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**Article for submission to
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Title:

What is Religious Education for? exploring SACRE member views.

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Abstract:

In recent years concern has been expressed about lack of clarity in the published aims and purposes provided for the teaching of Religious Education (RE) in English schools. Public reports and significant RE authorities suggest that this contributes to teacher confusion and a lowering of standards in the subject.

As a contribution to the debate, 513 Standing Advisory Council for RE (SACRE) members offer their responses to an online survey about competing alternative aims for the subject. The results provide fascinating data on the perspectives of one of RE's key stakeholder groups.

Key words: SACRE; Aims for RE; Purpose of RE; Locally Agreed Syllabus for RE.

Short biographical note:

Mark began his career as a secondary school RE teacher in the UK and India, before moving into youth work and then schools advisory work. He transferred into higher education in 2004, and has since been training RE teachers and teaching on various Religion and Theology courses.

Main article:

Introduction

The most recent subject report for Religious Education (RE) in England, carried out by the country's national inspection service (OFSTED 2013), argues that a lack of clarity about what the subject is for has led to confusion for teachers, and a subsequent drop in classroom standards.

After explaining the wider context of RE in English schools, and having discussed issues more generally about the development of aims for the subject, this paper explores the views of SACRE members (explained below) to discover their preferences when comparing seven possible competing aims for the subject.

SACRE members comprise a significant stakeholder group for attention in this study, because the SACREs of which they are a part hold legal responsibilities for the subject, making members a particularly appropriate focus for our attention. Although SACRE members are only one such stakeholder group, in fact the peculiar nature of their makeup means that in practice they are very representative of the wider field of RE interest groups.

Religious Education in England

The 1944 (Butler) Education Act established the present English framework for both state and Church schools working together as a dual system, with Religious Instruction (RI) and Collective Worship being a legal requirement in both contexts (Copley 1997). Certain religious schools could teach RI according to their own catechism or denominational interpretation, whereas the RI in all other state sponsored schools was to be non-denominational. Four decades later the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) reaffirmed the legal status and structure of what by now had become Religious Education (RE), and it established a more formal process for the development of the subject as a statutory requirement. It was however to be situated outside of the newly developed National Curriculum (NC). Today, although superseded by later Acts, the legal structure for RE remains unchanged from that imposed by the 1988 ERA. As such, whereas all other statutory subject disciplines are provided with a nationally approved framework for teaching, syllabuses for RE are determined at the local level.

The peculiar nature of RE and the role of SACREs¹

The way in which local arrangements for RE are organised since 1988 is that each of England's 150 or so local authorities are required to maintain a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) which is responsible, "*to advise the authority upon such matters connected with ...the religious education to be given in accordance with an agreed syllabus as the authority may refer to the council or as the council may see fit*" (ERA1988 Part 1 Ch.1 Sect.11:1a). Such advice could include, "*particular methods of teaching, the choice of materials and the provision of training for teachers*" (ibid. Sect 11:2). The SACRE must be comprised of four representative groups: the Church of England; the other churches and religions in the area; local teachers; the local authority (locally elected councillors) (ibid. Sect.11:4). Decisions of the SACRE are then made by the agreement of these four groups and any one group therefore holds a power of veto on all major decisions of the SACRE (ibid. Sect 11:6). Section 11:7 of the Act also gives each of the four groups the right to at any time, "*require a review of any agreed syllabus for the time being adopted by the authority*".

¹ For those who may not be familiar with the English system, full details are available in the government guidance, *Religious Education in English Schools: Non-statutory Guidance 2010* (DCSF 2010).

However, at least every five years the local authority must convene an *Agreed Syllabus Conference* (ASC) in order to either create or review their *Locally Agreed Syllabus for RE*. The ASC must have the same four-committee structure as the SACRE, but may draw in further expertise in order to carry out its task. However, unless and until the syllabus is approved by the four committees and the full council of the local authority, there can be no ‘agreed’ syllabus for schools in that region. The law does not explicitly require that SACRE members are the same ASC committee representatives, but in practice this is always likely to be the case, since otherwise the local authority would need to go through a whole new process of selecting representatives from the various four co-opting bodies. SACRE members therefore potentially hold significant legal powers to determine the aims and shape of classroom religious education within the English system.

The contribution of SACRE members to determine what is taught in RE

Although local authorities (through their SACRE) are required by law to continuously review and update a Locally Agreed Syllabus for RE, in practice, only those schools which remain under local authority control are mandated to follow it. Some ‘faith’ schools were always entitled by the 1988 Education Reform Act to teach their own denominationally based syllabus, and, since 2010, new academies and ‘free’ schools are also not required to use their locally agreed syllabus, but may choose any other approved alternative (DfE undated). Such schools, whether ‘faith’ schools who use their own denominational syllabus, or academies and free schools who select an alternative, are under no legal obligation to the SACRE or to the locally Agreed Syllabus. The present government’s intention to increase the number of academies therefore poses some interesting constitutional questions concerning the future role of SACREs². It also suggests that SACRE members’ influence is much less significant in shaping RE today than it might have been when the 1988 Act was first introduced.

