



Looking to the future: the problematics of determining RE among early career teachers

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Abstract

The landscape of RE continues to evolve, in part, due to the academisation programme in England which is disrupting long-standing historical local structures. Following the National Plan by the Commission on RE, as a contribution to the ongoing debates, this study explores the perceptions of early career teachers about the future determination of RE. To examine such views, an online survey gathered quantitative data from PGCE and Year 3 students and a questionnaire gathered qualitative data from two groups in Year 1 of the BA Honours in Primary Education course at a university in the West Midlands, England. The findings are based on 149 survey responses and 52 completed questionnaires. This article reports the results about the membership and duties of Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) and the proposed Local Advisory Network for Religion and Worldviews (LANRW) from the Year 1 groups. The open-ended questionnaire data were analysed by thematic analysis. The results reveal that a small majority of the Year 1 groups were unhappy with the current membership setup of SACREs. However, a larger majority were happy with the current duties of SACREs. More than half of the responses received for the question about the creation of LANRWs agreed with this proposal. All responses received for the question about the representativeness of LANRWs agreed that the five groups proposed would make a LANRWs representative. A majority of the responses received for the question about the proposed roles designated for LANRWs also expressed their satisfaction with the roles. Based on these, further research is recommended.

Keywords Religious education · Local · Authority · SACRE · Advisory · Network

1 Introduction

In the English context, all compulsory subjects have a National Curriculum except for Religious Education (RE). Some time ago, when a review of the National Curriculum took place RE was excluded (DfE, 2013). At the same time when calls are made for reforming the subject controversies ensue (Chater, 2018; Clarke & Woodhead, 2018; Cooling, 2022).

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As part of this ongoing debate, over the years, educators have also grappled with many questions concerning RE. They have questioned the influence and centrality of Christianity upon the RE curriculum (Parker & Freathy, 2012; Gearon, 2013) and the local setting of the subject (Francis, 2020). Discussions have also taken place about the number and which of the major and minor religious and non-religious traditions should be included in its curriculum and how it should be taught (Barnes, 2022; Chater, 2020), whilst others posit that RE is outdated and muddled (Dinham & Shaw, 2020). In fact, the name of the subject also features as part of this deep rooted schism (Clarke & Woodhead, 2018; REC, 2018). Among the plethora of issues that the subject faces an important one is about the determination of the curriculum, i.e., whether SACREs (Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education) should continue to exist, reformed, strengthened or abolished (Chater, 2020; Clarke & Woodhead, 2018; Smalley, 2023). However, there is probably one feature of this important subject that may have consensus. That is its entangled relationship with the law for over two centuries (Fancourt, 2022). In other words, any reform to the structures and arrangements of RE is only likely to be with changes to these longstanding legal arrangements. In all these debates, there is a paucity of the viewpoints of early career teachers. It is towards this end that this research contributes. This article only reports the findings about the membership and duties of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education and the proposed Local Advisory Network for Religion and Worldviews from the Year 1 groups.

2 Literature review

2.1 Historical context

There is a longstanding legal background in England relating to RE. As a result of this, locally agreed syllabi (LAS) have been the statutory mechanisms for determining the RE curriculum and underpin the subject's definition and content (Fancourt, 2022; Parker & Freathy, 2012). While a detailed review is beyond the scope of this article, this brief historical overview highlights some of the structures and legal parameters that have created this apparently unsustainable climate and provides the context for the current research.

The Education Reform Act of 1988 demanded that a permanent body called the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) must be established by every Local Authority and that each SACRE must convene a statutory Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) to produce, review or revise a legally binding LAS every five years (Hannam, 2021). Table 2 shows its membership structure and Table 3 shows their main duties. However, a recent court ruling established that representatives from non-religious belief systems may be appointed to Group A of a SACRE and/or to an ASC (DfE, 2023). SACREs also monitor the achievement, attainment and standards of RE in their local schools (Plater, 2020). So RE in England is determined by each Local Authority and there is no National Curriculum or syllabus for it. This means that in local authority schools, the RE syllabus is not decided by individual schools. As such, there has been a long-standing call for RE to relinquish its independent status and enter the National Curriculum (Baumfield, 2000). Thus, it would be interesting to know whether such views are relevant to future teachers.

