Plymouth SACRE Annual Report 2025/6

Foreward

Welcome to the Annual Report of the Plymouth Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education and Collective Worship. This report reflects another productive and eventful year for SACRE. It has been a privilege to continue serving as Chair during this period, and I now hand over the role to Cllr Sally Cresswell. With her extensive experience of teaching in primary schools across our city and her longstanding commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, I know she will be an outstanding Chair for Plymouth SACRE.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all members of Plymouth SACRE for their continued commitment, enthusiasm and invaluable contributions throughout the year. Their dedication ensures that our meetings are not only well attended but also thoughtful, engaging and productive. It is always encouraging to see members giving so generously of their time, expertise and experience in support of Religious Education and collective worship across our city.

The role of SACRE is to support and challenge schools in ensuring that children and young people receive a high-quality Religious Education. We are fortunate to benefit from the tireless commitment and expertise of our Consultant, Ed Pawson, who continues to provide invaluable advice, guidance and analysis of participation and attainment data. Ed works closely with schools and Trust leaders to support their understanding of the legal requirements and educational importance of Religious Education, helping to strengthen provision across Plymouth.

I am also deeply grateful for the support of our Vice Chair, Katie Freeman, whose passion for Religious Education is evident in every aspect of her work. As both a respected local primary school teacher and the Chair of the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE), Katie brings a wealth of knowledge, insight and national perspective to our discussions. Together, Ed and Katie help ensure that Plymouth SACRE remains informed about developments in Religious Education at both local and national levels.

While there is always more to do, I am proud of the progress we have made and confident that Plymouth SACRE is well placed to continue its important work. Under the leadership of Sally, supported by Ed, Katie and our committed membership, I know SACRE will continue to champion high-quality Religious Education and collective worship for the benefit of all children and young people in Plymouth.

Cllr Tess Blight
SACRE Chair (2023-2026)

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1 Introduction

1.1 Membership

During the year 2025/6 SACRE was pleased to welcome new members:
Jeremy Skelton (Catholic Church), Tatty Wilson (co-opted, Church of England), Cllr Chris Penberthy (Local Authority), Mary Aspinall (Local Authority), Louise Lewis (Teacher, St Christopher's Trust). We also welcomed Cllr Tina Tuohy back into SACRE.
Many thanks to those who have stepped down during the year: Sarah Lakey, Gwen Hughes, Cllr Bill Stevens, Cllr Andy Lugger, Lesley Clark, Cllr Chip Tofan.
Wendy Bratherton attended a meeting as an observer.
See Appendix 2 for a full list of SACRE members.

1.2 Details of Plymouth SACRE meetings

November 2025: 20 attendees, plus clerk and adviser, hybrid meeting
March 2026: 19 attendees, plus clerk and adviser, hybrid meeting
July 2026: 24 attendees, plus clerk and adviser, hybrid meeting
All meetings were quorate.
SACRE has been well led this year by Cllr Tess Blight (Chair) and Katie Freeman (Vice-Chair).

2 SACRE's statutory responsibilities

2.1 The Local Agreed Syllabus (2024-29)

The current agreed syllabus for schools in Plymouth was launched in June 2024. This syllabus has been well received by schools, although there are some schools (and trusts) in the city who have opted out of its use, against the advice of SACRE. On the whole, RE leads report that they are positive about the way the syllabus enables them to embed a Religion and Worldviews approach into their teaching and learning planning. Both community and Church schools have found the new teaching frameworks helpful.
Work has been completed to further support the syllabus with resources available through Oak Academy. A mapping document has been produced and shared with schools which shows how and where the Oak materials can be utilised in the Plymouth syllabus.

2.2 Standards and monitoring in RE

2.2.1 Secondary schools

Data from the DfE annual workforce survey shows that a number of secondary schools in Plymouth are not meeting statutory expectations for teaching RE. Some schools are only teaching RE for 1 hour every fortnight at KS3 and 4. Some schools are dropping RE in Year 11.
Schools have been contacted and conversations with headteachers and senior leaders have taken place to explore further and offer input to encourage them to develop the place of RE in the curriculum.

2.2.2 GCSE Religious Studies exam results 2025

GCSE exam data for 2025 reveals that there are a number of schools that are not entering any students for GCSE RS exams in Plymouth, and others who are only entering low numbers of students.
A number of these schools, and, where relevant, the trusts they are part of, have been contacted. This has resulted in fruitful conversations with a number of headteachers and trust leaders, where we have been able to explore these issues further and offer input to encourage them to develop the place of RE in the curriculum. However, there are some schools and trusts who either do not respond or refuse to engage.

