



An evaluation of the work of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education

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Introduction

1. This report was produced at the request of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) to inform his advice to the Secretary of State about the future policy for religious education (RE), collective worship and Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs), and to inform the continuing debate about the role of SACREs. Between January 2003 and March 2004, HMI visited 19 SACREs representing shire counties, metropolitan boroughs, London boroughs and unitary authorities.¹ HMI collected a range of evidence to inform their judgements on the six key questions that form the basis of this report.

1. Do local education authorities (LEAs) and SACREs carry out their statutory duties?
2. How far does the SACRE's partnership with the LEA enable it to carry out its responsibilities effectively?
3. Has the LEA adopted a high quality agreed syllabus: one that provides a good grounding for planning, teaching and learning in RE?
4. How far does the SACRE's partnership with the LEA enable it to help teachers and schools raise standards in RE and the quality of RE teaching?
5. How far does the SACRE's partnership with the LEA enable it to help schools improve the quality of collective worship?
6. How far does the SACRE contribute effectively to the social cohesion agenda, by improving religious/racial harmony in the community and support for inclusion in schools?

Legal requirements

2. Every LEA is required by law to have a SACRE. The origins of SACREs go back to the Education Act 1944, but the Education Reform Act 1988 and the Education Act 1996 strengthened the place of the SACRE in LEAs.

3. The function of a SACRE is to advise the LEA upon matters connected with religious worship in community schools and in foundation schools which do not have a religious character and the religious education to be given in accordance with an agreed syllabus.²

¹ The LEAs involved were: Bedfordshire, Bracknell Forest, Brent, Bradford, Cheshire, Cornwall, Devon, Ealing, Islington, Lancashire, Medway Towns, Redbridge, Rochdale, Rotherham, Sandwell, South Gloucestershire, Tameside, Thurrock and Wigan.

² See section 391 of the Education Act 1996, as amended by the paragraph 94 of Schedule 30 to the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

4. A SACRE also shall, on application by the head teacher of any community school maintained by the authority, or any foundation school which has not been designated as having a religious character, consider whether it is appropriate for the requirement for collective worship to apply in the case of that school or any class or description of pupils within that school.³

5. The responsibilities of SACRE are to:

- require the LEA to review the locally agreed syllabus at least every five years
- produce an annual report, which is sent to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
- advise on matters relating to teaching methods, the choice of teaching material and the provision of training for teachers in RE and collective worship.

Developing role of SACREs – a context for the report

6. The advisory responsibilities of SACREs set out in legislation give them very little independent authority or power. A SACRE that did no more than carry out its legislative functions would be judged to be compliant, even if the LEA consistently rejected its advice.

7. In 1988, when the current legal framework was established, many LEAs had the resources to provide high quality support and advice for their SACRE and to provide a monitoring role in relation to RE and collective worship. Strong SACREs would advise on and monitor this role from the perspective of local religious and professional communities. However, since the late 1990s the ability of many LEAs to continue their work of monitoring and supporting the curriculum has diminished as the broader role of the LEA has changed.

8. Factors at play include a stronger focus on school improvement and intervention taking place in inverse proportion to a school's success (which has reduced the input of specialist subject advisers to schools). Delegated budgets have reduced LEAs' resources for direct spending on monitoring and advice, leaving the decisions about such spending to schools. Additionally, the increasing centralisation of the curriculum and inspection have been associated with a reduction of the services and structures that previously supported some SACREs; for example few LEAs now employ full-time specialist RE advisers compared with the situation in 1988. Such reductions in advisory support have, in turn, limited the opportunities to undertake internal LEA monitoring of standards, and reduced budgets have led to reductions in the on-going implementation and review of agreed syllabuses.

³ See section 394 of the Education Act 1996, as amended by paragraph 97 of Schedule 30 to the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

9. In response to this situation, many SACREs have extended their role from advising the LEA to working as partners with LEA officers producing guidance for RE and collective worship, hosting conferences for teachers and creating websites. Ofsted has taken these activities into account when evaluating the effectiveness of SACREs by asking how far they contribute to improving the quality of provision of RE and collective worship in schools. In doing so, Ofsted recognises that the effectiveness of a SACRE cannot be evaluated in isolation from the LEA, which funds and supports the extended role of its SACRE. Effectiveness can, therefore, only be judged in terms of the partnership between the SACRE and the LEA. The most effective SACREs are those that have a strong and productive relationship with the LEA, 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.

Main findings

- ❑ All local education authorities (LEAs) inspected carry out their statutory duties to convene a SACRE and set up the review of the agreed syllabus every five years.
- ❑ Several LEAs experience difficulty in recruiting members of the SACRE, especially from within minority religious groups.
- ❑ All SACREs inspected carried out the legal requirements to produce an annual report, consider applications for determinations (where made) and require the LEA to review the local agreed syllabus.⁴ However, the majority of SACREs inspected had not offered advice to the LEA in recent years and in this respect were neglecting one of their key responsibilities.
- ❑ The role of SACREs has changed since they were made statutory in 1988. Some SACREs have retained their original advisory function. Others have developed the role, becoming actively involved in the provision of support for RE and collective worship.
- ❑ Many SACREs inspected work on the margins of the LEA rather than being fully integrated into its professional structure. Only a minority of SACREs have a costed development plan with rigorous success criteria clearly linked to the LEA education development plan (EDP).
- ❑ Few LEAs provide adequate resources or training for SACREs to carry out their designated functions thoroughly.
- ❑ All the SACREs inspected had to rely on professional advice in order to execute their statutory and extended responsibilities. This advice is most effective when it is linked to advice given to schools.
- ❑ Agreed syllabuses vary significantly in style, character, structure and quality. None of the agreed syllabus conferences (ASCs) in the LEAs inspected had the capacity to carry out an agreed syllabus revision without significant support from an adviser or consultant. The extent of the involvement of ASC members varied between LEAs.
- ❑ SACREs' functions have not been sufficiently focused on raising achievement in RE and improving the quality of teaching and learning.
- ❑ Too many SACREs have lost touch with their original brief, which was to advise the LEA. The key challenges to successful RE, for example non-compliance and

⁴ Schools can apply for a determination (permission) to hold acts of collective worship that are not mainly or broadly of a Christian character.

the shortage of RE teachers, may be better resolved by focusing the LEA on policy decisions rather than producing guidance.