By law, local authority-maintained schools are required to use their LAS. Over time they have allowed a certain degree of latitude to take account of the interests of both teachers and pupils (Watson & Thompson, 2007). Indeed, a London syllabus of 1947 included references to Gnosticism and the Mystery Religions (Priestly, 2009). Thus, at the school

level, there is considerable flexibility in implementing a LAS so long as schools meet its legal requirements and Ofsted, the body responsible for monitoring the quality of education, would also need to be satisfied that it has taken into account the fact that religious traditions in Great Britain are, in the main, Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain (Long et al., 2019).

This situation became further complicated with the introduction of academies and free schools. In England, academies and free schools are state funded schools that are independent of their Local Authority. These schools operate in accordance with the funding agreement between the individual academy trust and the Secretary of State and do not have to follow the National Curriculum. However, as they are state-maintained schools, they must provide RE. For such schools without a faith designation, they can either follow their locally agreed syllabus, that of another area or produce their own syllabus. Schools with a religious character (often referred to as 'faith schools') in the state sector are associated with a particular religion. RE in schools with a religious character must be provided in accordance with the school's trust deed or, where provision is not made by a trust deed, in accordance with the beliefs of the religion or denomination specified in the order that designates the school as having a religious character. RE in a foundation or voluntary controlled school with a religious character must be provided in accordance with the locally agreed syllabus for the area (Long et al., 2019, pp. 7–8). Moreover, faith designated schools have to follow the National Curriculum but they can choose what they teach in religious studies. However, Church of England schools usually use the Locally Agreed Syllabus (Hannam, 2021).

This synopsis reflects a complex landscape of the expected curriculum for RE in different schools which has led, according to some, to an unsatisfactory situation. The recent RE subject report has highlighted many concerns including the lack of clarity on the RE curriculum (Ofsted, 2024). At the same time, it is argued that these local structures have fallen behind in progressing with changes in the wider educational world. As a result, a system that is increasingly hyper-localised is confusing for schools to navigate (Ofsted, 2024). The lack of capacity and effectiveness of the system to provide improvements in the subject is a long-standing concern (APPG, 2013). Indeed, it has also been observed that the system is collapsing as local authority schools convert to academy status (Chater, 2018). Consequently, changes have been recommended such as requiring academies to use a Locally Agreed Syllabus, the introduction of a National Entitlement and other root and branch changes (APPG, 2013; Lawton, 2018; REC, 2018; Chater, 2020). One of the aims of this research was to gauge the intensity of the appeal of such proposals among contemporary student teachers.

2.2 Current challenges

Unlike the NC, which is nationalised, the deep localism of RE manifested through SACREs is not replicated in any other subjects (Conroy et al., 2013). As a result, particular communities can directly influence RE curricula in ways that would not be considered appropriate elsewhere. There are other criticisms related to the efficiency of the system and financial investments required especially among those authorities facing budgetary constraints. The production of over a hundred versions of probably the same content is phenomenally wasteful and introduces unfortunate variance in quality (Chater, 2018). Moreover, the system highlights the unusual nature of the subject and the uniqueness given to RE and religious

communities that are represented on SACREs. The process and the products are sometimes wonderful and impressive, however, such special arrangements, it is claimed, diminish the status of the subject (Lawton, 2018) and, at times, are not cost effective (Clinton, 2021). Previously, Ofsted also recommended that the DfE review the principle of local determination to keep pace with changes in education policy (Ofsted, 2013), but these appear to be unheeded. Moreover, Clarke and Woodhead (2018) stressed that schools have changed almost beyond recognition and religions and beliefs across the country have been transformed. In view of this, they recommended that Agreed Syllabus Conferences should be abolished and a National Curriculum for RE established.

On the other hand, in response to the proposal by the REC (2018), NASACRE (2018) expressed disappointment with the recommendation of reconstituting SACREs and renaming them. They argued that a SACRE is ‘standing’ is important as it signifies permanence and a place in the democratic structure, which makes it accountable. In its current report Ofsted (2024) is silent on these matters other than reiterating the legal requirement that maintained schools and voluntary-controlled schools must teach the agreed syllabus that has been proposed by their local SACRE and approved by the Local Authority (Mogra, 2024). These changing trends raise research questions about the kind of syllabi used by academies and free schools across the country.

