



Durham Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE)

Annual Report 2024 - 2025

Local Authority: Durham County Council

Reporting year: 2024–2025

LA Advisor to SACRE: Sarah Blakeman, Senior Professional Learning Advisor

Table of contents

Introduction

Durham's context

- Geography and rurality
- Education
- Religion

Durham's SACRE

- Membership
- Support arrangements
- Meeting dates and a brief overview of content
- Agreed Syllabus Conference

Statutory responsibilities

- The locally Agreed Syllabus and RE in schools
- Standards and monitoring of RE
- Teacher training, materials and advice for schools
- Other information and advice to the LA

Collective Worship

- Standards and monitoring of CW
- Determinations
- Teacher training
- Other information

Links with other bodies

SACRE involvement locally

Appendices

- KS4 and KS5 attainment and progress charts
- Circulation details for this annual report

Introduction

This report is submitted to NASACRE and the Department for Education in fulfilment of the statutory requirement for local authorities to publish a SACRE annual report. This provides an overview of SACRE's work during the 2024–2025 academic year. It also references more recent work carried out through the local authority to further strengthen regional provision for RE. An update around this will be shared in the 2025-2026 report at the end of the calendar year.

Durham's context

Geography and rurality

County Durham is a large and geographically diverse local authority in the North-East of England, covering approximately 860 square miles. While the county includes several densely populated urban centres such as Durham City, Chester-le-Street, Peterlee and Bishop Auckland, around 57% of the county's area is classified as rural, including remote communities in Upper Teesdale and Weardale, where schools can be geographically isolated and access to services is more limited. The combination of urban, semi-urban and deeply rural contexts presents both opportunities and challenges for the delivery and monitoring of Religious Education.

Education

Durham has 115 maintained schools and 172 academies based on the January 2025 school census data. Of the academies 41 schools belong to one of three Catholic trusts: Bishop Wilkinson, Bishop Chadwick and Bishop Hogarth, which all serve the broader North-East region. There are 17 Christian denominational schools within the maintained schools where support is offered from the diocese. There are only two maintained secondary schools, both of which are non-faith schools. Keeping an up-to-date understanding of the local school landscape enables SACRE to prioritise its work effectively and respond to emerging needs across the county.

Religion

The population of the county, by religion, is outlined in the table below. Notably, Durham has a higher % residents who are Christian than regional and national statistics and lower %s of the other 5 world religions than the regional and national population. Durham SACRE members understand the importance of ensuring that children and young people are given the opportunity to develop their understanding of religious- and non-religious perspectives.

| Resident Population by Religion in County Durham | County Durham | | North East | | England | |
|--|---------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| | Count | % of total | Count | % of total | Count | % of total |
| Christian | 285,167 | 54.6 | 1,343,948 | 50.8 | 26,167,899 | 46.3 |
| Buddhist | 1,290 | 0.2 | 7,026 | 0.3 | 262,433 | 0.5 |
| Hindu | 990 | 0.2 | 10,924 | 0.4 | 1,020,533 | 1.8 |
| Jewish | 286 | 0.1 | 4,389 | 0.2 | 269,283 | 0.5 |
| Muslim | 2,922 | 0.6 | 72,102 | 2.7 | 3,801,186 | 6.7 |
| Sikh | 839 | 0.2 | 7,206 | 0.3 | 520,092 | 0.9 |
| Other religion | 2,198 | 0.4 | 9,950 | 0.4 | 332,410 | 0.6 |
| No religion | 201,688 | 38.6 | 1,058,122 | 40 | 20,715,664 | 36.7 |
| Not answered | 26,687 | 5.1 | 133,345 | 5 | 3,400,548 | 6 |

Source: ONS Census - Resident Population by Religion in County Durham 2021

Durham SACRE

Membership

Durham SACRE continues to benefit from a strong and well-balanced membership, with good representation across faith communities, professional groups and elected members, supporting constructive dialogue. During the reporting period, changes to membership included the departure of Luke Cozens (Salvation Army) on 31 August 2025, Bhakti Rasa Adhikhara (Hinduism) on 31 August 2025, Cloud Singh (Sikhism) on 6 March 2025 and Sharon Lupton (RE Curriculum Group) on 10 October 2024. These departures were balanced by new appointments, with Jaswinder Singh (Sikhism) joining on 4 April 2025, David Priestley (Methodist Church) on 11 April 2025, Vicki Mitchell and Emma Downing (NEU) on 10 October 2024, and Paul Bray (RE Curriculum Group) on 9 October 2024, ensuring continuity of expertise and perspective. Durham SACRE has also welcomed Jenni Rawlinson, Faculty Leader for RE at Wolsingham School and co-opted member of NATRE’s Executive Committee, bringing valuable regional and national insight.

