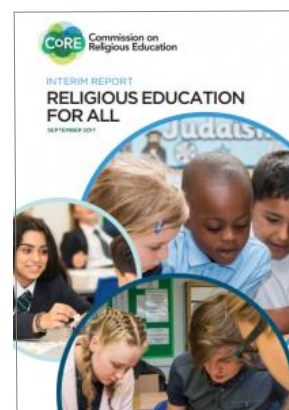


**The Commission on RE's Interim Report**

Nearly sixty delegates attended the joint NASACRE and AREIAC conference on Fri 24 Nov 2017. The high level of interest is an indication of how relevant the issues are that the Commission on RE (CoRE) have been considering to RE advisers, SACRE members, and anyone interested in the future of RE. NASACRE and AREIAC are grateful to the Commission for permitting two Commission members, Professor Denise Cush and Dr Anthony Towey to attend the conference and provide valuable keynote presentations in the morning. They together with Lat Blaylock and the Rt. Hon. Charles Clarke formed the panel members for the afternoon Question Time session.



The Commission on RE's Interim Report

**The Morning Programme** (11.00 am to 12.30)

**1<sup>st</sup> Keynote Presentation**

**The main issues**

Professor Denise Cush opened the conference by providing a very clear presentation of the main issues the Commission has so far discussed. Not surprisingly this included areas which have been part of the public debate about RE for some time, for example, the quality of teaching and learning in RE; the existing legal arrangements for the subject; the profile of RE both public and professional; the form RE may take given the range of school settings, whether the right of withdrawal should remain in place; whether RE would be well served if it was called something else, to name just a few. Denise also spoke about the evidence the Commission had received. She identified a particular concern about the limited evidence available about Primary RE. The Commission are aware of this weakness and they hope to rectify the problem.

**Policy developments and RE**

Denise also identified recent policy developments which the Commission thought had weakened the status of RE. Of these three in particular were mentioned, they were: (1) the exclusion of RE from the 'English Baccalaureate'; (2) the popular short course GCSE RS which is now know longer included as a measure of school success; and (3) the inadequate time given to initial teacher training in RE especially for primary teachers. These and other developments Denise reported had combined to give schools the impression that the subject was not a priority.

**Four Recommendations**

Denise also identified four main recommendations in the Interim Report. These were: (1) a national entitlement for RE, which was intended to be used as a means to (2) hold schools to account for their RE, (3) a "new and expanded role" for SACREs, and (4) a national plan for improving teaching and learning in RE along the lines similar to the national plan for music education.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Keynote presentation**

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Keynote presentation Dr Anthony Towey identified five areas which he and other members of the Commission were particularly interested in learning the views people have

about them. The five areas he identified were:

### **1. The Nature and Purpose of RE**

RE is often loaded with other agendas such as the prevent strategy, British values, character formation, etc. Anthony asked the delegates how far is it appropriate for RE to be formative in terms of character, faith and citizenship? Are these primary aims of RE or are they best understood as positive side-effects?

### **2. Method**

The second area identified arose from Anthony's description of the proposed RE national entitlement as one which adopted a "thematic development" approach rather than a "content driven" approach. He suggested that this means the entitlement statement adopts a different approach to the one adopted in the GCSE KS4 and the A Level KS5 material. Anthony asked are delegates in sympathy with this approach?

### **3. SACREs**

Thirdly, given the increase in the number of academies and cuts in LA funding Anthony asked is there really a future for SACREs? Anthony suggested the CoRE's evidence gathering sessions seem to suggest that even without the growth of academies the days of SACRE agreed syllabuses are numbered. Against this background is it realistic to suggest that SACREs should have a renewed and expanded role? If "yes" then "how"?

### **4. Providers**

Fourthly, a detailed picture of school based Initial Teacher Education is not easy to acquire. Even traditional routes into teaching report patchy preparation, particularly for Primary practitioners. What would delegates regard as the priority and is the Commission right in looking to the kind of strategy adopted by the national plan for music as a way forward?

### **5. Language**

Fifthly, is the non-traditional language of the Interim Report appropriate? For example, is there sufficient clarity about what "non-religious worldviews" means? Also, should the subject be called something like "Religion and Ethics" to recognize the way its content has changed? Lastly, is it realistic for the Commission to recommend phenomenology, philosophy, sociology, textual studies and also theology as appropriate methodologies?

The conference probably failed to provide Anthony with the feedback he was hoping for on these five areas as the remaining morning session time was taken up by a Q&A opportunity.

### **The Morning Q&A Session**

#### **The right of withdrawal**

The first question raised in this Q&A session which Denise and Anthony responded to was about the right of withdrawal. The question asked was: "Given the increasingly significant role religion plays in the world today can we afford to allow parents to withdraw their children from RE?"