It might therefore reasonably be argued that other players hold even greater influence in shaping RE than do SACRE members: local authority and diocesan advisers, members of RE professional associations such as the *Association of RE Advisers, Inspectors and Consultants* (AREIAC), the *Association of University Lecturers in RE* (AULRE), and the *National Association for Teachers of Religion and Education* (NATRE), as well as specialist RE teachers themselves. One would assume that members of such bodies are the educational experts in the field, while many SACRE members are likely to be non-specialists.

A case therefore should be made for the focus of this study on the views of SACRE members rather than on the views of other professionals in the field, and in that respect I offer four points of defence. Firstly, we already have a substantial collection of perspectives on RE from the

² For instance, Roger Butler’s posting on the WhatisRE blogsite, 25 Feb 2016, at 13:47 whatisre@googlegroups.com :

1) *Must an agreed syllabus cover all key stages?*

Is there any duty on an LA that no longer has any community secondary schools to produce an agreed syllabus which sets out material to be covered at key stages 3 & 4 and in the VI form?

Indeed, might such an LA actually be acting ultra vires in producing an agreed syllabus with material for secondary schools, given it would involve spending a significant amount of council-tax payers’ money for the benefit of schools it has no financial relationship with and which have no duty to follow a locally agreed syllabus?

professional field of RE advisers, scholars and other professionals, found in books, journal articles, professional magazines, online chat and social media sites, as will be summarised below. Comparatively, much less is known about the views of SACRE members. Secondly, the fact remains that constitutionally, SACRE members still hold statutory powers for advising and overseeing RE (albeit within the limits outlined above), so their voices must be heard. Thirdly, SACRE members are one of the distinctive stakeholders who contribute to, and have a specific voice in the field of school RE, having their own active national association (NASACRE: the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils for RE), a permanent seat on the overarching national association for English RE, the REC (Religious Education Council), and, because of their statutory function, the ear of government officials (see examples of this on their website: <http://www.nasacre.org.uk/>). Last, but very significantly, because of their stated intention to be representative of the various interest groups in the region, SACREs consist of a very wide spread of stakeholders, including faith group representatives, locally elected councillors, teachers, RE advisers, and many others called on for their particular interest or expertise in the subject: university lecturers, independent RE consultants, local authority and diocesan (Church) staff, etc. This range of membership arguably makes SACREs the most diverse collection of interest groups in the support of school RE.

Any empirical data on the views of RE stakeholders should anyway be of value to those who show interest in this subject and its ongoing development, but the views of SACRE members will be of particular value for the above reasons.

The aim and purpose of RE in schools

The issue of aim and purpose for RE was always likely to be open for contention in the English education system, because, from 1988, whereas all other curriculum subjects were to be developed as part of a nationally devised curriculum, RE was explicitly to be determined locally. The 1988 ERA merely states that RE must (along with the rest of the curriculum) “*provide for the spiritual, moral, physical and mental development of pupils...*” (DfE 1988), that it must teach about Christianity and the other major religions found in the UK (ibid. s8:3), and that, apart from in the case of designated ‘faith’ schools, it must be non-denominational in its emphasis (ibid.); that is, one may not teach the subject from any particular religious emphasis or denominational bias. No further guidance was offered concerning its content, purpose or intention since this was to be determined by each local authority at the local level.

In recent years this lack of a clearly articulated purpose for RE has been identified as a major cause of confusion for teachers –especially non-specialists- and a contributing factor towards an ongoing poor quality of RE teaching in English schools (e.g. OFSTED 2013; Conroy 2014). The issue is of such significance that the recently formed REC Commission on RE was given, as the first of its four tasks, *To consider the nature, purpose/s and scope of RE* (REC 2016).

Mixed intentions from the beginning

Even a cursory reading of parliamentary debates leading up to the 1988 Education Reform Act shows that from the beginning there were at least six distinct arguments for an inclusion of RE within the curriculum. In a debate in the House of Lords in February 1988, Baronesses Cox, Blatch & Strange presented a *religious heritage* or *spiritual birthright* case (Hansard 1988 cc1456, cc1464 & cc1476); Lord Hampton argued for *knowledge about our Western cultural heritage* (ibid cc1461); Lord Ashbourne focussed on a *moral health* argument (ibid cc1468); Lords Swinfen and Thurlow offered a *British Christian values* defence (ibid cc1474 & cc1475); Lord Monson and the Earl of Arran gave an *understanding and social cohesion* argument (ibid cc1478 & cc1486); and Baroness David argued for *religious literacy* (ibid cc1481). If legislators had such different hopes for RE in developing the 1988 framework, it was always likely that the final legislation would also be either silent or undecided on the matter.

Wider forces which impact RE

Ongoing work by Fancourt, Freathy, Parker and others has drawn attention to various forces which have impinged on the subject of RE in recent decades, raising questions about the nature of, and intentions for, the subject (e.g. Fancourt 2014; Freathy & Parker 2015). For instance, the changing landscape of people's everyday religious assumptions and practices in the UK has raised questions about the appropriateness of much of the content traditionally included in RE syllabuses, in particular the question of whether and how to explore non-religious world views.

