

## *Why SACREs should complain to schools when they neglect RE*



I think it is reasonable to say that almost all SACREs undertake activities that involve the monitoring of provision for RE as part of their work. This monitoring supports one of the main functions of SACRE and allows them to carry out the statutory duty to advise the local authority (see figure 1 below). These monitoring activities often include, reviews of Ofsted reports, reviewing published information on school websites, analysis of GCSE entry and performance data, consideration of school workforce data and visits to schools to observe RE.



to advise the local education authority upon such matters connected with ... religious education to be given in accordance with an agreed syllabus as the authority may refer to the council or as the council may see fit ...

Figure 1: Education Act 1996 c.56

All these are valuable activities and in the past, a report to the local authority from SACRE advising them of concerns about RE in a school would usually lead to the resolution of the problem. Sadly, for many reasons, that is no longer the most common pattern. The State of Nation Report<sup>1</sup> (left) makes clear that there are serious problems with the level of provision for RE in secondary schools in England and we know that this situation is almost certainly mirrored in primary schools.

### What has changed?

In recent times, even when advice has been offered to a local authority or academy trust that a school is not meeting its legal responsibilities in relation to RE, it is increasingly common for no action to have been taken that results in those schools amending their provision. Chairs of SACRE sometimes write to Headteachers and/or a Governing Board but many annual reports that I have read recently as well as minutes of meetings indicate that the names of the same schools often appear as causes for concern year after year. This suggests that little has changed. In the case of Academies, local authorities have limited authority, but even for LA maintained schools without a religious character, the local authority officer is in an unenviable position since the possibility of academisation inevitably changes the nature of their conversations with school leaders.

A cloud of powerlessness seems to have descended over SACREs and, a myth has been shared suggesting that no one can do anything about the situation. **Put very simply, this is just not true.** The action I want to suggest is not without risk, but it is possible to effect change. Schools that are bound by the local agreed syllabus can be held accountable for their legal responsibility to 'make

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Free Resources/SOTN RE 2017 Report web v4.pdf>

provision for Religious Education in accordance' with that Agreed Syllabus. NATRE has tested this process and shown that the Department for Education is ready, willing and able to act.

One note of caution about this exercise. Before making any complaint, it is wise to check the language of the legal requirements of your Agreed Syllabus. For example, if the stated requirement is that "schools *should* make provision ..." that is not the same as "It is mandatory for ..." or "It is a requirement of this syllabus that schools must ...". If SACRE "recommends" that, schools can choose not to follow that recommendation.

## What can be done?

### Step 1

If, as a consequence of a monitoring exercise, a SACRE becomes concerned about a school, then the first step will probably continue to be to send a letter to the school. Monitoring data can sometimes be misleading, and the school leadership team should obviously have the opportunity to respond. A suggested template for such a letter to a LA maintained school and an academy can be found on NATRE's website in the section "Being on your local SACRE" (additional Documents to support you) [here](#).

### Step 2

If the Headteacher responds to the first letter, then SACRE will need to consider if the response is satisfactory. i.e. that the school is actually compliant with the Agreed Syllabus. If not, then a second letter will need to be written. On this occasion, the phrase 'formal complaint' will need to be mentioned. A suggested following up letter for such a letter can be found [here](#).

### Step 3

If the Headteacher failed to respond to the follow up letter, then SACRE will need to consider making a formal complaint. A case study of the use of the complaints process can be examined [here](#). Appendix 2 explains how to use the complaints process. Appendix 3 is an exemplar letter beginning this process.

## What are the challenges of using the complaints process?

Making a complaint against a local school may feel counter-intuitive to a SACRE, especially when so much effort is made to build relationships at all levels. I want to argue that the current situation for RE in English schools constitutes extreme circumstances and in many areas this means that extreme measures are justified. In the end, it is the students that are losing out as a consequence of schools failing to make provision for RE for all of its pupils or where tokenistic levels of RE are provided that fail to prepare pupils for life in the modern world.

## What are the challenges of not using the complaints process?

If in one in four schools in England, there is no provision for RE at all, there cannot be many SACREs that are not aware of a school that is either partially or completely ignoring their responsibilities for pupils' RE. NATRE receives regular calls for help and support from teachers who are having teaching hours cut. Those people who follow RE social media, can be in no doubt of the scale of the problem. I believe that without action from all sectors of the RE community, the situation can only get worse. SACREs are arguably the best placed to deal with this issue and I believe it is important for them to do so to demonstrate their vital role in securing effective religious education for the children in their local area.

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