Delegates at the conference raised many questions

In response it was acknowledged this was an issue that people felt strongly about on both sides. Having the right of withdrawal perhaps does RE no favours as it suggests RE is not a proper academic subject. Partial withdrawal raises the problem of parents withdrawing their children from learning about a particular religion. This unfortunately made it possible for parents motivated more by prejudice than any other reason to withdraw their child from parts of RE. Regarding changing the legislation about withdrawal a more cautionary view was also expressed as removing the right of withdrawal might turn what is currently a marginal issue into a major concern. Conference members were told, "You have to be careful what you ask for as you may not get what you want." Delegates were also invited to consider if the right of withdrawal was removed "what would the tabloids make of this?"

### **The DfE's willingness to engage**

Another question asked was about whether there are any indications that the DfE will engage with the issues that are in the Interim Report?

In response two similar answers were provided. The first was that the CoRE had received indications that "there may be a window..." These words suggest that there may be a possible opportunity to address some or all of the issues under discussion. The second similar answer was that there was an understanding that "an invitation had been made to the RE Council to foster discussion" of these matters. Both of these responses suggested that the DfE might indeed be willing to see legislative change. However, a NASACRE executive member commented, "an open window was not the same as having an appetite for change".

### **Dharmic faiths and the pursuit of truth**

A third question raised by a delegate asked why the Interim Report made no explicit reference to dharmic faiths. Also the delegate observed that in the discussion about world views no mention is made of "truths".

In response it was made clear there was no intention to neglect dharmic faiths in the Interim Report. Also, it was pointed out the entitlement statement does not specifically name any religions or non-religions but attempts to be inclusive by referring to "a diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews". With regard to the second part of the question it was recognised that the pursuit of truth and making sense of life has perhaps not been properly captured in the Interim Report and this might have to be addressed in the final Report.

### **RE and the development of pupils' own beliefs**

A fourth question raised by a delegate highlighted the words in the entitlement statement which requires that, "RE should equip pupils to develop their own beliefs, practices, values and identity in the light of their reflections on the worldviews they have studied." The point was made that many parents would not want their children to be encouraged to develop their worldviews based on their reflections on what they have been told by a particular teacher, in a particular classroom, within the subject of RE. It was further suggested that RE might be in danger of undermining its claim to be a subject alongside many others if it seems to suggest that it is only in RE that young people's worldviews are developed.

In response it was claimed that the words 'in the light of' were not intended to suggest or support a confessional approach to RE. Rather they attempted to express the idea that RE was

more than just learning lots of facts that have nothing to do with the child. It was suggested that in RE an attempt was being made to help young people develop their own informed and more subtle understanding of what was going on.

A final question or rather statement put by a delegate in the morning session was expressed in the following way, "There is no future for RE as it is at the moment unless it broadens its remit and embeds religions within the study of humanity, individually and socially. Visiting different schools the most important message we have for young people is that we have to learn to live together."

### **The Afternoon Programme (1.15 to 3.45 pm)**

#### **The Question Time Session**

The following highlights of some of the questions and responses made during the Question Time session which was expertly chaired by Lesley Prior. Hopefully what is provided here gives a flavour of what took place and an indication of some of the important things discussed.

A number of questions were asked about the proposed "renewed and expanded role for SACREs". Typical of questions of this kind was:

**"How does the Commission see the development of SACREs as part of the entitlement? This is with particular reference to local involvement as opposed to a ready-made commercially devised curriculum. Surely this then becomes academic rather than rooted in a community."**

In responding to this question Denise Cush explained that whether SACREs should continue to produce agreed syllabuses was an issue the Commission were still consulting about. The Commission however was clear that if some or all SACREs ceased to write agreed syllabuses the Commission did not want to see the other work which SACREs undertake which supports RE undermined or lost.



"If one puts syllabuses and resources to one side for a second - what ought or could SACREs be doing?"

Charles Clarke thought that putting to one side writing an agreed syllabus and identifying resources there remained three other roles which he believed were important for SACREs to undertake. The first was developing dialogue and the relationship between faith communities in a local area and the local schools. Secondly, SACRE had an important role training, supporting and mentoring teachers of RE. Thirdly, SACRE had an important role to contribute to community cohesion in the local area.

Lat Blaylock said that he thought it was hard to distinguish in the Interim Report whether the new role that the Commission proposed for SACREs was a fig leaf for taking away one the core functions of SACREs which was to write an agreed syllabus, or whether it represents something



The "Question Time" panel were asked questions about the proposed renewed role of SACREs, whether a legal change is necessary and whether there is also an opportunity to discuss collective worship.

genuinely new. He believed that if it turned out to be a fig leaf then SACREs would be subject to even more withering which the austerity policies of the last few years have subjected them to. He said that personally he was in favour of retaining the syllabus making role for SACREs even if it was a non-statutory rather than a statutory entitlement. He also said that he believed legal change was unlikely but whether new legislation did or didn't emerge he thought it was important that SACREs should defend the agreed syllabus writing role that they had.

