

S.A.C.R.E – STANDING ADVISORY COUNCIL ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

04/02/2025

Attendance:

Councillors: Menna Baines, Dewi Jones, Paul Rowlinson, Anne Lloyd-Jones, John Pughe Roberts and Elin Walker Jones.

Others:

Christian and Other Faiths and Non-religious Philosophical Convictions: Eurfryn Davies (Union of Welsh Baptists).

Teachers:

Officers: Buddug Mair Huws (Assistant Resources Officer and SACRE Clerk), Rhodri Jones and Jasmine Jones (Democracy Services Officers).

Co-opted Members: Eleri Moss (Secondary Headteachers).

ALSO PRESENT:

Item 7: Dr Gareth Evans-Jones

1. PRAYER OR QUIET REFLECTION

The meeting was opened with a prayer from Councillor Anne Lloyd-Jones.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from:

- Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education)
- Nick Sissons (The Methodist Church)

3. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

There were no declarations of personal interest.

4. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

5. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this Committee held on 19 November 2024 as a true record.

6. ANNUAL REPORT – GWYNEDD SACRE 2023/24

Resolved to defer the item to the next meeting.

7. UPDATE ON THE REPORT ON THE TEACHING PROVISION OF RELIGION, VALUES AND ETHICS IN SCHOOLS IN WALES

The item was presented by Dr Gareth Evans-Jones, drawing attention to the following main points:

The presentation was opened by providing context about the National Centre of Religious Education for Wales, which was re-launched in August 2023 at the Llŷn ac Eifionydd National Eisteddfod. It was reported that the objective of the Centre is to promote study, knowledge and awareness of the variety of religious traditions, values and philosophical traditions that exist in Wales and the wider world.

It was noted that the Centre, over the last year, had organised and held several sessions and a number of activities:

- An internal A-level revision session had been organised for Anglesey, Gwynedd and Carmarthenshire students.
- Two weeks of A-level revision sessions were held on-line, covering 24 sessions on Philosophy, Ethics and Buddhism.
- CPD training was provided for teachers on the teaching of Buddhism and Hinduism.
- An on-line summer school was held in July with 15 lectures to introduce students to university-level topics in philosophy, ethics, and religion.
- A panel was held on Holocaust pedagogy and an on-line talk with a Holocaust survivor was organised for secondary schools.
- Talks were organised with Nerys Siddall (Mary Jones) and Hanan Issa (National Poet of Wales).
- An educational resource was produced - 'Teaching Peace', which is a bank of lessons and materials for Year 7/8/9 students to use in the context of Religion, Values and Ethics or as part of the Mixed Humanities course.
- 10 religion-specific artefacts boxes were produced for teaching the world's major religions, which are available on loan to schools.

It was explained that the research project had been developed as a result of school teachers requesting support from the Centre specifically relating to teaching Advanced Level, Religious Education and Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE) in junior sections up to GCSE. It was noted that the research project had lasted nine months looking at RVE teaching provision across Wales. It was noted that the purpose of the questionnaire was to obtain a better idea of the challenges teachers feel they are facing, what the strengths are, and any weak aspects at present, to enable the Centre to respond and conduct a series of developmental sessions.

It was noted that 58 schools had responded, but given the higher number of secondary school respondents, a decision was made to produce a report based on secondary schools' data. It was noted that there were good examples of teachers accessing and engaging with training opportunities, however, that there were also examples which raised concerns.

It was noted that RVE is taught either as a standalone subject or as part of a Mixed Humanities scheme up to GCSE, as GCSE continues to be Religious Education. It was

highlighted that this had raised concern about losing subject expertise and in relation to the fact that teachers teaching the subject have not been trained adequately. It was noted that training had been created to teach the subject within Mixed Humanities but not separately. It was added that this lack of training was concerning given the sensitive nature of the subject.

It was noted that there is one official RVE textbook - in English, without a Welsh equivalent. It was noted that it had not been approved by the WJEC or the Welsh Government, and that there is no need for one textbook for all given the holistic nature of the curriculum in Wales. It was elaborated that the publishers had refused a request to translate the textbook.

It was noted that systematic challenges exist within RVE, specifically in terms of the uncertainty regarding the term 'mandatory' and the subject's statutory time allocation, as there is no clear explanation of what this means. It was elaborated that, on average, RVE does not receive the same time allocation as other subjects.

It was underlined that some schools are still allocating the old statutory requirement of one hour per week for every pupil, while other schools only allow one hour per year. It was noted that ambiguity around RVE progression and assessment methods has left educators searching for clearer guidelines and cross-curricular strategies.

It was reported that the Centre is holding discussions with SACREs regarding the research findings on how to help. It was expressed that the findings of the report had been criticised by the SACREs central council for being too negative and an unfair reflection of the general consensus due to the number of respondents to the questionnaire.

