

‘Re SACREs’ – reflections from Helen Harrison*

Your flier says John Keast* will provide his frank and perceptive overview – I’ll do my best resting on being an RE teacher first and a passionate advocate for what SACRE’s can achieve with vision and support. (Please note I will put Collective Worship to one side for the purpose of this presentation.)

RE has had many challenges over the past few years – previous speakers in previous AGMs have raised these. Alan Brine’s last subject report stressed the need for teachers and others to understand the ‘core purpose of the subject’. I sit in many meetings and sometimes wonder what their core purpose is. I don’t in REC meetings, the clarity of the strategic plan links to the statement on all the REC’s correspondence ... ‘Working together to strengthen the provision of religious education in schools, colleges and universities’. Enter the website www.religiouseducation.org.uk and you will be told ... ‘The Religious Education Council of England and Wales was established in 1973 to represent the collective interests of a wide variety of professional associations and faith communities in deepening and strengthening provision for religious education.

It provides a multi-faith forum where national organisations with an interest in supporting and promoting religious education in schools and colleges can share matters of common concern.’

Nor do I ask ‘why am I here?’ when I attend meetings of Lancashire SACRE whose syllabus aim explains its purpose: ‘To support pupils’ personal search for meaning by engaging enquiry into the question ‘What is it to be human?’ - exploring answers offered by religion and belief.’ Its meetings and sub committee are carefully planned in response to its development plan.

So everything that the RE Council AND Lancashire SACRE do must contribute to the support and empowerment of those who deliver this challenging subject at the interactive whiteboard face as they strive to deliver an RE curriculum that puts the pupils’ needs at the center of their learning.

Easily said ... so difficult to achieve?

I want to explore how the REC is trying to do this and how this relates to the work of dedicated SACREs...

High quality learning must be the focus of all who support RE. Local determination means that SACREs have the responsibility to create syllabi that enable teachers to construct planning for engaging learning. The HMI subject report, *Transforming RE*, urges an enquiry model, empowering pupils to explore the complexities and relevance of faith and belief. Effective assessment measures to ensure appropriate progress is another focus of the report.

Last year the RE Council, in response to the Government’s request published *A Review of Religious Education in England and Wales*, thus ensuring RE was reviewed alongside NC subjects. It states that ‘every child and young person who goes to school is entitled to an experience of Religious Education (RE) that is both academically challenging and personally inspiring’. Not only does this document offer a non statutory framework for RE that SACREs may utilise when creating their

syllabi but it also raises questions for SACRE members, and other interested in the wellbeing of the subject, to discuss as they strive to support local RE.

Another aspect of the REC's work to support the RE curriculum is the Curriculum and Assessment Committee, chaired by Dave Francis. This now functions as the Expert Advisory Group (EAG) for RE in parallel with similar groups set up and supported by the DfE for other subjects. The core EAG had representation from the Board, RE professional organisations and publishers as well as the chairs of six teacher working parties. These comprised a group each for Early Years/Foundation Stage and KS1, for KS2 and for secondary, and one each for C of E/Methodist, for RC and for other faiths which are school providers. The EAG has a wide remit and started its work with two conferences in early May. The REC web site has an EAG update newsletter

A third element of the REC's work in supporting RE lies with its Qualifications Committee. The REC has been asked by the Department for Education to take the lead in working with Ofqual and the awarding bodies to assist in the process of revising GCSE and GCE subject criteria in readiness for Autumn 2016. It has now established a Qualifications Committee, chaired by Deborah Weston, with membership consisting of teachers, advisers and others with current examination expertise. A Reference Group is also being established to work with the Committee in order to provide for consultation with representatives of religions and belief. This consists of organisations of religious traditions which have their own (religiously designated) schools or have established GCSE and/or GCE papers in their tradition.

A common thread running through all this work is diverse groups working together under the umbrella of the REC. Strong and effective SACREs will recognise this model as they work with a wide cross section of the local community to create a syllabus that is 'both academically challenging and personally inspiring'. Support for accredited RE eg. GCSE and A level is another key area for SACRE members, informed by the statistical reports and analysis from their local authority. Those SACREs fortunate enough to have academic establishments within their area have another opportunity to reach out to RE professionals to support learning.

The REC web site can keep SACRE's up to date – as can NASACRE's excellent updates – partly informed by the RE Council.

Another challenge to both the REC and SACREs is in the area of political influence. Working with the DfE and MPs is an essential aspect of the REC's work. An aspect of this has been raised by Stephen Lloyd this morning. Many SACREs have contacted their MPs to ask them to join the APPG for RE and support its work but more need to do so. The APPG's focus on teacher training and CPD last year drew attention to a critical issue for the well being of RE while attracting much needed and widespread media attention. This year's focus on Community Relations provides not only evidence regarding the important contribution RE makes to understanding of others but provides issues for SACREs to consider as part of their work. Many SACREs have elected members as LA representatives, providing other opportunities for raising issues related to the support and development of RE.

Another aspect the REC and SACREs share I mentioned at the start of this presentation, is a clear vision and an achievable development plan to ensure the precious time of members is put to the maximum use. In Lancashire we moved to a rolling 3 year plan but I have heard of others who link it to the review of the syllabus and so make it a five year plan. The REC's strategic plan 2011/16 is reviewed and updated on a regular basis to make sure it keeps pace with the many changes in education.

