

Reading Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education



Reading
Borough Council
Working better with you

Thursday 3 July 2025, 6.30pm
Via Microsoft Teams

Attendees:

Fiona Middlehurst - Vice Chair Group B (Chair)
Mark Laynesmith Group B (Tendered resignation for tonight)
Vikas Srivastava, Hindu – Group A
Elizabeth Munro – University Lecturer – Group C
Cllr Mohammed Ayub – Group D
Rabbi Zvi Solomons Jewish Faith - Group A
Mark Laynesmith – Church of England – Group B – Reading University Chaplain
Cllr Meri O'Connell – Group D

Clerk: Heather Mendham

Apologies:

Reverend Jo Williams – Group B (Chair)
Cllr Rachel Eden – Group D

Not in attendance

Linda Heneghan – Roman Catholic Rep – Group A
Cllr Ruth McEwan – Lead Councillor for Education & Public Health – Group D
Fiona Middlehurst Monger – Baptist Church Group B
Julia Feeney – Roman Catholic Rep – Group A
Cllr Stephen Goss, Group D
Amir Saqlain – Group A
Emma Raven – Humanist Rep – Group A/C

Agenda Item	Discussion and key points for the Minutes	Action/Whom
1.	Welcome, apologies, new members & requests for AOB .	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">No requests noted for AOB.	
2.	Introductions	
	Panel Members introduced themselves including which nominated group they represented	
3.	Minutes of the last meeting, corrections and matters arising.	
	1. Key Issues	

	<p>Procedural Failure at ASC (Syllabus Conference). The vote to approve the new syllabus was annulled due to a procedural issue (awaiting further feedback from Brian).</p> <p>3. Upcoming Meetings October 2025 (In-Person Proposed):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aiming for an in-person meeting to facilitate ASC and group voting. - Members are encouraged to check their diaries for availability. <p>Proposed next dates: 1st October 2025 (conflicts with two major religious festivals). 25th February 2026.</p> <p>Members should review availability for both dates to aid scheduling.</p> <p>4. Minutes & Documentation Concerns raised about the accuracy and timeliness of published minutes: Rabbi Zvi Solomons noted that minutes have not been published on the RBC website for some time.</p> <p>Action: Clerk to explore this with RBC'S Committee Services.</p> <p>5. Training & Feedback Training on syllabus materials has taken place. Attended by the meeting chair and Elizabeth, feedback to be shared later. Awaiting further information from regarding implementation and outcomes.</p> <p>Annual report was circulated.</p> <p>There was a new global Christianity resource coming from the Church of England. Which once available would be more diverse, when the ASC is reconvened, it would be good for the individual communities to have the opportunity to meet to ensure that equality and diversity is sustained. This can be discussed at the next meeting.</p>	
4	Appointment of a new Advisor	Chair
	<p>This agenda item to be moved to October meeting as there was no new update to share.</p> <p>David Reese has stepped down as advisor to many of all the West Berkshire Pan Berkshire hub groups.</p>	
5	Update on Pan Berkshire Syllabus	Chair
	<p>Wokingham Locally Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education Pathways to Understanding – circulated prior to the meeting.</p> <p>Summary of the New Religious Education Syllabus 1. Overview and Layout</p>	

