

CEO's Report – 15/5/2019

It is a great pleasure to be here with you all today and to have the opportunity to talk with you about the work that the RE Council has undertaken over the last six months.

And it's a particular pleasure to be able to do so here in Amigo Hall, right next to St George's Cathedral, Southwark. As you know, we always hold our General Meetings at places of significance to different members, and so today it is our Catholic colleagues to whom we are grateful for allowing us to meet here. I am very grateful to everyone at St George's Cathedral for their help in hosting us, and in particular to Sharon Docherty for her help setting this up. It is a privilege for us to be meeting here, and a fantastic time to be doing so given the canonisation of Oscar Romero last October. We will be seeing the Oscar Romero shrine in the Cathedral later, and having an opportunity to learn more.

On more worldly matters, we have been busy at the RE Council. Very busy. Now I know I say this every time, but this is because it is true...

Speaking personally, I've been kept extremely busy attending all sorts of events and speaking at them. Looking at my diary since last November, I can see that I have given presentations or spoken on panels at the NATRE conference; the ISRSA conference; the WASACRE meeting; a NatCen event on RE's response to the changing religious landscape; a conference of RE teachers at Epsom College; the OCR Religious Studies Teacher Network; a conference of Jewish SACRE reps; a joint meeting of Warwickshire & Coventry SACREs; the South West SACREs conference at Dillington Park; and a round table discussion on RE and social cohesion hosted by the National Baha'i Centre.

I've been to the House of Lords to watch Peers debate the Commission on RE's final report, and I've attended a lunch at the House of Commons organised by the APPG on the Baha'i Faith. I've been to a Friday Night Breakfast at the Jewish Museum; the Theos Annual Lecture; a round table discussion of the NATRE & University of Bristol Shared Space research work; another round table event at the British Academy on Beliefs, Values, and Worldviews in the workplace; a conference on Religion and the Media; the Education and Religion Special Interest Group at UCL; the TRS-UK AGM; a Faith Matters event on religious extremism; and an event on Religion & Brexit at Goldsmith's University.

I've had meetings with Officials at DfE on multiple occasions, and at MHCLG; with Officials from Ofsted, and with Officials from the Welsh Government, again on multiple occasions. I've met with the Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, and the Shadow Schools Minister, Mike Kane. I've met with the back bench MP Andrea Jenkyns; with people from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission; with academics from SOAS; with the Faith Research Centre; and with a wide range of current and potential funders.

I've recorded podcasts for the Faith & Belief Forum, and for the National Secular Society. And I've spoken with various different media outlets.

And of course, I've had all sorts of one-on-one meetings with people from REC member organisations.

These, and many more meetings, have kept me busy.

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But obviously, the work of the REC is rather more than a sequence of meetings and events. The big thing – still – dominating the work of the REC has been the Commission on RE, or rather, the work that we've been doing to build on the final report.

Now. I think there's been an interesting bit of discussion over how successful the Commission Report has been so far. I've certainly heard one or two people try to say that it hasn't been much of a success and that it's largely been ignored by the Government. There may even be one or two people in the room today with those views. Well. I have to say that this is a real misrepresentation. The truth is that the Commission Report has already had a significant impact, and that there is much more to come. And I hope to set some of this out for you today.

But let's start at the beginning. It's true that in December, the Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds, wrote a rather disappointing response to the Final Report. While he accepted much of the findings of the report, he declined to act on the heart of it, saying that he didn't want to make curriculum changes this Parliament.

But. Leaving aside the political reality that we could very well see a General Election well before the scheduled date of 2022, and therefore that no curriculum changes this Parliament might not actually *mean* very much, it's important to remember that the CoRE report didn't recommend any legislative change until everything else was in place – something that I anticipate would take a minimum of 3 years anyway. So no curriculum change this Parliament isn't really much of a limit on what we want to do. And senior DfE officials have made clear to me that they see the CoRE report as a document with a long shelf life – at least 5 years or more – meaning that there is ample opportunity for this Government, or the next one, to act on the recommendations.