- There is limited evidence of any systematic evaluation of the work of SACREs in improving the quality of RE provision in schools.
- Collective worship generally occupies less of the time and interest of SACREs than does RE. SACREs monitor levels of non-compliance by reading Ofsted's school inspection reports but have limited success in persuading LEAs to make compliance a priority. SACREs take seriously their responsibility for considering applications for determinations, and generally undertake this task very professionally. Many SACREs already make a significant contribution to their LEA's role in promoting social cohesion and others recognise their potential to do so.
- Ofsted's evidence from school inspections reveals that there is no consistent link between the productiveness of a SACRE, the quality of an agreed syllabus, the existence of an adviser and the quality of RE in the LEA at Key Stages 1 to 3. This raises questions about whether all SACREs and LEAs are using appropriate measures to support teaching and learning in RE.
- SACREs and their work are not generally well known among teachers outside their membership. RE teachers interviewed were generally more familiar with national initiatives and guidance and with text books than with publications from the SACRE or the LEA. Where the LEA had an RE adviser, he or she was better known to teachers than was the SACRE.
- The best SACREs make a significant direct contribution to supporting RE, in particular faith community members who regularly offer their services to schools by leading collective worship, organising school visits to places of worship and contributing to RE lessons. A few provide high quality support that can be shown to have a positive impact on standards. Effective SACREs give confidence to local faith communities that their religion is being accurately presented and that RE is not confessional.⁵
- SACREs are worthwhile organisations in that they provide unique opportunities for members of the community, of all faiths and none, to meet and discuss educational issues. The strength of SACREs lies in their multi-faith, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural composition. Building on this strength, several have already developed a role as an advisory group to the local authority on any matters related to faith, ethnicity and culture, either alone or in collaboration with other committees. Too many, however, 're-invent the wheel' when they revise syllabuses and guidance and do not take account of the resources available to them.

⁵ To be non-confessional, RE teaching must not be distinctive of any denomination; it should not try to force specific beliefs or doctrines upon children.

Recommendations

- Each LEA should:
 - clarify what is expected of its SACRE and provide the SACRE with adequate funding to achieve it
 - ensure that any plans for the work of the SACRE are included in the LEA's educational development plan
 - evaluate the impact of the work of the SACRE
 - provide training for members of the SACRE
 - ensure that the SACRE is provided with high quality information about standards, provision and the factors affecting pupils' performance in RE in order to hone the SACRE's advice to the LEA
 - keep the agreed syllabus and its impact under review so that the request from the SACRE for its review is well supported.

- SACREs should:
 - focus their advice and activity on priorities for improving RE and collective worship
 - be proactive in carrying out their functions, particularly in respect of the provision of advice for the LEA
 - set themselves realistic and achievable targets within a strategic plan for their achievement
 - make teachers, schools and the general public better informed about their work
 - develop strategies to recruit new SACRE members
 - where possible, collaborate with other SACREs to share high quality syllabuses and guidance, rather than stretch meagre resources to produce new and often inferior variants of existing materials.

Evaluation

Do LEAs and SACREs carry out their statutory duties?

LEA responsibilities

10. All local education authorities (LEAs) inspected carry out their statutory duties to convene a SACRE and review the Agreed Syllabus every five years.

11. Only a minority of SACREs have no vacancies and many are struggling to recruit members to all committees. Occasionally, reduced membership, coupled with poor attendance, leads to inquorate meetings and business being delayed. In particular, SACREs and LEAs make great efforts, even in areas with limited religious diversity, to appoint or co-opt representatives from all major local religious groups on to the SACRE. However, some are more successful than others in this respect. In LEAs with very diverse populations, SACRE membership generally reflects the wide religious diversity in the area, including the diversity within faith communities, and echoes the commitment of the LEA to social inclusion. However, in other LEAs recruitment is less successful and several SACREs experience difficulties in recruiting from a broad spectrum of faiths. In a few cases faith representatives recruited to the SACRE do not have close ties with the majority population of the faith, and hence do not always represent community interests.

12. Particular difficulties are experienced in areas where local faith communities serve several local SACREs; notably urban areas with several adjacent councils. Even the Church of England has a shortage of suitable people to serve the SACREs in some regions, with the result that some diocesan representatives sit on as many as six different SACREs. Two unitary authorities inspected had lost the majority of faith community representatives to their urban neighbours as a result of local government reorganisation. In response to such a situation, one SACRE in the Midlands has contacted the local Racial Equalities Council in an effort to recruit more active Muslim and Sikh representation.

SACRE responsibilities

13. All SACREs produce an annual report, as required by law. These vary in detail and quality.⁶ Some are detailed, and provide a useful tool for self-evaluation, reflecting on the key issues of purpose, method, and links to achievement and the quality of teaching. By contrast, some are descriptive and merely set out the activity of the SACRE uncritically.

14. Responsibility for producing the reports is generally given to an adviser, a consultant, the chair or, as in one case, a small group of SACRE members writing on

⁶ The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) publishes an annual analysis of SACRE reports, which can be found on their website <http://www.qca.org.uk>.

the basis of information provided by the LEA. In the best cases the annual report is sent to all schools and colleges, libraries and other public facilities. Some reports are not disseminated widely enough, minimising their scope to raise awareness of SACRE in schools.

15. SACREs have responsibility for considering and awarding determinations to exempt schools from collective worship that is 'mainly or broadly of a Christian character' SACREs discuss applications, make a judgement and inform the school, sometimes inviting school representatives to the meeting to support their case. The following example demonstrates exemplary practice:

Each applicant school was visited by a SACRE member. This practice provided the SACRE with important information, which extended members' understanding of schools in the LEA and of how they implemented the requirements for collective worship. Each visit was reported clearly and succinctly with recommendations well supported by evidence and argument. These were professionally presented to the SACRE and discussed with genuine interest.

