



## **Religious Studies Task Group: Final Report (Amended Version)**

**Children & Young People's Services  
Overview/Scrutiny Committee**

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## Downloadable version

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[http://www.devon.gov.uk/index/democracymunities/decision\\_making/cma/index\\_scs.htm](http://www.devon.gov.uk/index/democracymunities/decision_making/cma/index_scs.htm)

# Preface

By Councillor Trevor Pennington



## **Chair, Religious Studies Task Group, Children & Young People's Services Overview/Scrutiny Committee**

I am very pleased to be able to present this Scrutiny review on Religious Studies. It has been a great privilege to chair this Task Group.

I would personally like to thank all those schools that contributed to this review and granted us the opportunity of visiting them and meeting with their staff.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Trevor Pennington".

Councillor Trevor Pennington

# Religious Studies Task Group: Final Report

## 1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Task Group — Councillors Trevor Pennington (Chair), Christine Channon, Vanessa Newcombe, Saxon Spence and Mrs Patricia Martin (Diocesan Religious Education Adviser) — would like to place on record its gratitude to the schools which contributed to the review by providing information and/or being interviewed. In submitting its recommendations, the Group has sought to ensure that its findings are supported with clear evidence and information to substantiate its proposals.

1.2 The Task Group's terms of reference were:

- to assess the number of schools in Devon where no pupils are taking GCSE Religious Studies;
- to examine the reasons as to why there are some schools in Devon where there are few or no pupils taking GCSE Religious Studies; and
- to make detailed recommendations to the Overview/Scrutiny Committee on the findings of the Task Group.

## 2.0 Context

2.1 Religious Education is a statutory subject for all school pupils including post-16 level for schools with sixth forms. Unlike the National Curriculum, RE is locally agreed and taught in accordance with the local Agreed Syllabus. RE benefits from the support of SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education), a statutory body which advises the local authority on RE, Collective Worship and other related areas e.g. spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development. SACREs have four main groups (Faith Communities, Church of England, Teacher Associations and Elected members).

2.2 In Devon the current Agreed Syllabus *Every Child Matters in RE* was published in 2007 and places considerable emphasis on the following issues:

- the contribution of RE to the five learning outcomes of *Every Child Matters* (Being Healthy, Staying Safe, Enjoyment and Achievement, Making a Positive Contribution and Economic Well-being);
- the central role of RE in pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. developing key skills including reflection, enquiry, empathy, communication, interpretation, reasoning analysis and evaluation;
- developing the important attitudes of self-esteem, respect, sensitivity, open-mindedness and appreciation;
- the pivotal role of RE in developing effective community cohesion. the setting of challenging expectations and learning experiences in RE (the syllabus is based on the QCA non-statutory national framework for RE (2004), written by the Devon RE Adviser in his former role as RE Adviser at QCA); and
- developing pupil-friendly versions of both the P-scales and eight level scale of achievement in RE.

2.3 The Agreed Syllabus was developed in full partnership with the Diocese of Exeter and the Plymouth and Torbay local authorities. It is used extensively in voluntary aided (VA) schools. Since publication, Devon SACRE has also produced — again in partnership with neighbouring authorities and the Diocese — comprehensive handbooks for primary, secondary and special schools.

2.4 Regarding RE provision at Key Stage 4, the Agreed Syllabus states that:

*“14–19 is the awarding key stage in that the central means of assessing students’ learning in RE will be through accredited courses (mainly GCSEs and AS/A level). It is both a legal requirement and entitlement that all students (other than those withdrawn by parental request) study RE at Key Stage 4. RE is also statutory post-16 for students in school sixth forms. It is expected that all students who are capable of achieving an approved qualification in RE are given the opportunity to do so. At KS4 students are encouraged to take accredited courses which link with the designated programmes of study and give particular emphasis to the study of complex philosophical and ethical issues and the ability of students to develop thoughtful, well substantiated conclusions to their learning in RE.”*

(page 47, *Every Child Matters in RE*)

2.5 While few secondary schools are fully compliant with RE legal requirements at post-16 GCSE, Full and Short courses in RE have become very popular. Most GCSE RS specifications focus on the study of questions of meaning, philosophical issues and/or complex ethical issues.