2.3 Recent proposals

With the expansion of academies, the legal arrangements around RE are deemed not to be working as more schools are moving out of the control of LA and they would not be required to use a LAS (REC, 2018). It has also been reported that there are SACREs operating with only one state school within their area—all others being academies (Clinton, 2021). This became a reason for the Religious Education Council of England and Wales to set out a National Plan for RE and to call the Government to adopt it. The plan proposed a shared national vision of RE (Cooling, 2022). As a result, they recommended that legislation regarding SACRE be amended and called the Local Advisory Network for Religion and Worldviews (LANRW). The proposed membership and duties are shown in Tables 5 and 6 respectively. Nevertheless, studies conducted about locally agreed syllabi reveal a gap among student teachers and their views about LAS and the future of RE (Cush & Francis, 2001; Wedell, 2010; Watson, 2010; Smalley, 2020; Chan et al., 2021; Hannam, 2021).

Currently, the government intends to usher in a fully trust led system which might result in no school being controlled by the Local Authority by 2030, although LAs could establish their own trusts (DfE, 2022). This expanding multi-academy trusts landscape calls for a new generation of teachers to have input about the status of RE within them. It has also prompted a suggestion that future RE curricula will be planned at Trust level (Smalley, 2023). The purpose of the present research is to extend this research tradition with the perspectives of early career teachers. It aims to explore their current perceptions about the membership and duties of SACREs and the proposed LANRW.

3 Research methods

As a contribution to the ongoing debate about the structures, location and determination of the curriculum for RE in English schools, this research used two methods. Some sources from the literature review and recent publications informed the design of both

research methods (Chater, 2020; REC, 2018). An online survey using Forms gathered quantitative information from 103 student teachers in Year 3. They were selected as they were nearing the completion of their course and had completed three school-based placements. All but one were closed questions, most of which were based on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. This online survey was also completed by 46 students from the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) full-time cohort. At the time of the research, they had completed one placement. They were chosen to enhance their engagement with RE issues at a deeper level and to assist them in preparing for research projects.

In addition, a paper questionnaire, to gather qualitative data, was also completed by two randomly selected groups from the Year 1 cohort. They had not been on placement at the time of the research but some were taught about the legal and policy framework concerning the curriculum of RE. The Year 1 groups were involved as it was considered to be beneficial for them to become familiar with the research process which is important for their academic and skills development. The cognitive skills learned through research participation in the first year has been found to benefit students in advanced coursework which are cognitively demanding (Bowman & Holmes, 2018). They were targeted for the qualitative data as at the point of the research not all of them had encountered all the RE sessions. By Year 3, these participants develop a more mature academic perspective and therefore more areas were investigated through the survey from the PGCE and Year 3 cohorts. Moreover, including both PGCE and Year 3 in the qualitative data required more resources and time.

To give them sufficient time and optimise their motivation, thereby the quality of responses, the questionnaire was divided into two parts most of which were open-ended questions aimed at eliciting details. Part 1 of the questionnaire investigated their responses about the legal context, set-up, membership and duties of SACREs and RE in schools with a religious character, and academies and free schools. In Part 2, the emphasis shifted to enquiring their thoughts about some of the proposals made by the Commission on RE (REC, 2018). This included questions about the setting up of LAN-RWs, their role, composition and the introduction of a National Entitlement. Within this questionnaire, as stimuli, short extracts (Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6) were included for them to read after which they recorded their views.

Questionnaires are invaluable for collecting quantitative data but pose challenges when designed to obtain personal opinions about abstract or controversial matters (Gray, 2022). Thus, simplicity and contextual information were necessary especially for the Year 1 groups to minimise their anxiety and to ensure they had the knowledge accessible to respond to the questions. To achieve this, a few BA2 non-participating students piloted the survey and the questionnaire which led to the refinement of some questions. The survey data were analysed using Stata 19 and descriptive statistics were produced to summarise the data to describe the basic features of the study and to show what the data are (Gray, 2022). The questionnaire data were analysed by each question and within these responses, thematic analysis was employed.