SACRE continues to work with schools to encourage them to offer RS as a GCSE exam option. It is vital for the subject to continue to be offered to enable it to be studied at higher levels, helping to create the pipeline for the next generation of RE teachers in our schools. Teachers on SACRE wanted to emphasise that they consider the current GCSE specifications to be overly content-heavy and outdated.

2.2.2 Primary schools

Monitoring of RE in primary schools continues through sampling of websites and scrutiny of recent Ofsted reports. Over 70% of Ofsted reports include a mention of issues relating to SACRE's purpose (eg RE, collective worship or SMSC) and the majority of these comments are positive. Topics which have been highlighted by inspectors include:

- Spiritual and cultural development
- Understanding of world religions
- Inclusion and respect for diversity
- Creating an inclusive and respectful environment
- Good awareness of fundamental British values

Where SACRE has concerns, schools have been contacted to raise issues about standards or profile of the subject. SACRE officers have had conversations with a number of schools where their Ofsted report has highlighted weaknesses in RE or related areas. Where RE is mentioned positively schools have been contacted to thank them for their strong provision. Resources have been shared and advice has been given to a number of schools with regard to parental requests for withdrawal from RE (and/or collective worship). In particular, the Plymouth LTLRE hub leaders for have been an important resource in being available to offer support and guidance where schools make contact for help.

2.2.3 Headteachers' briefing

Following the publication of the 2024/5 SACRE Annual Report the Adviser gave a briefing to a Plymouth headteachers' updates event on the importance of good RE provision.

2.2.4 National Data on RE

Over the year, SACRE members have been kept informed about the national picture for RE. There are large geographic inequalities in the profile of the subject across the country. The percentage of pupils who sit GCSE RS, by local authority, is hugely divergent. Data from 2023 show that in Tower Hamlets 83% of pupils take the GCSE RS exam. This compares to 43% in Torbay, 36% in Devon, 31% in Plymouth, 15% in Cornwall. Members were interested to discuss why there should be such a significant disparity of access to this subject across the country and to ask if there is an issue of equity here?

3 Collective Worship

The guidance on collective worship and school assemblies from Plymouth SACRE is now under consideration, but this review process is currently on hold. The current guidance supports schools in developing a suitable CW policy and encouraging active pupil participation in assemblies. It outlines some of the rich opportunities that assemblies/ collective worship can offer pupils for spiritual, moral, social, cultural and personal development.

Plymouth SACRE is aware that its current guidance document (written in 2020) is in line for development, but the DfE has confirmed it will update long-standing guidance on collective worship in England's schools, following a Supreme Court judgment on religious education and worship in Northern Ireland. Once there is new national guidance in place SACRE plans to set up a working party to consider how CW support needs to change.

There have been no formal complaints about collective worship in schools and no applications for determinations.

4 Links with other bodies

4.1 Strong partnerships

Strong partnerships are a hallmark of the way Plymouth SACRE operates. We have good links with a number of organisations, working closely with Plymouth City Council, the Diocese of Exeter, the Universities of Exeter and St Mark and St John, Plymouth Centre for Faiths and Cultural Diversity and Devon Faith and Belief Forum.

The SACRE Adviser attends the annual conferences for AREIAC (Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants) and NASACRE (National Association of SACREs), and sits on the AREIAC executive. He coordinates the SW AREIAC network of advisers (SWARE), organises the annual SW SACRE conference and acts in the role of RE Hubs lead for the SW. The 2026 SW SACRE conference hosted inputs from a number of regional and national RE figures, offering workshops on a range of important inputs for SACRE member training. The keynote address was given by Dr Vanessa Ogden and was attended by over 200 delegates.

During the year, Plymouth SACRE officers attended a regional 'In Conversation' forum, hosted by RE Hubs and NASACRE, to receive updates and discuss issues of SACRE effectiveness.

4.2 Plymouth Centre for Faiths and Cultural Diversity (PCFCD)

Plymouth SACRE continues to support the work of PCFCD. PCFCD offers a great provision to enable schools to draw on visitors to classrooms and to inform SACRE about suitable faith and belief representatives when member vacancies occur.

