

EAST OF ENGLAND FAITHS COUNCIL



Working with SACREs: an introduction for Local Inter Faith Organisations (LIFOs) in the East of England

What is a SACRE?

A SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education) is the statutory body convened by the Local Authority (LA) to advise it regarding the quality, standards and progress of Religious Education (RE), Collective Worship and spiritual development in foundation, community and voluntary controlled church schools. The origins of SACREs go back to the Education Act of 1944 reinforced by the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the Education Act of 1996. LAs must appoint representatives to each of the four committees that constitute a SACRE. These include: Christian denominations other than the Church of England, and other faith groups represented in the local authority's area; the Church of England; teachers' professional associations/unions and/or teachers in the local authority; elected councillors.

In the East of England there are 10 SACREs, each relating to a County Council or Unitary Authority.

SACREs have five responsibilities:

- they advise the LA in matters concerning the quality and provision of teaching RE and provision of Collective Worship: this includes monitoring standards of RE according to the agreed syllabus, together with the overall effectiveness of the syllabus, and provision and quality of collective worship in the local schools
- they advise the LA on anything to do with RE, particularly advising on the support needed for effective teaching of RE in 'community, voluntary controlled foundations schools' and collective worship in 'community schools'. Maintained schools have a duty to promote community cohesion
- they can decide applications from schools to modify the legal requirement to hold an act of collective worship of broadly Christian character (such requests typically are made by schools with a large number of pupils from non-Christian backgrounds)
- they can require the LA to review its Agreed Syllabus for RE, and approve any revision, but it must be revised within five years of the last review and subsequently every five years
- to produce an annual report.

SACREs have a very important role to play in supporting RE and in contributing to the raising of standards in the subject.

LAs are responsible for providing support for their SACRE, and in practice the effectiveness of a SACRE will depend very much on the quality of that support.

SACRE members are formally appointed by the LA and are representatives, not delegates, so they bring their own views based on their individual skills, background and experience to the SACRE. It is expected that SACRE members will report regularly to the

group they represent and that each group will review membership on a regular basis. It is important to bear in mind that not all SACRE members come from a faith background.

Interaction between LIFOs and SACREs

Local Inter Faith Organisations (LIFOs) promote good relationships and greater understanding between people of different faith communities in their area, act as a point of contact with external bodies and make input to local decisions. Many originally arose from a 'grassroots' desire to foster dialogue between local faith communities, but more recently LIFOs have been formed or developed by the involvement and encouragement of LAs who see them as a crucial part of engaging and consulting with local communities.

LIFOs are not statutory bodies, and they vary widely in the ways in which they are constituted and the activities in which they engage. This is reflected in a survey carried out by NASACRE (National Association of SACREs) and the Inter Faith Network for the UK in 2009 which suggested that contact between SACREs and LIFOs ranges from minimal to, in a few instances, close and successful collaboration.

LIFOs and SACREs could interact in several ways. Most obviously, LIFOs provide a potentially valuable source of members for SACREs but there are other opportunities for collaboration. For example, LIFOs may be able to provide links into the faith communities in an area, ensure that information about faith communities in its locality is available, assist a SACRE with consultations, advise on the planning and promotion of activities and even undertake initiatives jointly with a SACRE.

It is important that LIFOs report back to their own faith communities on their interaction with the SACRE.

What could LIFOs and SACREs do together?

There are a number of possibilities for partnership working that LIFOs and SACREs could explore, for example:

- School visits by faith community members
- Visits to places of worship
- Information about different faith traditions
- Directories of faith groups in a locality
- Joint responses to events (eg Holocaust Memorial Day), government documents etc
- Joint working on countering extremism
- Joint working on local community cohesion
- Exhibitions
- Schools conferences
- Youth forums
- Training programmes eg for schools visitors
- Provision of or advice on potential SACRE members by the LIFO
- Capacity building
- Literacy from both sides – 'bilingualism'
- Festivals/meals
- Lectures
- Other partnerships with eg police, equality
- Advice on creating 'Sacred space'
- Advice on the content of the RE syllabus.

We are not suggesting that all of the above will be possible! It must be recognised that there are also constraints and challenges. Many LIFOs are not as well resourced (either financially or in terms of their members' time) as they need to be to meet all the demands made upon them, and SACREs too may have limited resources.

It is important that LAs are kept informed about joint working between LIFOs and SACREs as they may be able actively to partner or support certain projects, and in any case they should be made aware of any planned activities or events.

Becoming a SACRE member

SACREs need faith members who reflect the diversity of the various faith communities in the LA area, and may approach LIFOs to ask whether there is somebody from a particular faith group who would be interested in becoming a member. Specialist knowledge of education is not necessary (other SACRE members provide this) but a willingness to attend meetings regularly (there are usually three or four a year), to read the papers circulated and to offer knowledge about a particular faith group and make connections to its networks is essential. It is, however, important that faith group members do not approach SACRE membership as an opportunity to promote a particular faith point of view.

In addition to their responsibility for religious education and collective worship SACREs are in a very good position to help schools contribute to community cohesion and a SACRE with committed faith members who present their own tradition positively and listen to and respect the traditions of others can be a very effective model of cohesion for children and young people and the wider community generally.

Each SACRE has its own constitution and the clerk/secretary appointed by the LA will brief new members about its requirements. More detailed information about becoming a SACRE member can be found in a booklet called *'So You're Joining Your Local SACRE...A Handbook for SACRE Members'* that has been produced by NASACRE in collaboration with the Free Churches' Education Committee and is available from info@nasacre.org.uk at a price of £1.00 per copy (inc. p&p).