Membership changes among councillors reflected the local elections in 2025, with Councillor D Haney leaving on 27 May 2025 and Councillors S Townsend, M Walton and M Wilson stepping down on 5 May 2025. New councillors I Cross, S Frankin, E Pears and D Walton were appointed in May 2025, maintaining elected member involvement and strengthening SACRE’s link with the local authority.

At the end of the reporting period, SACRE received notification that the Chair, Paul Welsh, would be resigning following his successful appointment to a new post. All members were informed and expressions of interest were invited in line with agreed procedures. As a result, Caroline Weir, previously Vice-Chair, was appointed as Chair, with Paul Bray taking up the role of Vice-Chair, ensuring continuity of leadership and experience within SACRE.

Whilst this reporting period runs up until 31st December 2025, more recently, Durham SACRE recorded with sadness the passing of Deanna Van der Velde in February 2026. Deanna represented the Jewish faith community and was widely respected for her contribution to interfaith understanding and education.

Support arrangements

Durham local authority supports SACRE through the provision of a Senior Professional Learning Advisor, Sarah Blakeman. Sarah's role is to work with primary and secondary schools and specialist provisions on professional learning and she helps to coordinate the authority's subject network meetings and courses.

Durham's *Democratic Services* team support SACRE through clerking services. This includes, but is not limited to, sharing agendas and papers in advance of every SACRE and ASC meeting, liaising with members around attendance on behalf of the Chair, minute-taking and circulating and contacting SACRE members with reminders about training and mailings shared by regional and national organisations. Durham County Council also provides committee rooms for all meetings and ensures refreshments are available for members.

The local authority is in regular conversation with SACRE around the use 2% of the central school services budget (DSG). The local authority covers advisor time, clerking and administrative support and venue/ catering costs. RE network meetings, including preparation, delivery, evaluation reviews, resourcing and room hire are covered by the local authority. The local authority also pays national memberships and the full NASACRE training package to ensure all members can access the latest advice and guidance.

SACRE meetings

Durham SACRE met termly during the reporting period:

- 7th November 2024 1.30pm
- 6th March 2025 1.30pm
- 5th June 2025 1.30pm

Meetings were supported by the local authority adviser and clerking, administration and roomings facilitated through Durham's democratic services team. All meetings were held in County Hall: Durham County Council's main administrative base, which is a central location on public transport routes for ease of access.

Agendas included statutory business, the agreement to convene an ASC, sharing of curriculum and workforce data, professional development updates, Ofsted inspection activity, and presentations from school representatives on the use of Durham's Agreed Syllabus. Durham

SACRE also re-introduced a standing agenda item 'my faith and my community' to provide an opportunity for members of different faiths and world views to share their stories.

The LA Advisor to SACRE has met with her line manager to review the NASACRE self-evaluation tool and has suggested that this, alongside an updated development plan, form two standing agenda items on future SACRE meetings. More information will be provided in the 2025-2026 report.

Agreed Syllabus Conference

A new ASC was agreed upon in the 7th November 2024 meeting to coincide with the legal requirement for SACREs to review locally agreed syllabi every 5 years.

During this period we reflected upon findings from a survey shared with schools by the local authority in the summer term 2024 to hear directly from schools how they were using the syllabus and the extent to which they felt it was still fit for purpose. Responses from 53 leaders suggest that the Agreed Syllabus 2020 is largely fit for purpose, with particular strengths identified in exemplar plans, unit questions and curriculum progression, and with generally moderate to strong confidence in RE delivery where subject knowledge and access to CPD are secure. Key areas for development include assessment guidance, additional planning and resourcing, and consideration of content balance and progression across key stages. It is acknowledged, however, that the survey reflects the views of only a proportion of schools and that further engagement is required to obtain a more comprehensive picture. In addition, dialogue with secondary academy leaders indicates that some academies are not following the Agreed Syllabus, instead developing their own curricula or drawing on alternative sources, which is an important contextual factor for SACRE to consider as part of future planning and support.