Researchers are bound by codes of ethics which govern the way they conduct their research. To address these, before commencing the research, ethical approval was given by the Faculty Academic Ethics Committee. Thereafter, the aims of the research were shared with the students. Accessible information was provided to enable them to make an informed decision to participate voluntarily and withdraw at any point. They were instructed not to declare their names to preserve their anonymity.

Table 1 The future of SACRE

Variable	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
<i>SACRE should continue to exist</i>						
Freq	0	5	43	76	25	149
Percent	0	3.36	28.86	51.01	16.78	100
<i>SACRE should become regional rather than local</i>						
Freq	3	11	75	47	13	149
Percent	2.01	7.38	50.34	31.54	8.72	100
<i>ASC/SACRE should continue to create local RE syllabuses & support, monitor & report on RE</i>						
Freq	0	6	49	72	22	149
Percent	0	4.03	32.89	48.32	14.77	100
<i>The privileged position of the Church of England in SACREs should be retained</i>						
Freq	4	22	85	29	9	149
Percent	2.68	14.77	57.05	19.46	6.04	100

Table 2 Committees on SACRE

Group A: members that represent Christian denominations and other religions and their denominations who will appropriately reflect the principal religious traditions in the area;
Group B: members that represent the Church of England;
Group C: members that represent the teaching profession or other relevant associations that, in the opinion of the authority, ought to be represented; and
Group D: members that represent the [local] authority
Members of groups (c) and (d) may be of any faith, or none. Meetings are open to the public. Many SACREs co-opt representatives (often including humanist representatives). It is worth remembering that each group has one collective vote, and the adoption of a syllabus must be unanimously agreed upon. The number of representatives in each group is decided by each SACRE as decided by the authority. Group (a) should be broadly proportionate to the size of that denomination or religion in the area. (DfE, 2023; Plater, 2020; Smalley, 2020)

Table 3 The duties of SACRE

To advise local authorities on implementing the locally agreed syllabus in their schools
To express a view as to whether or not the syllabus needs revision. To publish an annual report concerning their duties and functions. Monitor the provision and quality of RE
Advise methods of teaching, the choice of teaching material and the provision of teacher training. Advise and support effective teaching of RE. Advice to schools on how the syllabus can be interpreted so that it fits with a broad balanced and coherent curriculum

Table 4 The case for creating LANRWs

Some RE educators want the locally agreed syllabus to be replaced. They want the system to be centralised. They say that local authorities should not produce them. They argue that the situation of education has changed. The religious composition of the country has changed. They want a top-down system rather than a local one. Also, academisation and reductions in funding have reduced the work of local authorities and in some areas, this support is disappearing (REC, 2018)

Table 5 Membership on LANRW

The Local Advisory Network for Religion and Worldviews should be made up of members from five groups: Teachers of Religion and Worldviews from all phases including Higher Education. School leaders and governors. Initial Teacher Education and/or Continuous Professional Development (CPD) providers. School providers including the LA, MATs, dioceses etc. Religion, belief and other groups that support RE in schools or wish to do so (this might include local museums and galleries as well as religion and belief groups) (REC, 2018)

Table 6 The roles of LANRWs

The Local Advisory Network for Religion and Worldviews may also: Provide CPD support for schools. Develop programmes of study to support the National Entitlement and supplementary curriculum materials for use within and across their local authority boundaries. Provide extra resources for schools on local faith and belief communities to support local studies. Provide further support for learning outside the classroom. Provide advice to schools and school providers on matters of religion and belief in schools. Facilitate school-to-school collaboration. Celebrate success including through offering prizes and competitions. Promote good community relations within and outside schools (REC, 2018)

4 Findings

The survey collected 149 responses of which 130 (87%) were female, 17 (11%) male, one declared genderfluid and another preferred to abstain. Participants' ages ranged from 20–29 (88%), 30–39 (7%) and 40–49 (5%), reflecting a predominantly younger and female demographic typical of early career teachers. From the Year 1, 52 questionnaires were received. There are some differences in the findings from the qualitative and quantitative data. These have mainly emerged from the lack of experience of Year 1 cohort and from their point of view they could not perceive a substantial difference between SACREs and the proposed LANRWs. Nevertheless, the exclusion of Year 1 from the survey is a limitation. In discussing the findings, agreed refers to the combination of agree and strongly agreed responses. The findings about the membership and duties of SACREs are presented first and this is followed by matters regarding the proposed LANRW.

