**AREIAC / NASACRE Conference on The Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) Interim Report**

On Friday 24th November 2017, the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC) and the National Association of SACREs (NASACRE) held a joint conference on the subject of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) Interim Report, ‘Religious Education For All’.

Observations and perspectives on the Report were provided by two Commission members, Prof Denise Cush and Dr Anthony Towey. A Question Time Panel too questions from the delegates on the Report. The Panel consisted of the two Commission members, plus the Rt Hon Charles Clarke and Lat Blaylock (Editor of RE Today).

The Interim Report itself contains four recommendations:

1. There should be a national entitlement statement for RE.
2. Schools should be held to account for the provision and quality of RE.
3. There should be a renewed and expanded role for SACREs.
4. There should be a national plan for improving teaching and learning in RE.

**Prof Cush** led the first session, observing that the Interim Report was largely a consultation document and the CoRE continued to receive contributions to enable it to bring firmer recommendations together. She explained the remit of the CoRE, which is titled ‘RE for All’.

* To consider the nature, purposes, and scope of religious education.
* To identify the enabling factors that currently promote high quality RE, and the barriers that currently limit it.
* To identify what changes are needed to ensure the highest quality provision of RE.
* To ensure that recommendations focus on realistic and specific proposals aimed at both immediate and long-term implementation in the context of continuing educational reform.

There are several key issues on the CoRE agenda:

* The quality of teaching and learning in RE.
* The legal and structural arrangements.
* The public and professional profile of the subject.
* Recruitment, Initial Teacher Education and CPD.
* The range of school settings in which RE should be required.
* The age range for which RE should be required.
* The right to withdraw (parents/carers, pupils and teachers).
* Whether or not there should be a common entitlement in RE, and if so what the entitlement should be.

So far there have been well over 2,000 responses to the survey from a variety of organisations and individuals, and key recent reports had been taken into consideration. Prof Cush visited primary schools and one 6 year old already knew the difference between RE and PSHE.

Prof Cush outlined the main problems emerging:

* There is some excellent teaching and learning in RE taking place, but too dependent on individual teachers, schools and contexts (‘RE lottery’).
* Standards are low in too many schools.
* Recent changes to the role of Local Authorities in relation to schools, in particular the rise of 'academies' and 'free schools’, have confused the place of religious education in the curriculum and the role of LAs in providing syllabuses (data shows that provision appears to be least in academies without religious character).
* This is complex and does not mean that there are no problems in LA run schools or church/faith schools, or that there isn’t excellent RE in some academies.
* The effect of current 'accountability' measures such as inspections not focusing on subjects, religious studies not being included in the 'English Baccalaureate', and the popular 'short course' religious studies examination at 16+ not counting towards measures of school success, have together given the impression that the subject is not a priority for schools.
* Teacher training is inadequate, both initial and continuing, especially for primary teachers.
* Changes in the religious landscape of England require reflection on appropriate content – the rise of the ‘nones’ and new individualised religiosity.

A number of issues were still to be addressed by the CoRE:

* Who should be responsible for the detailed curriculum?
* Effect of dual system
* Clarity of aims/purpose – legitimate diversity?
* More evidence on Primary
* Examination reform
* Withdrawal
* Age range
* A new name?

Prof Cush emphasised that there were further opportunities for individuals and groups to contribute to the ongoing consultation: online till 4th December (via [www.commissiononre.org.uk](http://www.commissiononre.org.uk) and in London on 6th December. The CoRE have at least three more formal meetings arranged and the Final Report is planned for September 2018.

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Isaac Sackey asked about the right for parents to withdraw their children from RE; should we look at the reasons why parliament insisted on that in 1944, when there was a war going on. Today there are many religions, but how can we allow parents to withdraw their children with this great need for knowledge of these different religions?

Denise said there were strong views on both sides of the debate. It is true that RE didn’t become non-confessional till the 1960s. The legal situation is complex. Perhaps there should be withdrawal in ALL subjects or none.

Paula Webber asked about partial withdrawal which caused other issues.

Denise noted that some parents might withdraw their children from study of certain religions. Might withdraw apply only when it comes to ‘practice’?

Katie Patterson asked about children’s rights and parents’ rights.

Denise noted that parents had a right to bring their children up in their own faith, while children had a right to their own choices. Dr Towey added that the debate might get extreme. Might this not be the most important issue and focussing on it could distract from other recommendations?

Kay Hammond asked if there were any indications that the DfE were prepared to engage with this.

Denise said that the DfE had been represented at CoRE meetings and there was a ‘window of opportunity’. Dr Towey noted that there was an invitation from the Department to foster the discussion and decisions would wait till the final report.

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**Dr Towey** from St Mary’s University, Strawberry Hill, noted the importance of RE in today’s world. There is more than one way of looking at the world; people need to learn how to navigate life.

