



# Strong SACRES Good RE

**Summary of Conference Findings  
from the three national developmental workshops offered for SACRE  
members by QCA, NASACRE and the RE Council in November 2006**

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## **Preface**

It is a significant indicator of the emerging national consensus on Religious Education that the three national organisations represented in this Summary collaborated to sponsor national workshops for members of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs). This Summary of Conference Findings captures both the challenges and the points of good practice shared by SACRE members at the three workshops that took place in November 2006. The organisations share a view that SACREs are an important element in strengthening teaching, learning and assessment in RE. It is also becoming widely recognised that SACREs have a vital contribution to make to the deeper understanding of diversity and to the national agenda of community cohesion and interdependence. In the belief that strong SACREs make for good RE and have an opportunity to enhance community cohesion locally, we commend this summary to SACRE members and to Directors of Children's Services in local authorities in England, as well as to other interested parties.

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## **1. Introduction**

QCA, NASACRE and the RE Council collaborated to offer three national developmental workshops for SACRE members in London, Leeds and Bristol in November 2006. The workshop aims were to:

- disseminate good practice among SACREs nationally in a way that deals positively with developmental issues
- initiate piloting of new SACRE monitoring and reporting processes

Although the structure of the days had some variations, the main recurrent focus was on identifying ways in which SACREs could overcome their difficulties, extend their procedures for sharing good practice and become more effective. The discussions used the SACRE self-evaluation guidance provided by Ofsted and QCA. Within each day, workshop sessions focused on aspects of the self-evaluation process. These aspects are used in the findings section, below, to collect the points that were made by participants. It was clear that the three 'stages' identified in the Ofsted/QCA guidance (developing, established and advanced SACREs) are most useful as a description of practice in specific areas, rather than as an overall evaluation of a SACRE. One delegate commented that "all SACREs are developing", in the sense that they are all learning and improving, as their membership changes and their targets move.

Taken together, the three workshops attracted 162 delegates representing 110 SACREs, about 73% of the SACREs in England. As some delegates represented more than one SACRE, a slightly higher percentage of representation is closer to reality, but cannot be exactly calculated.

## **2. Main findings of workshop discussions**

These findings represent the extensive sharing, through participants' discussions, of their main challenges and practical solutions. The reporting of challenges and difficulties is taken from the written records of group discussions in the three workshops. In this Summary, challenges and difficulties are gathered under three of the headings used by the self-evaluation guidance: standards and quality of provision in RE; management of the SACRE and partnership with the LA and other key stakeholders; and contribution of the SACRE to the social and racial harmony agenda (community cohesion and diversity).

The challenges tend to be recurrent across several local authorities, so no specific LA is singled out. Solutions are sometimes general and sometimes specific to local authorities. The groups' discussion notes identified many strongly recurrent patterns, both negative and positive. Occasionally, quotation marks indicate a significant word or phrase used by one or more delegates in discussions. This Summary avoids repetition by identifying each main challenge and practical solution once only. The listing of challenges and solutions does not therefore imply any order of importance, or indicate any particular level of support. Some challenges and solutions were identified by only small numbers of SACREs.

Therefore the concerns of some SACREs should not be attributed to all, just as the solutions proffered by some SACREs would not work in all contexts. Nevertheless, SACREs and national associations should find it useful to study the practical solutions, to select and adapt those which fit the local context, and, where possible, to contact another SACRE for a discussion of how the solution could be achieved. It is recommended that contact is made through the executive of the National Association of SACREs.

**(a)**

### ***Self-evaluation Guidance section***

#### **1: Standards and quality of provision of RE**

##### **Context**

As part of the new relationship with schools, the climate of monitoring standards and quality has changed nationally across all subjects. QCA no longer monitors the curriculum, but reviews, researches and interacts with the profession to collect perspectives on quality and to disseminate good practice. Section 5 Ofsted inspections no longer yield subject-specific information in reports, but Ofsted does conduct periodic reviews of subjects nationally. The era of 'light touch' offers school leaders more autonomy and responsibility. RE clearly has to operate in this new culture. In the interests of their own effectiveness in strengthening the quality of RE locally, SACREs may well periodically seek out more detail from individual schools. However, before a SACRE makes any request for information, it needs to ask why and to what use the data would be put, other than that which the Head and LA would achieve. Some data are inert, and do not offer a narrative of capacity for improvement. For this, relationships are necessary. The culture that grows up around a SACRE will control the extent to which it is trusted, and seen as a helpful critical friend, among teachers and Heads.