4.1 The future of SACRE

The BA 3 and PGCE groups were also asked questions about SACRE such as their continuity. Table 1 shows a majority (68%) agreed that they should continue to exist and 50% expressed neutrality about SACREs becoming regional rather than local. This implies a shift in how RE is structured. It could result in the reduction of its current variability and greater collaboration between different LAs. They were also asked about the status of the Church of England (CoE). While only 26% agreed that the privileged position should be retained, there does not appear considerable opposition. The views are largely indifferent although it is apparent more are wanting it retained than not.

4.2 Membership of SACREs

As an extension to their knowledge about SACRE, Year 1 groups reflected on the membership of SACREs. SACREs are established by local authorities and legislation stipulates their membership as shown in Table 2.

Of the fifty-two responses from Year 1 participants, 60% were unhappy with the current membership setup of SACREs. These committees are termed as representatives in law. However, at face value, this designation appears unconvincing regarding what true representation means and how that representation occurs. Accordingly, some participants who are unhappy think that ‘the setup just includes a group of people not representative of the public’. Since it is the constitution of a SACRE that specifies the number of representatives in each Group, this arrangement is perceived as being an unequal representation of members for each committee and was criticised. Some participants felt there should be a group of people to represent each religion, and that ‘groups A, C, and D should have a mixed diversity of religions to prevent unfair decisions by a majority group, and an equal number of members with different religions’.

I think SACREs should include the same amount of people presenting each religion. There shouldn't be a group representing the Church of England only. That doesn't make sense to me. I agree teachers and the local authority should be included.

Moreover, these early career teachers did not see the need for separating Christian denominations and the CoE as it was deemed unfair to others. Nevertheless, some appreciated that it is good to have people with different beliefs and no beliefs having a vote. But they stressed that ‘it should be a fair voting’ system.

Another criticism was directed to the significance attributed to the CoE as being an independent entity. A participant did not think that the CoE should be a separate committee as they were already represented by having other Christian denominations. Furthermore, the democratic process was questioned. They observed that it undermined collectiveness as reflected in this declaration, ‘What does it matter others agree when CoE has the final say’.

On the theme of widening representation on SACREs, these future teachers expect more representatives and some to be strengthened. Principally, this implies more people not just more of those within the existing committees. For example, one believed ‘there should be someone presenting children and what their best interests are’. In addition to teachers helping shape the syllabi, they prefer widening the scope of stakeholder representation to involve not only those entering the profession and those holding the highest position in school, but also young people. It was noted ‘student groups should be added, groups of younger demeanours’.

A minority (40%) were happy with the current SACRE set-up. The main theme underpinning this approval relates to representation as well. SACREs are seen to be broadly representative although they advocated ‘individual votes within the groups’.

Yes. It is not just one group of people following one religion. It is a group of people from different religions and that means more knowledge and input for the children learning different religions.

Moreover, the current setup legitimatised the curriculum taught by teachers and produced by a council. A participant thought there was a ‘good balance of representatives.

Teachers have a defence to what should be taught and local councillors know their community'. Having said that, some believed that 'parents/carers of the children should be involved as they give an outsider view of how the RE syllabus affects the everyday life'. In other words, to them, having a good representation contributes to balanced agreed syllabi.

4.3 The duties of SACREs

The Year 1 groups also read the main purposes of SACREs as shown in Table 3. They were asked whether they were happy with these duties.

The BA 3 and PGCE groups were also asked questions about SACRE and their duties. Table 1 shows that 63% agreed that ASC/SACREs should continue to create local RE syllabi and support, monitor and report on RE. Among the BA1, 88% were happy with the current duties shown in Table 3 whereas 12% were not. When asked what else, if anything could be added, they mentioned increasing the accountability of schools to SACREs both in terms of performance and teaching of RE. A student suggested 'the grades in school should be compared by SACRE' and they should 'review nationally the amount of religion being taught'. Moreover, another suggested that 'All SACREs over the country meet once a few years to see what they could learn from one another's Locally Agreed Syllabus'.

