

NASACRE briefing

Non-statutory guidance and the writing of an agreed syllabus

SACREs, Local Authorities and Agreed Syllabus Conferences

Every five years a local authority has to review its agreed syllabus for religious education (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/schedule/31>). In order to do this it must establish an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC). This Conference is not the same as a SACRE, although it can have the same membership – with the exception of co-opted members. Where the membership of the ASC and the SACRE are the same ideally the ASC should have a different Chair and Vice Chair to the SACRE, as they are statutorily different bodies. It does not follow, though, that they should have the same membership and this may itself be undesirable. The normal pattern for the establishment of an ASC is as follows:

1. When SACRE knows that the Syllabus needs to be reviewed, either because of the five-year cycle or because the current agreed syllabus is no longer fit for purpose Committees A, B and C vote for a recommendation to the Local Authority to establish a Conference for the review of the syllabus. (As Committee D is the Local Authority it doesn't get a vote.)
2. The Local Authority appoints members to the ASC on the same lines as that of a SACRE, four committees representing the key stakeholders in RE. This body may share the membership of SACRE, it may have some of the members of SACRE but not all, it may have some members of SACRE and new appointees or it may be a wholly different membership to SACRE.
3. The ASC meets to agree a syllabus. When all four committees agree on the syllabus it is then presented to the Local Authority for adoption. The Local Authority may or may not adopt the syllabus. If it doesn't it can send the syllabus back to the ASC to make changes or it may adopt any other agreed syllabus currently in use.
4. If SACRE is content with the choice of the Local Authority then the syllabus would stand. If SACRE was discontent the process would move back to stage one and there would be a vote of Committees A, B and C to review the syllabus.

Whilst it may not be practical in many areas for the membership of SACRE and the ASC to be different it does have some advantages. Firstly, the ASC might need to meet more often than SACRE and if they have different memberships this might be feasible, especially as the ASC is time limited in a way that SACRE isn't. Secondly, SACRE has the role of advising, monitoring and scrutinising the work of the ASC. If they are the same people this is difficult to achieve. Finally, it is SACRE's role to monitor the impact of the syllabus once it has been adopted. If the SACRE is not the same as the ASC this allows for a more objective form of monitoring and a basis for advice when the next review takes place.

The development of national non-statutory guidance

There is a serious question as to what informs the Agreed Syllabus review process. SACRE's monitoring of the impact of any current syllabus will be key to this, as will consultation with faith communities, schools, parents and pupils. Since 1994, though, there has developed guidance on what an agreed syllabus should contain and what it might look like, although such models were evident from the 1950s onwards. 1994 was a key year for this as a result of the 1993 Education Act that required a five yearly cycle of review because of the way that many local authorities had ignored the requirements of the 1988 Education Reform Act.

As a result of the 1993 Education Act the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority worked with faith communities and educators to produce two model syllabuses to inform the development of agreed syllabuses. Many syllabuses were reviewed in 1995 as a result and the impact of the Model Syllabuses can be clearly seen in these documents. With the changes that occurred to the National Curriculum in 2000 it was felt that new guidance was necessary and in 2004 the government and QCA published the non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education (NFRE).

In fact the NFRE was deemed so important that in the 2007 Ofsted subject survey: Making Sense of Religion comments were made about its use in agreed syllabuses and the impact it had on RE in the classroom. Ofsted heavily criticised syllabuses which had used the NFRE in a piecemeal fashion – not withstanding Ofsted's desire to see a 'national syllabus' for RE and a change in the statutory mechanisms for RE; as seen in the 2007 and the 2010 report Transforming Religious Education.

The latest advice, produced by the RE Council of England and Wales, is of the same provenance as previous guidance. It seeks to 'normalise' in relation and in terms of the National Curriculum. As such it is referred to as *A National Curriculum for Religious Education* even though there has been no change to the legislation at all and RE remains locally determined.

How should SACREs, ASCs and the LA use the guidance?

So how should SACREs and ASCs use the guidance? Here are some pointers:

1. SACRE will wish to discuss the guidance before an ASC takes place. It may wish to recommend the guidance to the ASC:
 - a. for its consideration without reservation
 - b. with recommendations – such as which religions might be taught at which key stage alongside Christianity or whether to include non-religious world views
 - c. with reservation – such as the need to look carefully as to the coherence of the guidance and its usefulness for framing RE within the Authority
2. The ASC will wish to look at the guidance in light of the practice of the current syllabus and may wish to use it as a basis for consultation.

Similarly, it will want to take on board the discussions about the guidance that have already taken place in SACRE.

What the guidance will not do is specify content per se, given that this is also locally determined. Hence, relative to the framework of learning that the guidance proposes, the ASC will want to attach content that is locally relevant.

Finally, the guidance makes no mention of assessment but this will remain important in terms of setting the standards for RE and the framework that SACRE will need in order to monitor standards.

The Local Authority too can use the guidance when it goes through discussions about whether to adopt the syllabus recommended or not. If the syllabus varies widely from the guidance LAs have the right to ask why. In this case members of Committee D of the ASC are crucial as they are the LA representatives on the ASC. If they cannot answer that question the quality of the work of the ASC can be rightly called into question.

Conclusion

Agreed Syllabus Conferences are statutory bodies and Agreed Syllabuses are statutory documents. This has not changed. Agreed Syllabuses can stipulate the content of RE for non-denominational and Controlled schools, as well as the arrangements for assessment and the time to be given to RE in a school's curriculum, within reason. The syllabus can also be adopted by Aided schools, Academies and Free Schools, in the case of the latter two as a way of fulfilling their funding agreement with the DfE.

ASCs should take any guidance supported by the government seriously but ultimately it is the ASCs syllabus, once adopted by the LA, which is the statutory document. Guidance remains guidance.