Wider political decisions have also had a significant effect on the subject: new government strategies and legal expectations have sometimes been seen by RE enthusiasts as having potential to raise the profile of the subject, or else been perceived as a source of increased protection for specialist subject staff whose jobs otherwise seemed at risk. RE's response to the addition of Citizenship as a national curriculum subject in the 1990s serves as an example, alongside the more recent imposition of the government's Prevent strategy. In each instance, there were those who saw this as an opportunity for RE, and those who wanted to distance the subject from becoming opportunistic and instrumental to governmental or other agendas. Each of these influences has offered new directions and intentions for the subject, adding to the growing list of hopes for what might be achieved by good RE teaching.

The continuing challenge

The most recent OFSTED subject review of religious education expresses concern about this proliferation of aims for RE, citing evidence of teachers' confusion about what they are trying to achieve (OFSTED 2013, 14.), and concludes, "*There is still an urgent need to clarify the purpose of RE for teachers and to promote this through straightforward guidance.*" (15 #24). However, this is easier said than done: a group of RE professionals who gathered to consider the way forward in 2011 -including RE teachers, advisers, lecturers and RE consultants- determined that "*a shorter, punchier and crisper statement is needed for use with members of the public*", but finally laments: "*the rationale for RE is difficult to agree in the RE community*" (St Gabriel's Trust 2011, 10). The following year, an "expert panel" of RE professionals, tasked with a review of RE by the Religious Education Council (REC) also state, "*The nature & purpose of RE are not easy to define in straight-forward, unequivocal ways*" (REC 2012, 8). Reasons offered for this lack of clarity include, "*People's ideas of the role of religion & education have changed over time*", and, "*religion is a complex concept, fundamental to life for some, while highly problematic for others*" (ibid 48). But integral to this debate is contention about the purpose of education in general, some emphasising its purpose for individual and community flourishing (e.g. Grimmit 1987) while others stress its necessity for providing a viable workforce for the future. A number of RE academics have explored these issues in recent years (e.g. Gearon 2013; Chater & Erricker 2013; Orchard 2015; Chipperton et al 2016), and more recently, the REC's Commission on RE has even proposed that the name of RE be changed -to *Religion & Worldviews* -in order to reflect a revised emphasis (REC 2016).

International contributions

If we look more widely for direction, the Toledo Principles (OSCE 2007) offer guidance on the topic of RE teaching for all democratic countries in Europe. They identify four "compelling reasons" for teaching about religions and beliefs in schools: first, the fact that "*religions and beliefs are important forces in the lives of individuals and communities and therefore have great significance for society as a whole*"; second, because "*learning about religions and beliefs contributes to forming and developing self-understanding*"; third, because "*much history, literature and culture is unintelligible without knowledge of religions and beliefs*"; and, fourth, because "*knowledge of religions and beliefs can help promote respectful behaviour and enhance social cohesion*" (p19). In light of these 'compelling reasons' they argue that RE is

useful, “*particularly as a tool to enhance religious freedom*” (p19) both for the individual and for society.

Guidelines produced by the American Academy of Religion for *Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States* (AAR 2010), see the purpose of RE as ‘to diminish religious illiteracy’, with the subsequent aim of improving understanding and integration within society.

Both of these international guidelines offer a concise, albeit very instrumental approach compared with the British Religious Education Council’s most recent, ‘*A Curriculum Framework for Religious Education in England*’ (REC 2013, 11). This UK statement suggests a wide range of aims: provoking & challenging pupils to think about meaning; providing information about religions and other wisdom-sources; developing aptitudes and skills (including dialogue and respect and the ability to articulate personal perspectives).

Where the USA and European statements offer relative clarity of purpose (both aiming to promote religious tolerance and freedom), arguably the UK version offers a more child-centred and educational aim, but it does indeed lack their clarity and focus.

Aims in Locally Agreed Syllabuses

At a more local level, an analysis and comparison of six English locally agreed syllabuses by the Cornwall Agreed Syllabus Conference 2009-2010 (Cornwall 2010) identified a range of approaches taken by local authorities in stating their aims for the subject. Cornwall themselves had in previous syllabuses accepted a *personal wholeness* focussed aim, based on the Children’s Act 2004:

The aim of religious education is to help pupils to be healthy, to stay safe, to enjoy and achieve, to make a positive contribution and to achieve economic wellbeing.

(Cornwall County Council 2005, 8)

Some other local authorities had shaped their aims for RE around the Education Reform Act 1988, defining it as *promoting the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of pupils and preparing them for the opportunities and responsibilities of adult life*. The Birmingham syllabus, for instance, had stressed the SMSC development dimensions by stating that RE emphasised personal education and transformation rather than the study of religious traditions per se; the latter were merely a means to the realising of the former overarching aim for the subject (Birmingham City Council 2007. p1). This emphasis reflects Grimmit’s work in Birmingham in the 1980s, focussing on *RE for human development* (Grimmit 1987). The Cornwall paper points out that other syllabuses tend to prioritise ‘personal search’ rather than personal transformation as the major purpose of RE, sometimes emphasising aspects of the study of religion as the means to this end, and sometimes identifying the promotion of SMSC development as the major emphasis. The main conclusion of this summary document however, is that most agreed syllabuses are not very precise in stating their intentions for the subject, and, where this is done, there is not much agreement between authorities.