As an organisation they are working hard to keep up the excellent service they offer to schools, but the impact of school budget cuts and administrative issues have made this harder to achieve. There is a strong demand from primary schools in the city, and they are looking for more speakers to fulfil the training expectations required by schools. There is particular demand for speakers from the Hindu and Jewish communities.

SACRE has been working with PCFCD, using money devolved to Plymouth in the wake of the 2024 unrest, to make additional provision of RE workshops for schools.

Preparations are in place for PCFCD's 25th Anniversary celebrations in November 2026.

4.3 Interfaith week activities

Once again, PCFCD presented a wonderful Interfaith Week 2025 event in the Council Chamber, offering an opportunity for local faith and belief groups from across the city to showcase presentations and performances.

Schools were provided with website links, resources and offers of school speaker visits to enable them to add to the impact of this focus week.

4.3 Learn, Teach, Lead RE

Plymouth SACRE is pleased to continue to partner and offer financial support to the Learn, Teach, Lead RE programme (LTLRE). Plymouth LTLRE hub is working well to support teachers of RE, offering termly twilight meetings and networking opportunities.

Hub leaders continue to be a significant resource to teachers of RE in their locality, and termly training days enable hub leaders to keep up to date with current RE issues and initiatives.

The 2025 LTLRE conference was well supported, with over 100 teachers attending from across the region. Both conference and hub meeting evaluations show how valuable teachers are finding these networking and CPD offers.

5 SACRE: local involvement

5.1 RE Newsletter

The half termly RE newsletter gives schools in depth support, information and networking links. It signposts current CPD, hub groups and conferences. Through this newsletter SACRE signposts guidance to schools about significant events, eg religious festivals such as Easter, Ramadan and Diwali, Interfaith Week etc

5.2 Holocaust Memorial Day

SACRE was pleased to invite Dr Alasdair Richardson (reader in Holocaust Education) to speak to the meeting during the year. He outlined the Holocaust Educational Trust's programmes: Lessons from Auschwitz for 6th formers, survivor testimony initiatives and digital interactive resources.

The HMD theme for 2026 was 'Bridging Generations'. Over 50 guests attended the Council House and contributions were given from a variety of speakers, with a number of primary and secondary schools taking part. The Council House event was very emotive, powerful and thought provoking.

HMD resources and links were shared with schools.

6 SACRE: regional and national involvement

6.1 Curriculum and Assessment Review (CaAR)

Plymouth SACRE has been pleased to support the process which may result in RE becoming a National Curriculum subject. SACRE has contributed to the debate, and been kept up to date through the year, as the national Task and Finish Group worked on a set of proposed Programmes of Study and then subsequently submitted their findings to the Secretary of State for Education at the end of March 2026.

In discussion of this topic, members were keen to explore the potential implications for SACREs, should RE become a National Curriculum subject. Would this remove the requirement for the SACRE to make provision for a local agreed syllabus?

Many members felt that the increased levels of consistency and accountability would be welcome outcomes from this process. It would ensure the subject gained greater visibility and encourage schools to give it a higher priority. Ofsted would be much clearer about what standards to expect when inspecting.

Some members expressed concern about the place of schools with a religious character in the proposed curriculum, and have been relieved to understand that the 'dual-system' will remain in place, where Church and faith schools are able to exercise control over the content they teach and the approaches they put in place, provided their standards are high.

As the school year came to an end the sector was still awaiting a decision regarding the level of consensus achieved, but it became apparent over the summer that RE would be accepted into the National Curriculum consultation being planned for September 2026. Members noted the lengthy legislative process that would be required should national curriculum changes proceed.

6.2 RE Hubs

SACRE continues to be supportive of the RE Hubs initiative, which is providing teachers with a 'one-stop-shop' website, offering links to school speakers, places of interest, CPD events, local network groups, blogs and resources etc. The school speakers' database is of particular importance for schools who want to invite people into their classrooms with a particular 'lived experience' relating to the worldviews they are studying.

7 SACRE organisation

7.1 SACRE leadership and organisation

Plymouth SACRE is well served through its clerk (Asif Siddique), LA lead (Michael House) and adviser (Ed Pawson). Plymouth City Council is responsive to SACRE's needs and supportive in its administration and organisation. It is well supported financially.

SACRE membership is vibrant and well-engaged, although there are still a few vacancies. We are very proud to have a wide SACRE membership, offering an inclusive representation of the diversity of the City of Plymouth.