Both groups need to take into account and engage with diverse membership and thus harness the wide ranging skills, contacts and interests they bring to RE. Both model community cohesion in action and a common vision to make RE the best it can be. In this picture slide 4 Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Buddhist reps work with young people to create and deliver a SACRE youth conference to explore enquiry as a key element of a syllabus. How does your SACRE ensure that its diverse members contribute fully to its work? At a recent meeting in Lancashire a sub committee was discussing the recent APPG report into Community Relations, especially socio-economic issues. One of our councilors shared examples of local Muslim communities supporting various local and national charities – it was agreed that this information would be put on the web site as a resource for the living religion and beliefs and values aspects of the syllabus. Faith members are also invaluable 'living resources' for support with this, the NASACRE and NATRE web sites give guidance how to support this vital work .

Many RE teachers report feelings of isolation and insecurity when delivering our complex subject. Empowering teachers and schools to deliver effective RE and reach out to others when doing this is not only essential but it connects well to the current DfE model. The REC's PD committee has planned and created a new on line PD portal to put teachers in touch with professional development opportunities. SACRE's are encouraged to contribute and promote this tool. The RE Quality Mark, supported by the REC gives SACREs an opportunity to encourage schools to receive affirmation of the good provision they are making for RE. The REQM also puts on line an excellent audit document that any school may access and use, regardless of applying for the award. The REC with its member partners, Culham St Gabriel and NATRE, have responded to Recommendation 5 of the RE review ie 'Develop new structures and networks within and across the RE community so that its expertise is coordinated and utilised more effectively in the interest of improving the subject' by launching a 'Regional Strategy pilot' to encourage the creation of hubs that, to quote its report ' could offer some solutions to several issues of quality and support for teachers, by facilitating exchange of information between teachers, policy makers and researchers'. SACREs can find more information on any of the 3 organisations' web sites.

Limited resources mean limited capacity, both the REC and SACREs have to decide who they can reach out to and work with. There has been a mixed response to the rise of Academies and Free Schools, some seeing them as a threat to the very existence of SACREs. It is important to remember that Academies are not the end of SACREs because legislation permits them to discuss any matter related to their remit that they see fit. SACREs are not LA committees, they advise LAs but if they want to advise others, that's up to them!

Academies must make provision for RE according to their Funding Agreement. They must choose a syllabus; a LAS from their own locality, another LAS or write their own. Whichever they choose becomes the means by which their standards are judged. The form of RE in Academies and FS without a religious character is just the same as community schools ie reflect the fact that the religions in this country are in the main Christian while taking account of the teaching and practices of other principle religions in GB, thus they should not develop narrow syllabuses

The DfE and NATRE have developed very useful Q and As that SACREs will find helpful in approaching how to address the issue of Academies in their area. An interesting example is Thurrock where all secondaries and a fair proportion of primaries are academies. The document was sent to their academies and they asked them what they are choosing as an RE syllabus - 80% chose to adopt the LAS so they are, as their advisor puts it, back in business

See <http://www.natre.org.uk/docstore/DfERE&CWInAcademies&FS/Q&A/Dec2012.pdf>

Those of you who know me will have been waiting for me to urge SACREs and the REC to draw on Youth voice. It is wholly appropriate that young people from Hull are with us today to

genuinely contribute to RE's development. Those of us who had the privilege to hear various REC Young Ambassador groups addressing the launch of the RE review and APPG reports will be only too aware of their potential to promote and develop RE. Is there a YA group near you? They want to work with as many groups as possible to raise the subject's profile. Go online and see where they currently are, and consider asking them to speak to your SACRE. The REC is now offering the opportunity for other schools to apply to be YAs – could this be an agenda item for your SACRE? And if you are already committed to youth voice and have a Youth SACRE or Youth group Broughton Business and Enterprise College provide a model of how both schemes can work alongside each other to support RE locally and nationally.

Keeping ourselves up to date has been a theme of this presentation and of today's conference – RE must not lag behind and this has been a key element of the REC under John's leadership. NASACRE also works tirelessly to ensure this is achieved as do many other member organisations. A special mention need to go here to Deborah Weston, Secretary to the REC and former chair of NATRE. Her drive to support progress thorough careful gathering and utilisation of data has resulted in various papers and resources useful to SACREs eg. on the NATRE site you will find 2013 survey on RE in primary schools and same in secondaries. (New one out in July). Complaints protocol for maintained schools, including a section on the potential role of SACRE). Exam Reform 2013 – with a new update due this week

Data to show how much Universities rate RE in Facilitating Subjects - the Myth. And perhaps the most important of all. An explanation of the importance to RE of the changes to league tables. http://www.retoday.org.uk/media/display/Accountability_measures_NATRE_final.docx

The REC also has a range of briefing papers that could inform your SACRE's work. These range from the RE Teacher's Practice Code to examination results to case studies and guidance for school Governors.

The REC and SACREs must keep raising the profile Promoting why we are 'worth it' – and shouting out our achievements using social media – does your SACRE have a twitter account? A web site to forward the wide range of information we have explored here and even a Blog from the Chair as John Keast writes regularly? Today has proved, if any proof was needed, the good that SACREs do

A Secondary rep on SACRE recently reported that after staffroom conversations with fellow teachers she really felt her work with her pupils was supported locally by the SACRE and nationally by the REC along with its members such as NATRE – while her fellow teachers of other subjects felt there was no comparable support for their curriculum area

So returning to our enquiry question – 'what's the point?' – with an answer being to work together as an RE community in all its diversity and make a difference to every teacher of RE and so make the subject the best it can be for all our children.

** Due to illness, John Keast was unable to attend the AGM. We are very grateful to Helen Harrison, Vice Chair of the REC for replacing him at very short notice.*