Another question put to the panel was whether the proposed new role for SACREs might involve inspecting on standards in schools:

**“How can SACREs oversee schools that have the power to determine their own curriculum? How does the role of SACREs evolve from monitoring and sharing of good practice to perhaps inspecting standards in schools?”**

In his response to this question Charles Clarke suggested that the words “oversee”, “support” and “inspect” should not be confused as they meant quite different things. He thought that “overseeing” what goes on in schools is difficult for SACREs to undertake and that the nearest thing to a body having an overseeing role is probably Ofsted. He also thought that whether schools would accept being “overseen” by their local SACRE is a big question that would need to be addressed and those concerns become even more acute when one uses words like “monitor” or “inspect”. He was positively opposed to SACREs having an inspection role as he thought this would raise all sorts of difficulties and tensions about the relations between SACREs and Ofsted.



“I do not think we are yet at the end of what SACREs can accomplish.”

Lat expressed his agreement with much that Charles had said but he also described current examples of SACREs positively engaging with schools in their local area including academies and free schools. He reported that Leicestershire has 260 schools and is a highly academised county but when Leicestershire SACRE published its new syllabus they made an invitation to their academies and free schools to buy into the new agreed syllabus and they all did because it met their needs. In Birmingham following the so-called Trojan Horse event Lat pointed out that Birmingham SACRE had been funded to inspect Birmingham schools in terms of their RE, SMSC and the promotion of British values. Lat suggested that with better central government support for both LAs and their SACREs they could play a very supportive role and this would not require any change in the law. He suggested that if government gave a clear picture to LAs it would enable SACREs not to undertake the inspection role but rather to better undertake the monitoring, advisory and supporting role. Lat spoke about how two SACREs he was involved with which offer prizes for best practice and that headteachers love receiving local recognition of good practice of this kind. He also reported that SACREs responding to the NATRE research are identifying schools which have entered no students for RS GCSE for the last three years or more. Those schools are receiving discreet letters from their SACREs asking if they need some help from SACRE to meet their legal requirements. Lat thought that we have not yet seen what a well-resourced SACRE can do. He concluded with the claim that we are not at the end of what SACREs can accomplish with regards to what might be called accountability measures, stopping short of inspection.

Anthony struck a more cautionary tone. Although heartened by the positive work of SACREs the counter argument he suggested was that there is a question here of reliance on SACREs without SACRE reliability. He commented that the narratives of the best are not necessarily the consistent narratives across the country. He also expressed the view that resourcing is needed and that he would like to see SACREs on an evenly funded footing and that this may indeed be necessary in order to be able to say SACREs can solve this problem.



“Getting SACREs on an evenly funded footing – that is what I would like to see.”



“We have heard about the good SACREs but...we have had put to the Commission evidence of places where they don't even meet, where they have no power, no funding...”

Denise similarly noted that we have heard about the good SACREs but she said that the Commission had heard evidence of SACREs that don't even meet, where some SACREs have no power, no funding and nothing can be achieved. She acknowledged that SACREs worked well in some places but they do not work well elsewhere. Denise also expressed her concern that it is not fair that it depends on which particular authority, or which particular school a child happens to attend, whether they get decent RE or not.

This sparked a wider discussion in which delegates also contributed. The Chair of NATRE, for example, questioned the validity of the evidence that the Commission was using. He suggested that there was a good deal of anecdotal myth making about how weak and ineffective SACREs are. He reported two examples, one involving schools where RE provision was weak and another where the LA appeared not to have a working SACRE and following action taken by the local SACRE significant action has been taken to improve the situation. He suggested that where LAs are indifferent to their SACREs and are happy to see them wound down the RE community need to stand up and make a fuss about it and if improvements are not made the DfE are ready and willing to take action.

Another set of questions put to the panel were about the effectiveness, desirability or likelihood of legislation should the Commission make that a recommendation. In this category a typical question asked was:

**“As the government is occupied with other matters at the moment and they are more likely to be able to provide additional or supplementary legislation rather than primary legislation, should the Commission therefore be looking at what is pragmatic rather than what is ideal?”**

In response to questions of this kind Denise thought that if a change in law cannot be achieved that would not be failure for the Commission. She believed it would be preferable if changes in the law could be made, however, even if that didn't come about the Commission had many positives, for example, events of the kind that they were now involved in as discussion of these issues offered positive benefits for RE.

