

**Report on 6th Annual meeting of the London and SE SACREs
Tuesday 6th Nov 2012**

Excellent RE

The event was held at the National Zoroastrian Centre in Harrow and the delegates were shown around the centre and given an informative talk about their faith and practices.

The delegates divided into small discussion groups and were encouraged to report on successes, challenges and issues. These were then fed back to Bruce Gill and Denise Chaplin to be fed into the day as questions if appropriate, or to take back to the NASACRE executive to inform their work and the role out of a national initiative to replicate the London and SE SACRE group in other parts of the country.

Among the issues raised, delegates were concerned with the issues of non-compliance of schools to teach RE and the impact that the current situation regarding changes to schools and education are having on the state of RE in general.

Report by John Keast on the work of the RE Council.

The RE Council is an umbrella organisation, with membership made up of representatives from all the major faith and non-faith groups, RE professional bodies and other national voluntary bodies. They have 2 meetings a year and currently have 59 member groups. The aim of the RE council is to present a coherent national voice, working through a number of partnership organisations.

John presented the conference with some key facts about the state of RE:

- RE is no longer required by statute to be taught in academies or Free schools, although it may be required as part of their funding agreement with the government.
- Academies are no longer required to teach the local agreed syllabus. Whilst most academies have RE and CW included in their funding agreements – this can be changed by any secretary of state for Education in the future!
- There is no national QC(D)A advisor therefore no detailed analysis of data.
- There has been a reduction of the targets for RE PGCE students. With fewer RE teachers being trained than ever before the result will be that some teacher training institutions, with only a handful of students, are likely to close their RE department.
- The removal of exemplars, levels and programmes of study, in line with other subjects.

- RE was excluded from the government review of the curriculum.
- The move away from GCSE in favour of the EBacc will leave the subject in limbo. (Martin comment: by reducing its place in KS3 curriculum?)
- The education department has abolished bursaries for RE students (along with drama, citizenship and D.T.)
- There has been a leaked report to the effect that a 16+ Abacc may be introduced (replacing A levels), and this is likely not to include RE (in line with Ebacc policy)
- Fewer take up with short course GCSE in RE (due to non inclusion in end of year 11 stats)
- GCSE RE long course numbers are growing, but it is anticipated that this is unlikely to remain so.

The facts lead to John's simple first conclusion that RE is being dismantled of all national support structures, rendering RE totally a 'local matter'. So taking on board a consideration the significance of local developments:

- the loss of the RE subject paragraphs in OFSTED reports, so less information getting through to SACREs
- the loss of RE advisor posts
- diminishing or no budget for local SACRE
- disappearance of local professional development provision
- most secondary schools are now outside the remit of the LA and SACRE.

John's somewhat depressing conclusion was to suggest that there is also an increasing collapse of local support and structures for RE. He went on to suggest that there is a wholesale change in the way the government wants RE to be perceived. The intention, it seems, is to leave it up to local schools to determine their own response to the requirement (whatever that is) to teach RE. Whilst the government still continues to assert that RE is statutory, clearly this is not the whole picture. John asked what might be the role of the faith communities in this situation?

The key consequences:

- fragmentation of the RE curriculum
- fewer trained RE teachers
- reduction in provision and quality of RE teaching

His fear is that the end of RE as we know it could be in sight! So therefore the question comes to mind: why do we bother and continue to struggle? His response is to suggest that the REC will continue to propose that good RE is important to the development of society. He believes that the RE council, local SACREs and other key stakeholders need to take responsibility for the subject.

The REC produced a strategic plan a few months ago with 5 key areas of work, each one driven by a committee or working group:

1. CAQ (curriculum assessment and qualification group) – they have set up their own ‘expert’ panel and they are undertaking their own independent review of RE which will be published in Dec 2012. This will not have the same status of the previous RE National Framework, because of the width of its membership, it will still have impact, and in the absence of any other guidance, it will attempt to be seen as setting a benchmark for future RE developments, not least in its value to local SACREs as they re-writing their agreed syllabus.

They have also intend to set up a working group in 2012 looking at the rationale for RE to look at issues of curriculum, assessment and qualification, to be published in summer 2013.

(note: John has already published a paper on qualification reform in RE on the REC website?)

