

CEO's Report – 6/11/2019

It is, as always, a pleasure to stand before you all and a privilege to be able to update you on all the work that we've been doing at the RE Council.

It is a particular pleasure to be here at the London Muslim Centre where we have the opportunity to visit the East London Mosque, and I'm very grateful to our hosts. This is an impressive place to be. This site is the largest mosque in the UK, and one of the largest in Europe. I'm told it can accommodate more than 7,000 worshippers. The site is a relatively new one, with the oldest part dating back to the early 1980s. Although there was an earlier – smaller – East London Mosque in a different location from the 1940s onwards, and indeed the history stretches back further to 1910 when the first moves to try and establish a London Mosque began. In some ways, this means that the East London Mosque and London Muslim Centre are a great representation of the way that the demographics of religious identity have changed in this country. The Mosque and its community can trace its history to origins over 100 years ago, but it is the dramatic change in more recent decades that is most obviously noticeable. The dynamism of change in religious identification over recent decades is one of the fascinating elements that RE is able to help young people engage with. Our society has become so much more diverse, so much richer and more complicated in its patterns of religion and belief. And it is absolutely fascinating to try to understand. And this building, this community, exemplifies one part of that change. So it is, as I say, a great pleasure and privilege to be here today.

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It has been an extremely busy time for the REC. I know I've said this before, but the pace at which we've been working since our AGM in May underlines that although we are an education charity, this does not mean that our work is term-time only: I rather wish we had had a quiet summer.

Since speaking with you in May I've spoken at or attended a whole range of events. I've spoken at events at Middlesex University (twice), at an RE conference for independent schools, at Surrey SACRE, and at the launch of the once-every-10-years deep dive by NatCen into data on Religion & Belief in the British Social Attitudes Survey (where, election geek that I am, I was very excited to share the panel with John Curtice). I've been part of the Faith & Belief Forum's Education Advisory Committee and Welsh Government's RE Framework drafting group. I've attended events at Westminster for the APPG on the Baha'i Faith, the APPG on RE, and the APPG on Faith & Society. I've met with the Independent Schools Council. I've attended Interfaith Network events, briefings from the Joint Council on Qualifications on A-level and GCSE results. I've met with Ofsted and officials from DfE and from Welsh Government. I've had meetings with lots of REC member organisations including WASACRE, NASACRE, TRS-UK, and, through PREG, with an even wider range of acronyms. I've been to a NatCen event on non-religious responses to national tragedies, and to the House of Lords for an event drawing people together from the Commission on RE, the Commission on Religion & Belief in Public Life, and from Charles Clarke & Linda Woodhead's *A New Settlement* work. I've met with funders and potential funders, and previous funders who might become funders again. I've had the joy and delight of attending a trio of Political Party Conferences where I met with whatever the collective noun is for a large number of politicians. And in the case of Nick Gibb and Boris Johnson, I met their parents (or at least, Nick Gibb's mum and Boris Johnson's Dad). All, I should stress, in the service of the REC, and all in addition to the day to day running of the REC.

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At the heart of the REC's work at the moment remains the Commission on RE, its vision for the subject, and its recommendations. The Commission report has transformed my work. In previous years I've had to fudge a bit. It used to be quite difficult to explain to some people what the REC's position was on some things. And that's because we had a policy that you might call strategic ambiguity. This was because within the REC there's usually quite a diversity of views, and often quite a lot of disagreement. Disagreement that I think often leads to very fertile engagement, and fascinating debate. But disagreement that sometimes meant either that the only things we could agree on were things that were rather bland and uninspiring, or it meant that we had to create the illusion of agreement through fudge and careful drafting. This meant that as an organisation we sometimes appeared to lack clarity in what we were trying to do.

Well, I think things are different now. The Commission's vision and recommendations have given me real clarity to work with, and it's been a pleasure trying to articulate that with the varied audiences that I've been addressing over the last year. And the vast majority of the feedback I've been getting from across the RE community has been positive. Now, obviously there have been some criticisms. But I've enjoyed engaging with the critics. And I recognise that the criticisms are important and need to be taken on board. Those critical voices are part of the rich diversity of the REC, so it matters that when they come from within our membership, we hear and listen to them. And, that as an organisation, we should continue to represent them. So when I talk about the Commission, and all the exciting things that it represents, I'm careful to acknowledge the criticisms too. But the critics are very much in the minority, and the REC is committed to promoting the vision of the Commission and campaigning for the implementation of its recommendations.

