

A short guide to SACREs

(Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education)

For further information see Humanists UK's [Guide to SACREs](#).

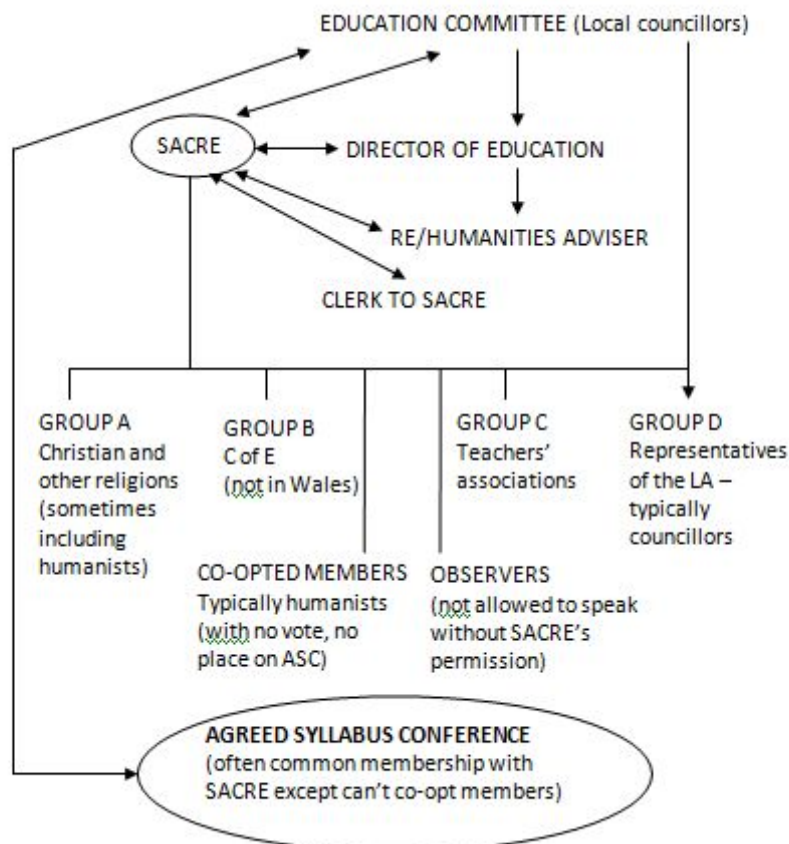
What are SACREs and why do they exist?

Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) advise local authorities (LAs) responsible for education and schools on matters connected with RE and collective worship. SACREs generally meet once a term.

Religious education is statutory for all pupils aged 5-18. The subject is, however, not on the national curriculum. Instead the content of RE syllabuses is set locally. Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs) are set up by SACREs every five years to review the locally agreed syllabus. They are normally made up of similar membership to the SACRE.

Who sits on SACREs?

Organisation of SACREs varies according to the size of the LA and its personnel, but it is usually something like this:



The [Education Act 1996](#) requires local authorities to appoint a SACRE consisting of groups of persons representative of (A) local Christian denominations and other religions; (B) (except in Wales) the Church of England; (C) local teachers' associations; and (D) the local authority. Each group has a single vote. The SACRE has the power to co-opt additional members.

It is also a requirement that meetings are to be held in public (except when confidential information is to be disclosed). It is as a consequence of this that SACREs and ASCs must be open to anyone who wishes to be an observer.

Humanists have been invited to sit as full members on over 40 SACREs (normally as members of group A, but sometimes as members of group C or group D). Many more have been co-opted onto SACREs and also often given voting rights.

What do SACREs and ASCs do?

Religious education

SACREs advise local authorities and support schools with the provision of religious education. Religious education must be taught to all pupils (ages 5-18) in full-time education, except for those excused at the wish of their parents.

The nature of religious education varies depending upon the type of school.