16. Only those SACREs that have actually received applications for determinations have developed procedures to deal with them. In some LEAs with high levels of religious diversity the number of applications for determinations was surprisingly small. In such cases SACREs should investigate whether schools are conducting inappropriate forms of worship for their population, or whether they are conducting appropriate forms of worship that do not meet legal requirements because the school has not applied for a determination.

How far does the SACRE's partnership with the LEA enable it to carry out its responsibilities effectively?

SACRE–LEA partnership

17. LEAs and SACREs have developed partnerships to sustain their responsibilities in response to the changes in LEA functions in significantly different ways. Some partnerships have been active in securing a high priority for RE, collective worship and the SACRE, demonstrating their value for the LEA. In the most effective SACRE–LEA partnerships, the SACRE is fully integrated into the LEA's professional structure.

18. Many SACREs have constitutions or terms of reference, although these vary in their quality and clarity. Central to the effectiveness of a SACRE is the chair. In most cases the chair is appointed by the LEA, generally from among the elected members. Such appointments are sometimes made specifically to take forward the work of the SACRE and ensure it is closely linked to the wider priorities of the LEA, or to remind members of the financial constraints on their work. In a minority of cases the SACRE elects the chair from each committee on a rotational basis. One LEA has an unusual tradition of electing the chair and vice-chair of the SACRE from the teachers' committee. This practice proved to be particularly effective in focusing the work of the SACRE on the needs of schools.

19. The SACRE–LEA partnership is particularly successful where elected members and senior officers attend meetings regularly, value the activities of the SACRE and are actively involved in its work. This is the case in several large LEAs, but also at an extraordinary level in one smaller LEA, where the Deputy Director’s personal interest and enthusiasm for the SACRE is influential in strengthening the membership and supporting its work.

20. Meetings of the SACRE are generally chaired effectively, supporting contributions from the full range of membership, although occasionally members not involved in education are not able to contribute fully enough. Meetings generally receive effective support from LEA officers and in some cases the chair relies heavily on strong support from the professional adviser. Some SACREs hold their meetings in schools and places of worship; and this is a particularly effective means of strengthening links with schools as well as faith communities.

21. Key to the integration of the SACRE within the wider LEA structure is deliberate linkage between the SACRE and LEA education development plan (EDP) and the identification of evaluation strategies and funding for SACRE activities. Most SACREs produce a form of development plan that includes priorities for improving RE or making the SACRE more efficient. But these plans are often no more than a list of activities for the following year and are frequently unconnected to the EDP, uncosted, without success criteria and are rarely monitored. In these cases the LEA does not provide enough direction by, for example, extending the SACRE’s priorities so that they are linked to the LEA’s own plans for RE and other local and national initiatives, such as the Key Stage 3 National Strategy. Some LEAs also do not ensure that the plan is dated and the time by which objectives are to be achieved is set. Very few SACREs have effective systems for self-evaluation. Annual SACRE reports, potentially instruments for robust self-evaluation, are largely celebrations of what SACREs have done in the past year, rather than what they have achieved

22. The variations found in the quality of training, planning and budget-setting reflect the extent to which SACREs perceive themselves, and are perceived, as part of the wider LEA. Members of several SACREs interviewed felt detached from the LEA and unaware of how the SACRE fitted into the LEA’s structure, agenda or priorities. For example, in one large LEA, a number of groups with an interest in RE, including SACRE and the independent advisory and support services, have little awareness of each other and of their potential for working together. In one LEA, the procedures for taking matters of concern to the LEA are not well known to members of the SACRE, most of whom are uncertain about how and through whom the SACRE relates to the committee structure or about how to ‘get things done’. Also, members of several SACREs interviewed did not know the LEA’s procedures for following up school inspections. Overall, SACRE members did not know enough about how their work relates to that of other committees of the LEA and received too little feedback on how their reports and requests are dealt with and what, if any, action has been taken as a result.

Funding

23. Nowhere is the relationship between the SACRE and the LEA so opaque as in the matter of funding. There is significant variation in the level and style of LEA support for SACREs. All LEAs inspected provided administrative support for the SACRE, which included photocopying and postage costs. Most also funded members' attendance at national conferences, although in a few cases individual members paid their own costs or were sponsored by the organisation they represented, such as a diocese, rather than by the LEA. Very few teachers were able to represent their SACRE nationally, for example at the National Association of SACREs (NASACRE) conference, because funding was not available for supply cover. The financial support provided for SACRE members also varies considerably. Some SACREs meet during the day; their members are paid travelling expenses and supply cover is provided for teachers. Elsewhere meetings are held in the evenings and no expenses are paid. The level and nature of funding is a key factor in determining the effectiveness of SACRE and its status.

24. A few SACREs receive a budget and it is clear what this is to cover. For example, the budget of £8000 for one SACRE includes meeting costs, the production of the annual report, and support materials for schools such as guidance on boys' attainment in RE. Another SACRE with a similar budget uses it to pay supply costs to release teachers to join the SACRE's activities; to part-fund training activities for teachers by paying for speaker expenses; to allow RE departments to send a second member of staff on courses, and to support school-based projects such as a new initiative on creative arts and RE in primary schools. Most unusually the budget for a SACRE in one LEA included funding for all matters to do with RE and worship in the LEA, including all training. In many other LEAs, substantial ad hoc funding is often found on request through one of the LEA's general budgets. These informal arrangements, though often favoured by SACREs, inhibit properly focused development planning, limit the ability of SACREs to participate in decisions about funding priorities, and lack the transparency desirable in the administration of public funds.

Training

25. Legislation describes the responsibilities of SACREs as though SACREs can discharge those obligations independently of professional advice. This is not the case. With the exception of the teachers and representatives of diocesan education boards, few members of SACREs have the professional expertise to advise either the LEA or schools on RE in relation to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment or training.

