

# SACRE funding in England



## A Second Report from the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education

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Edge Hill  
University

Faculty of  
Education



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## Foreword

It is my pleasure, as Chair of the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on RE, to introduce this new report to our members, and to wider education networks. We would like to thank everyone involved in its production, especially to all those in local authority Freedom of Information teams, and education officers supporting SACREs. Special thanks to the author, Paul Smalley at Edge Hill University for analysing the data and compiling the report. The headlines alone are compelling.

Our previous report on SACRE funding was published in 2021 and has had significant impact. For example, its findings were included in the Parliamentary research briefing *Religious education in modern Britain*<sup>1</sup>, prior to the Westminster Hall debate on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2022.

The NASACRE executive committee is listening to members and to local authorities as we decide whether or not to repeat this FOI request in two years' time. We are very happy to receive feedback on the process and the questions again. Feedback has already shown us that the two FOI requests made already since 2019 have helped officers and members of SACREs to understand the challenges of current education funding levels, and the position of SACREs within existing education systems at a time of complex change.

As statutory bodies, SACREs have a right to raise questions about their levels of support, and to receive the funding that is needed to underpin their work. SACREs should also advise their local authority of any matters arising from the budget allocated for their activities in order to enable SACREs to achieve their obligations, to operate efficiently within local democracy, and to promote excellent Religious Education and Collective Worship in schools.

I recommend this report to all members, to the Department for Education, and to our wider education networks.



**Linda Rudge,**  
Chair  
The National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on RE

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<sup>1</sup> *Religious education in modern Britain* (2022), House of Commons Library,  
<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2022-0182/>

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## Headlines

The majority of SACREs in England still do not get a sufficient share of the CSSB to enable them to carry out their duties well, despite CSSB increasing by 3.8% in the year 2021-22.

Overall, spending on RE has increased by over 10% since the 2021 report (In the 111 Local Authorities who gave reliable data)

LA funding policies seem somewhat erratic, with little correlation in individual LA funding allocations between 2019-20 and 2021-22. Of the 101 LAs who returned a figure for both reporting periods, 55 reported an increase, 42 a decrease and 4 exactly the same allocation

There are signs that funding is improving for many of the most poorly funded SACREs: of the 15 worst funded SACREs from 2019-20 (who reported an allocation above zero), 11 had seen an increase in 2021-22

Only 3 Local Authorities in 2021-2022 stated that they used 2% or more of CSSB funds on SACRE business, significantly fewer than 2 years ago.

Only 2 LAs reported increased expenditure on Democratic Services (Clerking) in the last two years.

5 Authorities declared no spending on RE at all. A further 34 (39 in all, 31%) stated they do not spend any money supporting RE in schools.

Some Authorities are able to allocate sufficient funding for a proper review of the Agreed Syllabus in a timely fashion. But 21 authorities have a syllabus from before 2017, over 5 years old.

Note: All percentages are based on data from those authorities that provided an answer to that question.

## Context

In the 1988 Education Reform Act, all Local (Education) Authorities (LAs) were given a statutory duty to establish a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE). In many areas they had existed prior to this date, to agree and support the local syllabus for RE. The latest guidance on RE confirms that “each LA must establish a permanent body called a standing advisory council on religious education”. The LA must also “establish an occasional body called an agreed syllabus conference (ASC) to review the agreed syllabus for RE adopted by the LA” and must “institute a review of its locally agreed syllabus within five years of the last review, and subsequently every five years after the completion of each further review”. “An LA should fund and support a SACRE and an ASC satisfactorily in line with the duty to constitute or convene each of these bodies and to enable them effectively to carry out their functions.”<sup>2</sup>

Local Authorities must carry out certain central functions on behalf of pupils in maintained schools and academies in England. SACREs are currently funded as one of those functions in the ongoing responsibilities category. This is allocated by central Government to each LA in the form of the Central School Services Block (CSSB)<sup>3</sup>. In total, across the 150 LAs that receive CSSB, £278,691,027 was allocated in the 2021-22 ‘ongoing commitments’ category. NASACRE considers that an LA would need to allocate at least 2% of the CSSB to the SACRE to enable it to carry out its statutory duties, and significantly more in the year that the Agreed Syllabus is reviewed. The following can reasonably be expected to be funded from the CSSB:

- a clerk
- a professional officer who has expertise in RE curriculum design
- a publicly accessible place to meet
- the reasonable expenses of members

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<sup>2</sup> DCSF (2010) *Religious education in English schools: Non-statutory guidance*, pages 10-11. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/190260/DCSF-00114-2010.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/190260/DCSF-00114-2010.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> DfE (2022) *Central school services block national funding formula: technical note July 2022* [Central school services block national funding formula: technical note \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

- publishing the agreed syllabus and other SACRE materials (including agendas and minutes), most usually on the LA website
- NASACRE subscription and AGM attendance.

After a decade where Local Authority funding reduced significantly with, on average, a 21% real term fall between 2009 and 2019<sup>4</sup>, there was significant pressure on local finances in 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 crisis. Central government provided additional fiscal support and council funding saw a real-terms increase in 2021-22 (with further increases in subsequent years)<sup>5</sup> Financially squeezed Local Authorities often appear to underfund the work of SACREs. A survey of SACREs completed in 2017 confirmed that a major concern of many SACREs was indeed their capacity to carry out even their statutory duties due to underfunding<sup>6</sup>. A small-scale survey carried out by NASACRE in 2019 suggested that many SACREs were being underfunded. The 2021 SACRE funding report showed that the majority of SACREs do not receive sufficient funding from their LAs. This second report is intended to enable policymakers to make informed decisions about SACRE funding.

When asked a parliamentary question about SACRE funding By Luke Pollard MP in July 2021, Schools Minister, Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP gave the following written answer:

In the 2021/22 financial year, the central school services block (CSSB) continues to fund local authorities for the ongoing responsibilities that they have a statutory duty to deliver for all pupils in maintained schools and academies. The total funding for ongoing responsibilities is £257 million in the 2021/22 financial year and is a 3.8% increase compared to the 2020/21 financial year, in order to keep up with inflation and pupil numbers. ... We do not specify what proportion of their CSSB funding local authorities should spend on specific central services - this is for local authorities' own discretion.<sup>7</sup>

## Research Methodology

A freedom of Information request was sent to all 150<sup>8</sup> Local Authorities in England on the 10<sup>th</sup> January 2023 by the National Association of SACREs. Specifically, the questions were as follows:

1. Can you confirm that the funding allocated to your local authority in the 2021-22 'ongoing commitments' category of the CSSB (Central Schools Services Block) was £{the amount from the Gov.uk website}?
2. How much of the funding specified in (1) above (as a raw figure) was allocated to SACRE related spending and if relevant to ASC (Agreed Syllabus Conference) related spending?
3. How much money from the CSSB funding for 2021-2022 did you spend on:
  - (a) Democratic services to support SACRE meetings in 2021-2022 (e.g. a clerk)
  - (b)
    - i. Professional support (A Religious Education specialist adviser or consultant to support the work of SACRE)
    - ii. Who provides the specialist RE support to SACRE in 3(b) e.g. No one, an RE specialist, a LA officer with an interest in RE etc.
  - (c) Support for schools, including CPD and training specifically for Religious Education and or Collective Worship

<sup>4</sup> Neil Amin Smith & David Phillips (2019) English council funding: what's happened and what's next?, IFS Briefing Note, Available from: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14133>

<sup>5</sup> Ogden, K and Phillips, D. (2021). *An initial response to the Local Government Finance Settlement* by IFS researchers The IFS. <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/initial-response-local-government-finance-settlement-ifs-researchers>

<sup>6</sup> Paul Smalley (2019): A critical policy analysis of local religious education in England, *British Journal of Religious Education*.

<sup>7</sup> Hansard, HC Deb, 20 July 2021, cW, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-07-12/31532/>

<sup>8</sup> FOI requests were not sent to The City of London or the Isles of Scilly as these do not receive CSSB funding, but receive a central grant from the government which includes funding for central schools' services, although they do not have any maintained schools.

