

[NASACRE Conference & AGM: Authority in RE on Monday 24th May 2021 09:45-16:00](#)

A write up by Sukaina Manji – NASACRE Exec

The day of the conference had finally arrived, with all the groundwork behind the scenes. NASACRE members logged onto Zoom full of energy, with a buzz going around the virtual room.

Our Chair, Linda, thanked everyone for their attendance as the numbers grew to over 190 participants. The Chair highlighted three themes that demonstrated the ongoing work through the pandemic of COVID-19:

Resilience throughout, with Executive meetings, meetings with the DfE and others, in keeping the NASACRE agenda on the move, SACREs' continuous excellent work in dealing with unprecedented queries as well as schools keeping RE alive. Flexibility and commitment were the following two themes that demonstrated the outstanding work carried out by the Executive in dedication to NASACRE and all the SACREs. Our mission statement identifies how '*NASACRE works to support, strengthen and promote the work done by local SACREs and represent members' interests at a national level.*'

While introducing the day's programme of Authority in RE, Linda spoke about the afternoon break for offering prayers for Muslim delegates, highlighting how public bodies like SACREs try to keep in mind the needs of members regarding daily prayer, reflection, festivals, and holy days.

Our Patron Charles Clarke congratulated NASACRE for organising the conference as the title sums up all the challenges faced across the country, hence the importance of clarity, integrity, and openness. He acknowledged that the Brexit process and the current Covid-19 situation made it difficult to debate publicly; however, the report on SACRE funding and its openness demonstrates the public responsibility and the essential need for SACREs to be supported. He also encouraged NASACRE to continue to push for public debate and mentioned how his work with Linda Woodhead continues in seeking the government's readiness and support for RE. By playing a constructive role, NASACRE can continue to be proactive in teaching RE and SACREs, playing a crucial role in ensuring this provision.

Keynote Address 1:

In her keynote speech, Denise Cush, the first female professor of RE in the UK in 2003, began with two iconic pictures as a sample of authority in the world. Using an image of the oldest copy of the Holy Qur'an in the world and two females dressed in religious clothing, she began by differentiating what authority could be and that the more she reflected on it, it made her question whether authority is about protection or power. Denise captured the audience by linking authority to the angel and one of the primary antagonists of Philip Pullman's trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, in contrast to Laurie Anderson's 1982 lyrics '*O Superman*' that depicts the power of control through the ambiguity of its words. Is authority about power, knowledge, truth, rules or even protection? Who or what should one believe, and how can that be known? Does it shape behaviour? Denise examined the different sources of authority in religions where sacred texts, for example, the Holy Qur'an or Bible for Abrahamic beliefs, come from revelations within the theist forms, whilst the non-theist from something deep within us. Therefore, authority is coming from somewhere. Scholars can be saints, too, as they have written commentary or given explanations. Authority thus rests with, for example, God, Dharma, the ultimate reality or truth, and individuals' experience, especially women, as sources of authority and authority as relative. Non-religious tradition could also include key thinkers, experts, empirical evidence, institutional and communal authority, who also influenced the wearing of masks during the Covid-19 pandemic. Who can make changes and influence by giving recommendations? Whose experience and knowledge bears weight within RE or RWV as a subject? The expertise within includes academics and professionals such as teachers, teacher trainers, communities, and bodies such as AREIAC, NATRE, AULRE, and faith groups. In her conclusion, Denise quoted a pupil who exemplified what RE can do: 'I like RE because in other subjects you get told what to think, and in RE you can say what you think, and no one can say you are wrong.' Denise said this comment was not something she would agree with - RE provides a chance to discuss your opinion within the discussion. NASACRE is an authority that works together. In the highlight of the keynote speech, Denise pointed out that authority is a chance for service and is not about having the power. Using the Indian tradition of '*sewa*' is about the service in ensuring children's/students' entitlement to the provision of RE, service for the young people to get the best possible RE/RWV.

Breakout areas:

There was a lot of energy within the Zoom room as delegates recognised their 'sewa' authority in ensuring that young people have the best opportunity for RE/RWV.

