

Can/should the SACRE monitor the work of Academies in RE and collective worship or must they be allowed to 'go their own way'?

Part 1

Academies are independently funded state schools, outside the remit of the LA and therefore of the SACRE.

There are two types of academies: those set up by the present Coalition administration and those established by the previous government. All academies are required to teach RE.

The new academies have to do so according to their funding agreements, which can be amended, without recourse to the law, by the Secretary of State. For that reason, the statutory requirement for RE has been lifted for the first time since 1870.

Guidance produced by the previous government stipulated that all academies (at that time) should follow their locally agreed syllabus. This strengthened the wording of the existing funding agreements of the earliest academies, that academies should 'take account of their local agreed syllabus'. However the status of this advice in respect of these academies is now uncertain because of the post-election change of administration. Current advice from the DfE says new academies must provide RE according to the requirements for new agreed syllabuses as set out in the 1988 Education Reform Act, that is they *'must reflect the fact that the principal religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teachings and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.'*

SACREs are increasingly opening up their previous contacts, or establishing new relationships with the academies in their area, in a variety of ways.

Some are inviting representatives of academies in their LAs to be co-opted onto the SACRE. Increasingly SACREs are also approaching their main academy sponsors to offer support for their provision for RE and to try to establish what their position is on RE and collective worship. Such sponsors (Ark, Harris, and Ormiston for example) have 'families' of academies which cover a number of LA areas and/or form a cluster within a given LA.

The recently published RETool for SACRE self evaluation looks at relations with the academies sector and helps SACREs assess how effectively they encourage academies to see themselves also as stakeholders in their local area, specifically by devising ways in which an academies presence is incorporated into the SACRE itself.

Such cooperation not only supports good working practice with advice and builds positive relationships within a locality but also affirms the value of RE and demonstrates the mutual benefit to partners of working together for pupils and communities.

Part 2

The Academies Act 2010 paved the way for the 'new style' academies announced by the Coalition Government. The Act removed from academies and free schools the statutory requirement, in force since 1870, for all maintained schools to provide RE in the curriculum and a daily act of collective worship for all pupils. The model funding agreements for such schools does require such provision but does not require a school to use a locally agreed syllabus. It is not clear whether these provisions of the Act also apply to the 'old style' academies. The Education Bill currently passing through Parliament may bring in further changes.

In response to issues raised by NATRE in February 2011, the DfE has stated:

'Academies must provide religious education in accordance with their Funding Agreements. The policy intention is for the model Funding Agreements to broadly reflect the provisions that apply to local authorities and schools in the maintained sector. The Funding Agreement requires that Academies with a religious designation provide religious education in accordance with the tenets of their faith and Academies that do not have a religious designation must arrange for religious education to be given to all pupils in accordance with the requirements for Agreed Syllabuses. In other words, a curriculum which reflects that the religious traditions in Great Britain are, in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.

'For foundation or voluntary controlled schools with a religious designation that convert to Academies, the intention is that they will arrange for religious education in accordance with the requirements for agreed syllabuses, as set out above, unless any parents request that their children receive religious education in accordance with any provisions of the school's trust deed or in accordance with the tenets of the school's faith. If any parents do request this, the Academy must make arrangements for those children to receive such religious education unless, because of special circumstances, it would be unreasonable to do so. The Funding Agreement sets this out.'

With regard to **compliance** the DfE has also stated:

'The YPLA monitors compliance with Funding Agreements and also deals with complaints about Academies on behalf of the Secretary of State. If you or any of your members would like to raise a concern about an Academy with regard to RE provision then please send details to academiesenquiries@ypla.gov.uk and the YPLA will investigate.'

Furthermore, the YPLA itself has since indicated that if a person or body wished to raise a concern about a specific academy they could send the query stating the name of the academy to academiesenquiries@ypla.gov.uk and it will be forwarded to the YPLA Academies Lead Officer (ALO) responsible for dealing with issues relating to that specific academy: the ALO will then liaise with either the person or body concerned. It was been stressed that individuals (who may be teachers) can choose to remain anonymous during any discussions between the ALO and the academy but considering the specific nature of the query, this may be problematic. However, the ALO could approach the academy simply stating that the query is from a concerned member of the community who wishes to remain anonymous.

Following enactment of the Education Act 2011, the functions described above transfer to the Education Funding Agency from the YPLA in April 2012.