What's more, there have been a lot of other very positive responses. Back in September the Government announced funding for Subject Knowledge Enhancement courses for people who wanted to train to teach RE, and an increase in bursary provision for Initial Teacher Education in RE. These were both things that the CoRE report had recommended, and indeed were policy changes we'd been pushing for for a number of years. They weren't the most high profile recommendations in the report, but they were still in there. Now we've calculated that the combined value of increased Government funding for RE as a result of these two announcements is worth an additional £2,000,000 each year. Or to put it another way, in one year, increased Government funding for RE is 8 times the size of the entire budget of the Commission. So in simple financial terms, the Commission has already been a huge success, and in time we will see the impact in the classroom of this improvement to the funding of teacher training.

Now, while the response from Damian Hinds has been disappointing, the response from Nick Gibb has been rather more promising. He's quite open to some sort of non-statutory programme of study drawing on the National Entitlement, or a model curriculum. Nick Gibb, like us, is concerned about those schools that are failing in their legal duty to teach RE, or who are teaching some sort of Thinking Skills course with no real content that has anything to do with religion in it. So he likes the idea of something that would make it easier to hold schools to account. There's no guarantee of anything at this stage, but discussion so far has been very promising.

The response from the opposition has also been very encouraging. I met with Mike Kane, the Shadow Schools Minister, yesterday and he was very interested in the work of the REC and the recommendations of the Commission. We had a good discussion about how we can try to encourage Labour to take a position that backs the CoRE recommendations. Similarly, Lord Watson, the Labour Education lead in the Lords has been very positive about the CoRE recommendations and spoke forcefully in support of them at a debate in the House of Lords in December. The Lib Dem spokesperson in the Lords was also very positive. This, I think, places us well should there be a change of Government any time soon.

Of course, political impact is something that goes beyond the confines of Westminster, and the Commission has been making waves elsewhere. I've had extremely positive meetings with officials in Cardiff about what the Welsh Government can take from the Commission, particularly as they believe it is very much in line with much of the broader educational thinking in Wales.

Part of what the Commission has given the REC is an increased profile for the subject. It's helped to get us noticed politically, and in doing so has built on the work we've done in the Policy Unit and at the Party Conferences for some years. It's helped us to build links with the wider education policy community, helping us to develop our relationships with the likes of the National Association of Governors, the National Association of Head Teachers, and the National Education Union. And I think all of this is really important for helping to ensure that we don't get forgotten when things are being drawn up and decisions are being taken.

You might see a bit of this, for example, in the new Ofsted Framework. I'm also reassured by what I've seen so far – of course it was only released on Tuesday and I haven't been able to read it all yet. Obviously a key part of the CoRE recommendations was for inspection to be the real lever that should be used to make sure that schools are providing the sort of RE that they should. It's early days and, as I say, I haven't had a chance to fully digest it all, but it does look as if the framework has been tightened up with better provision to ensure that RE is taking place.

But perhaps the most exciting place where the Commission has been having a significant impact is within the RE community itself. Over the last 6 months I've been involved in all sorts of fascinating discussions about what the implications of the new framing of the subject might be. What will it mean to be studying religion as a concept, and not just religions? How should we understand what worldviews are? What will the breakdown of institutional and personal worldviews mean in practice? I've found myself constantly appraising and reappraising my interpretation of the CoRE report and what exactly it will mean. I've found this exciting, invigorating, and incredibly encouraging for the future of our subject. There have been fabulous conferences where these issues have been discussed – both big National ones, such as the NATRE one, the 20:20 one at Crewe, and the AULRE one, but also smaller more local ones where the discussion has been no less interesting.

At the Strictly RE conference, Trevor and I were on a stand talking to RE teachers about the Commission. We asked Teachers to vote on what they thought of key parts of the Commission's report. Now I know this isn't the most scientific of surveys, but I think it's still useful.

100% of RE teachers agreed that the Government needs to take action to deal with the problems RE faces as set out by the Commission.

97% agreed that a National Entitlement would be really helpful for supporting high quality RE in all schools.

84% said they support the new vision for our subject that CoRE set out. None of them opposed it, but 16% said they weren't sure.

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So there's a huge amount of enthusiasm and excitement out there. A lot of support for the Commission recommendations. And a real opportunity for the subject.

But, there's a whole lot more for us to do if we want to grab this opportunity and use it to make our subject the very best that it can be.

So we are developing a strategic plan that will focus on what the REC can do to try and get the recommendations in the CoRE report implemented. And to draw up that strategic plan I've been working with a group of people drawn largely from the REC Board. We've called this group the Commission Implementation Group. Or CIG.