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- (d) *Other costs*
- (e) *Please explain what the amount in (d) was spent on.*
- 4.
- (a) *How much money from other funds outside the CSSB fund was used to support RE in schools in your local authority?*
- (b) *what was the source(s) of the funds in 4(a)? e.g. community integration fund*
- 5.
- (a) *In which academic year was your last agreed syllabus for RE published?*
- (b) *How much did it cost to complete the revision in 5a? (i.e., to write it, develop it, publish it and launch it including training for your schools)*
- 6.
- (a) *Where would a member of the public access your Agreed Syllabus for RE?*
- (b) *What is the weblink (url) for your syllabus or summary document?*
- 7.
- (a) *Who is the contact (Name) for SACRE business in your LA?*
- (b) *What is the contact's (email address) for SACRE business in your LA?*
- (c) *How many meetings of SACRE were held in the academic year 2021-2022?*
- (d) *how many of those meetings in 7(c) had representation from all four statutory groups (were quorate)?*
- (e) *Does your SACRE partner with any other SACRE?*
- (f) *If the answer to 7(e) is Yes, which other SACREs do you partner with?*
- (g) *What partnership activity is undertaken in 7(f)?*
8. *Are there any barriers to providing funding to fulfil your statutory duties in relation to SACRE and/or the Agreed Syllabus Conference that you want to tell us about?*
9. *Is there anything else you want to tell us?*

These questions were deliberately very similar to the questions asked in the previous FOI which were contained in the 2021 report, to allow for simple comparison. Responses were obtained from 142 LAs, with 8 not supplying answers by the end of March 2023. This is an increase on the response rate of the 2021 report, which was 136.

Following an analysis of the data received, the following conclusions were reached:

## 1. Total Authority spend on SACRE

The total national spend on supporting RE in English schools through the work of SACREs, from the 142 responding LAs was £1,429,424.

A number of Local Authorities gave quite opaque answers to some of the FOI questions, possibly suggesting that the respondent did not fully understand local government finance. For example, one LA answered that “the council provides funding for SACRE via its general fund budget and not from the CSSB of the DSG” but then answered that it did not draw any money from funds outside the CSSB. This LA, and others who answered in a similar way, answering that they drew no funding from CSSB or other funds, clearly drew funding from somewhere as they identified spending on professional advice, CPD or other costs. A number of LAs responded that they had no way of disaggregating spending on RE or SACREs. This may mean that for some LAs the total spend on RE is under-represented. There are 30 such authorities. Of these 5 Authorities declared no spending on RE at all – a significant improvement on the 25 authorities who reported allocating no funding to RE in 2021. There remain 7 authorities for whom it appears impossible to answer questions about funding, but where activity is clearly going on.

