

## CEO's Report – 10/5/2018

As always, it is a pleasure to stand before you all to tell you about the work that the RE Council has been doing since our last general meeting. Once again, I can tell you that we have been busy...

Personally, I have been very busy attending events and speaking at them. A quick glance at my diary reminds me that since the SRGM last November, I have spoken at the NATRE conference, ISRSA conference, the conference on Catholic RE at Heythrop College, the Symposium on Muslim Active Citizenship at the Palace of Westminster, and the launch of the Midlands Religion and Philosophy network at the University of Wolverhampton. I've attended a Church of England RE Advisors' Development Day, round table events at the thinktank Theos, a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on RE, and the inaugural Religion and the Media festival. I've had meetings with Welsh Government, both remotely and in person. I've had multiple meetings with multiple civil servants at DfE. I've attended the DfE round table discussion on Languages, Arts, & Humanities. I've met with David Laws, Executive Chair of the Education Policy Institute; Mark Friend, the author of the BBC's review of Religion and Ethics; and Lois Lee, the director of the Understanding Unbelief programme at the University of Kent. These, and many more meetings, have kept me busy.

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Dominating my work, and that of the REC, over the last six months (and before) has been the RE Council's role as secretariat to the Commission on RE. When last we met it was shortly after the publication of the Commission's Interim Report.

Now we have some hard copies of that here today – If you've not already got one, please do take one. We've still got quite a few in the office and you'll make Ffiôn happy if you take any off her hands.

The Commission has moved on significantly since this publication. In December, the Commission held a consultation at the Grey Coat Hospital School. A mix of 45 invited experts, teachers and key stakeholders attended, in addition to eight of the Commissioners and six people carrying out secretariat functions. Those invited had been identified as having expertise in some of the specific areas where CoRE had not heard sufficiently. The event was planned around the four main areas of recommendations from the interim report.

On the day we had structured table discussions, each chaired by a different commissioner. This allowed everyone to speak directly to a commissioner, unmediated by the secretariat. Each table seating-plan was designed to ensure a diversity of views and experiences. The feedback from attendees was extremely positive and Commissioners found the day valuable.

The interim report was intended to be an invitation for people to engage in conversation with the Commission about its work. The Commissioners therefore asked the REC to put in place a consultation that ensured they heard responses from as wide a range of people as possible. The consultation ran from 9<sup>th</sup> October to 4<sup>th</sup> December 2017. There were 673 responses with meaningful content: 494 came from individuals and 179 on behalf of organisations. There were a further 38 responses that came in outside the official portal for the consultation. The consultation questionnaire had a series of specific and detailed questions to focus respondents on precisely the issues that the Commissioners identified as being in particular need of thoughtful consideration. In addition, there were 10 case studies received that highlighted strengths and weaknesses of how the recommendations in the interim report would work in practice.

The responses were analysed by Frances Lane, a Senior Lecturer in Education at Canterbury Christ Church University, RE Subject Lead & Subject Tutor at University College London, and Subject Lead in RE at Ark Schools. Frances provided a written report for the Commissioners and attended a full Commission meeting where she was able to present her findings and answer questions. She also undertook an analysis of the case studies. Frances' work was of a very high standard and provided a crucial resource for the Commissioners.

The Commission has had 4 one day meetings so far this year. The meetings have been preceded by online work on position papers. The REC has produced position papers that summarise what Commissioners have already said on the issue (both in public and in commission meetings), what evidence has been received from the consultation or elsewhere, and key questions for the Commissioners to consider. The position papers are made available for the Commissioners to comment on online (via a private site) with each Commissioner able to see the comments that others make (and therefore build on them or offer alternative perspectives). The online discussion thus provides the essential groundwork for discussion at the meetings.

The Commissioners have been working hard and have been producing a high volume of material to be shaped into the early drafts of the final report. We have in place a timetable for producing drafts of the report and are on schedule for the autumn publication, as planned. The Final Report is planned for launch on 12<sup>th</sup> September, and we are working with our PR agency 3:nine on a communications strategy for the launch.