A number of SACRE members have taken advantage of useful training opportunities over the last year, both through attendance at the SW SACRE conference and national online NASACRE training events.

SACRE would like to extend a huge 'thank-you' to Cllr Tess Blight, who stood down at the end of July, having served as SACRE Chair for 3 years. You have shown what true leadership is, over this period, Tess, and we will miss your calm, considered approach.

SACRE extends a warm welcome to Cllr Sally Cresswell as our new Chair. Your commitment to SACRE over recent years gives us full confidence that we will continue to be a well-run committee. We are also pleased to note that Katie Freeman will continue in her role as SACRE Vice-Chair.

7.2 Constitution Review

A review of the Plymouth SACRE constitution was concluded during the year, and has been ratified by SACRE members and by the Local Authority.

7.3 Local Government Re-organisation

Throughout the year, SACRE has been kept abreast of national proposals for local government restructuring. At the SW SACRE conference one of the workshops focused on how the LGR changes had impacted on the way Cumbria SACRE operates. There is an awareness that the SACRE constitution is likely to require updating because of the political reorganisation. There is a possibility that Plymouth may expand to include 13 new parishes. This has implications for SACRE membership and governance.

7.4 SACRE Website Development

There has been significant work taking place during the year to make plans for a Plymouth SACRE website, and members have received a presentation on the proposed SACRE web presence.

The proposal is for the website to include information on: SACRE news and updates; meeting information and minutes; resources for schools; Agreed syllabus access; Annual reports; Collective worship guidance; useful links and contact information.

7.5 Local Councillor support for SACRE

Documentation from the Religious Education Council has been shared with LA councillors to ensure they have a full understanding of the purpose and value of SACREs, and a clear picture of the way RE is taught in our schools.

7.6 Protecting what matters – MHCLG support for SACREs

Plymouth SACRE has welcomed the Policy Paper from MHCLG entitled Protecting What Matters: Towards a more confident, cohesive, and resilient United Kingdom, published in March 2026. It is refreshing to see such a firm commitment the need to act on issues of social cohesion and to recognise the significance of SACREs in this regard, and the importance of strengthening Religious Education in our schools.

8 Appendices

Appendix 1

Plymouth Schools GCSE RS exam data 2025 (anonymised)

Appendix 2

Membership of Plymouth SACRE August 2026

Group A: Christian denominations and such other religions and religious denominations that appropriately reflect the principal religious traditions in the area

Eight places

David Evans	Baptist Church
Vacancy	Buddhist Community
Muhunthiny Sivasothy	Hindu Community
Vacancy	Muslim Community
Dr Judith Beckman	Jewish Community
Vacancy	Methodist Church
Jeremy Skelton	Roman Catholic Diocese of Plymouth
Vacancy	United Reformed Church
Martyn Cox	Humanist
Leonore Newson	Pagan Community
Arezoo Farahzad	Baha'i Community
Bhai Gurmit Singh	Sikh Community
Prof. David Salter	Quaker Community

Group B: The Church of England, appointed by the Exeter Diocesan Board of Education

Five places

Michala Firth	Diocesan Board of Education, Exeter
Katie Freeman	Bickleigh Down Primary (Vice Chair)
Selina Day	University of St Mark and St John
Louise Lewis	St Christopher's Trust

Group C: Teachers' Associations

Nine places

Kerry Wardle	NASUWT
Jasmin Rhead	NEU
Vacancy	NATRE
Dr Ian Jamison	NASUWT
Giles Freathy	HE
Vacancy	PAPH (NAHT)
Claire Wills	Special Schools

Group D: The Local Authority

Six places

Cllr Sue Dann	Plymouth City Council
Cllr Tess Blight	Plymouth City Council (Chair)
Cllr Chris Penberthy	Plymouth City Council
Cllr Sally Cresswell	Plymouth City Council
Mary Aspinall	Plymouth City Council
Tina Tuohy	Plymouth City Council

Co-opted Representatives

Six places

Sara Wells	Community (Centre for Faiths & Cultural Diversity)
Tatty Wilson	Diocese of Exeter
Deborah Temple	Jewish community and schools speaker
Charanjeet Singh	Sikh Community
Father David Bailey	School Governors

SACRE Officers

Clerk: Asif Siddique
Adviser: Ed Pawson
LA lead: Michael House