Questions that helped to engage discussions within the first breakout area included:

1. Who do you think has the most power/authority in RE?
2. Who do you think should have more power/authority in RE and why?
3. How can we as SACREs influence those in power/authority well?
4. If we all understood authority as a chance for service, what difference do you think this would make in RE?

Here are some of the highlights of the morning discussions:

- It was apparent that it is essential to question 'who are we speaking about?'
- Teachers' authority is important, whereas finance is a massive challenge, mainly as it drives academy chains.
- SACRE's authority should be locally focused to ensure different traditions meet through mutual respect, valuing all contributions to maximise engagement of various groups; the role of RE in anti-hate crime through engagement with multiple authorities
- Opinions towards the syllabus and teaching of Islam and Judaism sometimes need to be corrected as they do not accurately question which authority can change things
- RE subject leader needs to be empowered to be the authority in school
- Schools need reminders of the way SACREs can support them at a local level
- Councillors on Comm D can offer a political lobby for schools which is often under-used
- Parental engagement, e.g. schools explaining/negotiating their RE curriculum offer
- Problems with limited teacher competence, as shown in the recent study of teachers re. Hinduism
- Some concern over the power of Ofsted – much authority in one voice! Another group felt that this was not so
- Teachers have authority as they translate whatever they are given to the pupils, so ultimately what happens in class is up to them
- Media is one of the areas of authority outside the classroom, as well as parents and faith leaders
- The key agreement was that the power locally rests with the Senior Leadership in schools, especially in academies
- Some authority is with RE teachers, but not all are specialists, so this may impact confidence in leadership
- Discussion about checking websites to see how well schools are following legal requirements
- Some were disappointed that teachers were not mentioned as authorities, maybe because many are non-specialists who need CPD, but are willing to learn. Headteachers, Ofsted, SIAMs, etc. mentioned. Parents???
- Need to make informed choices
- Discussion re. teacher training - how many hours of RE?
- The elephant in the room - money. Money for teacher training, CPD, etc. Free 12-hour course on RE for teachers - Teach RE website
- Discussion included the different universities that offer RE teaching
- RE knowledge includes in-depth, or more faiths and minority faiths

Keynote Address 2:

In his keynote speech, Richard Kueh, Ofsted's subject lead for Religious Education, outlined the quality of education within the 2019 Education Inspection Framework and explored the idea of the curriculum as a 'narrative over time'. In line with the conference theme, Richard outlined three authorities - that on which the RE curriculum draws; the 'authoritative status' of what is taught and teacher development on 'becoming an authority' in RE. Richard outlined the RE curriculum as a journey. As pupils go on their journey, they enter a rich discourse about the religious and non-religious traditions that have shaped Great Britain and the world.

In their judgement, Ofsted considers that the locally agreed syllabus acts in a similar way to the National Curriculum. It supplies the high-level outcomes which schools turn into their RE curriculum to teach pupils in a local context. He discussed ambitious end goals that may overload and become superficial. At the same time, he acknowledged that it would be impossible to cover everything. The 'journey' maps out what gets better in a subject. High-quality RE prepares pupils to engage in a complex multisecular and multifaith world.

Richard discussed how types of knowledge would differ between subjects and linked to the EIF, which states: 'knowledge that is taught, and pupils learn and remember'. The question is to recognise where the knowledge 'journey' leads pupils to and think carefully about representation and the importance of reflecting accurately. Richard pointed out that more than half of RE teachers have no qualifications, and half of primary school teachers lacked confidence in teaching RE. The 'knowledge journey' should be one where teachers can address pupil misunderstanding and strengthen their RE teaching, as they become leaders in the field of RE.

Breakout areas:

Once again, the energy within the room after Richard's knowledge 'journey' led to vibrant discussions within the breakout areas.

Questions included:

1. Given that the Locally Agreed Syllabus is an authority for constructing a school's RE curriculum, what consideration do SACREs need to have to ensure this curriculum is of high quality?
2. Another key area of authority for teachers is the professional training they receive; what can SACREs do to support teachers' access to high-quality RE training?
3. As SACREs, how do we model authority in a positive way for the diverse range of schools in our local RE community?