##### **Challenges to be met**

- It may be hard to justify asking schools for RE-specific data such as results, levels or evaluations of quality of teaching/learning.
- Requests for any data or self-evaluation may create extra work and may cut across agreements based on the new relationship with schools.
- Given the weakness of some forms of RE assessment, and their imbalance in learning about/learning from terms, some assessment data may be misleading.
- National analysis of standards cannot be done while local agreed syllabuses use different versions of the 8-level scale.
- Non-specialists, or specialists with their own agenda, may not know that their teaching approaches, standards and quality are adrift of local or national expectations, and may therefore use the SEF too optimistically.
- Some school data systems for recording attainment do include a column for RE while others do not.
- The national strategies have improved teaching, but sometimes this has been built on a weak RE syllabus. Syllabus review in the light of the NSNF is important in underpinning quality.
- Some worrying practices, such as routinely using TAs to take RE, are unchallenged.

## **Practical solutions**

- Collaborate with the LA to ensure that any available data is shared with the SACRE.
- Establish a specialist monitoring and review group doing visits to schools.
- Train and use members to make supportive, dialogue-based visits to schools, using the subject SEF as basis for dialogue. and support (these members would need to be CRB checked); "it has to be done in a spirit of showing interest rather than for monitoring purposes". When seen as supportive, and school names are not circulated, this can work well.
- In small LAs, each school can have a link SACRE member.
- Have a quality and standards sub-committee that meets before the main SACRE; make this a central, strong function of the SACRE.
- Use pupil/student voice procedures to discuss quality and to review and revise agreed syllabuses; have regular student reps on SACRE; have a youth SACRE, or links to a local youth parliament.
- Organise sixth-form conferences and use them for gaining pupil perspectives on quality in general terms.
- Use questionnaires or electronically-based survey forms that may be more user-friendly.
- Offer a 'service' to schools, such as scrutinising their subject SEF when an inspection is due, training in SEF writing, structured visits to other schools, or 'ask an expert' sessions.
- Issue briefing papers that support schools on issues such as death and bereavement, and other support materials.
- Write letters of congratulation to specific schools.
- Set up a cycle of questionnaires and visits to primary and secondary schools, coordinated by an Adviser or AST, or a cycle of overall development.
- Collaborate with advisers/inspectors for PSHE and Citizenship, which face similar issues in schools.
- Establish regional networks to share assessment data and to look at exemplification samples.
- Ensure that 8-level scales are in the statutory section of an agreed syllabus.
- Set up annual SACRE prizes for RE.
- Invite the regular meetings of Heads to pick up on data about collective worship.
- Celebrate the success of special schools in RE.

**(b)**

## ***Self-evaluation Guidance section***

### **2: Management of the SACRE and partnership with the LA and other key stakeholders**

#### **Context**

An effective SACRE is one that has the public and material support of its local authority. It has good access to education advisers/inspectors and to other key staff. Its channels of communication with the LA are positive and frequent. Its agenda coincides to a considerable extent with the LA's developmental plans,

and it is pro-active in raising issues as appropriate. LA staff know the function of their SACRE and have regard for its advice. Its representation and relationships with other stakeholders, such as faith communities, professional associations and training providers, are open, dynamic and positive, allowing it to seek help as necessary.

### **Challenges to be met**

- Length of time between meetings.
- Membership constantly changing.
- Attendance sometimes poor, sometimes inquorate.
- "Talking shop with one person doing all the work".
- Lack of professional/clerical support.
- Lack of systematic access to advisers, portfolio holders and other decision makers in Council.
- Patchy representation of LA.
- Key SACRE members' names and contact details not known to NASACRE, QCA or others – leads to isolation.
- Still some misconceptions about nature of RE.
- Small LA SACREs have specific challenges.
- Lack of specialist adviser; consultants are valuable but have limited time.