The work of the Commission has been substantial, and I am extremely grateful for the hard work not only of the 14 Commissioners, but also of Trevor, Jon Reynolds – the Commission's project manager – and Amira Chilvers, the report drafter. The hours that Trevor, Amira, and Jon have put in have been considerable. But I'm confident that, come September, it will all have been worth it.

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But despite the heavy workload that providing the Secretariat services to the Commission brings, the RE Council has had a number of other plates to keep spinning.

Peter will tell you shortly about the EGM held on the 9<sup>th</sup> February and the adoption of the RE Council's new Articles of Association. This marked the realisation of work that had been developing for over two years. I am extremely grateful to Peter for working on this as Company Secretary, to Sarah for Chairing the Governance Committee that oversaw this work and for the members of the Governance Committee for going over every line of the articles, often multiple times, at multiple meetings, to ensure that we got everything right. I'm thrilled that we now have a system guaranteeing Board elections every May and hope that this will mean that member organisations feel that there is more opportunity to get involved in the governance of the REC.

Of course, the new system of elections that you'll be voting in shortly does mean that some people will come to the end of their terms on the Board at the end of August. I therefore want to thank Phil Leivers, Sarah Lane Cawte, Peter Ward, Sara Perlmutter, Richy Thompson, and Karamjit Singh Thind for all the work that they have done. I'd also like to thank Emma McVittie who came off the Board at the end of last December.

In addition to the sometimes-torturous process of getting the new Articles in place, the Governance Committee has created a new Risk Register which has proved invaluable and has led on consideration of HR issues and GDPR.

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I think the last 6 months has seen really productive work by the Finance & Fundraising Committee under Trevor's careful Chairmanship. The Committee has been continuing to hold Richy as Treasurer to account by scrutinising his report before it goes to the Board. Richy has put in a huge amount of work as Treasurer over the last three years, as will, I'm sure be clear from his report shortly. I am very grateful to him indeed. The Finance & Fundraising Committee has overseen the development and adoption by the Board of an Ethical Fundraising Policy. And it has built on last year's strategic away day facilitated by the Charities Aid Foundation by considering the different options for how we might ensure the REC's financial future.

Closely related to the work of F&F has been the establishment of an "RE Council Sustainability Group" to consider in more detail the big strategic picture for the REC's future sustainability. And I'm very grateful to its members for the time and thought that they have put in.

Now I know that both this group, and the Finance & Fundraising Committee will want me to point out that while lunch is provided, the REC's costs for the day are running at about £10 per person. So if you would like to make a donation towards these costs, we would be very grateful. You can donate online – just go to our website and click on the "donate" option – or you can donate cash in person today.

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The joint PR Group, with Deborah in the Chair, has been very active, working with our PR consultants 3:nine media and our political consultants PB Consulting. We've been building on our busiest party conference season yet and building on the high-profile publication of our *State of the Nation* report last autumn. We've been helping MPs to ask questions in Parliament and have been planning a second Youth Event in Westminster to follow on from our successful event in 2016.

This Youth Event will bring together the work of the PR Group with the RE Council Young Ambassadors. I continue to be really proud of the way that the Young Ambassador scheme empowers young people by helping them to be advocates for RE, promoting it within their school, and to their local media, and to their MP. The Youth Event will be a great opportunity for them, and it will be a great opportunity for us to advance our lobbying strategy by selecting pupils from schools in the constituencies of MPs we most want to influence. I want to thank Lynsey Wilkinson of Redhill Academy for her work as Young Ambassador coordinator: her work has been invaluable.

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The Education Committee has again undertaken important work for the RE Council, and I am grateful to Phil for his astute chairmanship. This is a committee with a remit to consider the key issues at the heart of what the RE Council stands for. It's a big and popular committee – I'm aware that there has, again, been an incredibly strong response from member organisations recommending people to fill one of the current vacancies. The Board, meeting in just over a week, is going to have a tricky time considering so many high-quality expressions of interest.

One of the key areas of Education Committee's work is to review the work of the REQM project. This continues to be a great scheme, and I'm delighted that we're able to help so many schools to support and promote high quality RE. At the moment we are undertaking a full review of the project, exploring different models for REQM's future in response to anecdotal evidence suggesting that a lower fee might help to expand the scheme.