4.4 The Local Advisory Network for Religion and Worldviews (LANRW)

Year 1 participants were requested to respond to the case for the creation of LANRWs as presented in Table 4.

Of the 24 responses received to this question, 10 disagreed. Those opposing a LANRW system focused, in principle, on questioning the suitability and efficacy of such a perceived hierarchical system. Some of them strongly disagree on the basis that 'a top-down system might not be properly suited to the local majority'. Others had reservations given the spread and diversity of the population and preferred to maintain the status quo. This group believed that the RE curriculum should be tailored to the areas in the UK as different communities are more in numbers in some areas than in others. Moreover, these future teachers disagreed as their vision for RE was a multi-faith one and they felt a LANRW system threatened that. A participant wrote 'I disagree with this as learning about the religions in your local area is more beneficial as some areas will be based on one religion'. This respondent seems to conflate a LANRW system teaching only one religion, whereas that is not intended. Nevertheless, another socio-centric perspective revealed the strength of a LAS as possessing stronger local knowledge. They felt 'locals know best what is happening in their community which will mean they will make the right choices for their community'.

I partially disagree as local areas should be able to choose what syllabus should be taught. However, it is important that all religions are being taught to improve knowledge of all religions and not just a person's own.

On the other hand, 14 agreed for LANRWs to be created offering varied justifications. Some, like those who disagreed, focused on the religious landscape of the country to propose a centralised system which would create parity of provision for all pupils. They suggested that 'pupils should be entitled to the same RE as Britain is multicultural'. In light of societies evolving rapidly, a more centralised system was seen as more beneficial as it would address demographic diversity. Accordingly, some felt that 'even children in areas

with less diverse religious views should learn about all religions'. While these respondents agreed with the creation of LANRWs, nevertheless, they argued that a LANRW system should be 'equal rather than prioritise Christianity' and that 'education will constantly change and always will change', thus emphasising the need for reform.

Aside from viewing the locally agreed syllabus system as 'outdated' and proposing that 'children should learn about what is happening now and about current affairs', the LAS arrangements for RE were perceived to be restrictive. Thus, some agreed on standardising the RE curriculum saying 'it should be centralised for everyone because everyone must learn different religions. A Locally Agreed Syllabus limits students. Centralising it to everyone where each religion is utilised will be effective'. A couple were uncertain:

I agree to a certain extent because it would be fairer and more equal if everyone learned the same thing. However, with the Locally Agreed Syllabus, the children are learning things that are tailored towards them.

4.5 Membership on LANRWs

The Year 1 groups were asked to respond to the proposed membership of the LANRWs shown in Table 5.

29 responses were received for this question. All these suggest that these five groups would make a LANRW representative. However, although the group would reflect a diverse membership these future teachers were alert to favouritism and like-minded people being brought together. This reservation was expressed thus 'it could be one-sided as they may add people, they want'. Paradoxically, some thought that these five groups would be 'less biased as they may have less political interests and more interest in the children and community'.

Nevertheless, overall, these five groups are a diverse group with different backgrounds and were seen to be representative of the communities most involved in teaching RE. They also have a direct relationship with their communities. As such, a participant observed that 'they each have a say in it, they can share their thoughts on what they think children should learn'. In other words, a wider range of views from religious groups and professionals would emerge during their deliberations. Some participants saw the existence of a range of opinions as a strength saying it would 'ensure the strongest curriculum for the children' and that 'people with expert knowledge can contribute and give accurate advice'.

They were asked to indicate others that they thought could be added. At least six suggested that parents should be added because 'if they have the option to withdraw their children from RE lessons then they should get to decide what their children learn'. They also recommended that SEND professionals and Ofsted should be added. However, although having many opinions would create stronger syllabi, according to one view 'having too many members can cause many disagreements'. A suggestion reflecting a multidisciplinary approach featured as well. This student felt that while these members were appropriate 'they could potentially add history/geography views to add to the humanities.' In contrast, another disagreed 'with museums and galleries to be in the group'.