### 3.0 Recommendations

3.1 The Group’s recommendations have been drawn up using the evidence obtained from contributors, site visits and background material.

**Recommendation 1** That the Local Authority provide continued financial and professional support to all Devon schools in developing high quality RE, especially those that are having difficulty in meeting the requirements of the Devon Agreed Syllabus for RE.

*Rationale:*

National Strategy funding to support schools in the foundation subjects (including RE) stopped in 2008. Additional funding is now needed for the Religious Advisor to work with schools that need guidance and support in terms of their statutory provision of RE.

**Recommendation 2** That Devon schools be urged to enter all students capable of achieving an approved qualification in RE in either the full course or the short course GCSE Religious Studies.

*Rationale:*

In terms of the value of qualifications it is preferable that students take the GCSE full course in RS. The Task Group carefully considered alternative accreditation at Key Stage 4 to the GCSE Religious Studies short course. Members expressed concern that the alternative accreditation such as the Integrated Humanities GCSE and the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (COPE) lacked the sufficient depth, breadth, rigour and challenge of the GCSE RS/RE full course/short course qualification, especially in the contribution of the subject to community cohesion.

**Recommendation 3** That RE’s contribution to community cohesion is affirmed and developed by the LA and SACRE.

*Rationale:*

RE has a central role in promoting understanding of people’s faiths and beliefs, developing respect and combating prejudice and discrimination.

- Recommendation 4** That schools are encouraged to support non-specialist teachers in RE, through training courses provided by the LA.
- Rationale:*
- Schools need to provide continued professional development for their staff, and it is of particular importance that easily accessible training is provided in RE for non-specialist teachers, given the demand and complexities of the subject.
- Recommendation 5** That the Local Authority improve its links and liaison with Further Education colleges in the County, particularly in regard to RE provision and performance, in view of the evidence in FE Colleges relating to students dropping out of RE courses and accepting the validity of short course RE as a formal qualification.
- Rationale:*
- Evidence indicates that the Local Authority does not at present have a clear picture of RE provision and attainment in the FE sector in spite of considerable efforts to improve links.
- Recommendation 6** That the valuable work of SACRE is recognised, especially its contribution to the Every Child Matters Agenda and Community Cohesion and that SACRE is fully enabled by the Local Authority in continuing its vital role in monitoring standards in RE in Devon and providing advice/support for improving pupil performance and that SACRE be requested to investigate RE provision in Primary schools for report to this Overview/Scrutiny Committee.
- Rationale:*
- Devon SACRE, through its costed development plan, has a number of strategies to enhance the quality of RE in all Devon schools. It is essential that sufficient time, budget and professional support is available for SACRE to carry out these essential tasks.

## 4.0 Summary

3.2 The Task Group identified three main characteristics of high quality provision of RE in schools:

- strong support for RE from the senior management team;
- specialist teachers who are well qualified and effective practitioners; and
- RE is given sufficient time and resourcing to meet the demands and time allocations of the accredited courses.

The Task Group recognises that, above all, the support of the headteacher and leadership team is crucial to the level of RE provision in a school. Without this support it is very difficult for an RE department to obtain the resources it needs to ensure that the subject can flourish. If senior school staff value RE both in terms of students academic and personal development then this tends to ensure that the subject is well promoted and resourced.

3.3 Members recognised that as vitally important that RE never sought to persuade or cajole pupils towards a particular religion or set of beliefs. RE is an important subject in developing pupils' thinking skills, enabling them to produce thoughtful responses to their learning

## 5.0 Findings

### 5.1 Introduction

Entry levels in full and/or short course RS range from 0–100%. The data provided (at Appendices 1 and 2) highlight the range of entry levels in RE.