Here are some of the highlights of the afternoon discussions:

- Importance of Pupil Voice and Governor training
- Collaboration between SACREs to deliver regional training and reach more teachers
- SACREs working with all available partners, e.g. universities
- A good LAS is only the beginning (but necessary) e.g. need for good resources, monitoring how LAS is being delivered, keeping a finger on the pulse
- SACREs have to earn the aura of authority - by being known, by engaging/enthusing for good RE
- Importance of expertise
- What are high-level outcomes? Do our syllabuses make these clear? Wonder about collaboration on these rather than 151 SACREs working separately on them? (need to be based on research)
- Norfolk AS (that Richard was involved in and is 'disciplinary') – available freely
- A mixture of CPD needed – develop the voices of representation (also training for leaders and governors)
- Possibility of linking with universities (SACREs are often particularly good at content knowledge)
- Collaboration using Zoom for SACRE training events?
- Funding is an issue
- SACREs need to signpost but, if they can, offer funding for teacher CPD helps
- Collaboration across LAs might be good too
- We need to see the development of high-quality RE as a journey
- See the whole picture over several years of teaching
- Keep it simple and concentrate on main faiths rather than a 'Cook's tour' approach
- Some saw the need for an overarching agreement on the core curriculum
- There was agreement on the importance of a balanced view
- Each SACRE should produce a briefing paper on the key features of a local syllabus
- What about sequencing? Intent, implementation and the impact
- School matching – support teachers, leaders, head
- Contexts – buddy systems
- A mutual partnership between teachers and faith groups leads to harmonious good quality RE
- Holistic and integrated approach necessary

Workshops:

The day also included workshops with delegates having made their choices beforehand. These were opportunities to get insights into the NASACRE and Westhill grants, the proposed annual report template for SACREs, RE Quality Mark, and many more. Here are the highlights from both the morning and afternoon workshops:

a. Making sacred text scholarship and the multidimensionality of meaning central (Bob Bowie)	A hermeneutical approach to interpreting sacred texts that opens a pathway to helping SACREs support schools as a curriculum method that is rich and relevant. Worth SACREs' time to investigate and advertise to schools. (Sheila Gewolb)
b. Pan-Berkshire - winners 2019-2020 Real People, Real Faith: Bringing local faith communities into the classroom (Anne Andrews)	The six unitary LAs out of the former Berkshire, working together with the same AS to develop a further Award project to create resources for schools in filmed interviews with individuals from local faith communities. Clips shared were of Reform Judaism (KS1), Baptist (KS2) and Hinduism (KS3), with others planned. Supporting materials delayed by Covid-19, but will come – all materials freely available to all SACREs via NATRE website. In the afternoon, participants asked about various aspects of the process and commented on the good quality of the film clips. (Preb Michael Metcalf)