26. For SACREs to be effective it is vital that those members with little contemporary knowledge of education, schools or the RE curriculum receive appropriate training. Such training for SACRE members is not guaranteed. In some LEAs care is taken to make available to SACRE members details of all INSET activities in RE and collective worship, with an invitation to attend. Some SACREs invite teachers and their pupils to make presentations on their RE work.

27. This is particularly good practice and gives some members their only first hand insight into classroom RE. A minority of SACREs offer regular training opportunities for members, as in this example.

Particularly good practice was seen in an LEA where SACRE meetings were divided into two parts, training and business. In the meeting observed during the inspection an input was made by a QCA officer on the proposed framework and another by an advanced skills teacher (AST) on her work done on RE. Meetings were held in a wide range of locations including schools and places of worship, which provided members with opportunities to extend their understanding of education and the faith of their colleagues. In addition the annual SACRE lecture, which was open to teachers, was delivered by a prominent national figure. The text of the lectures was distributed widely through the website.

28. Often, however, there is no SACRE training programme and SACRE meetings do not capitalise on opportunities to share religious perspectives or visit places of worship.

29. Training is particularly important for those members of the SACRE who have limited knowledge of the educational system. In some meetings observed by inspectors, these members were marginalised from discussion because they had received no training and they relied on experienced members to explain educational terminology, such as 'Key Stage' and 'National Curriculum'.

Role of advisers and consultants

30. Pivotal to the effectiveness of the LEA–SACRE partnership is the LEA officer with responsibility for serving the SACRE. In only a minority of LEAs is this a specialist RE adviser, and the time made available from the advisory services varies considerably. Many SACREs do not receive adequate professional support, given the extended role they are expected to perform.

31. Broadly, support is provided by the deployment of the LEA's own professional RE adviser, by buying in specialist consultants, or by using LEA advisers who are not RE specialists.

32. Specialist RE advisers are central to the most effective partnerships between SACRE and the LEA, as in this example:

This large local education authority was an example of an LEA that has retained a professional RE adviser, shared with two neighbouring unitary authorities. He provided SACRE members with high quality professional briefings on national initiatives, such as inclusion or the non-statutory National Framework for RE. This enriched discussions in meetings of the SACRE and supported its advice to the LEA.

33. In particular, LEA advisers have good knowledge of schools and teachers and also can translate data on the performance of local schools in RE into focused training.

34. Some LEAs without specialist advisers use consultants, and these are largely effective where the consultant has been given time and direction. However, where he or she is employed by the LEA to work with schools and has minimal contact with SACREs, or where the consultant attends SACRE meetings but with no contact with schools, their effectiveness is diminished. The effectiveness of consultants, like the RE advisers, lies in their dual role of advising the SACRE and schools. This enables them to provide the SACRE with first hand information about local schools, which in turn enables the SACRE to give well informed advice to the LEA.

35. Several SACREs receive their professional advice from senior LEA advisers who are not RE specialists. Some LEAs have found other ways to provide specialist support, as in these examples.

The SACRE in one small LEA was advised and served well by a committed senior adviser but teachers felt keenly the loss of the full-time RE specialist adviser. An effective solution was found by appointing an advanced skills teacher to the LEA on a part-time contract, to provide good support, especially to the primary teachers in the borough. Her effectiveness has been increased by her co-option to the SACRE.

The SACRE in another LEA was very well supported by an efficient clerk and by an adviser and advisory teacher who are both committed and very well organised. Neither the adviser nor the advisory teacher was an RE specialist though both had taught RE extensively in schools. They provided high levels of support based on careful analyses of the SACRE's and teachers' needs. Where they are unable to meet these needs from their own expertise they contracted specialists from outside the LEA to lead training. The advisers, the chair and diocesan staff provided SACRE members with clear and helpful information, which increased their effectiveness.

36. When no professional support is forthcoming, the lack of detailed knowledge of schools and teaching becomes a serious disadvantage. Where this is the case, the role of the SACRE is reduced to that of a merely responsive body that 'receives papers' and maintains a 'watching brief', rather than a body driven by clear targets focused on the improvement of RE and collective worship in schools. Furthermore, where there is little or no support from the LEA, the SACRE's activities are restricted to producing an annual report and considering determinations.

How SACREs are informed

37. In order to advise the LEA on RE and collective worship, a SACRE has to be well informed about what is happening in schools. All the most effective SACREs were well informed with high quality information about local and national developments and priorities for RE. It has become customary for LEAs to provide members of the

SACRE annually with detailed information about examination performance in RE and analyses of relevant sections of Ofsted reports on schools in the LEA. The benefits of this procedure are illustrated in the following example.

...The advisory teacher, with the help of a small SACRE sub-group, produced a succinct summary of strengths and weaknesses identified in Ofsted reports on RE in local schools. This was a very effective strategy which sped up the process of report review, helped the SACRE focus on key issues, enabled members to compare individual schools' performance with national data and helped the advisory teacher to focus some of her work on schools where there were concerns. The agreed syllabus conference used this analysis to focus on specific issues that need addressing in the agreed syllabus, such as assessment.

38. Not all SACREs make best use of these data by analysing them, for example to identify the most common weaknesses in RE, the extent of non-compliance, or to track standards or the quality of teaching and assessment over time. None of the SACREs inspected was aware of the LEA's statistical neighbours or of how RE in their LEA compared to that in similar LEAs.

39. Many SACREs rely only on Ofsted reports for information about the quality of RE and generally only those with specialist RE support receive information of really high quality about what is going on in local schools. SACREs have already realised that short inspection reports provide very limited evidence about RE and that Ofsted's school inspection reports from September 2005 are likely to include no evidence of RE at all, except for references to non-compliance. LEAs and SACREs will need to consider alternative methods of gaining intelligence about RE in local schools. Lack of information was a regular concern from some members of SACREs interviewed, especially on issues such as the supply and qualifications of RE teachers. Some SACREs do not receive important national publications from Ofsted and QCA, such as the annual subject reviews published on the Ofsted website, which reduced their knowledge of RE and collective worship at the national level. The more active SACREs were the best informed, as in the following example.