Now. Let me stress. This is a plan for how we can get the Government and others to implement the Commission's recommendations. As we discussed at the last General Meeting, the REC has already committed itself to working towards the implementation of the CoRE recommendations. So CIG is simply discussing the detail of how we might achieve our aim. The big decision about what our aims should be, has already taken place. But we do need a group to think big, and think strategically, about how we can get the recommendations implemented. The strategic plan will go to the REC Board next month and will hopefully give us the road map for how the REC can work to try and secure the changes that the CoRE report called for.

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But not everything is about the Commission. Some of the most dramatic developments in RE, and in education more generally, have been taking place in Wales. Welsh Government has published the new draft Curriculum for Wales. This is available for feedback until 19th July. It builds on the Donaldson Review from 2015 and will mean a radical reshaping of the curriculum around Areas of Learning and Experience, rather than around subjects. And for RE it means coming in from the cold and becoming part of the curriculum by sitting within the Humanities Area of Learning & Experience. Now, because RE remains statutory, there's going to be a separate RE Framework, so RE will be in an interesting position of being part of an integrated curriculum, but also having its own framework. And I'm very pleased that I've been invited to be part of the working group that is drawing up the RE Framework.

It's very clear to me that for the REC to be effective as the RE Council of England *and Wales* it means needing to work closely with colleagues in Wales. The English and Welsh education systems are growing ever further apart (even though they do retain much in common), so there are some real challenges there. But I'm delighted that I'm able to work with a range of fantastic colleagues in Wales from REC member organisations. Their help is invaluable and I am very grateful to them.

Now the changes that are happening in Wales are clearly of massive importance for the future of education in Wales, but there is also significance for England. There are still significant areas where the law for RE in Wales is the same as in England, so as reforms take place in Wales and laws get challenged, it is vital that people in England watch and learn. It's important therefore to note the clarity that Welsh Government has given about the legitimacy of non-religious representation on SACREs, and potentially, should Wales decide to remove the right of withdrawal (something I do remain personally sceptical about) it will be essential for people in England to look at what legal challenges there might be, and whether they are successful or not. These could be very interesting times.

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Now today we are having elections to the Board. Deborah will explain the mechanics of the vote later, so I shall spare you that for now. The elections do mean that some people's terms on the Board are coming to an end. Mark Chater will be stepping down from the Board at the end of August. He's served on the REC Board in two separate stints, and has been full of ideas and scrupulous in holding the executive to account. I'm very grateful to Mark and want to thank him. Satnam Poonian is also

coming to the end of a term on the Board, but I'm not sure whether to thank him just yet, as he is standing for potential re-election. Nonetheless, I'm very grateful for what Satnam has done over the last year. There are 8 brilliant candidates today. It is tough that there are only 2 places as I'm sure all 8 would make worthy trustees. Nonetheless, I hope that the competition for Board places is a sign of the health and vitality of the REC. I hope it shows a recognition of the importance of what we do as an organisation, and of the important responsibility that Board members take on in shaping the strategic direction of the charity and holding the executive to account.

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I am very grateful to the Governance Committee, under the careful Chairing of Sarah Lane Cawte, for the work that they have done. Deborah is going to tell you later about the change to the membership criteria that have come out of the Governance Committee's work. They have also produced a code of conduct for Board members which I hope will give greater clarity about the role of being a Board member and the expectations that come with it. I hope that you'll have taken a look at this code of conduct when it was circulated with the papers inviting people to stand for election to the Board.

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The Finance & Fundraising Committee has continued to do vital work scrutinising the REC's finances under Trevor Cooling's assured Chairing. There have been two key developments to this Committee's work which I think place the REC in a better position. First, our new Treasurer, Andrew Copson, has overhauled the reporting in the Treasurer's reports. He's streamlined the reports, introduced a projection of how we expect to end the year given where we currently are within it, and introduced more relevant points of comparison with the previous year. The reports are improved, and it makes it easier to see what we're doing right and what we're not. The second change is for the production of these reports to be undertaken within the REC's executive, rather than by the Treasurer himself. It's much better that Andrew is not the author of the report that he brings for scrutiny. He directs what he wants the report to look like, but it's REC employees who produce it. I'm much more comfortable with this clearer divide between the executive doing the work, and the Board interrogating it.