<p>c. Bath and NE Somerset - winners 2019-2020 RE-Live: example lesson plans that use Big Ideas for RE (Dave Francis)</p> <p>Shropshire - winners 2017-2018 Supporting Local RE with Local Experts - Collective Worship Video Project (Adrian Black)</p>	<p>Big Ideas offer 'what really matters' in children's lives; offer personal development aspects on contemporary issues, such as COVID... resulting in slimmed-down content, but in greater depth. (Sue Holmes)</p> <p>This winning project is offering local people the opportunity to speak into local schools, even those minority faiths who wouldn't normally get into schools. Videos are useable both in RE and Worship. (Sue Holmes)</p>
<p>d. South Gloucestershire - winners 2019-2020</p> <p>The Wire Award: Inclusion through RE (Jane Allinson and Adam Robertson)</p>	<p>Need to underline respect for other religions. Interesting to see how this project supports Muslim children to visit churches and other places of worship, and ensures all children get to visit mosques, so it is a balanced approach. (Roy Galley & Alex Klein)</p>
<p>e. Quality RE through local authority and national frameworks (Linda Rudge)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Most people were hearing about REQM for the first time. 2. Very few who spoke use any form of 'celebrating' RE in their areas, whether REQM or not, to advertise competitions and NASACRE opportunities more widely? 3. When people realised all the material is 'free' and useful for local CPD and curriculum development, the £475 fee for each school didn't seem quite high... 4. At least two people said they set aside a fund to support schools with REQM progress. (Linda Rudge)
<p>f. New SACRE annual report template proposal (Denise Chaplin, Lesley Prior, Sukaina Manji, Neil Lawson-DfE head of curriculum)</p>	<p>Work in progress on a revised format for SACRE Annual Reports was shared along with the proposal that future work will link an updated SACRE self-evaluation process to SACRE accountability and to the report-writing process. The DfE is working to support the health of SACREs and is taking an interest in this. Attendees emphasised that statutory requirements for SACREs need to be indicated strongly in both documents. SACREs are partnerships – made up of a range of stakeholders for RE in all sorts of contexts. It is important within the new framework that NASACRE and the DfE produce, that we are mindful of supporting all members. The template will be helpful to ensure that SACREs are functioning within statutory requirements. (Sukaina Manji)</p>
<p>g. What do SACREs need to know and understand about worldviews? (Ruth Flanagan)</p>	<p>Pupils can discover and evolve their worldview. What led you to join a SACRE? That's your worldview. It's a presupposition about the world. Worldviews sometimes compared to a map, but a map can be ignored; worldviews can't be. There's a need to go beyond generalisations (all Christians, all Muslims). Not a code for Humanism but a frame or lens. Worldviews are changing, awareness of the effects of worldviews is changing. (Elizabeth Jenkerson)</p>
<p>h. Where now with worldviews? (Dr Trevor Cooling)</p>	<p>https://www.reonline.org.uk/research/research-of-the-month/what-does-the-shift-to-worldview-mean-for-teachers/ Discussion on national entitlement.</p> <p>There were varying views about whether we should have a national curriculum. A suggestion that RE Today curricula could become a <i>de facto</i> national syllabus. (Roy Galley)</p>
<p>i. How can national data help SACREs speak with authority? (Deborah Weston and Paul Smalley)</p>	<p>In both sessions, delegates appreciated the report and the fascinating data Deborah shared, showing pupils do better overall in GCSEs when they study RS GCSE. There was a desire for a longer session - perhaps a workshop to delve deeper into the data. Delegates felt empowered to have discussions with LAs around funding. (Paul Smalley)</p>
<p>j. What makes a text sacred? (Kate Fowler & Annika McQueen of the British Library)</p>	<p>The presentation showed what excellent resources are available to support high quality RE teaching in schools. Worth looking at materials on the website: https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts (Alex Klein)</p>

Question Time Panel:

The day was incomplete without a Question time panel. The importance of recognising the end goal of RE and avoiding generalisation of "all Muslims" "all Christians" was pointed out. Some of the questions included:

- How can high-quality RE be measured/evidenced?
- What does it mean to be a religiously educated person? How do we define it at different ages and stages? It's about the person/people, not the product?

Amongst the responses, there was consensus that if schools ask anyone to take a lead, then there needs to be a level of investment. The other challenge is how to develop teachers' knowledge and how important it is to upskill teachers and HLTAs to teach RE when initial teacher training provides so little guidance, and there are problems with funding. In response to looking at worldviews, a paradigm change can sound like a complete change from the past; it's more about drawing from the insights of religion, as RE is about every human being and not only about religious people - a new way of looking at the subject. Other responses included a worldviews paradigm reflecting the complex, diverse and plural nature of religious and non-religious worldviews. As young people are more negative about religion and think RE is only about religion, it can create more negativity. The direct opposite to adding more -isms is about deconstructing -isms, making it for everybody and about diversity.

The virtual conference ended with much food for thought for all SACRE representatives to take back to their SACREs. The NASACRE Exec welcomed newly elected executives to the team. The new website that NASACRE is soon launching will have valuable documents for SACREs to share.

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