	<p>Each syllabus follows a consistent layout with introductory notes from the chair. The structure is designed to be user-friendly and includes the following sections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal requirements • Purpose of the syllabus • How to use the syllabus • Time allocation guidance for each key stage • Base guidance for each key stage • Non-statutory content • Core unit plans and suggested unit outlines <p>2. Legal Requirements</p> <p>All students in state-maintained formal education must receive Religious Education (RE) up to the end of sixth form. This requirement is often overlooked, even by educational inspectors.</p> <p>3. Aims and Scope</p> <p>The syllabus aims to support both Religious Education and personal development. It emphasizes open and inquiring RE, encouraging students to explore and question the world around them. The term 'worldview' is defined and used in alignment with current government guidance. Recent Ofsted reviews suggest a potential move toward including RE in a national curriculum due to inconsistencies across schools.</p> <p>4. Statutory and Non-Statutory Content</p> <p>The syllabus includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear overview pages for each key stage • Recommended religions with flexibility for schools to adjust • Core units proposed for all schools in Berkshire • Guidance for Early Years through Key Stage 5 • Suggested unit plans, especially helpful for primary educators • Guidance on non-examined RE for Key Stages 4 and 5 <p>5. Time Allocation Guidance</p> <p>Time allocation is provided as guidance to support discussions between teachers and school leadership. It offers a foundation for negotiating appropriate RE time within the curriculum.</p> <p>6. Feedback from ASC Conference</p> <p>The syllabus was well received at the ASC conference. Teachers appreciated the clarity and structure, especially the suggested unit plans. There was discussion about the inclusion of Judaism in upper Key Stage 2, and the flexibility for schools to include additional religions. Concerns were raised about teaching multiple Abrahamic faiths simultaneously, highlighting the need for sensitivity to differing theological perspectives.</p> <p>7. Syllabus Structure and Accessibility</p> <p>Fiona Middlehurst explained that all syllabuses follow a consistent layout, beginning with a chair's note. The structure includes legal requirements, purpose, usage guidance, time allocation, and both statutory and non-statutory content.</p>	
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	<p>The syllabus is designed to be user-friendly, with bolded keywords, inquiry questions, and core unit plans to support especially primary teachers.</p> <p>8. Legal and Educational Context Fiona Middlehurst emphasized the legal requirement for RE throughout state-maintained education up to sixth form, which is often overlooked. She noted the inclusion of the term worldview aligns with current government direction and Ofsted interest in standardizing RE nationally.</p> <p>9. Core Units and Flexibility Fiona Middlehurst highlighted the introduction of core units for each key stage, which help ensure consistency, especially for secondary schools with multiple feeder primaries. Schools are encouraged to adapt the syllabus to local needs and combine or revisit questions flexibly.</p> <p>10. Religious Representation and Pedagogical Balance Rabbi Zvi Solomons raised concerns about the placement of Judaism in upper Key Stage 2 and the complexity of teaching Abrahamic faiths together due to differing theological perspectives. He also emphasized that religious practitioners often have both lived and academic insights.</p> <p>Fiona Middlehurst responded by affirming the syllabus's effort to distinguish between academic views and lived experiences, referencing SACRE's Real People, Real Faith series and Crossing the Bridges recordings.</p> <p>11. Assessment and Teacher Support Fiona Middlehurst noted that primary teachers often struggle with assessing RE. The syllabus addresses this by providing inquiry questions and structured lesson outlines.</p> <p>Each key stage includes at least one fully planned unit to support teachers who may lack subject expertise.</p> <p>12. SACRE Conference Feedback Fiona Middlehurst and Elizabeth Munro reported that the SACRE pre-launch event was exceptionally well attended, with strong engagement from RE specialists across all educational levels.</p> <p>Elizabeth praised the CPD quality, resource signposting, and networking opportunities. She noted that the event effectively promoted SACRE membership and collaboration.</p> <p>Fiona Middlehurst added that the event was so popular that attendees had to park off-site, and despite minor catering issues, the atmosphere was enthusiastic and productive.</p> <p>13. Outreach and Impact Councillor Meri O'Connell asked what contributed to the high turnout. It was agreed that effective messaging and the relevance of the new syllabus played a key role.</p>	
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6	<p>Membership of SACRE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do we recruit suitable members in Groups A,B,C? - What more can we do 	All
	<p><u>Fiona Middlehurst</u> Noted the challenge of inconsistent attendance and reliance on personal networks for recruitment. Suggested reaching out to university Religious Studies departments to engage students considering teaching. Highlighted the decline in RE training courses, even at institutions like Oxford. Proposed sending a mailshot to local faith communities with a flyer explaining SACRE and inviting participation. Acknowledged the difficulty of getting teachers involved due to workload and systemic changes (e.g., academisation). Supported reviving interfaith school conferences and using "Crossing the Bridges" documents to build connections.</p> <p><u>Mark Laynesmith</u> Recommended checking in with previously active members who have dropped off (e.g., a Catholic member recovering from surgery, and Amir from the Shia tradition). Emphasised the importance of a personal touch in re-engaging members.</p> <p><u>Elizabeth Munro</u> Shared that she promotes SACRE to trainees, but many are based in Hampshire, not Reading.</p> <p>Noted the loss of PGCE provision in Reading, which used to be a natural feeder for SACRE.</p> <p>Encouraged openness to self-nominating groups like the Pagan community. Highlighted the shift in teacher training to broader humanities courses, reducing the number of RE specialists.</p> <p>Rabbi Zvi Solomons Explained that Jewish reps are appointed via the Board of Deputies and asked how other faiths appoint members.</p> <p>Suggested reaching out to central bodies (e.g., dioceses, Hindu, or Buddhist organizations) for nominations.</p> <p>Emphasised the importance of professional and accredited appointments over informal ones.</p> <p>Noted that COVID and remote meetings have made engagement harder and reduced the personal connection.</p> <p><u>Vikas Srivastava</u> Recalled that SACRE previously had interfaith school conferences that brought diverse groups together. Suggested reviving these events and ensuring they are part of the annual calendar.</p>	