4.6 Duties of the LANRW

The Year 1 groups were requested to respond to the duties of LANRW as shown in Table 6.

Nineteen responses were received for this question. 17 expressed their satisfaction with these roles. Their satisfaction seems to have developed knowing that these duties involved a wide range of expertise which was essential for making RE stronger and being supported. It was noted 'I am satisfied with these [duties] as they are very broad and help the schools and teachers who are teaching RE'. Concerns about quality also featured such as 'The LANRW would support schools to provide the highest level of RE by providing CPD to support teachers'. To them, RE was a subject which deserves 'a diverse and dedicated team'.

That RE needs more attention and credibility was known to them. Thus, they were satisfied with these roles 'because it puts more focus onto RE and makes people and children more engaged with the activities'. The 'extra resources provided would tie in appropriately with the new curriculum'. A participant recorded that they were satisfied 'because RE to some, is not seen as important, so all the sources are required to help teachers teach this'.

However, an isolated response revealed that they were unsatisfied with these duties because 'the professionals and local advisors have a better view of what they are doing. It would be more work for the local advisory network to implement a new syllabus'.

5 Discussion

The value of this research lies in the data provided by early career teachers who responded and reacted to questions and texts about the future of RE in relation to existing SACREs and the proposed LANRWs. In the absence of large-scale research, the recent Ofsted (2024) subject report and the change in government, these findings pave the way for further investigations.

The data from BA 3 and PGCE suggest that a majority of them agree with the continuity of SACREs. However, like NASACRE (2018), who are not intrinsically opposed to some reform of the composition of SACREs and ASCs, a majority of participants from the Year 1 cohort expressed unhappiness with the current membership set-up of SACREs, indicating a perceived lack of inclusivity. In essence, for them, this relates to the case of representation to reflect current times. One feature they question is the existence of the Church of England as an independent entity, although among the PGCE and BA 3 there does not appear considerable opposition to the CoE retaining its privileged position. However, to reflect the makeup of twenty-first century society and ensure diverse voices, Clinton (2021) recommended that the UK Government consider whether a separate group for the Church of England group should continue as it is or that these important members should join a newly constituted religion and worldviews panel. In addition to ensuring that different religious groups continue to be represented on SACREs, the case of including those with non-religious beliefs, parents and students is made. A recent court ruling established that representatives from non-religious belief systems may be appointed to Group A of a SACRE and/or to an ASC (DfE, 2023). So, to these participants, a diverse representation is essential to enhance the legitimacy of syllabi and the status of the subject, but the Commission proposed to end the SACRE system of having four groups that each have a single vote on a SACRE's decision (Francis, 2020).

Any change to the membership and duties of SACREs requires modification in law and perhaps it is at this juncture that the varied and complex matters of RE rest. It is 36 years since RE experienced a significant change in legislation. That legislation in 1988 had given the subject a new identity and mandate to make RE an educational endeavour remote from

the indoctrinatory nature of its predecessor of Religious Instruction. Moreover, it made statutory the incorporation of religious and belief systems other than Christianity a feature of the curriculum content. Scholars and professionals involved in RE (Chater, 2018; Clarke, & Woodhead, 2018; Clinton, 2021; Dinham & Shaw, 2020) have called for a review and reformation of legislation, likewise, a majority of future teachers of this study think that it is time for some change. They contend that society and religions have changed considerably, and the law is also outdated, although there is both an absence of a willingness and an acknowledgement from the DfE that there will need to be a change to the law (Smalley, 2023).

Admittedly, overall, there are fewer responses from the BA1 groups, nevertheless, in terms of the current duties of SACREs and the proposed LANRWs a majority of the BA 3 and PGCE and of the BA1 groups were both happy with these duties. In other words, whilst they differ about the continuity and constitution of these bodies, they agree on their duties. However, one of the statutory duties of SACREs is to establish an Agreed Syllabus Conference who create the syllabus (Smalley, 2023). The LANRWs would no longer be required to convene ASCs to develop LASs as they would be encouraged to develop programmes of study and supporting materials (Francis, 2020).

