

CEO's Report – 7/11/2018

Let me start by wishing a happy Diwali to all those who are celebrating today, and by thanking you for taking the time to be with us on such an important day.

I am delighted that all of you are here today, and thrilled to be standing before you. I am particularly pleased to be at the Jewish Museum. This is a wonderful venue for us to be at – thank you to Lisa Shames and Frances Jeens for their help in arranging everything for today. I always think it important for every General Meeting to be an opportunity for all of us to learn from those who are hosting us, and today I am particularly excited about what Lisa and Frances have lined up for us before lunch.

But we have a little bit to cover before then.

The last six months have probably been my busiest since joining the RE Council. Truly, we are no “term time only” organisation. The summer months in the REC's offices were particularly packed and there is much that I need to cover in this report on the RE Council's work since the AGM in May.

Personally, I have been very busy attending events and speaking at them. A quick glance at my diary reminds me that since the AGM last November, I have spoken at the NASACRE AGM, represented the REC at the launch of the Faith & Belief Forum's Charter for Faith & Belief, attended the launch of Charles Clarke & Linda Woodhead's report on religion in schools, attended the WASACRE meeting in Anglesey, attended JCQ briefings on the publication of A-level and GCSE results, been at all days of the Liberal Democrat, Labour, and Conservative party conferences, been to 10 Downing Street to meet with the PM's special adviser, had meetings with Lord Alderdice and Baroness Warsi, with the MPs Tom Tugendhat and Paul Williams, with the Welsh Government, with the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, with the National Centre for Social Research, with representatives from ASCL, NAHT, NEU, and NASUWT, with people from Ofsted and DfE, and with a number of funders and potential funders (trying very hard to turn the latter into the former). I've also had a large number of meetings with representatives from REC member organisations about the Commission. These, and many more meetings, have kept me busy.

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Of course, dominating everything has been the work that the RE Council has been doing in relation to the Commission on Religious Education. We're going to hear later from Joyce about the conclusions the Commissioners came to, so I'm not going to go into the details of what the report actually says. We'll also hear from Trevor about the decision the Board made regarding the REC's support for the report and its recommendations, so I shall try to focus on the work that the REC undertook to get to this point and something about where we're going next.

As you all know, the REC established the Commission. We set its terms of reference, appointed the 14 Commissioners, and raised funds to cover its costs. The REC then acted as secretariat for the Commission, holding the budget for its work, overseeing the logistics for the Commission, and carrying out the functions that the Commissioners requested us to do. The REC hired a project manager to undertake some of the work, and a drafter to take minutes of all the meetings and produce drafts of the reports. I am indebted to Jon Reynolds as Project Manager, and Amira Tharani as drafter for their work. Their job titles do little justice to the scale of work they put in to the project. John and Amira worked tirelessly with Trevor and me as we did everything we could to deliver what the Commissioners called for. It is, however, vital to remember that the Commission had full independence from the REC in terms of, what was discussed at meetings, what conclusions were

reached, what recommendations were made, and what the text of the interim and final reports said. Critically, Amira, as drafter reported directly to the Commission, and not to me.

The REC was heavily involved in preparing the ground for the publication of the report. I met with the Prime Minister's Special Adviser on Faith & Communities, and the Head of Education at 10 Downing Street. I had a large number of meetings with civil servants at DfE over the course of the Commission's work, keeping them apprised of the progress of the project, and, where appropriate, briefing them on the recommendations that the Commission would make. In addition, I had conversations about the recommendations with Ofsted. In the run up to the publication of the final report I either met in person or spoke over the 'phone with a range of people from within REC member organisations. I had extensive email correspondence with others. And I spoke with many people from the wider world of education about the Commission's report in an attempt to ensure a well-informed response on publication.

The REC oversaw the launch of the final report. It was released online on 9th September. The date was selected due to a very limited window of opportunity. We had to launch before the start of the Party Conference season, after the beginning of the academic year, but while Parliament was sitting. We also wanted to avoid launching on Rosh Hashana. We had done extensive work with the media to prepare for the launch - and many thanks to Colin Hallmark of 3:nine Communications who was, once again, fantastic helping here. I put out an initial statement from the REC that was positive in tone, but which didn't tie us to any position.