Methodology of this study

As a contribution to the ongoing discussion about the overall aims for the teaching of RE in English schools, a survey was designed which could be used to gather quantitative information about the views of individuals, exploring what they consider to be the main aims, goals or purposes for the subject. It was hoped that this might provide some empirical data to inform any continuing debate at the local and national level.

Consideration of aims and purposes however is a complex matter, and the aims for any individual subject will inevitably be framed by the more all-encompassing aims which drive the whole education system within which the particular subject sits. Aims may be expressed at various levels (Alexander 2010), and curriculum designers are advised to ensure that they are all coherent and pulling in the same direction (Schmidt & Prawat 2006). The Expert Panel for Review of the National Curriculum (DFE 2011) concluded that curriculum aims should be expressed at three levels:

Level 1: Affirming system-wide educational aspirations for school curricula.

Level 2: Specifying more particular purposes for schools and for their curricula.

Level 3: Introducing the goals for the Programmes of Study for particular subjects. (14)

If we assume the same advice specifically for RE, then our aims ('goals') should cohere with the 'aspirations' (level 1) and 'purposes' (level 2) of the wider British school curriculum. It is my view that level one and the subsequent 'schools' element of level two have never been explicitly defined by any British government or government agency and this compounds the problem for determining the aspirations for, or intentions of, RE teaching. We do however, have a clearly defined purpose for the curriculum at level two. This is spelled out in statute as, to offer a:

...balanced and broadly based curriculum which:

(a) promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society; and

(b) prepares such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

[ERA 1988, Part 1 Ch 1(2); reiterated in DfE 2014. 2:1]

Within this broader framework for the RE curriculum a number of possible aims/goals/purposes might conceivably be emphasised. The UK-wide study, *Does RE Work* (Conroy et al 2013) identifies thirteen such 'competing imperatives' for the subject, although many of those named are clearly not the exclusive responsibility of the subject, including *Citizenship education* and *Sex and Relationships education*.

For the purposes of this survey, seven possible aims for RE were distilled from Conroy et al (ibid) and a wider trawl of aims identified in RE scholarship, published and online guidance materials and Locally Agreed Syllabuses. The list does not purport to be a systematically generated distillation of aims, but offers a reasonable propositional basis for the purposes of this study and for any future research analysis on the topic. These seven aims are not presented as a definitive list of possible purposes for the subject, but they do arguably offer seven distinctive emphases, each of which is sufficiently unique to warrant separate identification (Fig 1).

Also, because participants might interpret the given wording of each of the selected goals in different ways, within the survey the seven emphases are presented in several different linguistic formulations (e.g. compare the wording in Fig. 1 and Fig 3), but always the intention is to invite respondents to express a graduated level of preference, or a comparative commitment towards each one.

Religious Education for...	
...Academic qualifications	<i>(academic emphasis; good grades)</i>
...Religious literacy	<i>(understanding for engagement in the modern world)</i>

...Religious/faith nurturing	<i>(being helped to understand one's own faith)</i>
...Personal development	<i>(search for wisdom/ self-understanding)</i>
...Social cohesion	<i>(understanding and appreciating difference)</i>
...Understanding of heritage	<i>(seeing how religion has shaped culture & history)</i>
...Critical reflection	<i>(critiquing everyday practices and assumptions)</i>

Fig. 1. The seven aims/emphases identified for the purpose of this study.

Issues of validity and reliability

Questionnaires are invaluable for gathering quantitative data, but notoriously hard to design, especially when seeking personal opinions about complex issues (Oppenheim 1992). Brevity and precision is also important, in order that the respondents do not become bored or frustrated with the set task (Cohen et al 2011). Every effort was taken therefore to construct and to refine the items in this survey to ensure that it would accurately summarise the selected goals for RE, and that the responses would genuinely reflect the views of SACRE members. However, the resulting instrument does not constitute an unequivocal statistically validated tool, and this must be kept in mind in considering the results.

The final four banks of questions provided in the survey are the pared-down version of a much larger series of questions, initially developed and trialled during early 2015 with 114 RE teachers and undergraduate Theology students. The results of these questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS19) in order to identify those items which were most effective for evoking divergent, but also internally consistent responses (using standard deviations and ANOVA -analysis of variance- scores).

The final survey that was used with SACRE members consists of the best questions from the above, organised into two Likert-scale sections (with five options, from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*), and two sections which ask respondents to choose between, or rank order, items.

Further questions ask respondents to provide personal information about the history of their membership on SACREs and about their religious affiliation, qualifications in the study of religion, and experience of teaching. These items were included in order to explore a number of specific questions: Is there any correlation between the views expressed and age or length of SACRE membership? How might the views of SACRE members vary according to religious affiliation or qualifications in religious studies? Does teaching experience correlate with any difference in viewpoint?