2. PD (professional development group) –
 - They are setting up a PD portal on the REC website
 - Continue to build on the Resilience campaign
 - Continue to develop the ‘sacred spaces’ initiative
 - Role out the RE quality mark (see later item)
3. PR (public relations group) – this includes meeting with ministers (schools minister met with REC earlier this year but was lost to a reshuffle so need to meet with ‘new’ schools minister Mrs Elizabeth Truss). Also letters to local ministers and other political parties in parliament. However, John noted that he is disappointed at the lack of response from government ministers (including the secretary of state for education) to any letters sent. (John suggested something along the lines of ‘turning a deaf ear’). He added that most MPs do not respond effectively to questions about RE and this gives the impression that most would appear ignorant of what is happening with RE. All this underpins the importance of the EDM (Early Day Motion) that was tabled by Stephen Lloyd MP (conservative) which has now helped the formation of the APPG (All Party Parliamentary Group) on the topic of RE. This group is currently enquiring into how teacher supply and local support will impact RE.

The REC is setting in motion a reThinkRE campaign for 2013 and they are also trying to link up with head teachers, governors and academy trusts.

4. Resources
 - Invite key people to become patrons of REC
 - Develop their supporters base
 - Build on the young ambassadors schemes
 - Fund raising!

5. Governance
 1. Expanded membership
 2. More individual members
 3. Working together smarter!

Questions put to John Keast:

1. Question about what might be the role of the REC in networking religious groups? John felt it was important to encourage faith groups to work together and speak with a single voice.
2. Question regarding extremist views in admission policies of academies? John felt that with the increased fragmentation of RE, the RE curriculum might descend into merely a list of topics or faiths we don't want to see. However, he added that whilst there are extremist opinions (the questioner mentioned extreme secularist opinions) the BHA is supportive of good RE and are part of the REC coalition.
3. One questioner asked if John felt this is all being driven by the Secretary of State for Education. John graciously suggested that Michael Gove has great energy but is dogmatic in his particular approach to education. He has a lot of support and is in a powerful position. However, he has created the impression that current changes in education are a huge experiment in two key areas: school autonomy and developing a core knowledge based curriculum. One key is that the Ebacc will become the dominant factor (common destination for students) and will determine everything else regarding school curriculum.
4. Another questioner expressed the concern that in a 'privatised' or commercial education system, is it not the case that he who pays the piper .. ? John replied that if RE is not being assessed (or validated?) it will not be taught. In other words, if schools are no longer judged on the quality or content of their RE .. they will drop it to focus on those area of the curriculum that is.

In conclusion, as we see the decline in the take up of short course GCSE in RE, and the projected drop in numbers for the long course RE, John suggested that the decline of RE in schools will lead to a growing lack in Religious Literacy within all levels of society. A closing anecdote was his worry that someone who is religiously illiterate will never understand the need for religious literacy in the first place!

Presentation by Mary Myatt on the Religious Education Quality Mark

The aim of this project is to recognise outstanding teaching and learning in religious education. It is an accreditation system which seeks to recognise good practice in RE, and designed to be a mechanism for whole school improvement beyond RE as its principle focus is to enhance pedagogy (see additional notes below).

The REQM is currently available to all schools, academies and it includes faith based schools too and additional information can be gathered from their website www.reqm.org. The purpose of the REQM is to provide a framework that will encourage schools increase their range and quality of planning, teaching and learning in Religious Education, and, by improving the standard of pedagogy in RE, aim to impact whole school improvement.

The main concern Mary suggested was that where there is little or no RE in a school, it is difficult to capture the role and impact of RE on SMSC (Social Moral, Spiritual and Cultural development of each child or student).

The way the REQM will benefit each school will be in:

- the dissemination of good quality RE through networking.
- maintain the position of RE as schools move forward towards a more creative curriculum.
- Assess the findings of Transforming RE initiative (reported 2012), especially relating to enquiry based RE teaching.

The REQM assesses 5 criteria:

- Learners and learning
- Teachers and teaching
- Curriculum
- Subject leadership
- Continuing professional development.

An evaluation form was completed by each of the delegates and Martin Sweet will be producing a report on this for the London and SE SACREs planning group.

Suggested points for action in Bromley:

1. Invite more schools to 'present' about RE at SACRE meetings
2. Try to capture what the learners feel about RE – pupil surveys?
3. Engage more with academies .. not less, especially as we spend time reviewing the Agreed Syllabus.

Note: Pedagogy: the method and practice of teaching children – from Greek to lead children.