grant funding from the Home Office. This funding was used to commission the work, project managed by the SACRE, which drew on established relationships it had forged with members of local religion and belief groups plus classroom teachers. The SACREs

⁴ Suffolk SACRE has kindly allowed Accord to share a link to its toolkit and associated resources, which are available at <http://www.suffolklearning.co.uk/11-19-learning-teaching/religious-education/sacre/prevent>.

work included consulting with local teachers about their needs and wishes from the proposed resources.

The SACRE's kit provides a '6 Step Plan' to structure the delivery of sensitive and controversial issues, and is accompanied by a bank of resources to support teachers, which focus on 9 themes related to the Prevent duty. The nine themes are: sense of belonging; terrorism; extremism; hate crime; tolerance; being British; radicalisation; world events; culture and faith.

The judges considered the flexible and non-prescriptive Toolkit an excellent resource, which highlighted skill and leadership those involved with RE can offer in addressing and teaching controversial and sensitive issues. They commend the kit - along with the joint working involved in its production - to others.

3rd place - City of Leicester

Aspects of the work of Leicester City SACRE that stood out included the range of links that it has managed to build and sustain. This included the SACRE's RE advisor sitting on the Mayor's Faith and Community forum; the SACRE supporting a schools linking project with schools in the much more ethnicity homogenous Lincolnshire; and SACRE members continuing to visit local academies, despite academies no longer having to be accountable to their local authority. This was deemed to provide a good example of how SACREs can - despite changes in the educational landscape - remain a hub of local excellence for RE. The SACRE's encouragement for schools to provide assemblies that seek to be inclusive of and forge shared values between those of different religious and non-religious beliefs also earned praise.

2nd - Newham

Newham SACRE was awarded second place by judges for a range of its innovative practices. This also included for the inclusive nature of guidance for local schools on providing assemblies. The guidance highlighted flexibly that the law provides to schools to provide assemblies that try to be inclusive and respectful of those with different beliefs, and which draw on teachings from different religious and non-religious traditions.

The SACRE drew praise from judges for organising separate Infant, Youth and Student SACREs, with members from the Student SACRE executive contributing to every adult SACRE meeting. The 2017 Award highlighted that many SACREs are conscientious about ensuring they include a wide breadth of voices, but one that was commonly overlooked is that of pupils. The judges welcomed that Newham SACRE included a range of religious and non-religious representatives as full voting members, but were further impressed that it ensures the views of pupils are considered and acted upon within the SACRE's decision making process.

And the winner is...

1st - Brent

Brent SACRE's standout practice was its approach to Collective Worship⁵ which highlights, not just the flexibility the law can provide to schools wishing to provide assemblies that better respect the autonomy of all staff and pupils, but the flexibility SACREs themselves have to operate.



Rather than granting determinations that allow some schools to provide assemblies that are distinctive of a faith other than Christianity, Brent SACRE grants determinations that allow schools to provide multi-faith assemblies that draw upon material and practice that hold special meaning for different religions and also non-religious views. Furthermore, though many of the Borough's schools admit a largely non-Christian intake, the SACRE considers multi-belief assemblies appropriate for all of its schools. A SACRE cannot compel schools to apply for a determination, but Brent SACRE encourages its local schools to give careful consideration to the religious affiliations of its students and their families, and is open to all of them applying to provide multi-belief assemblies.

Compulsory worship is theologically incoherent. As the then Chair of the Church of England's Board of Education, The Rt Revd John Pritchard, noted⁶ during a BBC interview in 2014 while commenting on the school worship laws, 'worship is by definition a voluntary activity'. Evidence suggests that the Collective Worship laws are not only unpopular⁷ but are unenforced⁸ and widely ignored⁹. This is unhealthy in a democracy and currently means society has worship laws which can be interpreted in a way that promotes conformity and does not properly respect individual autonomy, but also a culture where many schools rarely provide assemblies that consider religious and philosophical teachings, if at all.