I must reiterate: it is not claimed that these seven emphases provide either a theoretically constructed, or a statistically validated, taxonomy for the field. Nor for that matter is it claimed that the questionnaire provides the definitive tool for exploring these issues. Rather, the instrument offers a reasonable framework for exploring alternative aims, and it remains open to further refinement, or indeed, the challenge of further qualitative research to confirm a more scientifically assembled framework. However, in spite of the above limitations, the responses offer a fascinating insight into the range and variety of perspectives represented within contemporary SACREs, and they pose some significant questions for further study and reflection.

Breadth of research sample

In order to encourage as wide participation as possible, the survey was made available for six months during 2015, and it could be completed in paper format (downloadable from the NASACRE website) or online (Bristol Online Surveys, an academic survey portal). The survey

was publicly launched at the annual NASACRE conference in May 2015, and regular contact was made with SACRE chairs, clerks and local authority advisers to encourage widespread engagement. Furthermore, it was advertised through NASACRE and REC newsletters and social media networks. A summary of interim results was also made available partway through the distribution period in order to provoke further engagement and to encourage debate on the issues being raised. Although this might have the potential to contaminate responses of future participants, it was felt that the benefits gained from such feedback to SACREs far outweighed any possible future negative influence on the actual results. Indeed, not only did the interim feedback effectively increase participation in the study, but in some cases it was also effective in stimulating debate on these issues within participating SACREs.

Survey results

Feedback from participants to an open question at the end of the survey indicated that, although many found the questions difficult to complete, many felt positively challenged by the task and several expressed gratitude for the work or commented that it raised important issues for them and for their SACREs.

A total of 513 SACRE members (representing 131 of the 154 SACREs listed on the NASACRE website) completed the survey (see Fig. 2), including an equal balance of members from each of the four SACRE committees, and a broad range of representatives from different religious perspectives. No database of all existing SACRE members exists, so it is not possible to determine the percentage of possible responses that were secured, although the figures shown below (Fig. 2) indicate a good balance of responses for the purposes of this study.

Totals: · 513 respondents · Representing 131 SACREs			
SACRE committee respondents:			
1. Responses by COMMITTEES : Group A (religions) =36%; Group B (CofE) =16%; Group C (teachers) =16%; Group D (authority) =16%; Others =16%.			
2. Practicing TEACHERS : 28% practicing & qualified teachers (45% secondary; 34% primary; 21% both); +32% have previously taught; 24% have never taught.			
3. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION teachers : 62% have taught RE in schools; 38% have never taught RE.			
4. AGE profile: 3% under 30; 27% 31-50; 70% over 50.			
Religious Representation:			
Atheist 13	(3.7%);	Bahai 9	(3.3%);
Buddhist 7	(2.7%);	Christian 208	(62.8%);
Hindu 6	(1.8%);	Jewish 11	(4.1%);
Muslim 12	(4.3%);	Sikh 2	(1.0%);
Secular Humanist 26	(7.0%);	Other 28	(9.4%).

Fig 2. Headline response details for *What is RE for?* SACRE member survey.

Fig. 3 shows the mean scores allocated for each of the seven potential RE aims identified in the first section of the survey. Understanding and religious literacy prove to be the most popular emphases, and academic achievement and faith development are the least popular.

The final order of the seven aims was almost identical to that provided in the interim results (based on the first 322 responses), the only difference being a reversal of the positions for two of the middle options, *Wisdom* and *Social-Political*.

How would you rate each of the following intentions for RE? (*Absolutely essential to totally unnecessary/inappropriate*) (mean rank of all scores)

1st (m=1.5): **UNDERSTANDING** (RE for understanding other people and cultures)

2nd (m=1.56) **COMPETENCY** (RE for religious literacy)

3rd (m=1.73) **SOCIAL-POLITICAL** (RE for social cohesion)

4th (m=1.79) **WISDOM**: (RE for self development)

5th (m=1.89) **REVOLUTIONARY-SUBVERSIVE** (RE which is critically challenging)

6th (m=2.28) **ACHIEVEMENT** (RE for academic excellence)

7th (m=2.54) **FAITH DEVELOPMENT** (To help pupils understand their own faith)

Fig 3. Ranked results for section 1 of *What is RE for?* SACRE member survey.

The second section of the survey required participants to select what they considered to be the three most important goals of RE. Fig. 4 lists the ten options and the total scores of participants. *Enabling pupils to develop skills and aptitudes for living harmoniously in a multi-faith society* proves to be the most popular choice by far, with 61% (n=346) of the cohort selecting this, almost double the number who select choice number two (*Enabling pupils to understand the impact of religion on history and culture*) (n=176 =34% of the sample). It should be noted that the top scoring three aims completely reflect the top-scoring three items in section one of the survey, shown above. The same is true when we look at the top-scoring items in section four, the rank-order challenge.