As a result of all of this, we have put together a new strategic plan for the REC, a summary of which was circulated as Paper 6. Part one of the Strategy deals with Developing and Promoting the new vision for the subject as set out by the Commission. This is work that is focused on the RE community. It's about educationalists and faith and belief communities thinking about what the subject is and should be. This is all about us engaging with the vision of the Commission. How does the concept of worldview change how we might approach the subject? What does it mean? How should we use it? What does the Commission's description of a difference between personal worldview and institutional worldview offer us? What does it mean to break out of studying religions in silos and to engage more conceptually in questions like what is religion? What would the subject look like if it was based around the National Entitlement? Do people think that the RE that they teach already meets the National Entitlement? Do they think it would fundamentally change what they teach?

Questions like these – and many more – are being asked at every event I attend, and many people have already been doing some serious and exciting work to respond to the Commission's vision. You'll hear more about this later on today.

For this part of our strategic work the Education Committee will be giving particularly close advice to the Board. It's really exciting work, and I'm hugely grateful to Kathryn Wright as Chair of the Education Committee, and all of its members for the work that they are doing.

Parts two and three of the strategy deal with our attempts to secure the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission. This is much more policy based. It's aimed less at the RE community and much more at an external audience of those with power. It's about MPs, members of the House of Lords, Local Councillors, policy makers and others.

For this part of our work it is the Policy Unit, under Deborah Weston's chairing, that is best placed to offer the close and expert advice that the Board needs.

And the Policy Unit and Commission have already come together with great success. I look at the Government's increase in bursary provision for those wanting to teach RE, and the Government's funding of Subject Knowledge Enhancement Courses for potential RE teachers, and I see a commitment from the Government worth £2million a year. And these are policy goals that the Commission called for and for which the Policy Unit lobbied for over the last 3 years. The total cost of the Commission and 3 years of Policy Unit work put together was less than one quarter of just one year this Government funding. That's how much value for money the work of the REC is.

This is the type of achievement we can pull off. We know how to do it. We know it takes long term, deliberate, and consistent work. It requires building relationships with officials and with politicians. It requires finding how to put pressure on Ministers, and pushing hard when you get the opportunity. This is the type of work in which the Policy Unit now has years of experience, and which is vital for trying to get the Commission's recommendations implemented.

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Now, I've said something about what we've been doing, and I've something about the strategic plan with which we want to go forward. And this afternoon Trevor is going to say a bit more about one of the big projects we plan to take forward to build on the foundations laid by the Commission. But I want to say something now about the impact that the Commission has already had.

Already there have been SACREs that have been discussing how the Commission's recommendations will affect their next agreed Syllabus review, this is something that Bath & North East Somerset are doing with partner SACREs. The Norfolk Agreed Syllabus makes reference to the Commission. And the REC are working with NASACRE to pilot with some SACREs how the recommendations from the Commission might work in practice.

Universities are changing approaches to the subject and exploring the impact of the Commission. At Huddersfield University there's a project with 10 teachers looking at how the National Entitlement and the Big Ideas project might impact on schools in different contexts. At Middlesex University they've developed a Primary ITT toolkit that fully embraces the Commission's vision for the subject. While at Worcester University they're in discussions about changing the name of their course to reflect the Commission's proposal of "Religion and Worldviews". The British Academy has responded warmly to the recommendations, as has TRS-UK who we're planning to work with on the implications of the Commission.

The Commission is having a particularly significant impact in Wales where Welsh Government have been extremely interested in the report. We'll hear from Paula Webber this afternoon in more detail about developments in Wales, but it's fair to say that the work of the Commission has been extremely important in discussions about the future of the subject within the new Curriculum for Wales. You can see the impact of the Commission in the consultation that Welsh Government is currently running on a possible change of the subject's name to "Religions and Worldviews". There is, I think, one too many Ss there, and – if you haven't already – you can read on our website the initial response we put out when Welsh Government launched the consultation. But it's great to see that Welsh Government has at least taken on board something of the recommendation of a change of name for the subject. Now, you have until the 28th of this month to get your responses in to that consultation, and I suggest you do – again, details are on our website. The consultation is really important. It's not just about the name of the subject, it's also about potentially removing the parental right of withdrawal from RE. I strongly advise everyone to read the consultation, read about what the REC has already said about it, and to respond to it.