Rather than watching as assemblies wither on the vine, Brent SACRE's approach helps secure for local pupils a valuable opportunity to communally explore and forge shared values, in way that is respectful and workable. Findings¹⁰ suggest very few schools in England have been issued with a Collective Worship determination. It is perhaps little surprise that, as one of the most religiously diverse local authorities in Britain, Brent should have taken particular time to forge and develop such an original approach. However, Brent highlights a potential for SACREs to help lead a wider renaissance in school assemblies. The judging panel commended Brent's inclusive, pro-active and groundbreaking approach to other SACREs.

⁵ Brent Council's approach to Collective Worship is further explained by the authority at

https://www.brent.gov.uk/media/946260/collective_worship_model_approach.pdf

⁶ A report on the Rt Rev John Pritchard's comments are available at

<http://accordcoalition.org.uk/2014/10/09/liberal-democrats-join-call-to-end-compulsory-collective-worship/>.

⁷ A ComRes opinion poll in July 2011 for the BBC [found](#) 60% of adults in England (to 36%) thought the Collective Worship laws should not be enforced. It also suggested that only 28% of children in England took part in a daily act of Collective Worship at their school.

⁸ In 2004 Ofsted stopped asking its school inspectors to consider it, [citing](#) at the time that 76% of secondary schools were non-compliant with the law – either not having worship every day or not having worship at all.

⁹ A ComRes opinion poll in July 2011 for the BBC [found](#) only 28% of children in England took part in a daily act of Collective Worship at their school.

¹⁰ Findings from *Schools Weeks* in 2015 found only 127 schools in England had been issued with a determination: <http://schoolsweek.co.uk/leicester-tops-exemptions-from-christian-worship/>.

Other commended practices

Breadth of SACRE membership

Judges were impressed by several SACREs that reflected in their membership major denominations in non-Christian world faiths. This included SACREs such as Lancashire, Hertfordshire, Newham and Brent admitting representatives from different branches of Islam, including Sunni and Shia. Brent, with a significant mixed local Jewish population, also admitted a representative of both Orthodox and Reform Judaism.

In contrast, some SACREs were found to have not appointed someone to represent non-religious people, either as a full voting or even a co-opted member. These omissions undermined claims that the SACREs excelled at being religiously inclusive.

Given the growth of Britain's non-religious population, including amongst young people, it is not clear why any local RE syllabus would not include teaching about non-religious worldviews, such as humanism. Groups like the Accord Coalition and others believe RE should be inclusive and that it will remain relevant and popular from doing so. It is also established¹¹ that the state has a duty to take care that information or knowledge included in the RE curriculum is impartial, affords respect to different religious convictions and non-religious beliefs, and is conveyed in a pluralistic manner. As non-religious views should be taught in RE, it therefore follows that a non-religious representative (such as a humanist) should have a formal role in all SACREs in monitoring how their views are taught.

Some SACREs earned praise for the breadth of members on their local authority and teacher Committees. Newport Council operates a Gwent Education Minority-Ethnic Service (GEMS), which seeks to raise the achievement of minority ethnic pupils, and the GEMS Head serves on the Newport SACREs' Committee D. The emphasis on the needs of pupils from a minority ethnic background that the appointment symbolised was welcomed. Though other SACREs may find it hard to replicate the dedication, Southend SACRE had seven of the local authority's councillors serving on its Committee D. This sent a strong signal about the Council's prioritisation for RE, which was appreciated.

Several SACREs - in addition to Newham - had organised a youth SACRE, such as Staffordshire and Milton Keynes. The Milton Keynes submission indicated the Youth SACRE would soon be meeting¹² to feed into the next Agreed Syllabus Conference, which was considered another welcome inclusion of young people's views.

Cooperating with other SACREs

¹¹ R (Fox) -v- Secretary of State for Education [2015] EWHC 3404 (Admin). Available at <https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/r-fox-v-ssfe.pdf>. In his judgment Mr Justice Warby said 'In carrying out its educational functions the state owes parents a positive duty to respect their religious and philosophical convictions... the state has a duty to take care that information or knowledge included in the curriculum is conveyed in a pluralistic manner... the state must accord equal respect to different religious convictions, and to non-religious beliefs; it is not entitled to discriminate between religions and beliefs on a qualitative basis; its duties must be performed from a standpoint of neutrality and impartiality as regards the quality and validity of parents' convictions.'