In RE teaching, which of the following are most important? (<i>identify the 3 which you consider most important</i>)		
RE teaching should enable pupils:		
1 st	...to develop skills and aptitudes for living harmoniously in a multi-faith society.	346 (22.5%)
2 nd	...to understand the impact of religion on history and culture.	176 (11.4%)
3 rd	...to understand how religion shapes the practical details of everyday life for believers.	173 (11.2%)
4 th	...to be aware of a range of religious perspectives on ethical issues.	172 (11.2%)
5 th	...to explore personal perspectives on issues raised by religions.	143 (9.3%)
6 th	...to consider the relevance of religious practices and teachings for their own lives.	122 (7.9%)
7 th	...to appreciate religious responses to significant philosophical and	114 (7.4%)

	existential questions.	
8 th	...to experience the study of religion as an academic subject in its own right.	104 (6.8%)
9 th	...to weigh up the truth claims of religions for themselves.	102 (6.6%)
10 th	...to understand a range of religious teachings on the deeper truths underlying our cosmos.	72 (4.7%)
Other	<i>(various responses)</i>	15 (1%)

Fig 4. Ranked results for section 2 of *What is RE for?* SACRE member survey.

The third section of the survey asks participants to identify on a Likert scale their responses to six quotations which reflect all of the seven aims identified for RE (see Fig. 5). Note that in this section of the survey, statement two (*You can't understand our contemporary world without understanding basic facts about religion*) reflects both the *Understanding* and *Competency* aims offered in section one. Once again, the emphasis on community relations and multi-cultural understanding score highest, and good academic standards and personal development trail well behind.

The option for critical evaluation of self and society finds itself in the central ground in all of the survey sections where it features. Respondents are much less confident about RE fulfilling this role.

<p>QUOTATIONS: <i>(mean rank of all scores)</i></p> <p>What is your response to each of the following quotations? (strongly agree to strongly disagree)</p> <p>1st (m=1.62) <i>"In contemporary multi-cultural Britain, RE has never been more necessary for promoting good community relations".</i></p> <p>2nd (m=1.67) <i>"You can't understand our contemporary world without understanding basic facts about religion".</i></p> <p>3rd (m=1.75) <i>"RE should offer space in a busy curriculum for reflection on life and critical self-reflection"</i></p> <p>4th (m=1.89) <i>"Good RE is unsettling: it makes a pupil think and challenges their assumptions".</i></p> <p>5th (m=1.92) <i>"RE teaching should help pupils to understand what they believe and why".</i></p> <p>6th (m=2.84) <i>"In the end, what counts is good academic standards; this has to be every teacher's priority".</i></p>
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Fig 5. Ranked results for section 3 of *What is RE for?* SACRE member survey.

The final section of the survey is the one that many participants found most difficult to complete: the seven different aims for RE are presented and the respondent is asked to rank order them from *most* to *least* important. Fig 6 shows the seven options and the overall mean scores. The results are consistent with previous sections, identifying skills for confident engagement in a multi-faith society (Religious Literacy), space for reflection on life (Personal Development) and nurturing of social understanding (Social Cohesion) as the most popular, and personal faith development (Nurture) and grades and qualifications (Excellence) as least popular.

Surprisingly, Heritage scores badly in this task compared with how highly it is considered in other sections of the survey, where it is usually in first or second place. I can offer no other explanation for this than that it *is* considered important, but when forced to weight its benefits against those of other RE aims, it gets pushed down into a lower ranking.

As previously noted, Challenge (*challenging and critiquing everyday practices and assumptions*), attracts uncertain responses from SACRE members (hence, falling in the middle) and this fact, along with some other insights highlighted by a more careful scrutiny of the results are now explored in more detail.

RANK ORDER CHALLENGE (<i>mean rank of all scores</i>)	
Rank order the following from the most important (1st) to the least important (7th).	
1st (m=2.83)	RELIGIOUS LITERACY: <i>understanding & skills for confident engagement in a multi-religious/ faith world.</i>
2nd (m=3.24)	PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: <i>space for reflection on questions of purpose and meaning.</i>
3rd (m=3.29)	SOCIAL COHESION: <i>nurturing social understanding and appreciation of difference.</i>
4th (M=3.67)	CHALLENGE: <i>challenging and critiquing everyday practices and assumptions.</i>
5th (m=4.17)	HERITAGE: <i>understanding how religion shapes/ has shaped our culture and history.</i>
6th (m=5.31)	NURTURE: <i>supporting the faith development of pupils.</i>
7th (m=5.5)	EXCELLENCE: <i>ensuring that pupils achieve excellent grades and qualifications.</i>

Fig 6. Ranked results for section 4 of *What is RE for?* SACRE member survey.

Beyond the headline messages: SACRE groups

Overall, the four SACRE membership groups offer remarkably similar mean scores to questions across the survey, and this similarity of responses is particularly seen in the choice of the top three aims in section two, where all of the groups place “...to develop skills and aptitudes for living harmoniously in a multi-faith society” in first place, and “...to understand how religion shapes the practical details of everyday life for believers” in second place. Teachers (Group C) are the only group who do not give a similar high score to “...to understand the impact of religion on history and culture” though, even if this reticence is not sufficient to stop this being placed second overall in the section two hierarchy.