The REQM work is managed by Linda Rudge, and I am very grateful for all that she does. REQM also relies on the work of Ffiôn Cook, the REC's Operations Officer, who does a lot of the administration work necessary to make the scheme work. So, thank you Linda, and thank you Ffiôn.

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We are, of course, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, and I worry sometimes that as the education systems in England and Wales get ever more different, our role becomes more challenging. I'm delighted though to have been working more closely with WASACRE in recent months, attending a meeting of their executive in January and talking frequently with their Secretary, Paula Webber, on how best to coordinate our work. On Tuesday I was in Cardiff meeting with the Welsh Government, talking with them about the work of the Commission on RE. While the Commission's remit is England only, Welsh Government is interested in a lot of the thinking behind the Commission's work and sees a possibility of a meaningful overlap their work on the new Curriculum for Wales. I'm really positive about this and look forward to exploring how this might develop.

Of course, Tuesday was an auspicious day to be at Welsh Government as it was the day that news broke about the new guidance to Welsh SACREs about non-religious representation on SACREs. This was welcome clarification and could have real significance in England too given that, on this point, the legal frameworks in England and Wales are identical. You can see on our website the statement that the REC put out on this.

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The big picture of Teacher Recruitment has been alarming, although this is by no means a problem for RE alone. Kathryn Wright continues to undertake invaluable work project managing our Teacher Recruitment campaign, although for a proper solution I think we would require genuine Government engagement with the problem.

We have, however, had some success in this area. In February 2018 we achieved significant national coverage for our warning about the dangers of not recruiting enough RE teachers. This generated interviews on BBC R4, LBC, Talk Radio, Premier, UCB, Voice of Islam, and BBC's regional radio stations. It also generated coverage in the BBC online, TES, The Times, Daily Mail, a supportive editorial in the Guardian, and a placed article on Conservative Home. I found myself on Radio 4's the Today Programme and Sunday Programme; Ed Pawson, Trevor Cooling, and Ben Wood also gave radio interviews. What was positive about this was that in all cases, the different media outlets weren't able to arrange for anyone to argue against us. No one wanted to say that having more, and better trained, RE teachers would not be a good thing. This meant that we could use the media opportunities to set out, uncontested, often to large national audiences why RE is a crucial part of the curriculum.

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Of course, not all media opportunities come via traditional media these days, and the RE Council is increasingly active on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. I'm also fairly active with my personal Twitter account. I think these are ways of engaging with a wider audience and building networks beyond RE and into the wider Education Policy world. If you don't already, I'd encourage you to follow us and engage with us on social media.

Now, much of the groundwork for our social media presence was laid by Naomi Dalton. Sadly, since our last general meeting, Naomi has left the REC. Naomi did a huge amount for us in both of her stints working for the RE Council. Of course, having left once and returned, it's not impossible that she'll be back at some point, ready to help develop the REC further. Time will tell...

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Now, before I finish, I want to say a few words giving some consideration to where we're meeting. It is a great pleasure to be hosted for this AGM by Conway Hall. I'm very grateful to Humanists UK for facilitating this.

As you all know, we try to hold our general meetings at sites of significance to different member organisations. This means that in recent years we've been able to meet in a range of places of worship, special for different religious communities.

Conway Hall is, of course, not a place of worship. It is significant, not for a religious community, but for a non-religious one. And we'll hear later about the South Place Ethical Society (and now Conway Hall Ethical Society)'s long history.

It is really important for the Religious Education Council to be meeting today in a place heavy with the history of freethinking and non-religious worldviews. It matters because questions about the role of non-religious worldviews in RE form an important part of our history; an important part of the landscape of RE as it currently is; and an important part of the future of our subject.

The significance of the non-religious to our history is clear. This year the RE Council turns 45 years old. And right back in the year of our foundation, back in 1973, Humanists UK came into membership (though they were called the British Humanist Association back then). Ever since the RE Council has striven to be inclusive of the non-religious and to debate constructively what that means. We were clear about it in our 1991 report "RE, Attainment, and the National Curriculum". We were clear about it in our 2013 Curriculum Framework for RE. And we were clear about it in our submission to DfE when they consulted, most recently, on the content of GCSE Religious Studies.