	<p>Supported reaching out to the local Buddhist centre for potential representation.</p> <p>Action: Clerk to assist with creating a recruitment flyer and compiling a contact list of UK faith communities.</p>	
7.	Diversity and Equality	
	<p><u>Rabbi Zvi Solomons</u> Informed the group that the Board of Deputies has developed resources on understanding antisemitism.</p> <p>Offered to forward these materials to Clerk so they can be shared with SACRE members.</p> <p><u>Fiona Middlehurst</u> Thanked Rabbi Zvi and asked if anyone else was aware of new or useful resources.</p> <p>Highlighted that the Hindu Education Trust has a wealth of Hinduism resources available online.</p> <p>Praised a Newbury presentation that showcased the extensive support available for Hinduism in the local area.</p> <p><u>Vikas Srivastava</u> Confirmed his involvement in developing the Hinduism materials. Offered to visit schools and engage in discussions if they reach out via SACRE, showing willingness to support RE teaching directly.</p> <p><u>Fiona Middlehurst</u> Noted that the first two weeks of October are not ideal for meetings due to Yom Kippur and Sukkot, acknowledging the importance of scheduling around religious observances.</p>	
8.	Next meeting dates	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wednesday 1 October 2025 – to be rearranged - Wednesday 25 February 2026 <p>Action: Clerk to rearrange October meeting, to ensure that it is face to face at Civic Offices agreeing a suitable date to ensure that the meeting is quorate.</p> <p><u>Rabbi Zvi Solomons</u> Confirmed 15 October was possibly a good date for the meeting, as it falls just after Simhat Torah.</p>	

	<p><u>Fiona Middlehurst</u></p> <p>Emphasised the importance of holding the October meeting in person to properly conduct the syllabus conference. Each group (A, B, C, D) needed to meet separately and vote independently before feeding back.</p> <p>In-person format allows for breakout discussions, better communication, and a more human connection. Suggested booking a venue like the Civic Centre for accessibility and parking. Stressed the need to move forward with decisions, as delays were holding up progress.</p> <p>Flagged the 25 February as another key date that needs to be added to calendars early, especially for councillors.</p> <p>She mentioned that Wednesdays were generally good for teachers, as schools rarely schedule meetings midweek.</p> <p>Proposed setting dates beyond February during the October meeting, since school calendars are more predictable only up to that point.</p> <p>Noted that the new syllabus is set to activate in September 2026, and teachers will need to start succession planning.</p> <p>She planned to begin preparing Year 7 students in advance, and expected primary schools will have many questions as they begin implementation.</p>	
9	AOB – none recorded.	
	Meeting closed at 7.35pm	

Approved by: 

(Chair of Reading SACRE)

Date: 22 October 2025.