The only significant differences between groups can be seen in responses to the final rank order section where group D (the Local Authority) give a noticeably higher emphasis to *Heritage* and *Social Cohesion*, perhaps reflecting their concern and responsibilities for such issues within the community.

Other than these differences, the only other points worth noting concerning the SACRE sub-groups are that, other than the teachers group (Group C) the Church of England representatives (Group A) are the most likely to have taught RE, and, in terms of age, the teachers group (Group C) are the youngest members of SACRE (56% below 50 years, compared with 30% or less for the other groups).

Points of polarisation

The most polarising of the seven emphases is that which in section one is expressed as *Revolutionary-Subversive*, and in section three is represented by the quote, “*Good RE is unsettling: it makes a pupil think and challenges their assumptions*”. In section four it is titled as *Challenge*. Respondents who hold any RE qualifications, and Atheists are the most likely to support this aim. However, the most highly qualified SACRE members are the most divided group in their responses to the issue. In section four (the rank order challenge), 34% of the 52 persons with an MA, MPhil or PhD ranked *Challenge* in first or second place, while a further 38% ranked it in their last three. Older members are also more likely to support this aim than younger SACRE members, although they too, like the more qualified, are very divided about it.

One other very interesting difference between groups of those completing the survey concerns *achievement* or *academic results*. Practicing teachers (from all SACRE groups) are those most likely to affirm this aim for the subject. For example, in section one, 73% of practicing teachers consider good results to be *essential* or *absolutely essential*, compared with a combined score of 31% for non-teachers and those who are qualified but are not teaching at present. A similar distinction can be seen in the other sections of the survey, although not so pronounced. As the group who are being held accountable for the achievements of pupils, ‘results’ clearly matter far more to teachers than they do for other SACRE members.

Religious differences

Some further interesting perspectives come from a specific analysis of the results of members from different faith groups. For instance, the religious groups showing least support for *achievement and competency in RE* are Buddhists (in section one for example, 29% consider this unnecessary, compared with 10% average for the other religious groups), and Bahai’s (e.g. in section three, 65% *disagree* or *strongly disagree* with the statement supporting this, compared with a 34% average for the other religions). Secular humanists are also not very concerned about this dimension: they score even higher in section one on this option than do Buddhists (36%) (i.e. they consider it unnecessary), and they come second to Bahai’s in section three (with 39%) (i.e. they disagree with the statement supporting academic standards as the priority).

Another perhaps predictable result is that Secular Humanists offer the lowest scores for *Faith Development* (section one) and *Nurture* (section three): 78% identify it as *unnecessary* or *inappropriate*, compared with an average of 15% for the combined religious groups in section one, and in section three 89% score it in their bottom two choices compared with a combined average of 47% for all of the other various religious groups. The only religious/faith groups which come anywhere close to this in section three are Atheists (68%) and Jews (71%).

One further interesting result from the survey suggests that Sikhs are the most undecided of all religious groups in supporting *unsettling RE* (section three), or *RE which challenges everyday assumptions* (sections one and four). Atheists and Secular Humanists are the highest scoring of all groups in respect of this dimension, with respectively 74% and 78% placing it in their top three choices in section four, compared with an average of 34% for the other religious groups. Sikhs however score it highly in section one (80% in favour, compared with an average of 69% for the other groups), are 40% *undecided* in section three (compared with an average 14% for all other groups), and then place it lowest of all their options in section four (60% place it last, compared with an average of just 13% for the other groups). The small number of Sikhs involved in the survey however would caution us in drawing any firm conclusions from this result (total=5, the smallest representative religious group).

Comparing individual SACREs

A comparison of the results of nine individual SACREs (all those SACREs from which nine or more results were available) shows remarkable similarities in some aspects. For instance, in the quotations section, all nine SACREs place the '*good standards*' quotation lowest when comparing their mean scores. In the top-three-choices section of the survey, all SACREs identify the "*develop skills and aptitudes for living harmoniously in society*" as one of their highest scoring selections, and it is the absolute highest scored option for eight of the nine SACREs. Furthermore, in the final (rank order) section, six of the nine SACREs place '*Excellence*' (good grades) in last place, and two more place it fifth or sixth.

On the other hand, there are a number of differences both between and within SACREs. The biggest differences between SACREs in section one are the survey items *Social-Political* and *Wisdom*. Some SACREs scored these in first place from the seven options, while others scored them as sixth (second last). Likewise, in the last section of the survey, half of the SACREs placed '*Challenge*' first, while another half placed this fifth or sixth out of seven.

Within individual SACREs some enormous variety of responses can also sometimes be seen on some items. For instance, significant variations between individual SACRE members exist within four of the nine SACREs in their attitudes to *Faith Development* in section one of the survey: in four of the SACREs, scores range from one to five (*Absolutely essential*, compared with *Totally inappropriate*) indicating that very strong differences of opinion are evident.

Likewise, within the quotations section, very different perspectives can be seen in responses to the '*Standards*' quotation: in eight of the SACREs the scores range from one to four (*Strongly agree* to *Disagree*). In another two of the SACREs, the scores range from one to four, (or even five in one instance) for four of the six quotations in this part of the survey. Again, in the final rank ordering section of the survey, five of the SACREs show the full range of possible scores on at least two survey items, and in a further two a range of just one less than the fullest possible array of extremes can be seen on at least four items. This range of responses from individuals within some of the SACREs clearly indicates either confusion, or else very different ideas about the purpose of RE.