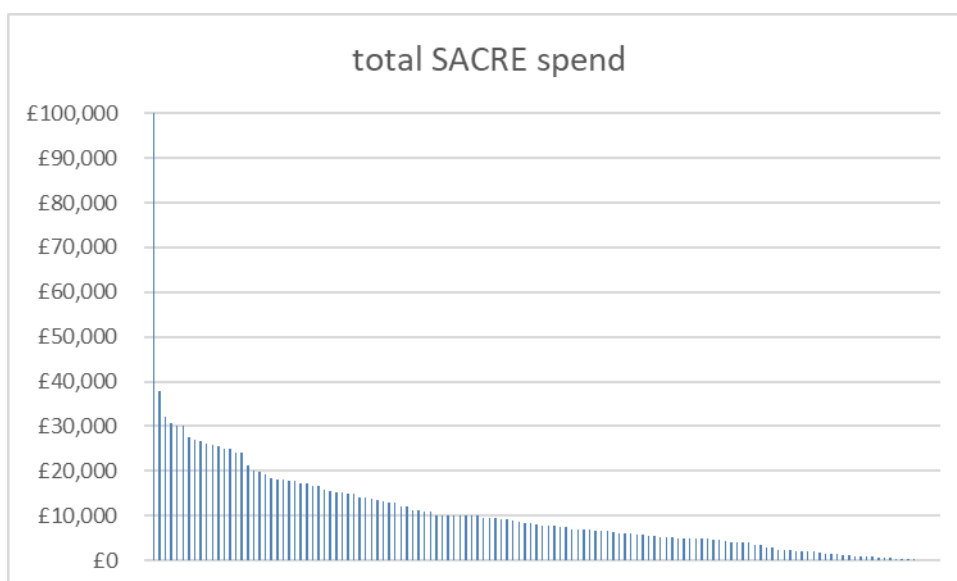


Figure 1

The largest total allocated by an LA was £100,000 with 5 more allocating over £30,000. Of the 111 Authorities who appeared to give reliable data (the same number as in 2021), the mean spend was £12,135 an increase of 10.3% over 2021's mean spend of £11,000.46. However, the increases and decreases in individual Authority spending appear to show no discernible trend. Of the 101 LAs who returned a figure for both reporting periods, 55 reported an increase, 42 a decrease and 4 exactly the same allocation. Of the 26 best funded SACREs in 21-22, only 2 had seen their allocation decrease. Conversely, of the 15 worst funded SACREs from 2019-20 (who reported an allocation above zero), 11 had seen an increase in 2021-22. The LA who gave the smallest allocation in the 2021 report has increased its spending on SACRE by over £10,000 after pressure from the DfE following that report.

This seems to show that LA funding decisions appear to be somewhat erratic, but pressure on the LAs who are the meanest funders may be having some effect. Being well or poorly supported in one year has little bearing on future levels of funding. The positive outlook is that where underfunding is identified, change can happen.



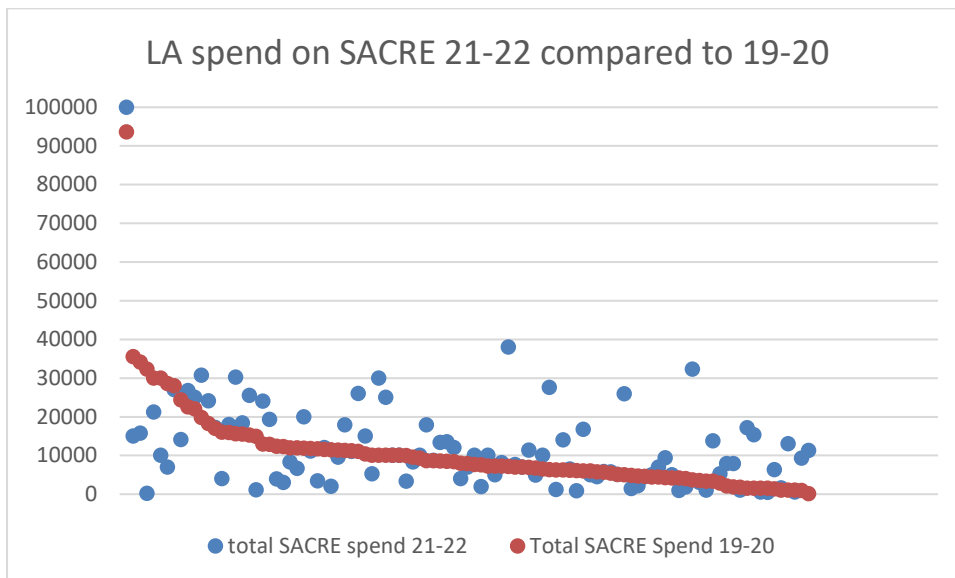


Figure 2

## 2. Funding Sources for SACRE, and percentage of CSSB.

The expectation of the Department for Education is that SACREs and Agreed Syllabus Conferences are funded from the Central School Services Block (CSSB). NASACRE recommends that for a SACRE to function well, that 2% of CSSB should be used for SACRE and RE.

40 LAs stated that they utilised funding from outside of the CSSB – a similar number to in the 2021 report. Some of these sources included Westhill grants, donations, recouped from charging schools and/or academies for services, but the majority of this income was explained as coming from the LA central funding or school improvement budget.