The proposed formation of LANRWs has faced criticism. McKain (2019) argued that bringing in something resembling a SACRE is not the solution. He questioned the efficacy of replacing the current antiquated local model with an identical one which is likely to involve the same people. It has also been argued that the proposed changes might dilute contributions from religious groups and weaken local democracy (NASACRE, 2018). Similarly, a minority among the responses received from the BA1 disagree with the formation of LANRWs as it is being perceived as the production of a hierarchical system which may formalise into a centralised or nationalised offering of RE. A case is made by them for maintaining the status quo so that the rich and diverse RE currently manifested through a localised system continues, albeit with some adjustments. The implication here is that the unique status of RE is retained. However more than half of the responses received agree with the formation of LANRWs. They argue that children across the country should be entitled to the same RE. This is because Britain is multicultural and societies are evolving. Hence a more centralised system would be more beneficial as it would address demographic diversity, produce parity and provide consistency. The latter resonates with Ofsted's (2024) recommendation that the government clarify what is taught in RE, and when and where it is taught. All responses received agreed that the five groups proposed would make a LANRW representative and a majority of the responses received were satisfied with the proposed roles designated for LANRWs.

There is some evidence in this data which concurs with the way forward proposed by Smalley (2023) who, in the eventuality of all schools including 'Church and faith schools' joining Multi-Academy Trusts and an LA being given permission not to have a SACRE, suggests the creation of regional advisory councils on RE. A majority of BA 3 and PGCE students think SACREs should continue to exist, whereas although about half expressed neutrality about SACREs becoming regional rather than local, there were more agreeing than disagreeing.

The discrepancy in data suggests that while a larger proportion of participants in the quantitative survey support SACREs, the qualitative responses indicate a preference for LANRWs. This may be explained by the way the questions were framed in the quantitative survey which might have influenced them to favour SACRE, whereas qualitative responses allowed for nuanced viewpoints. It may also have resulted from the qualitative data having a smaller sample size which is unrepresentative of the year group. Moreover, the data

suggests diverse inclinations, revealing that both proposals have support. This indicates the need for further research perhaps through a larger survey or focus group interviews to expose their underlying justifications for these positions. The findings also suggest the need for both qualitative and quantitative data.

6 Conclusion

This article began by offering a brief historical overview of some of the structures and legal parameters that determine RE in England. It emphasised that there appears to be little that can change structurally unless some modification is made in the legislation about RE which is recommended by some researchers, scholars and major professional RE organisations. It also reflected on the flexible nature of locally agreed syllabi which act as precedents for change. Moreover, it presented a synopsis of the complex landscape of the expected curriculum for RE in different schools. Some of the proposed changes to the SACRE system and the creation of LANRWs by the Commission on RE in 2018 were critically reviewed.

This research illustrated insights from early career teachers about the future of the subject in the context of these debates and proposals. The data shows an agreement between the PGCE and BA 3 groups on the continuity of SACRE. However, they indicate concerns about the extent to which their inclusivity and the constitution of the membership of these committees. These results are in line with the calls for the broader recommendations for reforming RE. This aim seems to be to have a better reflection of contemporary society and educational landscape. The proposed reforms are perceived as a means towards enhancing the legitimacy and relevance of RE.

However, the proposed creation of LANRWs has stimulated considerable uncertainty and debate. To some a centralised network has the potential of providing consistency and addressing demographic diversity. In contrast, others are concerned about the weakening of local democracy and local contributions. These varied perspectives suggest that both proposals have merits and shortcomings. As such, these findings indicate the need for a system that incorporates the strengths of both models.

This study is limited to a single institution. It used a survey and a questionnaire. This, combined with the discrepancy in the data, reveals the complexity of the issues. It also suggests that future research needs to address these limitations and gain deeper and varied insights and use larger sample size. For example, by including different HE institutions and other stakeholders. At the school level, future research can explore the perspectives of school leaders and RE subject leaders on these and other matters related to RE curriculum. This research has laid the foundation for the dialogue to continue to ensure that RE remains secure in schools and that it remains relevant in society.

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