He introduced five discussion points that had occurred to him personally for delegates to consider:

1. How far are character formation, faith and citizenship side-effects rather than primary aims of RE?
2. Does the national entitlement involve more of a ‘Big Ideas’ rather than ‘content-driven’ approach to RE - and if so - how might this be helpful?
3. With academisation, the role of SACREs appears to be changing - if so, how should SACREs be reimagined / reinvigorated?
4. What is the priority for ITE and CPD, and is the CoRE right to look to the kind of strategy adopted by the National Plan for Music as a way forward?
5. What do we think of new terms introduced in the Report: ‘Religion and Ethics’ or other alternative names, ‘non-religious worldviews’ as a term for inclusion of humanist and other views that don’t count as ‘religions’, and of the idea of including phenomenology, philosophy and sociology as approaches to RE as well as textual studies and theology? Is that too ambitious? The CoRE is searching to use the right language.

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Jo Backus asked about the need for pupils to consider the complexity of world views, but there’s no mention of Dharmic faiths? And why is there no substantial discussion of ‘truths’?

Denise noted that the CoRE had discussed the range of faiths, including the Dharmic faiths and reassured delegates that ideas of diversity should be spelled out more clearly, including mention of the real religious landscape.

Anthony quoted Tim Winton arguing that religion is primarily the pursuit of truth and has a ‘spooky’ element. Denise added that some of those elements were included but may need to be strengthened.

Giles Freathy asked about the nature and purpose of RE, and urged the CoRE to examine the schools where there was little commitment to RE - there might even be hostility to the idea of presenting pupils with a range of worldviews. Should pupils be asked to *reflect on* the worldviews they have studied? Many parents wouldn’t want that. pupils worldviews are not only developed in RE. Also investigating a range of worldviews: *should* pupils develop lifelong motivation to continue?

Anthony thought that the whole of education wasn’t just about RE of course, but this report is about RE. Difficult to measure character development- though unavoidable to develop thinking when doing RE. He was on the side of good questions and looking at the answers being provided.

Denise added that, yes, RE should be rigorous, but what’s the point of knowing 10 facts about a religion without including reflection about what it means for me?

Bill Moore added that RE includes the ‘so what?’ as well as the ‘what?’

Allan Hayes asked that RE be embedded within the history of humanity. The message must be: we have to live together.

Mark Chater: CSTG has money to support RE Groups: especially to support teachers in RE: aiming to raise standards, deepen research practice and build leadership capacity. Max £2K for a year: <http://cstg.org.uk/howwehelp>

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**Questions for the Panel:**

Charles Clarke (CC)

Denise Cush (DC)

Anthony Towey (AT)

Lat Blaylock (LB)

**Hazel Patterson: How does the CoRE see the development of SACREs?**

DC: Open to continued consultation. So - not decided. We don’t want to lose the valuable work that SACREs do, quite apart from the responsibilities for agreed syllabuses.

CC: If you put syllabuses and resources to one side, SACREs can develop dialogue between faith communities and schools in the locality. Pupils could go to faith communities or they could receive visitors. No one else is doing this. In addition, there is training and mentoring teachers, not just RE teachers. Also, with Linda Woodhead, the question of the overall community cohesion. Councillors need a vehicle for delivering this duty. Resourcing is needed. SACREs could be a resilient resource here. Sajid Javid is interested in this too.

LB: But giving SACREs a community cohesion role might be a fig-leaf that would wither if it no longer had a syllabus function. Legal change would be needed, and that is unlikely.

**Alison: How will SACREs oversee schools that have the freedom to organise their own syllabus? Extend to academies? Inspecting standards?**

CC: Note the words: oversee, monitor, inspect. They are very different. It’s worth exploring what a well-resourced SACRE might do. On ‘overseeing’: it’s difficult for SACREs to do this. With the decline of the LA it’s difficult to see where it happens. Ofsted do something, but does not have the capacity. Do HT’s and teachers accept being *overseen* by a SACRE? This is even more acute with words like monitor and inspect.

LB: In Leicester, eg, academies were invited to adopt the local syllabus, and all did. They did have a financial incentive to help their decision. With better government support SACREs could conduct its monitoring and supporting role, eg, best practice awards for RE. Letters to schools offering support for schools not currently offering GCSE RS.

AT: SACREs need equal funding across the country.

DC: There are many SACREs that have little or no support.

Paul Smalley: It’s a myth that SACREs are not functioning. They can still operate with some effect. We need to make a fuss about LAs that don’t have SACREs.

CC: Where schools or LAs are in breech of their legal responsibility, people can make a fuss, but in practice over the country there has been a variable level of SACRE to do what they are supposed to.

Lesley Prior: Yes, some schools who are keen to uphold British values are actually breaking the law themselves.

Dilwyn Hunt: SACREs have driven RE forward not national government.