In so many places, the influence of the Commission is coming through. Whether it's the RE Today special issue on Worldviews, debates and discussions on social media, or the references to the National Entitlement in documents like the Church of England's statement of entitlement, it's clear that the Commission has sparked intense thought and discussion. It is shaping the way lots of us think about the subject.

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Now one comment that comes up a lot is that, politically speaking, it's just not a good time for the Commission's recommendations to have impact. It's become a bit of a truism that Brexit means that nothing else can happen. And while there's obviously some truth in this, we mustn't get carried away. There are, in fact, some very promising signs that things are moving in the right direction.

One of the positive signs has been how interested Nick Gibb has been in key parts of the Commission. He's consistently been interested, across multiple meetings, in the possibility of there being model curriculums with DfE backing behind them. He's keen on stopping schools that claim to be meeting their legal requirements for teaching RE, but are in fact offering some sort of thinking skills course with almost no religion content in it at all.

Now, of course, we are about to have a General Election and it is therefore possible that Nick Gibb might not be the Schools Minister by Christmas – although part of me thinks that he will forever be the Schools Minister, as he already holds the record for the holder of that office for the longest time – but just in case he isn't, we've had very positive meetings with Mike Kane, the Shadow Schools Minister, and have a constructive relationship with Lord Watson, Labour's Education lead in the Lords. We've been keen to point out how the Commission's recommendations would fit well with Labour policy priorities. I've also been working to improve our relations with the Lib Dem education team in case they find themselves in some sort of coalition arrangement with influence on education. A General Election as unpredictable as this one means that in little more than a month everything could be different in our politics. Or it could be exactly the same. Whatever the outcome, the REC is ready to do what it can for RE.

I think we can take real positives from the new Ofsted framework, and from Ofsted's keenness to work with the REC and others from the world of RE. In general, Ofsted has become more sympathetic towards RE with Amanda Spielman, the Chief Inspector, speaking out strongly on the importance of the breadth of the curriculum. The Commission came at a very good time for these discussions as it's meant we've had something really tangible for Ofsted to see and for us to be able to make the case that Ofsted's work would be much easier if the Government backed a National Entitlement.

There are, then, some real positives to reflect on in the broader education and political context. We have an opportunity to make real progress.

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Of course, not all of the REC's work is about the Commission. There is a great deal of other work that needs to be recognised.

Absolutely vital to the REC is the work of the Board, the Officers, and our Committees. This autumn we welcomed Derek Holloway and Sarah Lane Cawte onto the Board (rather, in the case of Sarah, *back* onto the Board after a year away) as we said thank you to Mark Chater, Satnam Singh Poonian, and Andrew Copson who all left the Board.

The Governance Committee has been very busy with Sarah Lane Cawte in the chair. We have produced new policies on Whistle-blowing, Safeguarding, and Complaints. And I am extremely grateful to the whole committee for their hard work on these. We've also reviewed the membership of the REC's committees, and worked on changes to the REC's membership criteria. This has all been vital work.

I am very grateful to Kathryn Wright as Chair of the Education Committee, and to all its members for the hard work that they have done. I've already mentioned their work relating to the Commission. They've also discussed the new Ofsted Framework, the ongoing challenges of recruiting sufficient RE teachers, and the publication of GCSE and A-level Religious Studies results.

In addition, Education Committee has also been overseeing the successes of the RE Quality Mark. REQM is, I think, a shining example of what the REC can do. We are able to celebrate high quality RE, and encourage RE teachers to find networks of support beyond their school. We get fabulous feedback from schools that go for the REQM award. But I don't think enough schools get the award right now. I'd like to see more schools benefiting from REQM. We think the main reason why there aren't more schools doing it is simply that there aren't enough schools that know about REQM. And that's why we're putting together a development plan to try to increase the number of schools that take it up. But I would ask all of you here to think about what you could do to help. How can you help make sure more people know about the RE Quality Mark? What can you do to push that out across your networks?

Now, Linda Rudge, REQM's Project Manager has been working incredibly hard to make sure that the Quality Mark is a success. And I owe her a huge debt of gratitude. And also to Lavinia Castellan in the REC's office who does much of the admin, and to all of the REQM assessors who go into the schools. On top of the regular REQM work that Linda does, she's also been overseeing a wholesale review of the REQM project. She's worked closely with Helen Harrison here, and with a team of reviewers. As a result, I think we've got a much more robust REQM, and, most importantly, a new set of criteria that we will shortly be rolling out. So many thanks to Linda, and to everyone else who has worked on REQM.

