

What if a SACRE member becomes a problem?

A NASACRE Briefing

Introduction

There are times when a SACRE member's behaviour may become problematic and having a clear strategy on how to deal with this type of situation is important. NASACRE has already issued advice on SACREs' constitutions, which includes a section headed: code of conduct. This advice supplements that brief section. In addition, NASACRE has produced a generic Code of conduct document for SACREs to use or adapt. *See Resources area: SACRE Management section.*

Appropriate behaviour

It is not unreasonable to expect all SACRE members to speak respectfully to other members and to officers of SACRE and to act in a dignified manner, especially as this reflects on their nominating body. All local authorities will have a policy on the standards of behaviour expected of its members and officers, as well as a standards committee to deal with issues and complaints as they arise. SACREs can employ their local authority's policy as the standard for their members or they could use the local authority's complaints procedure – whichever is deemed most appropriate.

Issues that might arise

Amongst others, here are some issues that SACREs have had to deal with:

- general rudeness and offensive language
- contentious issues
- issues about the status of other members
- issues as to whether a member is representing their nominating body

These and some other issues are explored below.

General rudeness and offensive language

The behaviour of SACRE members is something that should be covered in the induction process for new SACRE members and can be a focus of on-going training for all members from time to time.

The Chair of SACRE through efficient chairing of meetings can deal with rudeness when it arises. *In one SACRE this manifested itself in the way a male member of SACRE spoke to the female RE adviser using sexist language, something clearly not acceptable.* Dealing swiftly with rudeness can ensure that a culture of rudeness does not develop in SACRE meetings.

Contentious issues

At times SACREs find themselves dealing with contentious issues as a result of a principled stance that a member or members feel strongly about. In such instances having clear protocols on how to deal with such issues is also important.

One example arose when the review of the agreed syllabus was taking place and the section on Judaism was being discussed. Some members of the Conference wanted all reference to the State of Israel or reference to Zionism removing. Many other members felt that this was inappropriate. In the end the meeting at which this arose had to be abandoned because of the level of discord. The matter was resolved by a joint statement between the local Council of Mosques, Teacher Associations and the Jewish community working through the local faith forum.

Sometimes the issues raised have nothing to do with the business of SACRE, but SACRE is the only forum where such open discussions about education were held within the authority. *An example of this was where some members of SACRE were exercised by the local authority's Reducing Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and the provision of free condoms to under-16 year olds in maintained secondary schools. It was pointed out, by the officer, that this issue was not within the remit of SACRE and that it should not be making statements about this. Members of Group D were asked to take this up with the Authority explaining why some communities felt that its policy was disturbing and possibly damaging.*

Issues about the status of other members

One issue that arises in some SACREs is about who is entitled to be a member and this is often made more difficult if a SACRE acts as its own appointing body with retrospective agreement from the local authority. Therefore, it is important to ensure that SACREs do not take on a role that statutorily they do not have. This also applies to Agreed Syllabus Conferences, whose members may be the same as the SACRE, may have a wholly different membership or mixed membership i.e. where some SACRE members are appointed and others appointed separately. What SACREs should not do is simply re-designate itself as an ASC. *(See Resources area: Effective SACREs - training and support section for a presentation on Agreed Syllabus Conferences.)*

Where nominating bodies have lost confidence in their representative

It can also be the case that sometimes religious communities see that there is a member of SACRE representing their community faith tradition in whom they have no confidence. In such a case the local authority, as the appointing body, should be contacted so as to investigate whether the claim has a broad consensus and act accordingly. This is not the role of the Chair of SACRE. If the Chair were to receive a letter to this effect they should pass it onto the appropriate person within the authority.

With the exception of co-opted members, it is clear that SACRE members are appointed by the local authority. To that extent SACRE does not determine its own membership. The Education Act 1996 paragraph 392 sub-paragraphs (1) (2) and (3) **Advisory Councils: supplementary provisions** states that members of SACRE represent specific communities and constituencies and may be removed if the authority no longer has confidence that the said member represents that community or constituency by which they were nominated. If it is the case that there are a number of different groups representing one religious tradition (denominations) within the authority who are demographically significant or are needed for the efficient discharge of Group A's function (Education Act 1996 390 (4)(a) and (6)) then the authority can ask for a nomination from those communities for possible appointment. SACRE members may have a view on that appointment and the authority may wish to listen to those views. However, if the authority wishes to appoint someone to SACRE, it is within its legal rights to do so. What an existing member cannot do is hold SACRE to ransom over the appointment of others to SACRE.

Group A – members without a nominating body

It has often been the case that it has been felt desirable to have a representation on SACRE from religious traditions where there is no community or a very small loose community within the authority that could nominate them. In such a case co-option may be the most appropriate form of membership. Often, minority religious groups have organised themselves into national bodies and a local authority may approach such a body for an appropriate nominee if they are of the opinion that this would assist Group A in the efficient discharge of its duties. What is important is the principle that all SACRE members appointed by the local authority should have a body to which they are accountable and which nominates them.

In extreme cases

Where there is an unresolvable issue at the meeting of SACRE or an ASC, or one that would bring the Council, Conference or the local authority into disrepute, the Chair would need to intervene to close the situation down. In extreme cases, local authorities have a sergeant-at-arms who can remove members and/or members of the public, if the meeting could not carry on.

Beyond the meeting, the Chair of SACRE can ask the local authority to remove the member and ask the nominating body to propose another representative to SACRE. Before this happens, it is good practice for SACRE to contact the nominating body to mediate between

the member and SACRE to ensure that their behaviour is appropriate and also that their legitimate views can be expressed.

One SACRE experienced intimidation from someone who wanted to be a member but did not qualify for membership. That person's behaviour became increasingly threatening and in the end the local authority had to take out an exclusion order banning the person from the place where SACRE meetings are held, whilst still making them publicly accessible.

A similar situation arose with an Agreed Syllabus Conference where two members of the public entered the chamber and put threatening messages on the Chair's seat whilst the Conference had adjourned for a comfort break. The members of the public involved were removed and the authority made it clear that such behaviour would not be acceptable in the future.

Conclusion

SACREs should be able to model good relationships between people of difference and be celebrated as such. Nevertheless, part of SACRE members' induction and on-going training should feature the behaviours that would enhance the work of SACRE. Where the atmosphere of a SACRE or ASC has become vexatious, it cannot be doing what it was appointed to do, namely give advice to the local authority and its schools on RE and collective worship or the review of a syllabus. In such instances the local authority and not SACREs or ASCs is the appropriate body to deal with such situations. It is also worth pointing out that a member who does not comply with the code of conduct would be bringing their nominating body into disrepute and in such cases, those bodies may wish to implement their own disciplinary procedures.