

# 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). ASCs should not be confused with SACREs. They may share their membership with a SACRE, have some members of the SACRE with other appointed members or be wholly different from a SACRE – although the latter would be unusual. Like a SACRE ASCs have four Committees (they are called Groups on a SACRE) but unlike SACREs they have no mechanism for co-opting members. Where the membership of the ASC and the SACRE are the same ideally the ASC should have a different Chair and Vice or Deputy Chair to the SACRE, as they are statutorily different bodies.

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 Groups A, B and C vote for a recommendation to the Local Authority to establish a Conference for the review of the syllabus. (As Group 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. As stated above it may have some of the members of SACRE but not all (co-optees), 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 Groups 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. By 1992 it was clear that many local authorities were simply ignoring the spirit, if not the letter, of the 1988 Education Reform Act and so the government passed the Education Act 1993, which set a date for a review of a syllabus, if one hadn't taken place since 1988, and then required a five yearly cycle of review. The five year review was then passed into a statutory instrument and restated in later legislation.

As a result of the 1993 Education Act the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) 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).

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*, and the 2013 report *Religious Education: realising the potential*.

The latest advice, produced by the RE Council of England and Wales, is of the same provenance as previous guidance. It seeks to bring RE in line with the National Curriculum. As such it is referred to as *A Curriculum Framework for Religious Education* (sometimes referred to in the document as *A National Curriculum Framework for RE*) 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 does 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. To inform this process ASCs might want to refer to the *Faith Communities' Working Group Reports (SCAA, 1994)* which set out the proposed content for RE for each religion and can be found at:

<http://www.reonline.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/SCAA-Key-Features.pdf>

Finally, the Curriculum Framework for RE repeats the National Curriculum guidance on assessing the subject, it also contains end of key statements in the form of progress statements that ASC might find useful.

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.