Nonetheless, our finances are still challenging. You can see from the Treasurers Report and from our Annual Report that we have been prudent and have not spent beyond our means, but in order to achieve the things that we would like, we will need to raise considerably more money.

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The Education Committee under Kathryn Wright's Chairing has developed into a more robust forum for consideration of the wide range of issues that fall under the banner of "education". As part of this it's had a key role to play in hearing about the developing review of the RE Quality Mark project. We have been comprehensively reviewing the REQM project, looking at the processes we use to run the scheme, looking at the criteria we use to determine the awards, and looking at the business model and considering whether changing this might lead to more schools being interested in the award and, potentially, greater revenues generated to support the REC's work towards our charitable object. I am very grateful to Linda Rudge for her Project Management of REQM and to Helen Harrison for her role as lead reviewer.

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I am very grateful to all members of the joint RE Policy Unit, bringing the REC, NATRE, and RE Today together. This has been an extremely effective group, and a highly productive one, driven forward by Deborah Weston in the Chair. We've worked with our PR consultants 3:nine media and our political consultants PB Consulting to build on what was last Autumn our busiest party conference season yet, and on the publication of the Commission's final report. We've been working hard on our programme of building relationships with MPs and drafting Parliamentary Questions for them to ask. We've also been building relations with officials whether at DfE, Ofsted, or even MHCLG. Our work at Westminster also included securing a debate in the House of Lords, sponsored by Lord Alderdice, on the Commission on RE. I think we can be very proud of the profile raising work we've done, and the effectiveness we have at reaching the right political audience for our policy asks.

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There have been some important changes to the REC's staff. Ffion Cook has moved on since the SRGM, and while I was very sorry to see her go, I'm delighted with the appointments we've made. Hazel Boyd is our new Executive and Communications Assistant, effectively filling the role that has been vacant since Naomi left a year or so ago. And Lavinia Castellan joined us yesterday as the new Finance and Operations Officer, so this AGM is probably a bit of a baptism of fire for her. We're also joined today by Rigerta Kalemasi. Rigerta has been with us on a temporary basis between Ffion leaving and Lavinia joining so this AGM is her swansong. All of these appointments are crucial. The REC simply wouldn't work without the hard work that colleagues in the executive team put in. I am very grateful to them all.

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I want to end by going back to the bigger picture. The publication of the CoRE report has given us a massive opportunity. Not only has it put RE on the map with politicians and policy makers, but it's given a clear set of achievable recommendations of what can be done to secure the subject's future. It's also given us a dynamic and exciting vision for what the subject can become. A vision that will prepare pupils so they can navigate and draw great positivity from the contentious world of religion and belief that will be a critical part of life in modern Britain.

But to deliver this we need an ambitious programme. As part of it, we need to convince pupils, parents, and the wider public that our subject is vital. This is no easy feat. In this room, we all know the importance of RE, but outside the world of RE there are considerable levels of scepticism towards it. A significant chunk of this scepticism towards RE is related to the increasing proportion of parents who are not themselves religious, because we know from polling that religious people value RE more than non-religious people. The clear message from this is that we *must* make sure we pitch our subject to this non-religious audience as well as to a religious one.

So how do we do that?

I think it means we have to make crystal clear the universal value of learning about Religion and Worldviews. Why is it that every pupil should study our subject? What is the education reason why it's vital for everyone? I think the answer is that it's about helping young people to grasp the diversity of worldviews in our society. It's about helping them to understand what worldviews are and how they work. It's about helping them to understand the impact that worldviews have. And it's about exploring how people with different worldviews use them to make meaning, answer existential questions, and deal with controversial issues. All of that should be true for all pupils. All pupils will benefit from this. And that's always what we should be focusing on: what are the educational needs of pupils. Not what do we want, but what do the pupils need.

I think that the Commission does a brilliant job of presenting this vision. It's captured in the heart of the National Entitlement. So for me, that National Entitlement is vital. And I think that collectively, and through the RE Council, we need to work to support that vision. If we do that together we will have a strong and clear voice, and we can be confident that we will transform the understanding of hundreds of thousands more children each year.

I'm looking forward to working with all member organisations to deliver this vision. These are exciting times for RE. There is a lot that we can achieve.

Thank you.