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Brief history of RE and duties of the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE).

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Religious Education (RE) has played a part in education in England ever since the earliest attempts, in the nineteenth century, to establish a national school system. The first schools had mainly a charitable or religious foundation. At the time the UK government was considering introducing compulsory elementary education for all children, there were existing providers in the shape of the churches. The government did not have the capacity to begin building a wholly separate secular education system (as happened in France) so the existing Church providers – Anglican, Methodist and Catholic being the largest - each came to a different settlement with the government of the day. From looking back at the beginning we can understand how there are a different relationships between the state and for example the Roman Catholic schools and the two kinds of Anglican schools. At that time the Catholic schools chose to opt out of the state religious education – but the agreement with the Anglican and Methodists was that there should be religious education for all – that is should be broadly Christian in nature but not distinctive of any particular denomination. Also under the 1870 Education Act other new schools were established, run by local authorities with their curriculum which was to include Religious Education but of a non-denominational character.

The Education Act of 1944 similarly required that all schools (other than independent schools) should provide 'religious instruction', while allowing both teachers and parents (on behalf of their children) the right to withdraw. Local authorities had the option to set up a SACRE.

This arrangement survived largely unchanged until the 1988 Education Reform Act which established a mandatory National Curriculum of ten subjects and made the establishment of a SACRE mandatory. The unique status of RE was therefore preserved or possibly strengthened by this legislation. The curriculum for RE is determined NOT by the national curriculum but by a locally agreed syllabus.

Currently, every Local Authority (LA) is required, by law, to have a Standing Advisory Council for RE (SACRE). The origins of SACREs go back to the Education Act of 1944, but the Education Reform Act 1988 and the Education Act 1996 strengthened their place in local authorities.

The responsibilities of the SACRE are:

- to provide advice to the LA on all aspects of its provision for RE in its schools (this does not include Voluntary Aided Schools)
- to decide when the LA's Agreed Syllabus for RE needs reviewing, to require the LA does so every 5 years by convening an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) , and require the use of the agreed syllabus in its schools.
- to provide advice to the LA on Collective Worship in its schools (this does not include Voluntary Aided or Voluntary Controlled Schools).
- to consider any requests from Head Teachers to hold Collective Worship that is not of a broadly Christian character (determination).
- to advise on matters relating to training for teachers in RE and Collective Worship.

The councils are made up of four committees each representing a group with a particular interest in the subject. The committees represent the Local Authority, the teachers, the Church of England and the other faiths and Christian denominations.

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When formal decisions have to be made each of these committees has a single vote, which the members decide how to use. These votes must all be used in the same direction if the council is to agree a formal decision on policy. Thus each committee has a vote, but individual members do not.

Guidance

Many SACREs offer guidance on various issues related to RE, including levels of attainment, programmes of study and resources. Guidance on the responsibility of the governing body to secure religious education in any school can be found in the DfE Circular 1/94, in particular: paragraphs 17-23. This guidance was updated in 2010, but has no statutory authority. Guidance regarding the right of parents to withdraw their child from religious education can be found in DfE Circular 1/94 and the 2010 publication.

Challenging areas

From time to time the problem of jurisdiction arises. The work of the SACRE is confined to the support of religious education and worship when this is not conducted in accordance with the religious character of the school. The Anglican representatives may be alert to any attempt by individual members of the SACRE to lead it into making decisions about matters which are outside its jurisdiction. For example some voluntary controlled schools have mistakenly applied for a determination on their school worship. If the SACRE is not well advised it may assume that it is able to do this. Where the voluntary controlled school has a religious character, the SACRE has no jurisdiction as the worship in the school must reflect its religious character.

The law

The law regarding the responsibility of the governing body to secure religious education in any school is contained in the Education Act 1996, Part 5, Chapter III, sections 376-384. It is also found in the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998, Part II, Chapter 6, section 69 and Schedule 19 of the same Act. The law regarding the right of the parent to withdraw their child from religious education can be found in the Education Act 1996, Part V, Chapter 3, section 389. The right of withdrawal is also found in the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 Part II, Chapter 6, section 71. The law on Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education can be found in the Education Act 1996, Part V Chapter 3, sections 390-396 and in schedule 31 of the same Act.

The law requires every LA to have a SACRE and its faith committee should be representative of the religious communities in its area. See Education Act 1996 Chapter III and DFE Guidance 'Religious Education in English Schools: Non-statutory guidance' (2010) pp 19-25.

Academies do not have to follow the locally agreed syllabus; however they have to teach RE in accordance with the law. In Hampshire most academies continue to use the Hampshire agreed syllabus.

Who sets up the SACRE?

SACRE is a statutory responsibility of the Local Authority and is set up by the LA. The LA will seek nominations for the religious committees from the local church and faith groups, set up elections for the teacher representatives and nominate councillors and officers to represent it on the committee. The Diocesan Board of Education normally nominates representatives of the Anglican Church. Between them the Anglican representatives need to have good contacts with the local churches, links with dioceses and knowledge of RE and worship in Anglican schools and in schools with no religious character.

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Can the SACRE influence RE teaching in Church Schools?

Yes, it can in voluntary controlled and foundation schools because they will, follow the agreed syllabus. It may indirectly affect RE teaching in voluntary aided schools through the quality of its support and its general indirect influence on all schools in the LA.

Who sits on the SACRE?

This is defined in law. SACRE is made up of four committees

- **COMMITTEE A**
This contains representatives of Christian denominations, e.g. the Roman Catholic Church, Free Churches, Baptist, Methodist, United Reformed Church, Salvation Army, Society of Friends (for Church of England see Committee B). It also contains representatives from other faiths, e.g. Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Bahais, Parsees, Jains. The composition of Committee A will vary from SACRE to SACRE as it reflects the variety and numerical representation of the different communities in the locality. In Hampshire a decision was made for Humanist representatives not to be members of Committee A but co-opted to the SACRE as additional members or, it would also to be members of Committees C and D.
- **COMMITTEE B**
This is made up of representatives nominated by the local Church of England dioceses.
- **COMMITTEE C**
The teacher members of the committee are representatives of teacher associations. It is the Local Authority that decides which teacher associations will be represented. They may approach the teacher unions, but it is possible that associations of RE teachers in the local area will be asked to provide a representative.
- **COMMITTEE D**
It is the Local Authority's responsibility to provide their own representatives for this committee. The LA may wish to have all parties and viewpoints from across the political spectrum represented on the SACRE.

What can a SACRE do?

A SACRE's broad role is to support effective provision of RE and collective worship within its remit. It will usually involve the following:

- give advice on methods of teaching agreed syllabus RE including the choice of teaching materials;
- advise the LA on the provision of training for teachers;
- monitor inspection reports in relation to RE, collective worship and the promotion of children and young people's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC);
- consider complaints about the provision and delivery of religious education and collective worship referred to it by the LA.

Members of the local SACRE will be involved in the formal processes of establishing and monitoring the provision for RE in the Local Authority as required by the law. It is, however, an opportunity to work with others to look creatively and imaginatively at the religious education of young people in the local community.

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SACREs should provide advice on:

Methods of teaching RE

For example it should consider how the agreed syllabus is best offered to each age group and offer appropriate advice and guidance to schools. What mixture should there be of formal content, thematic work, group work, personal discovery, visits to specified buildings or events, and visitors with an educational remit? What is the relationship to cross-curricular studies, to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, to citizenship and to the personal, health, social and education (PSHE)? Is the distinctiveness of RE being maintained in such relationships?

Choices of resources for RE

National publications review all new RE materials and resource centres can be visited by teachers. The SACRE should consider cost factors and offer, with an RE adviser's help, advice on the most appropriate materials to deliver the aims, objectives and content of the agreed syllabus. It is, however, up to each school which resources they eventually select.

Training of teachers

National surveys show that the effective introduction of a new agreed syllabus requires a considerable investment in resources and in the training of all primary teachers and are those teaching RE in secondary schools. If the syllabus is to be properly implemented SACREs should ensure that the LA is aware of the need for teachers to be trained to deliver effectively the local agreed syllabus for RE. SACREs may:

- receive inspection reports;
- monitor good practice in the delivery of the agreed syllabus and take note of any difficulties;
- disseminate good practice on the teaching of RE.

Other interests could also include:

Assessment and testing

SACREs should monitor school approaches to assessing pupils' progress in RE. They should also be aware of the uptake of external examinations in RE and religious studies.

RE and SMSC

SACREs should be aware of the links between pupils' RE and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Committees A and B have the opportunity to indicate areas of knowledge that pupils should have about religious beliefs and the influence these have on the formation of attitudes and values.

SMSC has a higher profile in the Ofsted Inspections, and the key elements of religion, faith and belief mentioned much more explicitly. However it is important for SACRE to be aware that SMSC is an aspect of the ethos of the whole school, and not only the responsibility of those leading RE.

What is a 'determination'?

Determinations are 'exceptions from broadly Christian Collective Worship'. The determination procedure allows for the requirement that collective worship should be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character' to be lifted in respect of some or all of the pupils in school for whom this is deemed inappropriate.

Applications for determinations are made to the SACRE by the Head teacher of any community school after consultation with the school's governing body. Determinations are only possible for schools that have no religious character. The SACRE should review each determination every five years.