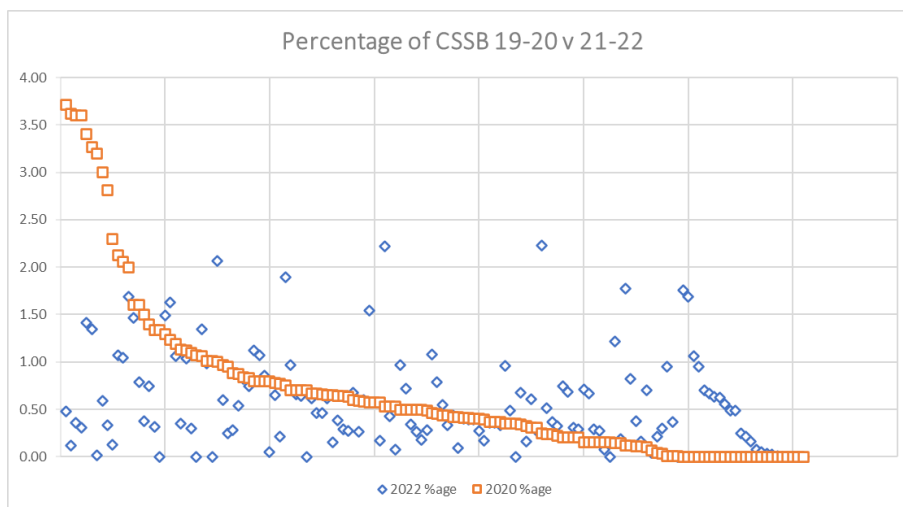


Figure 3

The most well-funded SACRE in the 2021 report received 6% of the CSSB from their LA in 2019/20; unfortunately, they did not respond to the FOI in 2023. The average spending on a SACRE, Religious Education and Collective Worship, as a percentage of the allocated CSSB funding source (based on data from 132 LAs) was less than one percent, 0.62%, 0.1% lower than in the 2021 report.

Of the 143 SACREs who responded to the FOI, (96) spent under 1% of CSSB fund or equivalent on SACRE, RE and Collective Worship in 2021-22. This is 10 fewer than in 2019-20. However only 3 (compared to 12 in 2019-20) spent over the 2% national recommendation.

It may be possible to summarise the data to say that there is a slight tendency towards the mean; SACREs well funded in 2019-20 are tending to have funding cut in percentage terms, whereas some that were poorly funded in 2019-20 have seen an increase.

### 3. Spending on Specific Items

We asked LAs how much they allocated to **professional support** including advisers and consultants. 118 LAs answered this question (18 more than in 2019-20). 30 reported that they allocated £0 of funding to professional support (in line with last time's 27). The average spend on professional support by the 87 authorities that responded to say they allocate funding was £7,081.45 (remarkably similar to £7,095.03 in 2019-20). The responses ranged from £25,000 to £100. 59 Authorities responded in both years; of these 26 spent more on Professional Support and 28 spent less, 5 remaining the same.



Figure 2

We asked who provides specialist RE support to SACRE and 109 LAs answered in a way that allowed the data to be analysed: 4 LAs stated that they did not get any specialist help. 17 took advice from an LA officer with an interest in RE and 4 from some other 'interested' person. Three of these four appeared to give their advice on a voluntary basis. Pleasingly, the majority (76) got advice from an RE specialist or adviser, however, the cost of this specialist advice ranged from over £25,000 -for a part-time specialist RE adviser to £100. It is questionable what amount and level of experience an LA can obtain for such a small amount of money: £100 may well be below minimum wage for three meetings.

We asked LAs how much they allocated to **democratic services** (e.g. clerking). Many LAs were unable to give a figure, despite assurances (in most cases) that they did use a Clerk. Those 84 LAs who gave a figure ranged from £6,300 to £181.12 and their mean spend on democratic services (excluding the zero responses) was £1,335 – less than the mean of £2648.18 from 2019-20. Somewhat worryingly one LA suggested that clerking was part of the role of the RE Adviser. Only 23 LAs were able to give a figure (more than zero) in answer to both FOIs. Of those 21 reported less expenditure on Clerking in 2021-22

We asked LAs how much they allocated to **supporting RE in schools**. 126 authorities responded to this question. 39 authorities told us that they allocate £0. 48 authorities were unable to supply a figure although they did claim to offer support. The mean spend for the 36 authorities who allocate funding to this area is £2529.07. The level of support ranges from £10,800 to £9. This is a similar sort of range to the previous survey.

