



Local Councillor Support for Religious Education: Statutory Responsibilities, Community Confidence and National Developments



Religious Education (RE) remains one of the few curriculum areas where local authorities retain important statutory responsibilities. In an increasingly academised and centralised education system, Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) continue to provide a valuable bridge between councils, schools, religion and belief communities, and wider civic life.



High-quality RE contributes directly to civic life. It helps young people understand religion and belief in contemporary society, supports respectful dialogue across difference, and develops critical thinking, ethical reflection and cultural literacy.

1. THE STATUTORY POSITION

Under the Education Act 1996, local authorities have a duty to:



establish and support a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE)



convene an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) when required



review the local Agreed Syllabus at least every five years



publish and support arrangements for Religious Education and collective worship in maintained schools



take note of, and respond to, SACRE advice



RE is a statutory subject in all state-funded schools, although the legal arrangements differ between maintained schools, academies and schools with a religious character.

Councils therefore retain important statutory responsibilities for RE and collective worship within a wider educational landscape in which schools and academy trusts also exercise substantial curriculum responsibility.

2. SACRES AND THE ROLE OF ELECTED MEMBERS

SACREs are statutory advisory bodies established to support local authorities in fulfilling their responsibilities for Religious Education and collective worship. Local authorities are required by law to convene and support a SACRE, but SACREs are distinct statutory bodies rather than ordinary local authority committees.

Their work depends upon collaboration between schools, local authorities, religion and belief communities, teachers and elected representatives.

SACREs are organised into four representative groups:



This structure is intended to support balanced representation, dialogue and consensus-building across the SACRE.

Elected members serving within Group D bring an important democratic and civic perspective to SACRE discussions. Their role includes:

- helping ensure that SACRE advice reflects the needs and character of the local community
- supporting effective communication between the local authority and SACRE
- considering how SACRE work contributes to wider civic priorities, including educational opportunity and community confidence
- helping ensure that statutory responsibilities are fulfilled effectively and proportionately



Members contribute most effectively when discussions are grounded in:

- the statutory responsibilities of the authority
- professional educational expertise
- the representative nature of SACRE membership
- respectful dialogue across different viewpoints and traditions
- the educational interests of children and young people

3. THE CURRENT EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

England's school system is now predominantly academised. Most secondary schools and many primary schools are academies and are therefore not required to follow the local Agreed Syllabus in the same way as maintained schools.



Academies are still required to provide Religious Education through their funding agreements, but many use trust-wide curricula or adapted versions of local syllabuses.



Schools with a religious character also operate within separate statutory and denominational arrangements.



In this context, SACRE influence increasingly depends upon professional expertise, the quality of support and advice offered to schools, and strong local relationships.

Successful SACREs therefore tend to focus on:



supporting rigorous and balanced RE



offering informed advice to the authority



supporting teachers and schools



helping different religion and belief communities work together



helping schools navigate complex issues relating to religion and belief

4. DRAFT NATIONAL CURRICULUM PROGRAMME OF STUDY

National discussion about the future of Religious Education is continuing following the government's Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR).



Sector bodies like the RE Council of England and Wales, the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) and the National Association of SACREs, and religion and belief representatives, are working towards greater national coherence through the development of the Draft National Curriculum Programme of Study for RE.

These discussions aim to:



improve consistency and curriculum



strengthen academic rigour



ensure pupils encounter a broad range of religious and non-religious traditions



support teacher workload and curriculum planning



improve equality of access to strong RE provision

SACREs remain important within this evolving landscape because they:



support local implementation



advise councils on statutory responsibilities



maintain local relationships and dialogue



provide local expertise and insight

5. RE AND THE LAW

Courts have repeatedly affirmed that Religious Education in publicly funded schools should be objective, critical and pluralistic while reflecting both the religious traditions and contemporary diversity of Great Britain.



The existing legal settlement balances:

- the historic place of Christianity in British public life
- the diversity of modern Britain
- the rights of parents and communities
- the professional autonomy of schools and teachers
- protections for schools with a religious character

SACREs play an important role in supporting this balanced and lawful approach.

6. WHY THIS STILL MATTERS

Well-supported SACREs can help councils:



strengthen civic cohesion and community confidence



support schools and teachers



maintain informed dialogue across diverse communities



respond constructively during periods of tension or misunderstanding



promote respectful and informed civic engagement