As Durham's syllabus has only had minor amends over the previous two review cycles, members felt it important to consider what other locally agreed syllabi look like, what they include and how they are constructed to support schools. On the advice of SACRE members who are well versed in the national religious education landscape, ASC members reviewed syllabi from Cumbria, Lincolnshire, Northumberland and West Yorkshire. Members worked in smaller groups to review each of the syllabi before feeding back to the group as a whole.

Most recently, and in light of the Curriculum and Assessment Review, the ASC has revisited the National Content Standard and will be reflecting on the extent to which current AS align with this. local authority advisors have also started reading around a *Religion and World Views* approach and they are considering how to weave key concepts into training for schools in preparation for a potential RE National Curriculum.

Statutory responsibilities

The locally Agreed Syllabus and RE in schools

Based on all available evidence, the locally Agreed Syllabus is being used in maintained schools across the county, although in some settings it is supplemented with additional resources or bespoke units to meet local context and curriculum priorities. Evidence from a recent survey conducted in February 2026 indicates that, of the nine secondary schools who responded, seven confirmed that they are using the Agreed Syllabus as the basis for their RE provision. The two schools not following the locally Agreed Syllabus are non-denominational academy trusts, both of which have chosen to develop their own RE curricula or draw on alternative sources. This reflects the wider autonomy afforded to academies and provides important context for understanding patterns of syllabus use across the secondary sector.

The locally Agreed Syllabus forms a standing agenda item on all primary subject networks (please see ‘teacher training, materials and advice section’) and subject leaders are encouraged to discuss units and familiarise themselves with planning materials to support teachers back in their schools.

During the reporting period, two teacher-member presentations have been given to SACRE on the use of the syllabus in context: these have provided helpful and informative insights into how the syllabus is brought to life in the classroom.

Standards and monitoring of RE

In addition to the aforementioned presentations, SACRE has been presented with examination results for GCSE and A levels, workforce data and Ofsted report findings where these relate to RE.

SACRE and the LA noted some inconsistencies and gaps in the workforce data shared so caution was used when drawing conclusions from the data set. Of the schools that shared their Key Stage 3 teaching hours, these were broadly consistent across Years 7 and 8, with a dip in Year 9. It was also noted that some schools begin GCSE courses in Year 9 which could account for this decline. Two schools reported RE hours significantly above the recommended minimum. These are RC secondary schools.

GCSEs: 21 schools entered students for GCSE religious studies in 2024, totalling 1640 pupils. 7 of these entered full cohorts, including 4 faith schools and 3 non-faith schools. All schools entered students for the full course, with one school also opting for short course entries. The GCSE headline outcomes for 2024 are in line with those from 2023 for attainment (actual results) and show a

marginal improvement for valued added (progress from KS2 outcomes). Please see Appendix A for further details.

A Levels: 8 schools and settings had cohorts completing A levels in Religious Studies in the summer, 2024. These included maintained schools, academies and colleges. Both faith- and non-faith schools/ settings were represented in this cohort. Cohort sizes varied from 3 to 14, with a total of 70 students across the county. These statistics are all in line with the previous year. The percentage of students achieving A* – C grades in 2024 was 76%, compared to 87% and 91% in 2023 and 2022 respectively. However, this percentage is still slightly above the national average (75%).

During 2024–2025, **Ofsted inspection evidence** relating specifically to RE was limited.

- In 2023–24 and early 2024–25, there were a small number of RE deep dives, all in primary schools. Feedback ranged from concerns about pupils’ retention of learning to positive commentary on the use of visits to places of worship and curriculum planning.
- In 2024–25, only one Section 5 inspection included an RE deep dive, with broader feedback highlighting pupils’ respectful attitudes and understanding of diversity.

SACRE noted that the revised Ofsted framework makes it more difficult to monitor subject quality directly.

The **Religious Education Quality Mark (REQM)** has been referenced in SACRE meetings during the reporting period as a recognised framework for evidencing high-quality religious education. A SACRE member who supported her school in achieving the Gold RE Quality Mark shared her experience and offered to support other schools interested in working towards accreditation. SACRE welcomes this peer-led approach and recognises the value of the REQM in raising the profile of RE, supporting subject leadership and promoting reflective practice. Over the coming year, SACRE will look to actively promote engagement with the RE Quality Mark, alongside other valuable enrichment and professional development opportunities available through organisations such as Culham St Gabriel’s, to support schools in strengthening the quality and impact of RE provision.