The coverage was by far the most extensive on any RE issue in my time at the REC. It was largely accurate, and pretty positive too. It was on BBC Breakfast on BBC, on Sunday on Radio 4, on Radio 5 Live, and on a range of BBC local radio outlets. It was even covered on Turkish TV. There was substantial coverage in print in many of the major news outlets including the *Sunday Times*, *Mail on Sunday*, *Telegraph*, *Independent*, & *Guardian*. Online there was coverage on the BBC, ITV, *Huffington Post*, *The Conversation*, *The Week*, *Conservative Woman*, *Unilad*, and *Open Democracy* among others. Within the faith & belief media there were articles in the *Church Times*, *Christian Today*, on Premier's website and in *War Cry* among many others. Denise Cush was interviewed on UCB. We were also successful at placing articles in publications such as *Prospect*. There was also significant social media activity with much discussion on Twitter and elsewhere.

On the 12th September we had a Westminster launch of the report, hosted by Luke Pollard MP. It was well attended with MPs, Peers, Commissioners, funders, people from the world of RE, and people from the wider Education world. It was an opportunity for us to have a second bite of the cherry in terms of presenting the findings of the report in the most helpful way, and was, I think, a success.

Many REC member organisations put out public responses to the Commission report. The vast majority of these have been positive. Where there have been criticisms from REC members, the points of contention have varied – that is to say, there's not one or two things that keep on coming up as being the stumbling block. Responses from the wider education world have been almost entirely positive with Teaching Unions, Headteacher groups, and others throwing their weight behind the report. There has been significant interest from the Welsh Government (even though the Commission's work only covers England), and substantial interest from MPs from across the political spectrum at the party conferences (pleasingly, many of them already knew about the Commission, and we had some very well-informed discussions with some of them). Importantly, the schools Minister, Nick Gibb, "welcomed" the report in his answer to a Parliamentary Question. And there's some indication of the possible impact of the Commission in that some of its recommendations have already been taken up: specifically, the call for funding for Subject Knowledge Enhancement Courses and for increased bursaries for people to train to become RE teachers.

There is, on the Commission website, a series of suggestions of what you can do to support the Commission's recommendations. If you've not already seen it, you should take a look. There you'll see template letters you can use for writing to your MP or to the Head of a local school. You'll also see other materials you can use: a short leaflet on the Commission, an executive summary of the report, and an animation explaining some of the Commission's thinking.

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But of course, the Commission isn't the only thing the REC has been working on since May.

The PR Group has been rebranded as the RE Policy Unit. The Unit remains under the wise Chairmanship of Deborah Weston to whom I am very grateful for all her work. The rebranding is designed to make it clearer to funders why they should support the Committee's work. "Policy" we are told, sounds important and like it makes a difference to RE in the classroom, it's much more attractive to funders than "PR" which sounds like nefarious spin. And it's now a "Unit" rather than a Group to give a greater sense of authority and stability. Certainly, it sounds more worthwhile for politicians to give meeting time to a Policy Unit than a PR Group.

The Policy Unit has overseen a successful lunch at the Palace of Westminster on 4th July to discuss the teacher recruitment crisis in RE. In attendance were Liz Twist MP, Stephen Timms MP, and Simon Hoare MP (at the time PPS to Damian Hinds), and a researcher from Nick Gibb's office, along with people from the wider education world.

Also part of the Policy Unit's work was the very successful Youth Debate on 9th July where 80 pupils in Years 10, 11, & 12 from 20 schools across England came to Parliament to debate some of the key issues around the teaching of RE. MPs, Parliamentary researchers, policy advisers, and others came to listen to the pupils debate. The schools were partially selected on the basis of being in the constituency of MPs who we wanted to encourage to attend the event. Some were selected as Young Ambassador schools. Despite strong competition from elsewhere for the attention of MPs (Boris Johnson was in the process of resigning as Foreign Secretary, and Theresa May was making a statement to the Commons), 10 MPs chose to attend the event.

The Young Ambassador aspect of the Youth Debate gives me an opportunity to thank Lynsey Wilkinson, the coordinator of the Young Ambassador project. Lynsey has been superb in helping to keep this project running and I've been extremely grateful to her for her work. Sadly (for us) she's stepping down from her coordinator role to take on greater responsibility in her school, so watch this space for developments regarding a new coordinator.

In August the publication of exam results made sobering reading for us. The number of A-level entries in RS fell by 23% compared to 2017, while the number of GCSE entries fell by 10%. We put out a joint press release with NATRE, the **Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT)**, the **Design and Technology Association**, the **National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD)**, and **National Drama**. Our press release focused on the danger of a narrowing curriculum and the deleterious impact of the EBacc. I think this was the right approach, recognising that the problems of a narrowing curriculum are not unique to RE and that we can make common cause with others to make our voice heard.