¹² A subsequent report by the *Milton Keynes Citizen* on priorities identified for by RE by Milton Keynes' Youth SACRE can be found at <http://www.miltonkeynes.co.uk/news/young-people-join-together-to-reform-religious-education-in-milton-keynes-1-7812680>.

Joint working between some local authorities in the field of RE is long established. For example, Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton have produced several popular joint syllabuses (in 2016 they were joined by the Isle of White), which have been drawn upon and used by other SACREs.

The 2017 Award nominations revealed that Peterborough, Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire are also embracing joint working, with the three SACRE having set up a joint Agreed Syllabus Conference and entered into a three year contract to joint fund a SACRE Advisor. This was done to alleviate funding restraints and uphold high standards. Similarly, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire were found to be working together, having brought their syllabi more into line with each other and having set up a joint working party exploring how to better support teachers.

Nominations for the 2017 Award made clear that SACREs were receiving sharply differing levels of funding and, in some cases, were dealing with cuts in actual or real terms. It is evident SACREs can and do cooperate and work well together whilst maintaining their autonomy. Although one SACRE revealed that they had tried and failed to pool resources and expertise with its neighbours, there appears untapped potential for more SACREs across England and Wales to work more closely together.

Events, training and extra resources for teachers

The judges delved more deeply into those SACREs that appeared to have submitted a stronger application, such as by examining their local syllabus, any associated programs of learning and (where they could be found) reading their most recent annual reports.¹³ This meant that the winning SACREs all had a strong local syllabus, but that there was a limit in the extent to which comparisons between syllabuses could be made given that most were very good and as judges did not explore the syllabus of evidently weaker SACREs, some of which were discounted at an early stage. However, there was a wider variation in the nature and extent of support that was provided to local schools.

Most of the SACREs were found to go far beyond their statutory duties and were pro-active in sharing advice and best practice with schools. Several provided extra teaching resources to complement the Agreed Syllabus. Many produced regular newsletters for schools, and a large number organised training.

Most training was provided for RE teachers, and was often delivered through periodic meetings or conferences that the SACRE arranged. A few SACREs, including East Sussex went a step further and contributed to training school Governors. East Sussex has achieved this by the SACRE Chair and RE Consultant contributing to Governor training events around the county, to raise awareness of school's requirements around promoting SMSC, teaching Fundamental British Values and providing RE.

Some SACREs were praised for responding to sensitive local issues. Greenwich SACRE has produced 'Responding to crises' guidance for local schools which was produced in reaction to the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby. Given the history of ethnic tension in the town, the symbolism of the Lancashire SACRE being located in the local authority supported Burnley Faith Centre was welcomed.

¹³ NASCRE and WASACRE provide a useful record of recent annual SACRE reports at <http://www.nasacre.org.uk/reports> and <http://www.wasacre.org.uk/publications/reports.html>. Though some SACREs in England had not recently submitted an annual report, most reports offered quite a lot of detail.

A number of SACREs held events for pupils. This included the Cheshire West and Chester SACRE organising its annual 2016 pupils conference in an area that had suffered from race related incidents. Several SACREs, such as Hertfordshire and Newport, made special effort to support Holocaust Memorial Day events. Luton SACRE arranges an annual 'Peace Walk' involving local schools and faith groups. A minimum of three different places of worship are visited, with presentations and activities held at each.

Visits to local places of worship were actively encouraged by most SACREs, and several issued guidance in this area. This included North Yorkshire whose [guidance](#) on visiting places of worship was issued in part to allay resistance and misguided concern about visiting mosques, after some local schools reported difficulty in gaining consent from some parents about their child joining such trips.