A SACRE received a report from the humanities adviser summarising progress in implementing the agreed syllabus. This report was based on a survey of primary and secondary schools, and provided very useful data on key developments such as assessment, the use of ICT, training needs, capitation, resources and time for RE. This was a very successful mechanism for identifying overall trends in local RE and priorities for the SACRE's work.

40. The effectiveness of a SACRE is invariably connected to the will of the LEA to improve the quality of RE and collective worship in its schools. An LEA that does not include improving RE and/or collective worship in its plans weakens the hand of the SACRE by not providing it with information that can be used to support the provision of training or guidance.

Advice to and from the LEA

41. The legislation requires that SACREs provide, and LEAs ask for, advice. In practice, however, SACREs rarely provide direct advice to the LEA in the areas required in legislation any more than LEAs ask them for it. The training needs of RE teachers are usually decided by the advisory service rather than recommended by the SACRE. Few SACREs offer advice on resources except in cases where significant changes in LEA structures have resulted in the loss of major collections of resources and no SACRE inspected had offered the LEA direct advice on methods of teaching. More often these matters are brought to the attention of SACREs by advisers. In practice, the flow of advice and requests between the SACRE and the LEA rarely comes from members, although some chairpersons liaise informally with colleagues on the Education Committee.

42. The SACREs inspected may be divided broadly into two categories; proactive and reactive. Proactive SACREs identified the needs of either their members, schools or the wider community and requested the LEA to take action, often providing a proposed solution. In cases of the best practice, the partnership between the SACRE and the LEA provides a valued structure within which the work of the LEA in relation to RE and collective worship is carefully focused, prioritised, monitored and evaluated. The role of most SACREs inspected is best defined as reactive in terms of requesting information, monitoring LEA activity and quality assurance of RE and collective worship in schools, using Ofsted reports as evidence. In their pursuit of this role their importance was perceived by the LEA as securing the confidence of local faith communities in LEA policy regarding RE and collective worship.

Has the LEA adopted a high quality agreed syllabus: one that provides a good grounding for planning, teaching and learning in RE?

Agreed syllabus conference

43. Agreed syllabuses vary significantly in style, character, structure and quality. There is evidence of increasing use of national guidance in the syllabuses reviewed but this guidance is subject to a variety of interpretations.

44. By law, an agreed RE syllabus for use in an LEA must be produced by an agreed syllabus conference (ASC), convened by the LEA specifically for that purpose and then disbanded (section 375 of the Education Act 1996). In reality, the boundaries between a SACRE and an ASC are often indistinct. In most LEAs the membership of the agreed syllabus conference and the SACRE are very similar and often identical. Moreover, many SACREs use their meeting time (in their role as an ASC) to revise an agreed syllabus, thus reducing the time available for fulfilling their statutory responsibilities, and hence limiting their effectiveness. While there are advantages in appointing members of SACRE to the agreed syllabus conference, and in broadening the membership of an agreed syllabus conference to include others who can make a significant contribution to the process of revising the agreed syllabus, revising the syllabus should not be the responsibility of the SACRE.

45. Most ASCs draw on national guidelines by including in their syllabus attainment targets, programmes of study and, increasingly, an eight level scale.⁷ However, they interpret the guidelines in a variety of ways. Some syllabuses include guidance on continuity, progression and assessment. To produce a syllabus with this level of professionalism requires greater educational expertise than is generally available within an ASC membership. Instead, ASCs look to an LEA adviser to co-ordinate the development of the agreed syllabus, provide specialist advice and guidance, prepare draft papers, devise the format of the syllabus and draft the text. In several cases where such professional expertise is not available, LEAs employ a private consultant to draft the syllabus. The best practice is found where advisers and consultants work with teachers and/or members of the ASC to produce the syllabus. But although some of the agreed syllabus conferences in the LEAs inspected worked closely with the adviser or consultant in producing the syllabus, none was capable of producing it without professional support.

46. At best, in the LEAs inspected, the working relationship between the ASC and the adviser/consultant is productive, ensuring that its members are not marginalised and that the particular expertise of the teachers and faith group representatives is used creatively, usually in the various working groups involved in developing the syllabus. ASC members recognise the adviser's professional knowledge and skills as indispensable, while the advisers value the specialist knowledge of members and the confidence that they inspire in local communities that schools' RE provision meets the needs of their children. In some cases, however, the adviser/consultant is the chief author of the syllabus and, although the agreed syllabus conference is kept informed, it is not involved in the process, as intended by the law.

Developing an agreed syllabus – the process

47. In those LEAs inspected where an agreed syllabus had been produced efficiently and with the widest involvement, the following features were present:

- the SACRE has kept the existing syllabus under review since its publication and has identified accurately the weaknesses in the current agreed syllabus to ensure that the revisions are clearly focused on improvement
- the LEA, SACRE or the ASC undertakes an analysis of a range of national guidance and other LEA syllabi to inform the process
- a clear list of priorities is established to focus the review process
- attention is paid to the distinctive character of the religious profile of the area in order to ensure pupils' needs are addressed
- a clear and appropriate budget is identified to cover development and production costs

⁷ *The model syllabuses for RE*, National Curriculum Council, 1994. Non-statutory guidance for RE.

- an agreed syllabus conference is established which meets regularly to review and contribute to the process of revision
- the ASC includes SACRE members but is distinct from the SACRE
- additional teacher representatives are involved and a senior LEA officer attends all meetings
- the process is guided by a person with expert knowledge of RE, particularly the curriculum and its assessment
- all issues for consideration are rigorously discussed ensuring the process is genuinely consultative
- a questionnaire is issued to schools to secure wider consultation on the revision process.

