

Remarks by Rt Hon Charles Clarke at NASACRE **AGM May 24th 2018**

This AGM celebrates 25 years of the work of NASACRE.

Over that time the National Association of SACREs has brought together, informed and represented the more than 150 local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) – established by every Local Education Authority - which cover the whole country.

They have worked with their Agreed Syllabus Conferences, in accordance with the principles first set out in the 1944 Education Act and then confirmed universally by the 1988 legislation, and have thus determined the syllabi for Religious Instruction, and then Religious Education, through which children throughout the country learnt about religion and other belief systems.

There are many things to celebrate in that work. They include the syllabi which have been created, the educational creativity and inspiration which have been promoted and the sense of purpose which has been generated.

Tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of individuals have worked together to make that contribution happen. The great things that have been achieved would not have been achieved without the efforts and commitments of those people in every part of the country, including those in this room today and our education system owes all of them a great debt of gratitude.

There are many particular examples of outstanding work for which school and wider communities have been immensely grateful.

Of course I know that it is also the case that there have been problems, most notably the absence of resources in some parts of the country, which have made the work a real challenge.

And the work has also taken place in many circumstances where the commitment to RE, and respect for the law, has been tolerated at best, actively opposed at worst.

Up and down the country SACREs have had in this last 25 years to carry out their responsibilities in a climate of enormously rapid change in two critically important respects:

- change in the structure of schooling
- and profound changes in the nature of religion and belief in our communities.

The authors of the 1944 Act simply would not have comprehended the extraordinary extent of the way that these changes have impacted upon the lives of every family in the country.

And that is why I want today to highlight what I think is in many ways the greatest achievement of the SACREs over these 25 years.

That is the contribution of the SACREs, both in their institutional work and in the commitment of individuals, to the cohesion of the communities of which they are a part.

Most of the debates about 'community cohesion' have tended to focus upon race and the position of minority ethnic groups. These important aspects have dominated the debates and actions of governments, opinion-formers and the media – national and local. For most of the time the issues around the cohesion of communities with different religions, and indeed no religion at all, have tended to take second place.

In a way that is understandable and just follows the sad code of etiquette which suggests that neither politics nor religion can be discussed in polite society.

But it has been a major gap in thinking, often hidden by the valiant work of SACREs up and down the country as they have sought to bring together in mutual understanding and tolerance people and communities of different faiths and beliefs, and to bring all of them together with the local education systems.

Of course that great success in promoting and spreading understanding and tolerance between religions, and with those who have no religion, which I believe to have been the greatest practical contribution of SACREs, has been under increasing challenge in recent years.

The challenge has mainly come from the threats of terrorism, and only two days ago we remembered the dreadful Manchester Arena attacks of

last year. But even before the rise of “Islamic fundamentalism” there were potential conflicts with other religions, for example those closely related to Northern Ireland, and today we see the shocking and threatening rise of anti-semitism in ways which for the first time in my lifetime are threatening communities.

The role of SACREs in these circumstances has been entirely positive but I would say not enough and needing more support.

But this year we have seen the new development that the government has for the first time directly recognised the importance of faith, and that positive and strong community cohesion must involve the type of practical good inter-faith relations which SACREs encourage.

In July 2015, following the so-called Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham, David Cameron and Theresa May asked Dame Louise Casey to report into what could be done to strengthen cohesion in the most isolated and deprived communities in the country.

Very significantly Louise’s report devoted a whole chapter to faith – and the need to understand and address its role in either weakening or promoting community cohesion. Her report was published in December 2016 and that led directly to the publication of the new Integrated Communities Green Paper in March 2018.

This Green Paper from the then Communities Secretary Sajid Javid, now Home Secretary, and the new Education Secretary Damian Hinds, was entitled “Building stronger, more united communities”. Following the lead of Louise Casey’s report it recognizes the importance of faith.

This important Green Paper shows that the balance of judgment has changed, quite rightly, away from the outdated idea that things can simply be kept as they are. In fact it is a conservative (with a small ‘c’) approach which most risks damaging the cohesion of society. Action has to be taken and the gathering pressure for change is steadily becoming unstoppable.

No organisational structure has been anything like as successful as SACREs in promoting engagement both among faith communities and between faith communities as a whole and the rest of society. SACREs

have a wealth of experience, skills and expertise which exists, at least to some extent, in every part of the country.

So I want to take this opportunity to urge SACREs to develop their contribution to building community cohesion from just in schools to more widely across their communities.

Professor Linda Woodhead and I will be submitting evidence, before their deadline of June 5th, to the DCLG and DFES in response to that Green Paper.

We will be urging that the government places faith as one of the central aspects of their efforts to “build the stronger and more united communities” which the Green Paper proclaims.

We will reiterate our views, already expressed in our evidence to the government’s consultations a year and a half ago on removing the free faith schools’ cap, about the best ways to develop the role of faith schools and promote high quality religious education in schools.

We will argue that there need to be organised efforts to promote good interfaith relations and good understanding of what faiths are, and what they are not, in every community in Britain.

We will suggest that the experience of SACREs, particularly where properly resourced and respected locally, offer an excellent example of what can be achieved.

We will suggest that the role of properly resourced SACREs could be developed to play a wider role and that would probably be a better way of making this work practically in local communities than just leaving it to local government or setting up a whole set of entirely new organisations.

We will argue that careful consideration should be given to the best ways in which SACREs, or indeed other organisations, could work to bring work around faith into the centre of community cohesion work.

We will suggest that one important component of this will be to develop relations between universities, particularly their faculty and students engaged with religion and belief, and community cohesion, and their local community, particularly schools.

And we will say that we believe that many local authorities would very much welcome the contribution that developed SACREs could make to

bringing faith into the centre of their community cohesion work and would be ready to fund that.

And of course we will also argue that such an approach would require serious government commitment, including to proper levels of funding, but most of all to mechanisms for really making change happen.

I believe that 30 years after the 1988 Education Act, with the establishment of SACREs across the country, and 25 years after the foundation of NASACRE, the time is ripe to build upon the enormously important experience and skills of SACREs across the country and extend even more widely to the challenge of building stronger, more united, communities.

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