**It is difficult to see how a SACRE can be fulfilling its statutory duties, let alone performing well, if an LA does not allocate a sizeable budget to professional support, democratic services and support for schools.**



## 4. The Agreed Syllabus

The LA must “institute a review of its locally agreed syllabus within five years of the last review, and subsequently every five years after the completion of each further review<sup>9</sup>. When the FOI was sent in January 2023 this would mean that the oldest syllabus review should have been September 2017. 21 LAs responded with a syllabus review of 2017 or older. This is significantly more than the 7 that had an ‘out of date’ AS in 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic may be a reason for some delay. However, 9 LAs had an Agreed Syllabus from 2016 or before. The oldest is from 2013 but is currently awaiting agreement but has been reviewed. One LA declared that they had a primary syllabus from 2019 but a secondary one from 2012.

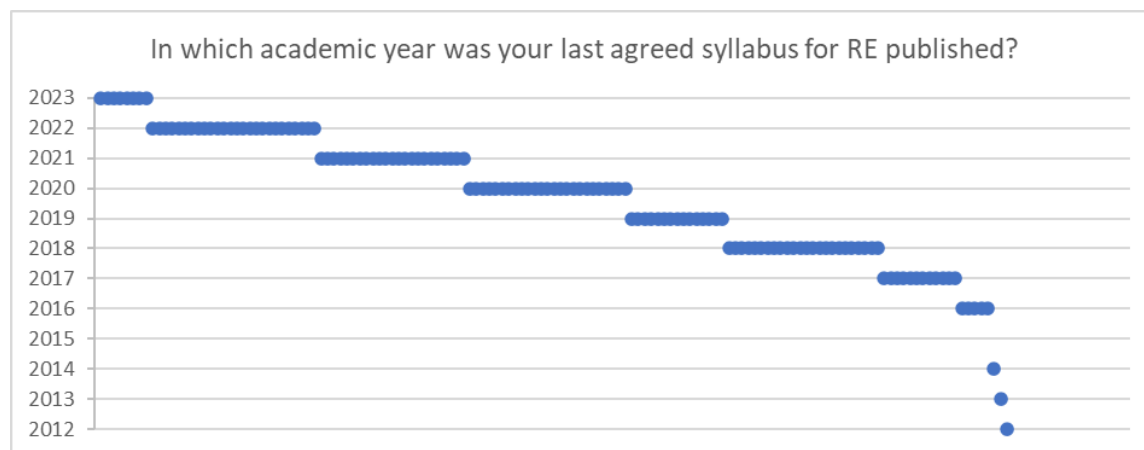


Figure 5

94 LAs disclosed the cost of completing their last revision of the Agreed Syllabus, including writing, developing, publishing and launching it with initial training for schools. The mean declared cost was £8,982 £500 more than two years ago.

The most expensive Agreed Syllabus review was £47,555, with 11 Authorities spending committing more than £20,000 of resource to the last syllabus review. Of the 8 most costly AS, 4 were locally produced and 4 licenced from RE Today. The remaining 3 costing over £20,00 were collaborations between LAs. Only one of these 11 reported the same figure as two years ago. Of the five who declared spending over £20, 000 in the 2021 survey, one had renewed its AS (with a substantially increased allocation) one reported the same figure for the 2019 revision, one did not answer in 2023, and two reported a significantly different cost that they reported two years ago for the AS published in 2019-20. This does cast some doubt on the accuracy of the responses from the LAs, but it is good to see that a growing number of LAs are funding the Agreed Syllabus Review properly.

39 authorities had reviewed the AS in 2021-3. Of these 23 Authorities gave us a figure in 2020 for the cost of the previous AS revision. 13 had spent more this time, and 10 less.

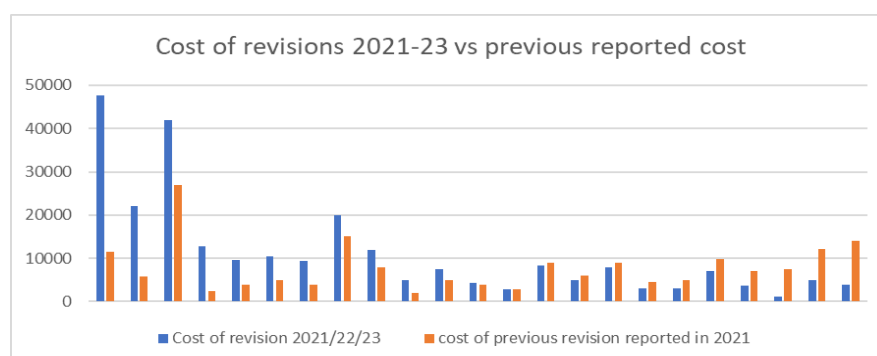


Figure 6

<sup>9</sup> DCSF (2010) *Religious education in English schools: Non-statutory guidance*, Page 11.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/190260/DCSF-00114-2010.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/190260/DCSF-00114-2010.pdf)