48. Without exception, all SACREs visited displayed a strong sense of ownership and pride in their syllabus. However, this sense of loyalty is not always accompanied by a process of rigorous evaluation of its quality. For example, in some LEAs insufficient funding is provided for the evaluation and revision of the agreed syllabus.

Quality of agreed syllabuses

49. All agreed syllabuses seen meet statutory requirements, but their quality varied considerably. Very few syllabuses seen were of high enough quality throughout to make a consistently sound basis for good planning, teaching, learning and assessment. Good features of syllabuses seen included:

- a clear structure, making the syllabus easy to use for planning
- clarity about the balance between coverage of the major world faiths at each key stage
- clarity about what has to be taught to pupils at different stages
- appropriate levels of challenge at each key stage
- radical and inventive approaches to RE at Key Stage 3
- clear statements of the expected standards
- provision for continuity and progression across the key stages and clear details about assessment requirements and standards of attainment, making good use of an eight level assessment framework
- very careful attention to detail throughout.

50. Very few syllabuses display all these qualities. The most significant weaknesses are:

- insufficient challenge and level of difficulty, especially at Key Stage 3
- incompatibility between level descriptors and the programmes of study, making it difficult for the levels to be achieved and for assessment to be effective and meaningful
- lack of continuity between Key Stages 2 and 3 due to separate writing teams for primary and secondary phases
- incompatible sections of different previous syllabuses side by side, resulting in confusion for teachers
- failure to clarify what in the syllabus is mandatory and what is intended as guidance
- failure to take account of national developments.

51. The purpose of legislation (as explained in DfES Circular 1/94) is to enable locally determined RE syllabuses to reflect local circumstances, and this has produced a range of provision. Nevertheless, the differences between syllabuses in terms of the number of religions included or the balance between religions are not as significant as might be supposed. Agreed syllabuses which serve areas of high religious diversity generally reflect local circumstances. Several LEAs with minimal religious diversity (except within Christian denominations) have also deliberately adopted a syllabus with a strong multi-faith element in order to make pupils aware of the multi-faith character of England and the world generally.

52. In response to Ofsted's recent criticisms of the lack of challenge in much RE work at Key Stage 3, several agreed syllabuses have increased rigour by limiting the study of religious phenomena in favour of units on broader issues arising from the study of religion such as beliefs, ethics, religion in the modern world and spirituality, which inspection has found to interest and motivate young people. However, there are still agreed syllabuses which include in Key Stage 3 units on, for example, 'festivals', 'food and drink' and 'holy books'; in these cases teachers could enable pupils to reach the upper levels expected at this age only by adapting the syllabus in a very creative fashion.

How far does the SACRE's partnership with the LEA enable it to help teachers and schools raise standards in RE and the quality of RE teaching?

SACREs and schools

53. The function of a SACRE is primarily to provide support for RE and collective worship in schools through its advice to the LEA. However, SACREs can only advise and have no powers to *require* schools to comply with legislation; hence their capacity to bring about change is very limited.

54. Their analyses of Ofsted's inspection reports from schools provide the best opportunity for SACREs to contact schools directly to congratulate them on success or identify under-performance and offer support. This practice is widespread and is a useful way of making schools aware of the SACRE's presence and role, as in the following examples of good, but unusual practice.

A SACRE invited headteachers or their representatives to attend the SACRE meeting where their report was to be discussed. This initiative was particularly effective in providing members with further insights into the realities of school life. There has been a good level of response to the chair's letters to schools about their reports and the periodic attendance of senior teachers at SACRE meetings increases their awareness of the SACRE's role.

A SACRE invites schools to seek help with writing their post-inspection plans for RE and collective worship, those that have had less satisfactory reports are particularly targeted.

55. SACREs generally request the LEA to follow up areas of concern, including non-compliance. The nature of SACREs' partnership with LEAs determines levels of intervention. In most SACREs visited the partnership with the LEA was effective in that either an RE adviser provided the support in schools or suitable consultants were employed to play an active role in supporting teachers and schools. In the best cases, all the information received on RE standards and provision is integrated into a SACRE development plan to highlight and focus future priorities.

56. SACRE members do not have a statutory remit to become actively engaged in training or school visits. As a result many teachers (other than SACRE members) are unclear about the purpose and function of the SACRE and are not aware of the membership, activity or priorities of their local SACRE. The proportion of teachers actively involved in the SACRE or the process of reviewing and developing an agreed syllabus is very limited, even in relatively small LEAs. Those teachers involved in agreed syllabus review felt a strong sense of ownership of the syllabus but most teachers not involved with the SACRE had very different views. For many of them, notably secondary teachers, the SACRE was far less influential to their practice than text books, websites, QCA and other national guidance. Exceptions were found in those LEAs with highly effective SACRE partnerships and highly effective RE advisers. These were the only partnerships sufficiently funded to provide the levels of training and guidance to attract long term local loyalty and trust; but even in these cases it was the adviser rather than the SACRE that was known to teachers. Most teachers interviewed, especially secondary teachers, had little interest in a local syllabus, preferring that RE should become part of the National Curriculum. These views have been confirmed recently by QCA's consultation with teachers about the non-statutory national framework.

57. One LEA has developed an innovative way of involving schools more closely in the work of the SACRE.

The creation of a student SACRE has been particularly innovative. This has extended the opportunities for citizenship through dialogue

with other students from different faith perspectives. This recently resulted in the issuing of guidance produced by the students to schools about ways of addressing the issues arising from the conflict in Iraq.

SACREs and guidance for schools

58. Changes in the function of LEAs has resulted in a transformation of the role of some SACREs since they were made statutory in 1988, especially in relation to the requirement that they should offer advice to the LEA on methods of teaching, resources and teacher training. Some SACREs have retained their original advisory function. Others have developed the role, becoming actively involved in the provision of support for RE and collective worship. In such cases guidance and websites that would once have been exclusively the work of the LEAs are now frequently publicised as the work of the LEA and the SACRE, although in reality guidance is generally the work of advisers, sometimes working with teachers. SACREs read, comment and approve. This role gives SACREs the potential to be directly influential in supporting RE and collective worship.