Teacher training, materials and advice for schools

Education Durham (DCC) provides professional learning, networks and in-school support for RE. SACRE is kept informed of participation, feedback and emerging themes through termly reports provided by Sarah Blakeman.

Throughout 2024–2025, Education Durham offered:

- Termly primary RE networks (Autumn, Spring and Summer)

- *A New to Leading Primary RE* course
- Courses on Hinduism and progression in RE
- Disciplinary literacy and curriculum impact courses

Primary engagement was consistently strong, with network attendance typically exceeding 60 participants. Evaluation feedback showed very high satisfaction, with attendees valuing subject-specific support, opportunities to share practice and clarity around curriculum expectations.

Secondary network attendance remained very low (typically two participants per session). SACRE was advised that this reflects the local academised context rather than lack of need. In response, Education Durham began reviewing alternative models, including 1-to-1 and small-group professional conversations for 2025–26.

Between Summer 2024 and Spring 2025, schools requested **over 20 hours** of bespoke RE support. This work included:

- Subject reviews and audits of curriculum provision
- Support for new RE subject leaders
- Advice on mixed-age planning, assessment and progression
- Guidance on improving multi-faith coverage

This support was delivered by experienced in-school advisers and responded directly to needs identified through networks and inspection feedback.

Other information and advice to the LA

No withdrawals have been brought to the attention of Durham’s SACRE in 2024-2025, nor have any complaints against schools in relation to RE or Collective Worship. The LA advisor is exploring this becoming a standing agenda item at SACRE meetings to ensure open dialogue between the local authority and SACRE so that information and guidance can be co-constructed.

Collective Worship

Standards and monitoring of CW

Durham SACRE recognises its statutory responsibility to advise the local authority on Collective Worship and to promote good practice. In practice, evidence of structured Collective Worship is strongest within faith schools, where worship forms a clear part of school ethos and is monitored through diocesan processes and inspection frameworks (e.g., SIAMS). In non-faith schools, Collective Worship is less visible and is often approached through

inclusive assemblies or values-based provision rather than formal acts of worship. Durham SACRE acknowledges this as an area for further development and will continue to explore proportionate and supportive ways of understanding and promoting effective Collective Worship across different school contexts.

Determinations

During the reporting period, Durham SACRE received no applications for determinations and there are not believed to be any determinations in place within the local authority area. SACRE is aware of the importance of ensuring that schools understand the determination process and the LA advises that guidance should be reviewed to ensure it is accessible, up-to-date and appropriately signposted for schools.

Teacher training

No training was provided focusing on Collective Worship in the period covered by this report. This is something that can be explored in partnership with the local authority.

Other information and advice to the LA

No complaints around CW have been brought to SACRE during the reporting period. No advice has been given to the LA.

Links with other bodies

Durham SACRE and the local authority place a strong value on partnership working with national bodies, including NATRE and NASACRE. Durham local authority funds full membership to ensure that SACRE members, local authority advisers, and network and course leaders can access high-quality, up-to-date training and remain well informed about key developments in the Religious Education landscape. The appointment of Jenni Rawlinson, a member of NATRE's Executive Committee, to Durham's SACRE further strengthens the collective knowledge and expertise of the Council.

The Chair, Vice-Chair and local authority adviser have benefited from participation in regional NASACRE networks, facilitated by Claire Clinton and Karenza Passmore, with the Chair also attending the NASACRE annual conference and providing feedback to SACRE at a subsequent meeting. Durham SACRE also benefits from the expertise of Karenza Passmore, North East RE Hubs Lead and member of the North East AREIAC group. Through this link, SACRE members are kept well informed about regional developments, resources and training opportunities.

Durham SACRE is well informed about the work of the Diocese of Durham through the Chair, Caroline Weir, who is an RE adviser for the diocese and works extensively with schools across the region to support and strengthen RE provision. In addition, schools across County Durham

benefit from access to a Religious Resources Centre, enabling teachers to browse and borrow a wide range of resources to enrich and bring to life RE learning for children and young people.