It was noted that the Centre had taken steps to produce a second report, attempting to conduct individual visits and conversations with teachers to hear more about their opinions. It was emphasised that these conversations would be completely confidential, and that teachers are entitled to withdraw their contributions at any time. It was noted that six visits had been conducted so far, focusing on North-West Wales during this stage of the investigation. It was elaborated that they were looking for willing teachers in secondary schools teaching RVE, Mixed Humanities or Religious Education to take part in the investigation, asking the Gwynedd SACRE to share this call with teachers in Gwynedd.

Several other matters were noted that had arisen and caused concern:

- That the GCSE short course had been abolished.
- That some schools were not offering Religious Education at all as a GCSE subject.
- That some schools are offering Social Studies instead of Religious Education because it sounds more interesting.
- That the new GCSE Religious Education, despite containing interesting aspects, also includes some that are dated (e.g. no reference to artificial intelligence).

It was noted that the Centre had started responding to some of the concerns that have been raised in the report. It was noted that the Centre is collaborating with Conwy and Swansea SACRE to provide twilight sessions on different aspects of RVE. It was further noted that they had created a teacher mentoring scheme. It was noted that, in February 2025, a free mentoring programme would be launched for teachers who will have to teach Religious Studies at GCSE level but who are not trained in RS/RE/RVE.

It was elaborated that the scheme will last 15 months – the application deadline is April 2025 and the scheme will start in September 2025. It was noted that there are 20 spaces on the course, with the aim of extending to A Level qualification from next year onwards, depending on more subsidy. It was outlined that information can be shared about the course developments with SACRE members if they wished.

It was further noted that the Centre runs A Level and AS Level Revision Sessions over Easter, focusing on Buddhism, Philosophy, Ethics and Christianity.

It was noted that the Centre is willing to respond to any calls or demands for the following through the medium of English, or Welsh, or bilingually:

- Visiting Schools.
- Delivering revision/training sessions.
- Sharing resources.
- Signposting to relevant organisations/places.

It was noted that there would be an event on 11 June aimed specifically at primary schools, with various sessions looking at 'cynefin' and referencing a number of places in Gwynedd named after places from the Bible. It was further noted that, during the evening (6.p.m. – 9.30p.m.) a conference for the public would take place looking more widely at biblical landscapes.

Thanks were given for the inclusive update. It was agreed to help by asking the Gwynedd SACRE to share the call for teachers to take part in the second stage of the research. It was asked what the Centre is doing to try and increase uptake of Religious Studies at GCSE, as evidence shows that numbers attending the courses are falling.

It was agreed that the numbers choosing to study Religious Studies in Wales are decreasing at every level, especially through the medium of Welsh. It was noted that there had been a missed opportunity when creating the new GCSE to embed the subject in the real world. It was further noted that there was a lack of continuity as GCSE has retained the name 'Religious Education' rather than changing to RVE. It was noted that there would be an opportunity to increase interest when the new A Level would be published in two years, which will reflect the modern world whilst retaining the integrity of the subject.

Further thanks were noted for the presentation and report, along with satisfaction with the discussion. The new title, RVE, was approved noting that it reflected the modern context. There was a willingness to support in any way with the work being undertaken by the Centre. The comments were appreciated, noting that the main support required relates to the second report, specifically in terms of engaging with teachers to partake in the confidential visits. It was noted that its main purpose is to give teachers a voice to highlight any existing issues.

It was noted that, many years ago, one school in North Wales had stopped offering Religious Education as an A Level subject due to a lack of staffing, and that they were now in a similar position with GCSE. It was questioned whether anything could be done with younger children to try and get them interested in continuing with the subject at higher levels. A willingness was noted on behalf of the Education Department to help by running sessions to engage interest in the subject with Year 8/9 pupils before they make their GCSE choices.

It was agreed that this would be a good idea that required further discussion. It was noted that Swansea SACRE had reported several schools that had experienced a lack of staffing in Religious Education following the retirement of subject teachers.

The comment about the response from the Wales Association of SACREs being negative was questioned. In response, it was noted that several core members had criticised that the report had been misrepresented. It was noted that several members of the WASACRE Management Board were involved in the new Curriculum for Wales and RVE and that they were extremely supportive of the Mixed Humanities approach. It was elaborated that WASACRE had now released their own questionnaire asking for teachers' opinions. It was noted that this is positive as it is important to have as many respondents as possible, however, it was noted that some of the questions were leading. It was noted that the aim of the Centre's report was to be as unbiased as possible. It was noted that the report of WASACRE had been received by the Gwynedd SACRE and would be shared with members in due course.

Dr Gareth Evans-Jones was invited to attend again at a later stage to provide a further update following the second stage of his research.

The meeting commenced at 3.40pm and concluded at 4:50pm.

CHAIR