### **Practical solutions**

- Be in the LA strategic development plan and stay abreast of current educational and children's services changes.
- Have a development plan costed for funding and linked to LA targets; and have a five year cycle round agreed syllabus implementation; ensure clear awareness of how SACRE contributes to overall goals and targets.
- Be pro-active, act as a pressure group, recruit high-powered members, develop priorities.
- Put meeting dates for whole year into councillors' and governors' diary circulations.
- Attract attention through articles, exhibitions, projects likely to stimulate positive interest, e.g. positive images of faith/diversity – so everyone knows what the SACRE is, what it achieves and how to contact it.
- Have regular strategic meetings with LA officer(s), emphasising legal role (1988 and subsequent Acts) and potential to deliver LA targets.
- Have a Councillor or some other independent person as Chair.
- Invite head of school improvement, SIP team, chair of education, cabinet members or other crucial staff to meet SACRE regularly – with a specific purpose that is clearly of mutual benefit.
- Report regularly through the Council's committee structure.
- Manage quality of relationships with key partners and LA officers; build up trust and support, do not be always complaining or asking.
- Organise projects to attract funding from identified budget sources, including NASACRE awards.
- Set up partnership with cohesion team.
- Develop publicity materials for schools and councillors, e.g. fliers, posters, booklets, PowerPoint shows, explaining what SACRE does, being specific about how it supports schools, explaining what RE is and is not; develop case studies/exemplars of SACRE activity; use SACRE/LA logo on all materials.

- Use LA's electronic communications to reach schools.
- Establish a core group effecting action between meetings and reporting to full SACRE.
- Establish task groups, made up from each of the four committees, to take on projects, e.g. self-evaluation, school visits, quality and standards.
- Agree job descriptions for key personnel: chair, clerk, adviser/consultant.
- Protect budget – range of budgets is reported to be anything from £0 to £75,000; organise bids under current Council concerns, e.g. ECM, diversity and cohesion.
- Protect specialist adviser/consultant; ensure they are line managed by a LA adviser.
- With other local groups that have a similar set of interests (such as faiths forum), have a mutual representation agreement to make presence on key committees and strategic partnership groups easier.
- Have nationally facilitated linking of SACREs with similar challenges (e.g. size, viability); seek help in making contacts through NASACRE.
- Visit and observe neighbouring SACRE meetings, share ideas; in London and other metropolitan areas, collaborate on issues; organise regional conferences or other events, e.g. annual cross-phase discussion with book display and exhibition.
- Get into governor training sessions.
- Organise induction sessions(s) for new members and annual ongoing development for existing members.
- Ensure that names and contact details of SACRE office holders are known to Council, NASACRE and QCA.
- Take one section of the SACRE self-evaluation at each meeting, rather than attempting it all in one session; balance completion of task with full, inclusive discussion of issues.
- Change or vary times of meetings.

(c)

### ***Self-evaluation Guidance section***

#### **5: Contribution of the SACRE to the social and racial harmony agenda (community cohesion and diversity)**

##### **Context**

Religion is in the forefront of much media coverage, and many faith communities have open access to government. Now is a good time to raise the profile of SACREs by drawing attention to the ways they can contribute to diversity and cohesion. SACRE work in this area is sometimes questioned by those who ask whether it should be the core activity of a SACRE. If SACRE work is defined strictly in terms of the provisions of Circular 1/94, a contribution to diversity, respect and cohesion is not a core activity. Yet it is so closely linked to RE and to SMSCD that it cannot be seen as irrelevant. SACREs are places where religious, cultural and moral differences, which could lead to conflict, are handled positively in a collaborative venture. Local agreed syllabuses and the NSNF encourage people to see beyond their differences. Also, many SACREs report the usefulness of "hitching their wagon" to the diversity agenda of their LA, because this forms alliances and pays dividends in

terms of wider awareness of the potential of a SACRE to deliver social and educational benefits.

