

NASACRE Conference and AGM
16th May 2017
York Hilton
Event Report for Bromley SACRE 12th July 2017 meeting
(Author – Reverend Roger Bristow, Chairman – Bromley SACRE)

This year's NASACRE Conference was held, for the first time, in York. I attended on behalf of Bromley SACRE. The conference theme "**Preparing for life in Britain today: the contribution of RE**" definitely resonated with our concerns locally as well as the national situation.

The keynote speaker in the morning was Dr Joyce Miller, a member of the Commission for RE and a former RE teacher and Chair of the RE Council. She gave a fairly comprehensive overview of both the history and current situation in respect of the Commission's work and its aim of gathering evidence to support future policy recommendations. This was set within a clearly recognised call for greater religious literacy in contemporary society and the role which the teaching of RE has to play in this.

The second keynote speaker was given the after lunch slot, potentially a time when people are less likely to be engaged. Professor Aaqil Ahmed, formerly Head of Religion and Ethics for both Channel 4 and the BBC and now returned to academia, proved to be a very lively and inspirational speaker. Whilst acknowledging that he was 'preaching to the converted', he gave an impassioned plea for measures to be taken to increase religious literacy amongst all sections of society and, in passing, laid some of the blame for its lack on those people of faith who had failed to communicate what that actually means in practice. He acknowledged that both broadcast and print media frequently took the soft option of resorting to stereotypical representations of religion or simply choosing not to engage with the complexities of religious belief and practice for fear of causing offence (which is the new unforgivable sin). This lack of understanding is then further exacerbated by the echo chamber of social media, where people reinforce their own prejudices concerning religious belief and thus increase fear and suspicion of those who are 'other than us'.

Between these two speakers there was a session of round table discussions with delegates sharing their experiences of the ways in which their local SACREs sought to support the delivery of quality RE which helped to prepare pupils for modern life. This was also a good opportunity for networking as the tables were broadly arranged in regional groupings. Sadly, there was no one present from either Croydon or Bexley.

The last part of the Conference, following Professor Ahmed's talk, was a general Q&A with a panel chaired by Rt. Hon Charles Clarke. This elicited some lively discussion on a range of topics sparked by the contributions of the two speakers but also exposing some specific concerns relating the local situations and particularly the role of SACREs in an ever changing educational landscape and diminishing financial support.

The day concluded with a relatively short Annual General Meeting, dealing swiftly with the business of electing the various officers and receiving the report on NASACREs finances. Further information about the Conference and other useful information about the RE Commission's current work, etc., can be found on the NASACRE website.