Outside visitors to a school can provide very positive experiences, which some SACREs tried to help facilitate. For example, Swansea SACRE was found to maintain for its schools a '[Religious Education Database of Contacts for Educational Visits 2016](#)', listing suitable local groups willing to provide schools with a speaker or to receive visits.

The resources provided for teachers were sometimes viewed as commercially sensitive, and generally depended upon how well resourced SACREs were. A noteworthy and innovative guidance leaflet was produced by Cambridge SACRE on '[Teaching about Gender Identity and Sexuality in Religious Education: Advice for Headteachers and Governors](#)'¹⁴ which has been praised by the LGBT rights charity Stonewall.

Guidance on assemblies from SACREs beyond those placed by the judges were praised. This included [Northumberland's](#), which also explored the flexibility that schools have to provide assemblies that are suitable to the backgrounds of all pupils, and which unambiguously recommended schools follow such an approach.

Pro-active scrutiny

Many SACREs were found to actively scrutinise school's provision of assemblies and RE. A few, such as Southend and Milton Keynes, did this by surveying schools and teachers. Their surveys revealed gaps in training and knowledge, and prompted them to offer targeted help to individual schools.

Findings¹⁵ have suggested that many schools in England are not meeting their legal requirement to provide RE for all pupils. Some SACREs monitored on an ongoing basis Ofsted reports and exam results of local schools, and several have been active in ensuring Key Stage 4 pupils not studying for RE GCSE are still provided with teaching about the subject, including pupil at local Academies. Similarly, some SACREs have sought to ensure local six form pupils receive RE. In addition to identifying short comings, some SACREs have also celebrated successes, such as by sending schools and pupils letters of commendation.

¹⁴ Cambridge's guidance on teaching about gender identity and sexuality can also be found at: http://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/downloads/file/5081/sacre_leaflet_-_guidance_re_sexuality_and_gender_identity

¹⁵ These include a 2012 poll of teachers by the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education, suggesting many schools do not meet their legal requirement to provide RE for all pupils. Available at: http://www.retoday.org.uk/media/display/NATRE_EBacc_Survey_2012_Final.pdf.

A few SACREs revealed that they have lobbied central Government about the impact of recent policy decisions. This included Southend and Northumberland SACRE, who have both written to the Department for Education to express misgivings about a lack of RE teacher training and the effect on RE of the subject being excluded from key performance indicators.

Conclusion

The 2017 Award only provides a snapshot of the work being undertaken by some SACREs in England and Wales. There are questions left outstanding about the work of SACREs across the board, which warrants further investigation. However it is evident that - despite the process of academisation and local authority funding restraint - many SACREs are:

- using the autonomy they possess creatively
- going a long way beyond their statutory obligations
- forging and maintaining valuable local links and relationships
- effectively boosting local standards
- remaining centres of expertise in RE and assemblies

The Award nominations provide for a positive story about SACREs directly advancing the aims of the Inclusivity Award. The SACREs that submitted for the Award are wishing to break down cultural and religious barriers, boost the growth of mutual understanding between those of different beliefs, and further develop pupils' capacity for making autonomous choices and becoming thoughtful and active citizens. In so doing many SACREs in England and Wales are - to varying degrees of enthusiasm and success - helping ensure shared spiritual, moral, social and cultural development in ways appropriate to all staff, pupils and families.

Some of approaches identified by the Award, like SACREs working with their neighbours to reduce costs and uphold capacity and standards, seem relatively common sense. Others, such as Brent SACRE's approach to Collective Worship determinations display particular innovation. Accord believes RE and assemblies have everything to gain from being religiously inclusive, and it hopes these and the other approaches that have been identified through the 2017 Award will provide food for thought and inspiration for others.

SACREs seem too often overlooked, while their efforts appear to regularly go un-thanked. Accord wishes to reaffirm its gratitude to all those SACREs that went to the time and effort in applying for the 2017 Award, and to those SACREs that have allowed us to highlight their work, both in this report and by allowing Accord to share their nominations with the independent [Commission on Religious Education](#) that is being supported by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales.