

5. What Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education and local authorities need to know

5.1 Local authorities, Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education and Agreed Syllabus Conferences working in partnership

The partnership between local authorities (LAs) and their Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) and Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs) is a key factor in the provision of successful religious education (RE) for all pupils. A positive joint approach allows a LA to draw on the strengths of local religious and belief groups and teachers as well as elected members. In many cases the partnership goes further than matters of the agreed syllabus, and makes an important contribution to the promotion of community cohesion (see 3.4 above). Ofsted report that "The most effective SACREs are those that have a strong and productive relationship with the LA, centred on a shared determination to support RE and collective worship and that schools should perform well in the only curriculum area entirely under local control".²²

However, there is significant variability in the quality of this partnership. While there is much good practice, in too many cases the partnership is not working effectively. The SACRE Self Evaluation Tool, produced in 2005, included a useful description of an effective partnership.

In a highly effective SACRE, "members will have a shared vision and understanding of their aims and purpose, and will seek to sustain their positive work in the light of changing needs and priorities. Meetings will be very purposeful and focused on the major priorities for improvement in schools. There will be a very effective partnership with the LA, and SACREs will be well supported by subject specialist advice, training and funding. They will be very well informed about the quality and provision for RE ... in schools, and about wider LA and national priorities and developments. The process of reviewing, revising, implementing and evaluating the locally agreed syllabus will be very robust, ensuring that schools are well supported in their work."

(SACREs and Self-evaluation – a guide, Ofsted, May 2005, HMI 2467)

²² Ofsted: *An evaluation of the work of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education*, November 2004, HMI 2269 paragraph 9. See also Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's analyses of SACREs' annual reports www.qca.org.uk/qca_7882.aspx

What makes for an effective partnership between an LA and its SACRE/ASC?

In evaluating the effectiveness of their partnership, LAs and their SACREs/ASCs should consider:

- Do the LA and its SACRE/ASC carry out their statutory duties?
- Is SACRE/ASC properly resourced and well supported by subject specialist advice and training?
- Do members of a SACRE/ASC have a shared vision and understanding of their aims and purpose, seeking to sustain their positive work in the light of changing needs and priorities?
- Are SACRE/ASC meetings purposeful and focused on the major priorities of improving the quality of RE in schools?
- Is SACRE/ASC well informed about the quality of RE in schools and about wider LA and national priorities and developments affecting the subject?
- Has the LA adopted a high quality agreed syllabus: one that provides a good grounding for planning, teaching and learning in RE?
- Is there an effective process of reviewing, revising, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the locally agreed syllabus?
- How far does the SACRE's partnership with the LA enable it to help teachers and schools raise standards in RE and the quality of RE teaching?
- How far does the SACRE contribute effectively to the community cohesion agenda by supporting inclusion in schools and improving social harmony in the community?

Case study

One SACRE has supported teaching and learning in RE through a project involving a course for primary, secondary and special schools, which enables schools to provide a certificate of achievement for children and young people, matching the colours of the rainbow with the eight levels of the local agreed syllabus/national framework for RE.

5.2 Role of local authorities

In addition to establishing a SACRE and, within five years of the adoption of a current agreed syllabus, an ASC, LAs should make sure that funding, expertise and structures are in place to support the provision of effective RE.

A LA must:

- establish a permanent body called a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE).²³ LAs must appoint representatives to each of four groups representing respectively:
 - Committee A Christian denominations and other religions and religious denominations
 - Committee B The Church of England

Committee C Teacher associations

Committee D The local authority

- establish an occasional body called an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) to review the agreed syllabus for RE adopted by the LA.²⁴ This may have common membership with the SACRE but is a separate entity and must therefore be separately convened;
- appoint members of the committees represented on the ASC;²⁵
- ensure that the composition of committee A on an ASC and group A on a SACRE are representative of the principal religious traditions in the area. The statutory provisions recognise that there will be occasions when the interest of efficiency override the requirement for directly proportionate representation;²⁶
- take all reasonable steps when appointing a person to be a member of a committee of an ASC or group on a SACRE to represent any religion, denomination or association, to ensure the person appointed is representative of the religion, denomination or associations in question.²⁷ To ensure that persons being considered for appointment to SACREs and ASCs are representative it is normal for LAs to seek nominations from the organisations that have a right of representation on each of the groups or committees;
- LAs should seek nominations separately for membership of SACRE and the ASC, but can request that consideration be given nominating bodies to nominating the same individuals for membership of both the SACRE and the ASC;
- there is no statutory provision that limits membership of the LA group (SACRE) or committee (ASC) to elected members, and there is merit in considering including senior LA officers or others who may appropriately represent the LA; and
- fund a SACRE and an ASC satisfactorily in line with the duty to convene each of these bodies.

A LA may:

- decide on matters to refer to its SACRE, including in particular methods of teaching, choice of teaching material and provision of teacher training;²⁸ and
- give its SACRE a role in the local statutory complaints procedure under Section 409 of the Education Act 1996.

²⁴ Schedule 31, para 2, Education Act 1996

²⁵ Schedule 31, para 4, Education Act 1996

²⁶ Section 390, Schedule 31, para 4, Education Act 1996

²⁷ Schedule 31, para 7, Education Act 1996; Section 392(2), Education Act 1996

²⁸ Section 391(1)(a), Education Act 1996

5.3 SACREs

5.3.1 Role of SACREs

The broad role of a SACRE is to support the effective provision of RE in schools in order to enrich the experience of RE for all pupils.²⁹

A SACRE must:

- advise the LA on RE given in accordance with an agreed syllabus, and on matters related to its functions as it may see fit;³⁰
- publish an annual report on its work and on actions taken by its representative groups, specifying any matters on which it has advised the LA, broadly describe the nature of that advice, and set out reasons for offering advice on matters not referred to it by the LA;³¹
- send a copy of the report to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA);³² and
- meet in public unless confidential information would be disclosed.³³

A SACRE should also:

- monitor the provision and quality of RE taught according to its agreed syllabus together with the overall effectiveness of the syllabus;
- provide advice and support on the effective teaching of RE in accordance with the locally agreed syllabus; the SACRE cannot do this unless there are clear arrangements to provide it with the information it needs concerning the up-to-date situation with regard to RE in the schools using the agreed syllabus;
- provide advice to the LA and its schools on methods of teaching, the choice of teaching material and the provision of teacher training;
- in partnership with its LA, consider whether any changes need to be made in the agreed syllabus or in the support offered to schools in the implementation of the agreed syllabus, to improve the quality of the RE and the learning of pupils; and
- offer schools and the LA advice concerning how an existing agreed syllabus can be interpreted so as to fit in with changes in wider education.

A SACRE can require its LA to review the agreed syllabus, and if after discussion a vote is taken on this matter the LA group on SACRE is not entitled to cast a vote.³⁴ A majority decision by the three other committees is sufficient.

A SACRE may decide to advise the LA on matters related to its functions to the LA. Equally a LA may decide to refer matters to its SACRE.³⁵ These reciprocal powers emphasise the partnership

²⁹ SACREs have a responsibility for both RE and collective worship. This document is only about their function in relation to RE. However, the information on membership and partnership with the LA would apply equally in relation to collective worship

³⁰ Section 391(1)(a), Education Act 1996

³¹ Section 391(6) and (7), Education Act 1996

³² Section 391(10), Education Act 1996

³³ The Religious Education (Meetings of Local Conferences and Councils) Regulations 1994, SI 1994/1304

³⁴ Section 391(3), Education Act 1996

³⁵ Section 391(3), Education Act 1996

between the two bodies. Although the advice given by a SACRE carries no statutory force, the LA or school should always give careful consideration to advice offered.

SACREs are encouraged to develop their own role in working with inter-religious bodies in the locality to enhance the important contribution that the study of religion and belief can make to community cohesion and the combating of religious prejudice and discrimination.

5.3.2 Composition and membership of a SACRE

If a SACRE is to be effective, its membership needs to be as inclusive as possible and to reflect the priorities for RE and for education more broadly in the twenty-first century. SACREs are local bodies and so should ensure that the religions and beliefs of the local area are represented. Membership of SACREs must be as required by law, comprising four committees or groups mentioned in Section 5.2 above. A SACRE may also include co-opted members who are not members of any of the four groups,³⁶ although it is often useful to attach, informally, co-opted members to one of the SACRE groups. Members of a group may well wish to take into consideration the views of co-opted members before taking a vote. SACREs should also make sure that their membership reflects, where possible, the breadth of study of religions and beliefs referred to in the non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education (the Framework) thus embodying a commitment to a RE which is inclusive, broad and balanced. It is therefore desirable that membership of a SACRE (through group membership or co-options) should include representatives who reflect both the diversity of religions and beliefs identified within the local agreed syllabus, and local commitment to inter-religious dialogue and community cohesion.

Case study

A LA reviewed the workings of its SACRE and identified as a problem the mutual lack of communication. The LA also realised that it was not making the most of the role RE could play in promoting community cohesion. It became clear that the SACRE needed more support if it was to operate effectively. The LA appointed a senior officer to attend SACRE meetings and report back to other council bodies, including its Race Equality service. It also prioritised the provision of expert support and appointed an adviser for RE, recognising the need for someone who could work with schools on behalf of the SACRE to inspire and challenge. The LA wanted to develop RE's contribution to community cohesion and encouraged this by supporting events for pupils such as a 'Beliefs and the Environment' week, a Young People's SACRE and a 'Religions and beliefs in our area' website. The LA drew on SACRE expertise by inviting some of its members to give talks to the LA's workforce on each of the faith and belief traditions represented; this included some traditions strong locally and others important from a national and global perspective. It encouraged SACRE's desire for inclusive membership whilst taking seriously the need to ensure representation of the local community. It supported a SACRE annual outreach event in the form of a lecture and refreshments, and the development of an effective SACRE website. It provided data for the SACRE to help it carry out the task of monitoring standards in RE.

³⁶ Section 390(3), Education Act 1996

SACREs have many opportunities to engage all of their members as stakeholders and ambassadors of RE. Increasingly LAs and SACREs are adopting innovative good practice by including representatives of pupils and students on their SACREs, or by having parallel Young People's SACREs.

Case study

The SACRE regularly participates in its LA's strategic development. In 2008 SACRE was consulted about:

- the Comprehensive Equalities Scheme (CES) 2008–11;
- the Community Strategy (SCS) 2007–20; and
- the Regeneration Strategy 2007–20.

Members' views were sought on key short-, medium- and long-term issues to be addressed and they were able to respond individually or to link the council to their faith communities for wider consultation.

SACRE members raised issues to be addressed, for example specific health, dietary and other needs of people of different faith (for example needs of women of different faiths to access a female doctor/dentist); working with local hospitals on health-related issues, including how to deal with the death of a patient from a particular faith, provision of burial sites, community safety and the particular needs of young people from their communities. SACRE was involved in the development of the borough's anti-bullying strategy in 2008, particularly bringing the needs of young people in schools being bullied because of their faith. In 2009 the SACRE supported a borough survey on community cohesion; the views and perspectives of faith members of the SACRE were sought on a range of issues to do with community cohesion in the area.

5.3.3 Decision making and workings of a SACRE

On any question to be decided by a SACRE its constituent groups each have a single vote. Co-opted members do not have a vote.³⁷ Decisions within a group do not require unanimity. Each group must regulate its own proceedings, including provision for resolving deadlock. Many SACREs have chosen to adopt a constitution to regulate their proceedings and ways of working.

³⁷ Section 390(7) and Section 391(4), Education Act 1996

Case study

A SACRE had several vacancies which needed to be filled and decided to carry out a review of membership in partnership with the LA. This brought to attention the fact that there were significant religion and belief communities in the area not currently represented on Group A, that there were no representatives of higher education on Group C, and that the voices of the young people most affected by the SACRE's work, the pupils, were entirely absent. It was decided that in the interests of effectiveness the membership should be expanded to include young people as well as a Bahá'í and a Humanist representative and somebody from a nearby university. Formal votes were very rarely necessary, and the SACRE and LA agreed that since the statutory requirement was for each group, not each individual representative, to have a single vote, there was no problem about these additional new members contributing to the decision making process.

5.4 Agreed Syllabus Conferences

5.4.1 Role and working of Agreed Syllabus Conferences

Every LA is required to establish and support an occasional body called an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC). Its role is to produce and recommend an agreed syllabus for RE which meets legal requirements and is educationally sound, and then review it every five years. An ASC can specify what must be taught through the locally agreed syllabus but it may not require schools to allocate particular time to RE in the curriculum. The guidance offered by the Framework provides a national benchmark for an ASC when revising its syllabus.

An ASC and any sub-committee it may appoint³⁸ must meet in public, subject to exceptions in relation to confidentiality.³⁹ Each of the four committees of a conference must cast its single vote in favour of a recommendation that an agreed syllabus be adopted by the LA before the LA can adopt that syllabus.⁴⁰ Any sub-committee of an ASC must include at least one member of each of its constituent committees.

5.4.2 Membership of an ASC

An ASC is required to be made up of four committees representing respectively:⁴¹

- A Christian denominations and other religions and religious denominations
- B The Church of England
- C Teacher associations
- D The local authority

There is no provision for an ASC to include co-opted members, but this does not mean that advice cannot be sought beyond its membership. Some individuals might be invited to attend all

³⁸ Schedule 31, para 6, Education Act 1996

³⁹ Regulation 3 of S1 1994/1304

⁴⁰ Schedule 31, para 10, Education Act 1996

⁴¹ Section 390(2) Education Act 1996; Schedule 31, para 4, Education Act 1996

meetings of the conference, and of committees of the conference, in order for their advice to be available to members of the ASC. For an ASC to work effectively and produce a syllabus, it is important that its membership is as inclusive as the law allows.

5.4.3 Nature of an agreed syllabus

The local agreed syllabus must meet statutory requirements and reflect breadth and balance in RE, particularly in taking into account local characteristics and circumstances. To ensure the effective promotion of high quality RE for pupils, it is recommended that an agreed syllabus should:

- provide a clear structure which users find easy to follow and which highlights the contribution of RE to the curriculum;
- ensure that learning in RE has both continuity and progression;
- have clear statements about expected standards and assessment arrangements;
- provide clear guidance about the process of learning which should underpin effective planning of pupils' learning in RE;
- provide appropriate levels of challenge for pupils of differing ages and abilities; these should be progressive and demanding but realistic; and
- reflect curriculum developments nationally (such as the aims of the curriculum, the use of key concepts and ideas, the personal, learning and thinking skills) to ensure RE is part of a coherent curriculum for all pupils.

The Framework is the basis for the illustrative non-statutory programmes for RE set out by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) alongside the National Curriculum. Both the Framework and the programmes of study, provide guidance on designing a RE curriculum for agreed syllabuses and for programmes of RE in schools with a religious character. To ensure a consistent entitlement to breadth and richness in RE for all pupils, and adherence to a coherent national set of standards, it is recommended that ASCs should use the illustrative programmes of study published by the QCA, as the basis for their development of the local syllabus. The ASC can interpret those programmes of study in the light of local circumstances, and to select appropriate content and construct learning experiences.⁴²

Syllabuses should enable schools to develop a balanced and inclusive approach to the organising of concepts, content, understanding, skills and attitudes.

⁴² Further guidance on this is to be found in *Using the framework to develop an agreed syllabus for RE*, published by QCA 2007, www.qca.org.uk/qca_7882.aspx

See also the aligned framework in the new curriculum, <http://curriculum.qca.org.uk>

Case study

This is how one ASC handled breadth and balance:

- Systematic study that looks at one or more religion or belief in detail, by exploring some of its key concepts, such as beliefs, teaching and sources, or values and commitments; for example a major unit in Year 5 on Christianity could include a study of how Christian worship and practice reflects the life and teachings of Jesus; or in a Year 9 unit on Judaism and Humanism, examples could focus on the beliefs, teachings and sources that motivate them to take social action to improve the world.
- Thematic study that looks at a question, concept or issue and explores it in relation to one or more religions or beliefs, by enquiring into how and why the questions are answered; for example a Year 4 unit on practices and ways of life could investigate how and why some people observe religious occasions at home, including Christian ways of marking Lent and Muslim ways of marking the month of Ramadan; or a Year 8 unit on environmental campaigners could look at the religious and non-religious values and commitments that lead some people to take action against roads, runways or the treatment of animals; or a Year 11 unit on fair trade, just war or ending life.
- Cross-curricular study that uses key concepts or processes from two or more subjects to engage pupils in a challenging exploration; for example a Year 6 unit could use the investigation processes in science and RE to generate questions about the concept of truth in relation to different accounts of the origin of the universe; or a Year 7 unit could address the historical concept of causation, the citizenship concept of rights and the RE concept of identity to investigate migration).

By offering a balance of all three, RE syllabuses and programmes will be successful in promoting pupils' understanding of the diversity of impacts that religion and belief has on individuals and communities. They can also promote pupils' awareness of the different kind of questions raised by religions and beliefs and how the various methods of study of religion and belief can answer them.