**Isaac Sackey: What evidence is there that SACRE syllabuses are commercialised? Does the CoRE suggest it should be?**

**Paula Webber: Has the CoRE looked at the approach of Wales, with all the LA SACREs adopting a national framework, with small local variations? In Wales there’s a ‘Big Ideas’ and ‘What Matters?’ approach - any interest?**

LB: Regional collaboration may be a route, eg, through the regional schools commissioners. In 2004 there was a national framework for RE and LAs have been undermined. Many SACREs ‘buy into’ the RE Today model, but it’s more charitable than ‘commercial’.

DC: We are aware of the situation in Wales, but do send in more, especially about ‘What Matters’.

**Derek Holloway: Should the committees on SACREs be reviewed in relation to equality?**

CC: On regional commissioners: the school improvement focus is not there any more. They’ve got 2.5K schools so can’t do it. What might SACREs do in relation to school improvement? SACREs have constitutional arrangements, but things have moved on. I’m in favour of more equality in SACRE committees and that could become even more important depending on what SACRE functions would be. Then you work out who is needed on SACRE.

**Michael Gammage: What about the complications with collective worship?**

DC: Someone will have to pick this up, but it’s beyond the Commission’s brief.

CC: The ‘New Settlement For RE’ pamphlet addressed both RE and collective worship. They are related in people’s minds. In legislation, which is not likely, but if everything stays, the law is still there. Why wouldn’t ministers legislate? - they are not certain of what to do and can’t be sure what happens if they do - the drafts get amended. Government will be frightened to invite controversy and difficulty. Action is needed, but is there consensus across the educational world and the faith communities - common thinking is needed. The consequence is damaging for RE, but to what extent can common approaches be developed?

AT: Parents and children don’t necessarily link RE and collective worship. It’s untidy but the point is that people will want things that are done well.

LB: Government and SACREs have separated RE and collective worship over the last decades. We might look at different sorts of RE if it’s going to be ‘for all’.

**Q. What is meant by the importance of experience and ‘extraordinary experiences’ in the report?**

**Q. What will happen to existing syllabuses if there’s a new entitlement?**

**Esther Zariffi (AQA Head of Curriculum and Newcastle SACRE): How is the entitlement linked to the GCSE specifications?**

**Dave Francis: Why not expand the entitlement to include expectations in learning for different ages and stages?**

DC: On ‘experience’: religions and worldviews are not just about beliefs, values, etc, but about everyday and extraordinary experiences, eg, ‘the spooky stuff’.

Barbara Wintersgill’s Big Ideas project might help the CoRE to recommend the inclusion of expectations.

AT: On GCSE changes: the leak-back of GCSE teaching into KS3 is disturbing. It’s not just prep for GCSE.

LB: Primary RE is not sufficiently accounted for in the entitlement statement.

Lesley Prior: ...and special schools.

DC: Please ask primary schools to provide evidence for the CoRE - it has been requested.

CC: The CoRE is trying to find a way through and mark a way forward, so is to be commended. Support it or we may be even worse off. Inaction has consequences.

Dilwyn Hunt: The CoRE has a substantial budget and should use it to research primary education.

**Derek Jay: What could be changed without legislation in order to support SACREs’ monitoring role?**

**Michael Metcalf: Should the CoRE look at what is pragmatic rather than ideal?**

**Brian Gates: Given the power of social media, what political strategic steps might be taken to support religion and ethics?**

DC: Will no new law be failure? No, even today’s discussion will help. RE grassroots may still be influenced, even if there’s no new legislation.

CC: You’ve always got to be pragmatic but is the current law an inhibition? I argue the the law is not helping in a variety of ways. So, also, what legal changes might benefit and what could make that likely?

AT: HTs on the CoRE want a nudge, eg, a school website accountability. Governors too.

LB: I don’t trust the ministers. SACREs have some power at least. Nationalising RE would hand all the power to ministers, and two of the last several would have turned RE off. Politically strategic steps: softly softly - boost the guidance and pressure on the LAs, schools. And we should use the stick if the carrot won’t work. We need outcomes to go with the entitlement.

Lilian Weatherly: In our new syllabus we now use the language of schools ‘must’ rather than ‘should’ enter students for an examination.

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**Further questions and comments**

Derek: What is the status of the ‘Big Ideas’ in relation to the recommendations of the CoRE?

DC: Barbara Wintersgill did present to the CoRE: she presented evidence of how the Big Ideas work in practice.

Allan Hayes: The Big Ideas publication talks of religious and non-religious worldviews, as though they are different, but everything follows from an interest in humanity.

Dawud Bone (Coventry): RE can be seen as an academic subject, but one of its beauties is that because it’s not in the NC, you can engage in character development. Ideally should be across the curriculum, but RE is often the only place where it happens.

Dilwyn Hunt: RE can’t just serve the knowledge economy.

Hazel Patterson: Any engagement with employers? e.g., LSE website pleads for religious literacy.

Mark Chater: Yes, Culham St Gabriel’s has produced a research project that involved employers.

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