- In schools with no designated religious character, the syllabus is set by the ASC and overseen by the SACRE.
- Academies and free schools are free to devise their own curriculum. Many choose to teach the local or another agreed syllabus; however, there is no requirement for them to do so.
- In schools with a designated religious character:
 - In foundation or voluntary controlled schools with a religious character, the locally agreed syllabus must be taught. However, if parents request that their children's RE is taught in accordance with the trust deeds and faith of the school, then the children of those parents are instead taught confessional RE.
 - In voluntary aided schools, academies, and free schools with a religious character, RE is set by the governors and is in accordance with the tenets of the faith of the school. However, if parents request that their children are taught the locally agreed syllabus, as set by the ASC, then those children are instead taught the locally agreed syllabus.

Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs)

Local syllabuses have to be reviewed at least once every five years, and this usually entails setting up an ASC. They are normally made up of similar membership to the SACRE.

There is no legal provision for an ASC to include co-opted members but it can seek advice it considers appropriate to inform the development of effective RE provision in its area. Many humanists take part as full members of ASCs whereas others have participated in an advisory role.

ASCs will develop new syllabuses in a variety of ways including building on frameworks such as the RE Council's Curriculum Framework (2013), buying in a syllabus from a different local authority or a commercial provider, collaborating on a syllabus with other local authorities, or writing their own from scratch.

The inclusion of humanism on the RE syllabus

Locally agreed syllabuses are expected to 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain'. However, following a landmark judgement in the High Court (R (Fox) v Secretary of State), which found that the Government had made 'an error of law' when it claimed a GCSE syllabus that left out non-religious worldviews such as humanism would meet the statutory need for RE, 'the state has a duty to take care that information or knowledge included in the curriculum is conveyed in a pluralistic manner' and 'must accord equal respect to different religious convictions, and to non-religious belief'.

As explained in [legal guidance](#) on the ruling written by Professor of Law at King's College London Satvinder Juss, 'an RE course which provides for the study of religions of a small size or little relevance without giving comparable attention to non-religious worldviews of the same or a greater size or relevance will be unlawful'. This latter point is vital – the law is not just about granting each perspective respect but about content.

For this reason, for the purpose of developing the RE curriculum, the term 'principal religions' includes religious and non-religious worldviews such as humanism. Only if SACREs ensure that they understand the term in this way can they also ensure that any curriculum developed in line with the agreed syllabus will meet the requirements of the Human Rights Act 1998, where the legal understanding of 'religion' encompasses both religious and non-religious beliefs.

Support for the inclusion of humanism in RE also comes from the [Religious Education Council of England and Wales](#), the 2018 [Commission on RE](#), numerous other reports into RE over recent years, and large numbers of teachers (demonstrated through the significant increase in demand for resources and training to support their teaching about humanism).

Collective worship

SACREs will advise schools on matters relating to collective worship.

The Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 requires all pupils at community, foundation, and voluntary schools to take part each day in an act of collective worship. Parents have the right to withdraw their children and sixth-form students have the right to withdraw themselves. In schools without a religious designation, 'collective worship shall be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character.'

Being 'of a broadly Christian character' does not mean that assemblies must be specifically Christian, nor that they must include prayers or hymns. SACREs can support schools with ensuring their acts of collective worship are inclusive to all pupils. Humanists UK campaign for acts of collective worship to be replaced with inclusive assemblies that are open to all young people regardless of their religion or belief. Inclusive assemblies are available on the Assemblies for All website: assembliesforall.org.uk.

How well does the SACRE system work?

Some SACREs have well-attended meetings and are efficiently conducted with good clerical and advisory support. They are proactively engaged with supporting local schools. Other SACREs are poorly attended and have badly run meetings. They are not well supported by their LAs and provide limited support to schools. Many SACREs have an open-minded educational approach and are inclusive of humanists, while in a few, narrow, intolerant attitudes can dominate.

When it comes to locally agreed syllabuses, whilst the opportunity to add local flavour to RE syllabuses can be positive, this does not outweigh the harm caused by inconsistencies in syllabus quality and inclusivity across the country, nor would a national syllabus remove the possibility of an exploration of religion and belief in the local area. A string of reports in the last few years have endorsed the development of a national syllabus or entitlement for all pupils, including most recently the Commission on Religious Education's final report (2018). Humanists UK support this move.