Discussion

In view of the legal and practical significance of SACREs for determining the nature of, and support for, RE in our schools, we know remarkably little about who is influencing these councils, or about the perspectives on RE of individual members. This brief survey seeks to fill in some of the data gaps.

The results indicate that the overwhelming preference of SACRE members is for RE which enables pupils to understand life in our contemporary world, and RE which serves a social function by promoting good community relationships. Members are significantly less supportive of an emphasis on academic standards or on an RE that attempts to nurture individual faith.

There is a wide diversity of viewpoints within and between SACREs however, and virtually all of the questionnaire items receive both whole-hearted support and total rejection. One of the biggest arenas of controversy relates to the issue of faith development, and this is the case in all sections of the survey. Where 127 (25%) SACRE members consider this *Absolutely Essential*, and a further 140 (27%) hold it as *Essential* in section one of the survey, equally 116 (23%) rate it as either *Unnecessary* or *Totally Unnecessary / Inappropriate* for the same item. Similarly, in the final rank-ordering task (section four), 83 (16%) members place *Nurture* in their top three selections while 356 (69%) have it in their bottom three.

Another issue which divides SACRE members is the issue of critical reflection: 196 (38%) members believe that challenging pupil and community assumptions is essential, while 17 (3%)

consider this unnecessary or even inappropriate, and where 436 (85%) members *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* that “*Good RE is unsettling*”, another 36 (7%) oppose this view. The strongest difference on this particular aim however, is seen in the final rank-order task, where 163 (32%) members place this first or second, while another 105 (20%) place it last or second last. We might assume therefore that some strong and lively debate might take place should such issues be discussed in the relevant chambers of SACREs or ASCs.

Of course we do not know what motivates individual SACRE members to score these various survey items in the way that they have. Recent media rhetoric and some significant and influential reports on the subject (esp. Clark & Woodhead, 2016, Dinham, 2016, APPG, 2016) have made strong reference to the importance of good RE teaching for community cohesion and for supporting government programmes such as Prevent and Citizenship education, and it could be that SACRE members have been influenced by this to such an extent that they are simply reflecting what is presently of political or community concern. On the other hand, the diversity and range of viewpoints within the cohort suggests that there are strong supporters for all of the seven aims identified in this survey.

In the future, as RE moves towards development of a statutory national curriculum style framework for the subject (as most of the previously referenced reports have argued it should), in order to avoid the issue of teacher confusion (OFSTED 2013), one of the key tasks will be to determine a clear statement of purpose for the subject. This could be a strong rationale for a particular set of aims, such as social cohesion (above mentioned reports), or the personal, spiritual-development emphasis offered by Geoff Teece (Teece 2011), or perhaps a case could be made for recognition of a diversity of aims and approaches (e.g. Plater 2016). However, the message from SACRE members is just as it was from RE experts (above, St Gabriel’s Trust 2011), that any final decisions will not go unchallenged, although SACRE members are more likely to respond positively to aims which are community cohesion or religious literacy based, than to aims which emphasise nurturing of individual faith or academic achievement.

Conclusion

Significant concern has been expressed in recent years about the range and diversity of aims and intentions for classroom RE teaching. Some have suggested that this breadth of emphasis contributes to a general lack of clarity about the nature of RE, and that it makes it especially hard for RE teachers –particularly non-specialists who are required to teach it- to feel confident about their teaching with children from week to week (OFSTED 2013).

To date there has been little empirical evidence about what SACRE members believe about RE, or what they consider to be the most important emphases when teaching the subject. The results of this survey provide some helpful empirical data on the views of SACRE members across the country. As such, it offers a useful starting point for discussion within individual SACREs and Agreed Syllabus Conferences about what might be their own local authority’s emphasis for the subject.

The results also provide statistical evidence more generally on the variety of perspectives held by particular RE stakeholders, including individual teachers, RE advisers, local councillors and religious representatives (all of these being members of SACREs). The data confirms a general direction of travel, but also identifies the challenge that lies ahead for RE if it wishes to speak with one voice about what it is trying to achieve within the curriculum.

Although the recent Commission on RE was asked to, “*consider the nature, purpose/s and scope of RE*” (REC 2016), it is interesting to note that the Final Report, and it’s proposal for a National Framework (REC 2018) makes no clear statement about the underlying purpose of RE, instead emphasising a shift in the study-focus: from religions, to ‘religion’ and worldviews.

Appropriate as this re-direction might be, it does not take us any further forward in helping to clarify what for OFSTED (2013) was a key stumbling block for RE: the uncertainty about its purpose.

Although there are limitations to this study (as outlined above), the interest shown in the work by RE colleagues, and the enthusiasm expressed by participants themselves as they engaged with the survey questions, suggests that it touches a raw nerve; there is still an appetite to grapple with this enduring and unanswered question, *What is RE for?*

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