This September I had the delight of attending three party conferences & speaking with many politicians at the Liberal Democrat, Labour, and Conservative party conferences. We talked to more MPs and Peers than in previous years. 18 Parliamentarians including two members of the shadow cabinet at the Labour Conference. And at the Conservative Party Conference, 31 MPs and members

of the House of Lords, including three members of the cabinet: the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Education, and the Communities Secretary. In addition we spoke with Nick Gibb, the Schools Minister, and Robert Halfon, the Chair of the Education Select Committee. At the exhibition stand we had school-by-school data based on both the school workforce survey and GCSE entry data which proved extremely attractive to MPs, providing the basis of some of our more involved discussions, and gave us something tangible to offer to send MPs as part of a post conference follow-up. Many of our discussions focused on the Commission's report, about which a significant number of MPs were already aware.

I am very grateful to those who joined me on the stands at the party conferences: Naomi Anstice, Joanne Harris, Ben Wood, Fiona Moss, and Juliet Lyall, and to PB Consulting for their support throughout.

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The Education Committee has a new Chair in Kathryn Wright. It has been a busy committee discussing issues at the heart of the RE Council's work. The Education Committee has had two big reports to consider this autumn with the Commission report joined by the report from Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead on religion in schools.

Kathryn has also led on our work relating to Teacher Recruitment. The big picture here remains alarming, although there is some positive news in the Government's increase in bursary provision to train to teach RE. That having been said, bursary provision is still too low, and is not comparable with other shortage subjects. So this latest announcement, while going in the right direction, has not gone far enough. There is still much work to be done.

Also sitting within the remit of the Education Committee is the RE Quality Mark work that Linda Rudge project manages. Linda has been tireless in her work promoting and running REQM. She has been combining that with a wholesale review of the REQM project with Helen Harrison brought in as an external lead reviewer. I am grateful to both of them. The review is an essential opportunity to consider the cost of REQM to schools, the criteria by which awards are given, the Quality Assurance processes, and other related issues. I look forward to using the review to help REQM to support great RE in even more schools.

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The Finance & Fundraising Committee has been doing sterling work ensuring that the Treasurer's reports are robust and that the budget of the REC. Of course, we have a new Treasurer in Andrew Copson – I am very grateful to him for taking the reins here. One of the ways in which I hope to make Andrew's job easier is by increasing the funds that we raise. To that end I've been working with Kishan Devani who has taken on an Ambassadorial role for the REC, working both to raise the profile of the REC with politicians, and with potential funders. I'm happy to say that in the few short months he's been consulting the REC in this way, he has already been successful on both counts. I'm now hoping he will become even more successful and that the donations will come rolling in in ever greater numbers.

In concert with the Finance & Fundraising Committee, the Sustainability Group has been considering some of the bigger picture issues of funding for the REC. The sustainability group has been considering how the Commission's report could change the landscape in which the REC seeks to be financially sustainable. It's a tough task, but a vital one. And one where I hope we are making progress. Our aim

is to diversify our funding and reduce our reliance on single Trusts in a bid to get the REC to a genuinely sustainable financial position.

Now I know that both the Sustainability Group and the Finance & Fundraising Committee will want me to point out that while lunch is provided, the REC does have substantial costs for today. So if you would like to make a donation towards these costs, we would be very grateful. If I can suggest a donation of £10 per head, I know Andrew will be a happy Treasurer. You can donate online – just go to our website and click on the “donate” option – or you can donate cash in person today.

I’d also like to flag up two other ways that you can support the RE Council. For those of you that shop using Amazon (and I’m not going to get into the ethics of whether you should shop with Amazon...). But for those of you who do, if you log in via Amazon Smile you can donate to the REC half a percent of everything you spend at no extra cost to you.

And if Amazon is not for you, you can sign up to “Give as you live” and select the REC as your charity. By using Give as you Live you can donate between 1% and 10% of all your online shopping. Again, that’s at no extra cost to you.

So, please. If you all sign up and nominate the REC before you go on an online shopping spree it’ll really help us. There should be details about how you can sign up in the “Support us” section of the REC website. If they’re not up already, they will be shortly.

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As ever, the Governance Committee has been undertaking crucial work to ensure that the REC remains well governed. We have adopted a new Privacy Policy to make sure the REC is fully GDPR compliant. We have been discussing options for a code of conduct. And we’ve discussed the challenges presented by the REC’s membership criteria. The Chair of the Governance Committee, Sarah Lane Cawte, has come off the Board, having served her full 9 years, but I am delighted that she has agreed to remain in the Chair. Thank you, Sarah. The continuity that you offer the Committee, in addition to your brilliant Chairing, is priceless.