59. It is difficult to make a secure external evaluation of the effectiveness of SACRE–LEA guidance to schools because so little rigorous internal monitoring has taken place. Few LEAs or SACREs systematically monitor the impact of their guidance and in most LEAs inspected there was little available objective evidence about how effectively the agreed syllabus had been implemented or how effective it had been in raising standards and the quality of teaching in RE. More broadly, evaluations of SACRE activity are often based on the quantity of outputs, such as publications, rather than their impact on schools. Consequently, even where the quality of the activity arising from the SACRE is good, there is limited evidence to demonstrate its direct impact in raising achievement in RE or improving the quality of teaching and learning. There were notable exceptions, as in the following case.

Teachers and pupils made presentations to the SACRE and discussed their work with members, giving them important insights into the outcomes of SACRE initiatives. The meeting attended during the inspection was addressed by the Head of RE and pupils from a high achieving department. The presentation demonstrated the positive impact of the new curriculum for Key Stage 3, in particular illustrating the effectiveness of the philosophical approach, the level of challenge and the centrality of skills. In response to extensive intelligent questioning of pupils, members of the SACRE extended their knowledge of the aspects of RE which most motivate young people.

60. Where a specialist RE adviser is employed it is more likely that the impact of the agreed syllabus on schemes of work, the use of published guidance or the impact of a conference on assessment will be known from evidence collected during school visits and teachers' meetings. Otherwise SACREs are dependent on anecdotal evidence from teachers.

61. Nevertheless, producing resources and training for RE teachers remain key activities for many SACRE–LEA partnerships. The most common and effective forms of guidance provided are implementation programmes to accompany a new agreed syllabus, as in this example.

Considerable attention has been paid to developing guidance material to support the agreed syllabus. At the primary phase detailed units of work have been drawn up by skilled teachers working with members of the SACRE. This guidance has helped teachers, especially non-specialists, to develop their planning and assessment. Currently, the team is formulating similar units of work at Key Stage 3. This is a timely venture in the context of the national Key Stage 3 National Strategy, particularly with its focus on assessment for learning.

62. LEAs that support RE well issue guidance in the form of books and videos on teaching RE, which reflect local circumstances.

One LEA, a prolific producer of high quality RE guidance, ascribed several documents to the SACRE on the front cover, raising the SACRE's profile with teachers and schools. The SACRE identified a need for guidance on teaching Islam. Such a resource will go some way to compensating for the absence of a significant Muslim presence in the county.

63. Several SACREs have identified weaknesses in the assessment of RE, partly as a result of Ofsted's annual subject reports. Consequently working groups have been set up consisting of the RE adviser and teachers from primary, secondary and special schools to create guidance on assessment. Increasingly, too, such resources are made available on LEA websites.

64. Some SACREs sponsor and support a range of activities to support teachers, such as annual SACRE lectures, awards for good practice, regular newsletters, and events such as an exhibition on the Jewish Way of Life. In a few cases SACREs meet their responsibilities for advising on training by forging good links to local teacher training providers. Effective SACRE–LEA partnerships work well together to provide training for RE teachers, as in this example.

The SACRE has regularly held an RE teachers' conference every year. These have been led by an external consultant and have been highly valued. Conferences focused on matters of contemporary significance such as the Key Stage 3 National Strategy or assessment and their application to RE. Secondary teachers in the LEA have implemented many of the ideas learnt on these conferences and have received valuable guidance on resources, including ICT-based resources. 'Best practice' forums, where teachers meet after school, were very well used to cover a wide and relevant range of matters, such as citizenship and thinking skills. Information from courses and meetings was disseminated to other schools, thus extending their value, as in the case of the primary

assessment group meetings. All courses were thoroughly evaluated and the outcomes presented in easily accessible chart form.

65. These examples reflect a minority of cases where it is possible to say with some confidence that there is evidence for the positive impact in schools of guidance initiated by a SACRE. Other data suggest that, across the country as a whole, the work of SACREs has relatively little impact on schools, notably the fact that standards at Key Stages 1 to 3 are lower than in most other subjects and teaching is generally of a lower quality. There is no consistent relationship between the efforts of LEAs, SACREs and advisers and the quality of RE provision across the country. Evidence from Ofsted's inspections of schools indicates that this is due in part to factors outside the control of SACREs that hinder their effectiveness in improving the quality of RE:

- although high quality curricula and guidance may be influential, ultimately the quality of RE in the classroom is dependent on the skills and knowledge of the teacher.
- the shortage of specialist RE teachers and schools' consequent extensive use of teachers with no specialist RE training contributes to weaknesses in teaching and learning.

66. The commitment of senior managers in schools to RE has a powerful impact on standards and the quality of teaching in the subject. Managers decide whether or not to comply with statutory requirements and whether to provide sufficient time for the agreed syllabus to be taught. Ofsted has published evidence from HMI that, in some schools, senior managers have lower expectations of standards and teaching in RE than in other subjects. This results in superficial monitoring and insufficient requirement for improvement in key areas, such as assessment.

67. There is limited evidence to suggest that improvements in compliance with legislation, especially in secondary schools, are a result of intervention by the SACRE. But the main contributors to improvement in provision at Key Stage 4 have been Ofsted inspections and the GCSE short course for religious education.

68. The answer to the question 'How far does the SACRE's partnership with the LEA enable it to help teachers and schools raise standards in RE and the quality of RE teaching?' is inconclusive. There is no evidence to indicate how well RE provision would compare to National Curriculum subjects if SACREs did not exist, although SACREs should take seriously the fact that standards in RE are highest at Key Stage 4 where the influence of local determination is less than at Key Stages 1 to 3.