The third of our committees is the RE Policy Unit. This is a joint committee with NATRE and RE Today, and I'm very grateful for the additional support that they provide. With Deborah Weston as Chair, the Policy Unit has been very busy. It has focused on our lobbying work at Westminster. On this we're grateful for the consultancy expertise of PB Political Consulting to advise us. The Policy Unit has overseen the work that Kathryn has led on to try to encourage people to train to teach RE. It has led our work on public exam results and the worrying decline in entries for Religious Studies at A-level and GCSE, using this as an opportunity to secure coverage of our PR lines, both nationally and locally, in print, on the radio, and online. In our media work we've been ably advised by Colin Hallmark of 3:nine communications.

This autumn, as part of the Policy Unit's work, I attended three of the political party conferences. I went to the Lib Dem one on something of a solo mission, but was part of a team at both the Labour and Conservative ones. I'm hugely grateful to Fiona Moss, Juliet Lyal, Katie Freeman, and Ben Wood for all their extremely hard work. This was, I think, our best year at the conferences yet. We've been going to the conferences for a few years now and I think we're now pretty slick. We knew exactly what we were saying to our different audiences, we had relevant data to share, and clear asks. We effectively used social media to get constituents to contact their MPs to ask them to come and talk to us. This year we were particularly effective at identifying local councillors, winning their support not only for their influence on SACRE, but also because they were very effective at contacting their MPs on our behalf and asking them to visit us. Neighbouring stands were suitably jealous remarking that we seemed to be getting more MPs showing interest than they were. The work we do at the party conferences is vital for raising the profile of the REC and RE with politicians. And it's crucial for lobbying them and trying to win

their support. It's the best way to speak to a large number of politicians and policy makers in a very short space of time.

The final REC committee is certainly no less important than our other ones. Trevor himself chairs the Finance and Fundraising committee. And what could be more important to the future of an organisation like ours than securing sufficient funding and scrutinising our finances to ensure we are run as efficiently and effectively as possible. So I am particularly grateful to the members of this committee for the critical work that they do.

I think the REC is a pretty lean organisation. We punch well above our weight as a national organisation on the basis of relatively limited resources. We have just three employees and as you can see from our Treasurers' Report we keep our costs as low as possible. We manage this through – well, partly through a lot of hard work from the employees – but also from huge generosity from volunteers. People volunteer time and expertise to serve as Board members or on committees. Some of our member organisations release their employees to serve on committees. The value of this volunteered time adds up to more than the entire costs of the REC over the course of a year. It means we're able to do more than twice as much as we could if we didn't have that sort of support. And of course, we rely on the wisdom and expertise of our membership. On all of you. Thank you.

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Of course, none of what the REC does would ever be possible without the staff who work in the office. And I rely very much on the support of my colleagues. Now at the AGM in May it was Lavinia's second day on the job. Since then she's learned a huge amount as our Finance and Operations officer. I'm very grateful for all her hard work. In September, Hazel left the REC to return to university for further study, but I'm delighted that she's been replaced as Communications and Executive Assistant by Joshua. Joshua has had a great start at the REC and will already be familiar with lots of you through his comms work. I'm delighted that Joshua has joined us.

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So, we have been busy since May. But I've no doubt that the next few months will also be busy. That's because there is still so much to do. So much opportunity for RE that we must seize. I hope that by working together we can achieve the very best for RE.

We all know the challenges. We know that there are increasing numbers of schools failing to teach RE. We know that there aren't enough qualified teachers to teach the subject. We know that all too often our subject suffers from being seen as marginal and unimportant, when we know that this couldn't be further from the truth.

But we should also know that we have a lot of the solutions too. We know that in the Commission's report we have something that brings most of us together, and that our collective voice can be a powerful one in calling for the changes that we know need to be made to secure our subject. We know that there is great expertise and huge enthusiasm within our sector. And we know that we can work together across all sorts of differences for the shared aim of ensuring that all young people get the high quality education in religion and worldviews that they need.

I look forward to continuing to work on this. And I look forward to working with all of you to achieve our goals.

Thank you.