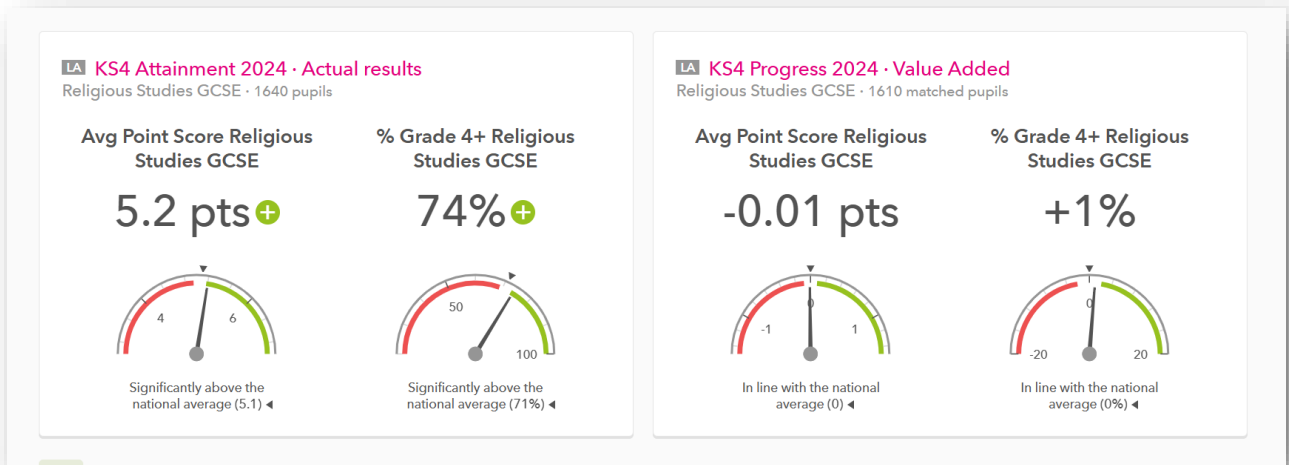
SACRE involvement locally

During the reporting period, a new LA7 Religious Education advisor group has been established by Durham, bringing together local authority advisers from across the North East to strengthen collaboration, share expertise and develop a more joined-up approach to supporting high-quality RE. Moving forward, this group hopes to work closely with the RE hub, Religious Resources Centres and other partners to exchange good practice, respond to national developments and coordinate support for schools more effectively. The LA7 group provides a valuable professional forum for dialogue and collective problem-solving, supporting greater consistency and capacity across the region while retaining sensitivity to local context. Its establishment represents a positive step in enhancing regional networks and strengthening the support available to RE leaders and teachers.

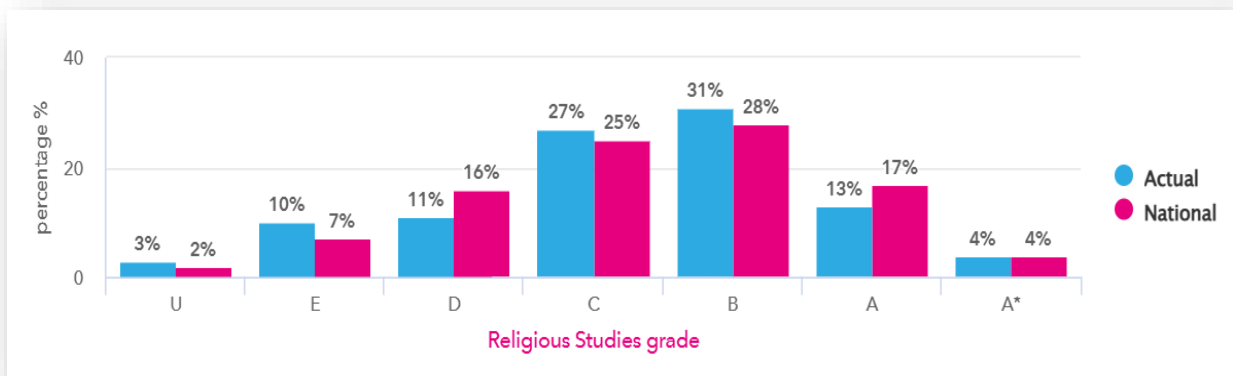
Appendices

Appendix A

KS4 and KS5 attainment and progress charts for summer 2024 examination season



The graph below shows the grade distribution of Durham’s KS5 entrants compared to those nationally. The % achieving A* grades are the same, Durham was down on ‘A’ grades but higher than national for ‘B’ and ‘C’ grades in 2024. Fr54edw32



Appendix B

This report will be submitted to NASACRE and the Department for Education in accordance with statutory guidance. A copy will also be submitted to the Head of Education and Skills for Durham County Council.