69. Where SACREs inspected had the least impact, the following factors contributed to a reduction in their impact on schools:

- confusing, inaccessible or insufficiently challenging agreed syllabuses
- lack of LEA support for the SACRE

- insufficient integration of the SACRE into the LEA structure, including the EDP
- absence of the professional expertise needed to produce high quality agreed syllabuses and guidance
- lack of rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the SACRE's work
- failure of SACREs and LEAs to reduce significantly the level of non-compliance
- the inability of local guidance to compete with major national publications or the work of large well-resourced SACREs
- insufficient use of Ofsted reports and other data to identify the most fundamental needs of schools in improving RE
- insufficient focus on providing local information that is not available elsewhere, such as places of worship, speakers from faith communities, museums and resource centres
- too much 'reinventing the wheel' rather than sharing good practice; for example small poorly resourced LEAs write new agreed syllabuses and guidance rather than adopting existing high quality materials from elsewhere.

How far does the SACRE's partnership with the LEA enable it to help schools improve the quality of collective worship?

70. Collective worship generally occupies less of the time and interest of the SACRE than RE and SACRE–LEA partnerships have been unsuccessful in persuading secondary schools to meet legal requirements for collective worship.

71. Where the partnership is effective, the levels of non-compliance and quality of provision reported in Ofsted's school inspection reports are monitored by SACRE. In some cases SACREs have requested the LEA to undertake their own analysis of the provision and practice in collective worship. However, in several cases this represented a dilemma for SACREs where many secondary schools are not meeting statutory requirements because of the demand on them to organise a daily act of worship required more people and resources than were available. LEA link advisers generally do not make this aspect of non-compliance a priority for improvement and many SACRE members interviewed were sympathetic to schools' situations and expressed the view that the law should be changed to allow fewer acts of worship of high quality focused on the spiritual development of young people. Guidance has been issued by most SACREs on collective worship, often in association with spiritual development. This guidance is often of high quality, actively involves members of SACRE in its development, and is realistic, accurate and supportive.

One LEA inspected had a national reputation for guidance on collective worship, largely due to the expertise and interest of the senior adviser. Over the years, specific guidance documents on collective worship have been issued to schools, drawing on principles of flexibility allowed within the legislation. These documents were discussed by SACRE before being commended to schools.

The LEA published a termly bulletin offering articles and advice on worship. In all, 137 schools subscribe, including schools from outside the LEA.

How far does the SACRE contribute effectively to the social cohesion agenda, by improving religious/racial harmony in the community and support for inclusion in schools?

72. SACREs are statutory bodies that include representatives of all local faiths. Although their statutory activities are limited to matters relating to RE and collective worship, they clearly have the potential to play a unique role in pursuing the government's social cohesion agenda as well as supporting the ideal of respecting diversity. In recognition of this, some LEAs have organised specific training for SACREs on issues to do with anti-racism and social inclusion.

73. All members of SACREs interviewed acknowledged that their membership had significantly increased their understanding and appreciation of other faiths. They also recognised the unique role of religious education in promoting mutual understanding in a multi-faith community, and this recognition had been written into most agreed syllabuses. Individual SACREs had produced outcomes of work in this area, such as a calendar of festivals in the local community or a poster of children's drawings reflecting on the destruction of the World Trade Centre.

74. Many SACREs acknowledge their potential for a wider role in promoting social cohesion. Not surprisingly, SACREs in areas of high religious diversity play a significant role, as in the following three examples.

The LEA is very clear that the SACRE is one of the most established and effective contexts for building positive links with local community groups, particularly those of ethnic and religious minorities. There is a long tradition of multi-faith representation on the SACRE and a whole raft of inter-connecting links, relationships and activities which place the work of the SACRE at the heart of the LEA's commitment to social cohesion and the development of religious and racial harmony. The partnership between the SACRE and the LEA is committed to sustaining the funding of the Inter-faith Education Centre and to the role it plays in the development of social and racial cohesion, through its work with other agencies such as the police, nurses and refuse managers.

One SACRE has established a 'Faith Visitors Forum'. It aims to develop a network of support between the faiths represented in the LEA and schools by acting as a resource which teachers can access. This is done through school visits and opening up places of worship to visitors. It requires considerable energy from volunteers which is freely given. The annual lecture from the SACRE provides another means whereby links between it and the wider community are sustained. The LEA's recruitment and retention service also utilises the expertise of individual SACRE members and their places of worship to provide an experience of a multicultural and multi-faith community to trainee teachers from other parts of the country.

SACRE meetings are occasionally held in local places of worship and are often preceded by a SACRE forum meeting which provides an opportunity for members, without the involvement of LEA officers, to discuss matters of mutual concern, for example, links between communities and local racial tensions. In addition, the LEA has consulted its SACRE on a number of matters beyond its remit, such as school re-organisation where there was a religious and community dimension to the decision. More specifically, the SACRE has been instrumental in helping to set up and support a number of important initiatives in the county including the provision of a Muslim outreach worker through an 'Understanding Islam' project. To date the outreach worker has visited nearly 80 schools and 25 mosques as part of an exercise designed to promote community dialogue. The project has involved the Commission for Racial Equality, the LEA's ethnic minority team and the local branch of the National Union of Teachers. A further initiative supported by SACRE has been a 'Building Bridges' project designed to encourage social cohesion. One impact of the work of the SACRE in promoting community harmony has been a significant reduction in the number of parents who withdraw their children from RE and collective worship in schools.

75. Equally impressive has been the determination of some SACREs in areas of low religious diversity to raising local awareness of faiths that are not represented extensively in the locality.

The SACRE supported the issuing of guidance on teaching about Islam in local schools to promote integration of the small number of Muslim pupils in the LEA. In response to primary teachers' concerns about teaching Christmas to Muslim children, SACRE has supported the production of a Qur'anic version of the Christmas story, which has been beautifully illustrated in the calligraphic style by pupils from a Devon primary school. This raised the children's awareness of the story from another cultural and belief perspective and helped them understand the prohibition in Islamic art on drawing people. The story was to be placed on the Internet in Arabic and English and was to include activities to enable the class compare and contrast

the two stories. The SACRE was asked to comment on a guide to religion and culture for the LEA, intended to provide information for social workers and other council staff, particularly health workers, about religions present in the county.