A successful SACRE can also ensure that its own procedures are inclusive. Its conduct of its own business takes account of the largely voluntary membership, some of whom will be lay people in education, and some of whom may have English as a second language. Induction, timing of meetings, location, hospitality, explanation of terms and establishment of relationships all play their part.

### **Challenges to be met**

- If the focus is on social and racial issues, religious/faith/belief perspectives can be marginalised.
- Community cohesion may distract a SACRE from its core business of RE and collective worship.
- Making contact with some faith communities can be a slow process requiring time, patience and persistence; often, SACRE members will need to take the first step.
- If SACREs behave bureaucratically, this can be excluding for some.

### **Practical solutions**

- Ensure a link to the LA community cohesion officer or diversity and inclusion unit, or equivalent.
- Use local faith and inter-faith networks to build strong partnerships and support recruitment and retention; avoid duplication, work with them.
- Establish, or liaise with, a young people's faith forum, or have young people join the SACRE, or join a youth SACRE.
- Award prizes such as young Muslim citizen of the year, young Humanist citizen of the year, etc.
- Make meetings purposeful, interesting and inclusive, with inputs from members, visits to places of interest, avoidance of jargon and acronyms.
- Ensure links with organisations such as police, youth service, connexions, health care trusts.
- Be pro-active in seeking out unnoticed groups, such as Travellers or Copts.
- Publish a resource book on local cultural diversity or cohesion issues, or a CD on local places of worship, or a faith directory .
- Take photographs of visits to places of worship, including faith community children (with permission) to include in a CD rom as part of syllabus support materials.
- Organise pairing of schools with different ethnic and religious diversities.
- SACRE membership can and should be 'sold' as excellent personal and professional development.
- Help minority faith community representatives, and others, to think about their capacity to be represented, to be pro-active and to choose successors in advance.
- Pair up with neighbouring SACREs to help recruit and retain members.
- Work with parents of different faiths, for instance by training guides for places of worship.
- Support the REC initiative with Muslim and Jewish communities.

- Train new members and establish protocols for induction and for reporting back to respective groups; this can be done through a “buddy system”.
- Meet in different places, including places of worship, with food and hospitality; this sends strong messages.
- Recommend that some community cohesion issues, such as religious tolerance, can best be treated in school jointly with Citizenship.
- Monitor selective withdrawal from RE, especially from units on Islam, and offer advice to Heads.
- Generate information leaflets, for parents, employers, political parties and faith leaders, on the community cohesion capacity of RE, highlighting the importance of the local agreed syllabus and NSNF.

### **3. Next steps**

The collaboration between QCA, NASACRE and the REC has produced a remarkable gathering of SACRE members, sharing their difficulties and good ideas with honesty and in a positive and cooperative spirit. It will now be for SACREs, supported by their adviser/consultant, by NASACRE, the RE Council and other national bodies, to discuss this collection of good practice by selecting appropriate actions. The evidence of good practice contained in this Summary will be used in proposals relating to the strengthening of SACREs which will be included in the emerging National Strategy for RE.

The three organisations that sponsored the November 2006 workshops would wish to recommend and encourage all SACREs to take the following actions:

1. Have an agenda item that reports on the workshop, considers this document and takes time to discuss the practical solutions and select those that best respond to the SACRE’s local context as understood by its own self-evaluation;
2. Consider further action reflecting any provisional agreements made in the November workshops, e.g. to pilot a new annual reporting format for the QCA, to partner a neighbouring SACRE or to initiate a local event;
3. Take out regular membership of, and contact with, NASACRE, to ensure effective communication with SACRE officers and to obtain maximum benefit for the SACRE.
4. Maintain and extend familiarity with national developments in RE through the RE Council's website and the gateway it provides to its fifty member organisations - professional associations and faith communities.

SACREs are a crucial part of educational effectiveness for RE, SMSCD and collective worship, as well as having an important contribution to community cohesion in public and communal life in this country. It is hoped that this Summary of participants’ accounts of good practice will prove very useful and relevant in helping all SACREs to move forward and become even more effective in their roles.