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Of the syllabuses reviewed since 2021, the mean spend was £5,000. The minimum spend was £1,200 which was a syllabus adopted from another LA with minor alterations. 4 authorities declared that they had been able to complete the review without spending any money – although these were all over 5 years old.

**It is difficult to see how a syllabus can be properly reviewed without a significant spend, unless it is essentially adopting another Authority's Syllabus. We would expect a proper local review process to cost in excess of £10,000.**

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## 5. Recommendations

Sadly, the recommendations have hardly changed since the previous report in 2021.

### A. SACREs

SACREs should consider offering formal advice to the local authority about the level of spend required for them to discharge their functions properly. They should share this report with their LA and ask for it to be noted. They should request from the LA their response to our FOI of January 2023 and then compare their local data with the national data in this report. This would provide many SACREs with a rich discussion to have with their LA. The Secretary of State himself has stated that the DfE “would investigate any complaint that statutory responsibilities were not being delivered to ensure that the LA took any necessary remedial action.”<sup>10</sup> SACREs should be able to set out ambitious work programmes without the fear of underfunding. Further clarification of the statutory responsibilities of LAs in respect of their SACREs and Agreed Syllabus Conferences can be found in the 2010 guidance.<sup>11</sup>

### B. Local Authorities

LAs must adequately fund SACREs to enable them to carry out their statutory duties and to support high quality RE and collective worship in schools.<sup>12</sup> They should ensure that there are adequate financial reporting mechanisms to be able to track the budget and spending allocated to SACRE business. NASACRE considers 2% of CSSB to be a reasonable spend to enable this. LAs must set aside sufficient money to ensure the Agreed Syllabus Review can be effective every five years. We reiterate that as a minimum expectation, LAs must provide the following:

- a clerk
- a professional officer who has expertise in RE curriculum design;
- a publicly accessible place to meet;
- the reasonable expenses of members;
- publishing the agreed syllabus and other SACRE materials (including agendas and minutes), most usually on the LA website.
- NASACRE subscription and AGM attendance.

The minister for schools; Nick Gibb MP included this statement in response to a parliamentary question from Stephen Timms MP. “If the Department is informed that an individual SACRE or ASC is experiencing difficulties in fulfilling its statutory duties, the Department will contact the local authority to remind them of their duty to support their activities satisfactorily.”<sup>13</sup>

### C. The DfE

In line with the Secretary of State’s directive above, the department should write to those 21 LAs who have not published a timely Agreed Syllabus review and ask for an explanation and a project plan. They should also write to the 5 authorities who declared no spending on SACRE business and ask them how they can be expected to fulfil their statutory duties without using any funds.

### D. Ministers

Finally, NASACRE recommends that government ministers should reiterate at every opportunity the expectation that Local Authorities will use a significant portion of their CSSB to adequately fund SACREs and Agreed Syllabus Conferences to discharge their statutory duties. They should consider enacting a National Plan for RE, to ensure the highest standards across the country.

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<sup>10</sup> Gavin Williamson (2019) private correspondence, 15th August. <http://www.nasacre.org.uk/file/nasacre/1-246-letter-from-gavin-williamson.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> DCSF (2010) *Religious education in English schools: Non-statutory guidance*, pages 10ff: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/190260/DCSF-00114-2010.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/190260/DCSF-00114-2010.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, page 11

<sup>13</sup> HC Deb, 28 March 2018, cW <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-03-28/134697>

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## Thanks

NASACRE would like to express gratitude to all those who give so much to ensure that SACREs do their very best to support high quality RE and Collective Worship in schools across the country. Thanks also to Marie Cooper, for administering the data collection which enabled this report to be published.

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*Cover photograph of a SACRE network meeting.*