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We are, of course, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, although as the education systems in England and Wales get ever more different, our role serving both can become rather challenging. I’m delighted therefore to have been able to work closely with WASACRE on issues relating to the new Curriculum for Wales. I’m also very pleased with the interest that the Welsh Government has shown in the work of the Commission and have had a number of meetings, in person and on the ‘phone, with civil servants there.

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There are a couple of people I haven’t thanked so far, but who I really ought to. First, I must thank Trevor Cooling. Now this isn’t just to thank you for your Chairing of the Board. And of the Finance & Fundraising Committee. And of the Sustainability Group. And it isn’t just for all your work as part of the secretariat for the Commission and all the fun and games that that led to. It’s also for gently putting up with all my esoteric questions about RE. It’s always nice when we agree. But it’s also pretty fun when I get to disagree with you. So it’s good either way. Thank you for tolerating me. And when Trevor escapes off to far flung climes such as Australia and India, it’s Dave Francis who gets his ear bent. So thank you Dave – I always value your patience & wisdom on what I suppose I should call your

Sophological thoughts. I hope that Deborah Weston and Andrew Copson, our two new Officers know what they're getting into with the Officer group. Deborah, at least, should – she's been there before...

One final person to mention, without whom none of the work of the RE Council would get done is our Finance & Operations Manager, Ffiôn Cook. We plan to recruit a third member of staff for the REC office, to belatedly replace Naomi, particularly now that Jon has finished his Project Manager role with the Commission. But at the moment it's just me and Ffiôn in the office, so we are rather busy. Thank you Ffiôn for all that you do: I am very glad that you returned from Mount Everest.

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I started today by talking about the Commission, and I'm going to come back to it as I come to the end of my report. This is only right as it's been the single item that has loomed largest for the REC in the last six months. The Commission's final report is a landmark moment. The Commissioners have given us a comprehensive vision for an exciting, valuable, and meaningful subject and a proposed legal structure to underpin it. Theirs is a vision for a subject that will remain inclusive for all pupils regardless of future demography. Theirs is a vision that that we should be able to sell to all parents, and to all politicians. The Commission's National Plan for RE should secure high quality RE for all pupils in all schools. This is, I hope, something that all of us can agree on.

And we desperately need this plan of action. Each year there are increasing numbers of schools that are failing to offer RE at all. The most recent figures are that around a third of all secondary schools in England report teaching no RE. This year we saw the number of entries for Religious Studies A-level plummet by 23%, while they fell by over 10% at GCSE. We hear of experienced and talented RE teachers being made redundant as their schools squeeze the subject from the curriculum. When surveyed, most parents are either indifferent or hostile towards our subject. And yet we know that RE is more important than ever. An understanding and appreciation of the complexity and diversity of religion and belief is an essential part of basic education.

There is a very real possibility that without intervention our subject will vanish from most schools. Without action, we could easily see RE become a subject to be found exclusively in schools with a religious character, and if that happens, one wonders what pressures there might be for those schools to focus more on one religion and not on a diversity.

The Commission offers us the best opportunity for changing things. It offers a National Plan for RE, showing the way forward for the subject. It offers the coherence of a national approach, while giving space and opportunity for local tailoring. It gives a vision of RE for all, while recognising the diverse nature of our school landscape ensuring flexibility for schools of a religious character to interpret the National Entitlement in ways most appropriate for their pupils.

The initial responses to this report have been positive. Politicians at Westminster are listening. We've got a real chance to make progress here. But to make that a reality we have to convince them that not only are the Commission's recommendations the right approach for RE, but that it will be politically safe for them to follow them. That it will be popular for them to do so. We need to reassure them that there is support for the recommendations. That's why it matters that the REC is taking a clear and positive approach towards the report. And I'm pleased that I've seen so many REC member organisations taking similarly clear and positive approaches. Because the alternative – division within the RE community and a consequent reduced political appetite to engage with us – risks blowing our chance for reform and letting our subject wither and die.

The stakes are high.

I believe that in 10, 20, 50 years' time our successors will look back on what we chose to do at this point and judge us for it. Now is the critical moment.

So over the next few months the REC's work will likely remain dominated by the Commission. I will be doing everything I can to build on the report. That means working with all of you to explore what the recommendations might mean in practice. That means encouraging people to engage with the vision of "Religion and Worldviews". And that means working to build political support for the recommendations in the report. I hope you'll join me in this. There is much work to be done.