Charles expressed the view that one always has to be pragmatic. However, he said it was important to ask if the current law was an inhibition on what we might want to do? We should ask, “Would a legal change improve the situation?” Charles’ view was that the current law was an inhibition on developing RE generally. He rejected the idea that one might turn a blind eye and ignore the law as adopting an attitude of that kind undermines the authority of the law itself. However, with regard to whether a change in the law was achievable and necessary Charles thought that the answer to those questions depended on the extent to which there was a consensus not only across the RE community but also across the education and the faith communities about the sort of changes that were wanted. If there is no consensus, no common thinking, then ministers will say we are not going to address this. He believed the consequence of that would be a general decline in the standing of RE in a way that would be damaging. He accepted that differences of opinion existed but he applauded the work of the Commission in trying to explore the extent to which agreement can be reached and for encouraging a proper discussion of these matters.



“I would argue, people may disagree, that the current law is an inhibition on the strength of RE generally.”

In contrast to Charles, Anthony was more optimistic about the contribution a non-legal approach might offer. He said the headteachers on the Commission have suggested that websites, accountability and publicity about what they are doing in RE are important to many schools. He went on to say that if the nudge was towards asking, “Is this entitlement being met in our school and if so how?” and if that information was available within a few clicks of a schools homepage and so was something people can look at and hold senior management teams in schools accountable for there would be great sensitivity about the issue. Senior management teams would be asking themselves, “Have we hit that Kitemark?” Anthony suggested that he did not think schools would want to be too far away from the kind of targets and aspirations for RE proposed in the Interim Report and that hitting those targets would be important to many schools just in terms of their own self-esteem and their wish to be accountable to the parents who send their children to the school.

Lat had serious reservations about seeking legal change that would make RE a nationalised subject. He supported the existing system of having of having a locally agreed RE syllabus. He likened each SACRE to being like a tiny battery of power, a 1.5 volt, triple AAA battery which mounts up to power. He said that we should have serious reservations about nationalising RE as it potentially hands all that voltage into ministerial hands and that would offer few safeguards for the future of RE. Lat expressed his view that he did not trust ministers to protect the subject but instead he stood by the current system for producing a religious education curriculum. He did however think that a non-statutory national entitlement statement could be a compliment to the current system. He also expressed his hope that the entitlement statement in the Interim Report might be developed into something with age related outcomes for children across the 4 to 14 age range and thought this was likely to emerge as the way forward. He talked about a softly, softly approach which looks to the government to boost the guidance and improve the direction that it gives to local authorities, headteachers, academy trusts, to all the agencies that have power over RE under the current legislation and that would more likely secure an effective outcome to the Commission’s work than any proposed legal change.

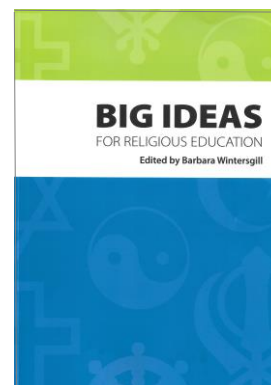
### **Open discussion (3.00 – 3.40 pm)**

In the final session of the conference there was a further opportunity for delegates to reflect on what they had heard during the day and share their thoughts and ask any further other questions.

Questions and Issues raised in this session were:

#### **The use made of the “Big Ideas” booklet**

A request was made to know more about the relationship between the proposed entitlement statement and the recently published “Big Ideas” booklet. In particular delegates were curious to know given that the “Big Ideas” booklet had only recently been published what the rationale and the evidence was for using it.



What was the rationale for using the “Big Ideas” booklet?

#### **More human and deep questions**

Some delegates expressed their concern that perhaps in order to give RE status and parity with other subjects there was too much emphasis given to young people being prepared for examination in GCSE Religious Studies. The view expressed was that RE should help young people in their response to a much more human and deep set of questions – Where have we come from? What are we? Where are we going? The point was made that it is questions of this kind that seriously touch the lives of children and children have a right to address such questions in school.

#### **Quality of teaching**

Another question raised had to do with the quality of RE particularly in secondary schools if every child was to be a recipient of their RE entitlement. Regardless of the proposed national plan for RE it was suggested that if each child was to receive their RE entitlement this might lead to an increase in the number of young people being taught by non-specialist who because of the requirements of the timetable and staff availability many of these non-specialists would only being asked to teach RE temporarily. One delegate, for example, reported the situation in a secondary school where there were eleven teachers of RE of whom nine were non-specialists. The consequence of arrangements of this kind meant that the RE entitlement was being met but that quality of delivery was at best patchy.

#### **Engagement with employers**

Finally, some delegates were also interested to know if the Commission had had any engagement with employers and if so had this informed the entitlement statement?

#### **Concluding remarks**

Thanks were given to all involved in organising the conference with particular thanks to the keynote providers and Question Time panel members, Denise Cush, Anthony Towey, Lat Blaylock and Charles Clarke. Their understanding of the issues the conference and the clarity and frankness with which they shared their thoughts was greatly appreciated.

The conference ended at 3.45 pm

Dilwyn Hunt  
Jan 2018