Discussing the role of non-religious worldviews in RE remains a live issue today. For some of us the importance of including non-religious worldviews is straightforward, but I know that for others it remains contentious. And that's understandable. Within the RE Council, we don't all agree. In fact, the thing that gives us most strength – our diversity – is the reason why there are many things on which we have differing views. So, it's important – and it will always be important – to recognise that not all member organisations will agree with each other. They might not even approve of each other. And member organisations won't always agree with what the RE Council collectively decides. But that's ok. In our pluralist society, having space to disagree, and learning how to disagree well, is infinitely preferable to a forced consensus. So, I'm proud of the way that, as an organisation, we don't shut people out of the discussion. Rather, we bring different groups together – sometimes even groups who actively campaign against each other on other issues – to work collectively for better RE for pupils in schools. And it is important to remember that the broader our diversity, the stronger our collective voice is politically. When I'm talking to politicians, the thing that impresses them the most is when I tell them the sheer range of members that the REC represents. This is a vital part of our appeal.

Finally, meeting at Conway Hall is appropriate because questions about the role of non-religious worldviews will be an important part of our future. An increasing proportion of the British public identifies as not being religious. We can argue about whether to use Census data, the British Social

Attitudes Survey, or data from different polling companies, but the trend is clear. If RE is about exploring difference, developing tolerance, respect, and understanding for people from different faith and belief backgrounds. If it's about learning to live well in our pluralist society and creating skilled intercultural navigators. If it's about engaging with young people and getting them to think about the Big Questions. Then we must recognise that significant numbers of people in this country use non-religious, rather than religious worldviews.

And if over 70% of the children in our classrooms are likely not to identify as religious, as the British Social Attitudes Survey suggests, it would be crazy to tell them that their worldviews don't matter, or that they're not interesting, and that only religions should be studied.

Now of course, we can also argue about what it means to identify as not being religious. What it means to mark your religion as "none". What it means to say you are "spiritual, but not religious". What it means to identify as a Humanist, a freethinker, a Bright, a secularist, an agnostic, an atheist, a new atheist, or even "an atheist, but not a Dawkins atheist". We should argue about all of these things. And RE seems a pretty good place to do this.

And we struggle enough with parents being unconvinced of the value of RE – you'll perhaps have seen the polling from YouGov in February that ranked Religious Studies as 15<sup>th</sup> out of 18 for importance as a subject, above only Drama, Classics, and Latin. We also know, from the same survey, that while 53% of religious people think that RE is important, only 29% of non-religious people do. This means that for the future health of our subject it will be vital to convince the growing proportion of parents who aren't religious, and who are currently sceptical about the value of our subject, that it's not just important but essential.

I think we make our task far harder if we don't make every effort to show that we are inclusive as a subject. I think it's vital that our subject is seen as a place of debate, a place of challenge. It's vital that we are seen to be promoting critical thinking, and not thought to be protecting special interests.

Now obviously in many RE classrooms across the country all of this is completely commonplace. That our past, present, and future embraces the religious and the non-religious is not a radical point to make. And of course, it is longstanding REC policy. But I think it's still a point worth remembering. And it's great to be here at a place as special as Conway Hall to illustrate how the RE Council embodies these debates.

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If I step back and look at the big picture for the REC I think there is much to be positive about. Politicians are more and more interested in our work. Whereas once RE struggled to get attention from politicians, this is no longer the same problem. The civil servants get the need for reform of the legal, education, and policy frameworks for RE, and have been briefing Ministers accordingly. This is incredibly positive.

And in the Commission we have a vehicle for substantial political impact.

And within the RE community we have the talent to achieve a huge amount. Within the RE community the debate is fizzing. In the blogosphere and on Twitter there are fascinating discussions being had about what RE is, and what it should be.

So I am excited about the opportunities that we have, and I am excited about the future of RE. And I think that by working together, with and through the RE Council, all of us have a real chance to make

a significant, positive contribution to the future development of the subject. These are exciting times, and there is much to do.