It is very encouraging that 77% of Devon secondary schools achieve entry levels of over 80% of students taking RE as an accredited course. While not within the specific remit of the group, members were also encouraged by student performance in RS/RE. In both full and short courses Devon students achieve above the national average for grades A\*–C in RS/RE and several schools produce outstanding results. As part of its monitoring role, Devon SACRE carefully analyses GCSE results in RE and as a result sends letters of congratulation/commendation to individual Devon secondary schools. These commendatory letters are provided for:-

- significant improvement in results in RE from previous years;
- significant progress in improving RE results over time;
- standards and achievement which show considerable value-added improvement from prior learning; and
- standards and attainment significantly above national/Devon averages.

### 5.2 Value of RE

The Task Group felt it essential that the academic value of RE was recognised alongside other core subjects in the curriculum. In a few schools, leadership teams appeared not to be recognising sufficiently RE's value both from an academic perspective and its contribution to pupils' spiritual, moral and cultural development. Without this support from the school's hierarchy it was extremely difficult for RE to flourish and to be valued by pupils.

The Task Group found that the issue with GCSE entry levels was not whether children wanted to do RS or not, but rather the approach the school took to the subject's provision. Where RE departments were well resourced and supported by the school's leadership team, RS appeared to be a subject popular with the student body. Results benefited from the students not only being engaged in the subject from an academic and intellectual perspective, but also because they enjoyed the role RS played in their personal development. Evidence from teaching staff indicates that parents seem to recognise this as well and the subject is not only just respected in the school but also within the wider community.

### 5.3 Community cohesion

The agreed syllabus *Every Child Matters in RE* asserts RE's role in promoting community cohesion:

*"RE has a central role in promoting respect and understanding toward people's faith and beliefs. At the heart of Every Child Matters in RE is a commitment to helping all Devon, Plymouth and Torbay pupils recognize that they live in a society with different faiths and cultures present. A vital part of RE is studying the damaging effects on human beings of racial stereotyping, xenophobia and the belittling of people's beliefs and values. This syllabus specifically studies conflict and collaboration in religion and beliefs and the promotion of respect, understanding and co-operation through dialogue between people of different faiths and beliefs."*

(page 7, *Every Child Matters in RE*)

Evidence indicates that a minority of senior managers perceives that the rural nature of Devon and its low ethnic minority population means that young people in the region do not need to be adequately prepared for life in a society with different faiths and cultures.

One school flagged up, as something of a rationale for a lack of RE time on the school's curriculum that it was because there was a lack of both ethnicity and diversity in the area and little parental interest. Developing respect and sensitivity to the beliefs of others is a pivotal part of the RE syllabus, and is key in helping to equip Devon pupils for life in a society with different faiths and cultures.

With the rural nature of the County and its lack of ethnic diversity, it is a challenge for schools right across Devon to experience different cultures. It is however very important to give children in rural areas the opportunity to consider religion in a wider sense. Many schools in Devon do provide an array of opportunities for RE students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development from visiting Ground Zero in New York to spending a day in an inner city school in Birmingham, visiting various places of worship in Devon and using ICT effectively to build pupils' understanding.

#### 5.4 *GCSE Religious Studies Full Course*

The GCSE RS full course equates to 140 hours of lessons over two years. The Religious Advisor reported that he had initially been concerned when the GCSE RS short course was brought in that it could lead to decline in numbers of those on the full course, but this had not been the case. For the last seven years RE both at GCSE and 'A' level had been one of the fastest growing subjects in terms of numbers taking the subject.

#### 5.5 *GCSE Religious Studies Short Course*

The GCSE Religious Studies short course is by far the most popular course with over 250,000 pupils taking the subject, while the next most popular subject (Spanish) is taken by 16,000. The short course amounts to 70 hours of class time.

The priority with both the short and full courses is to make RE as engaging and relevant as possible, rather than be just about how the pupils can pass the exam although that is also important in giving pupils a further qualification. A number of Devon secondaries expressed concern to the group about the status of the short course qualification in RE and its value in counting towards future courses .e.g. 'A' level RS.

Some schools reported difficulties in teaching mixed ability short-course classes, with some pupils in the class not being entered for the exam. It was problematic catering for the two sets of needs, and they did ideally need to have these pupils in separate classes.

#### 5.6 *Alternative Religious Studies accreditation at Key Stage 4*

Two schools in the County enter students at Key Stage 4 for an Integrated Humanities GCSE. The Task Group received some evidence to indicate that the Integrated Humanities course did have a substantial RE component and aspects of the course allowed pupils to go into greater depth than the GCSE RE short course.

Evidence also indicated that a tiny number of schools in the County used the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (COPE), which provided an accredited qualification with a Religious Studies element. Members raised concerns however about whether the Integrated Humanities GCSE and the COPE courses offered sufficient challenge to pupils and were a worthwhile and robust substitute for the GCSE Religious Studies short course. Both the full and short course in GCSE RS demanded considerable knowledge and understanding of the religions being studied and how central beliefs and teachings related to complex questions of philosophy and ethics.

#### 5.7 *Further education*

There may be issues in some FE colleges with post-16 RE teaching, with some evidence of students dropping out of courses. It is however difficult for the Local Authority and SACRE to establish what is the precise RE provision in FE. The Advisor for RE reported that he had approached all FE colleges in the County but had not received any responses as yet. The only information that he had on FE provision was from schools with sixth forms.



5.8 *Key Stage 3*

It is vital that schools develop effective RE provision at KS3 to help promote student engagement in the subject as pupils reach KS4.

5.9 *Teacher Training*

The Local Authority provides considerable in-service training in RE, which is well supported by Devon secondary schools. Three or four events were held each year with nationally known speakers and every school had been represented at one or more of these.

5.10 *Withdrawals*

Parents could withdraw their children from RE lessons but students themselves had no right to opt out of the subject. Fewer than 1% of pupils were currently withdrawn but the figure was increasing nationally, including some evidence from conversations between the County RE Adviser and Devon parents, with evidence that the rights of withdrawal were being misused for racist reasons.

5.11 *Heads of RE Meeting*

The County's Religious Advisor reported that every term he convened a meeting of the Heads of RE across Devon and normally 25–30 teachers attended. It is vital that all schools are encouraged to send representation to the Heads of RE meeting. A smaller RE support group (around 6–8 secondary RE subject leaders) also helps develop RE in Devon through planning inset courses and reviewing new resources.

5.12 *Primary Schools*

Evidence indicates that there is a mixed provision of RE in the primary phase. It appears that there may in large part due to teacher training problems. However a number of representations were made to the Task Group from the secondary sector indicating that some RE departments were beginning to look at working with feeder primary schools and how gaps in RE provision at KS1 and 2 could begin to be addressed with stronger links between schools in RE. Training on implementing the Agreed Syllabus was provided through learning communities which lead to stronger liaison taking place.

5.13 *Adviser for Religious Education*

A number of representations were made by schools highlighting the importance of the County's Religious Adviser and the key role Graham Langtree played in promoting RE both within Devon and nationally. The Task Group recognised that the Local Authority was fortunate to have an officer of Mr Langtree's calibre leading on RE, which benefited schools, the overall provision of RE in the County and above all the central contribution of RE to the spiritual, moral and social development of young people across Devon and the vital role of Devon SACRE in enhancing provision for community cohesion.

Trevor Pennington  
Christine Channon  
Patricia Martin  
Vanessa Newcombe  
Saxon Spence

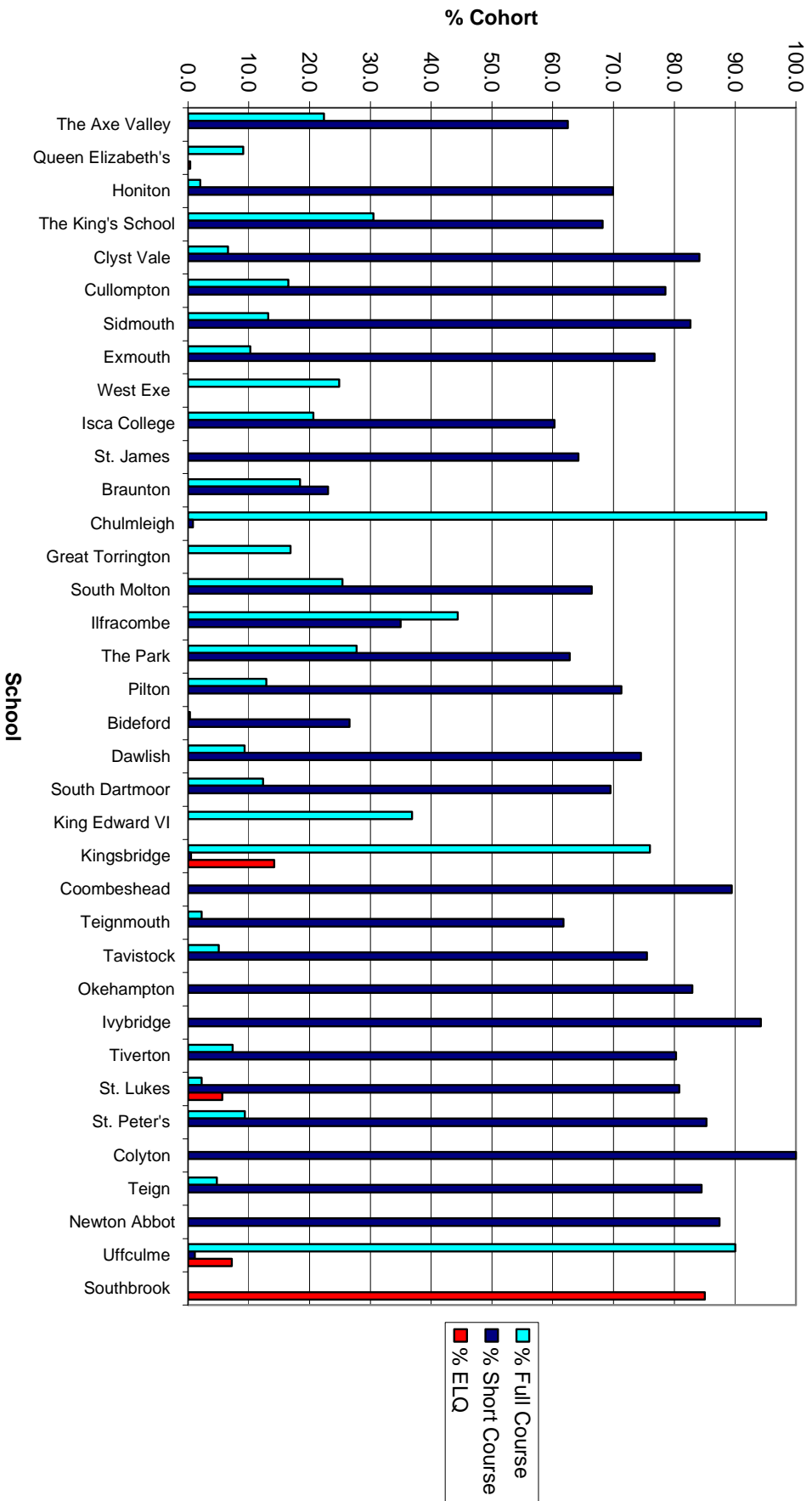
Electoral Divisions: **All**

Executive Member: **Councillor Smith (Children & Young People's Services)**

<b>Local Government Act 1972 List of Background Papers</b>		
Report originated by:	Dan Looker	
Room:	G.36	
Tel No:	01392 382722	
Background Paper	Date	File Reference
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Appendix 1: Entry levels for GCSE RE/RS 2008

2008 RE Entry as Percentage of Cohort - Year 11



## Appendix 2: Entry levels for GCSE RE/RS in full/short course

Of the 37 secondary Devon schools:

90% +	(13 schools = 35%)	Clyst Vale, Ivybridge, St Luke's. Chulmleigh, Colyton (100%), Sidmouth, St Peter's; Kings (100%), Cullompton (96%), South Molton, Teign; The Park School, Uffculme
80% +	(12 schools = 32%)	Coombeshead, Exmouth, Isca, Newton Abbot, Tiverton, Dawlish, Ilfracombe, Okehampton, Pilton, South Dartmoor, Tavistock, Axe Valley
70% +	(2 schools = 5%)	Honiton, Kingsbridge
60% +	(2 schools = 5 %)	St James, Teignmouth
50% +		
40% +	(1 school = 2%)	Braunton
30% +	(1 school = 2%)	KEVICC
20% +	(2 schools = 5%)	Bideford, West Exe
10% +	(1 school = 2%)	Great Torrington

2 schools (5%) (QE Crediton and Holsworthy) do Integrated Humanities, of which RE is a component

1 school (2%) (Dartmouth) is using the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (COPE) at KS4, of which RE is a component

## Appendix 3: Task Group activities

A3.1 The first meeting of the Task Group took place on **6 November 2007**. The aim of this initial scoping meeting was to determine the focus for the investigation, gauge Members' viewpoints and plan the next steps for the review.

It was agreed in view of both Members and Officers' commitments to other work that after this initial meeting the review would be held in abeyance until the following year.

A3.2 On **4 November 2008** the Task Group received an update from Councillor Christine Channon on her meeting that morning with the Head of West Exe Technology College. The Local Authority's Advisor for Religious Education provided Members with further background information, and the Task Group further considered the scope of the review.

A3.3 On **18 November 2008** the Task Group visited Dartmouth Community College and King Edward VI Community College, Totnes.

A3.4 On the **24 November 2008** the Task Group undertook visits to Holsworthy Community College, Braunton School and Community College and Bideford College.

A3.5 On **27 November 2008** the Task Group visited The King's School, Ottery St Mary and Uffculme School.

A3.6 On **8 December 2008** the Task Group met to consider its findings and recommendations.

## Appendix 4: Contributors/representations to the review

A4.1 Witnesses to the review (in the order that they appeared before the Task Group)

<b>Witness</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Graham Langtree	Advisor for RE	Devon County Council
Steve Maddern	Headteacher	West Exe Technology College
Joanne Evans	Head of RE/Assistant Headteacher.	Dartmouth Community College
Gail Snodin	Head of RE	King Edward VI Community College, Totnes
Keith Stevens	Head of Humanities	Holsworthy Community College
Geoff Page	Subject Leader Humanities.	Holsworthy Community College
Andy Pearce	Deputy Head	Braunton School and Community College
David Butt	Head of Humanities	Braunton School and Community College
Christine Boulton	Head of RE	Braunton School and Community College
Gill Ruffle	RE Teacher	Braunton School and Community College
Veronica Matthews	Principal	Bideford College
Kevin Baker-O'Haire	Assistant Principal	Bideford College
Mark Bithell	Vice Principal	Bideford College
Rachel Vowles	Head of RE	Bideford College
Ed Pawson	Head of Religion, Philosophy & Ethics	The King's School, Ottery St Mary
John Goody	Head of RE	Uffculme School

A4.2 Written Representations (in the order that they were received)

<b>Witness</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Organisation/District</b>
Young People's Scrutiny Forum		Devon County Council
Moira Marder	Deputy Headteacher	St James Community Secondary School, Exeter
Chris Jordan	Director of Learning	Queen Elizabeth's Community College, Crediton
Andrew Strachan	Spiritual and Moral Studies Curriculum Leader/Acting Director of Sixth Form	Teignmouth Community College
Dianne Nicholson	Headteacher	Great Torrington Community School
Rosemary Sampson	Education Advisory Service	Shropshire County Council
Colin Eves	Principal	Tavistock College
Ed Marston	Team Leader for Humanities	Great Torrington Community School

## Appendix 5: Bibliography

*Every Child Matters in Religious Education: The Devon, Plymouth and Torbay Agreed Syllabus 2007* (Devon Education Services)