

## **We need to raise our game**

### **The CoRE's interim report and the entitlement statement: a personal perspective**

There are good reasons for having serious reservations about the CoRE's interim report but there are things in it which are well worth supporting. The proposal that funding for SACREs should be ring-fenced is a good idea and is long overdue. The suggestion that there should be a specified minimum level of funding for each SACRE is also to be welcomed although any agreement on that would depend on what the minimum level might be. At the joint NASACRE and AREIAC conference on the 24 Nov 2017 Anthony Towey said he would like to see SACREs on an evenly funded footing and on that point I would entirely agree. The point made in the interim report that there are too many schools and academies that disregard the law as they have no, or virtually no, RE provision and that this is particularly a problem in Key Stage 4 is perfectly true. The recent excellent work undertaken by NATRE shows SACREs do not just have to wring their hands as if they are helpless and can do nothing about non-compliance. The law is already very supportive of RE and if complaint procedures are properly followed SACREs can make a difference. Lat Blaylock reinforced this same point at the joint conference when he said, "We should use the stick if we have tried the carrot and can't make it work".

However, although there are some good ideas in the report there are plenty of things in it which I think everyone that is serious about RE should have doubts about. Regretfully, I do not believe the proposed entitlement statement or the 'National Plan' will make any real contribution to improving the quality of RE. When it comes to the report as a whole I have six main concerns. The first two are specifically about the entitlement statement and the next four are more about the interim report as a whole.

The entitlement statement:

- (1) is written in dry, abstract and congested language
- (2) is not sufficiently specific to hold schools to account

The interim report:

- (3) neglects significant educational research
- (4) is too focussed on institutional religious and non-religious worldviews
- (5) links RE too closely with promoting community cohesion
- (6) relies too much on INSET to improve the quality of RE

#### **(1) Dry, abstract and congested language**

The entitlement statement is written in dry, abstract and congested language. It is the same old colourless, academic, clunky language used in the 2004 Framework and in the 2013 Framework (NCFRE). Just as these two earlier documents have not led to any improvement in attainment in RE there is little reason to believe the proposed entitlement statement offers anything that will now make all the difference. It will not result in a settled understanding of RE which everyone will agree with. I do not believe it will add anything to improving the public understanding of RE. I certainly cannot imagine any parent reading the entitlement statement will have a sudden lightbulb moment. Also, I do not believe the dense and abstract language in which it is written will help primary or secondary teachers understand or teach RE any better, regardless of whether they have specialist training in RE or not.

## **(2) Not sufficiently specific**

The entitlement statement is not sufficiently specific. There are entitlement statements which schools use which can be very helpful, for example: 'All pupils in Year 4 will receive a minimum of ten one hour free swimming lessons at the East End Leisure Centre'. A statement of this kind is specific, straightforward and easily understood. Its lack of ambiguity means that a parent, or anyone interested, can use it to hold a school to account. Entitlement statements can be effective when it comes to quantity but they are not very good at guaranteeing quality and yet it is 'quality of teaching and learning in RE' that is central to the Commission's remit. This is certainly a problem with the proposed entitlement statement for RE. Consider the following words from the CoRE's statement which tell us that pupils should learn about, understand and engage with 'the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews and ways of life that exist locally, nationally and globally'.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing wrong with these words taken in isolation. There are only a few that would argue with the main point that is being made and that is RE must be diverse and must engage with both religious and non-religious worldviews. However, as part of an entitlement statement there is an obvious problem with these words and that is they do not apply to what any one school has to do, but refer to the entire period of compulsory schooling. Consequently no one school is required to deliver on this statement and no one school can be held to account using it.

Even if this wasn't a problem it would be very difficult using the statement to pin a school down claiming that its RE was not sufficiently diverse. How diverse does a school have to be to meet the diverse requirement? A school that taught only about Christianity with a few references to Hinduism would fail most people's idea of being diverse. But what about a school that taught about Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and also included Humanism in its syllabus – would that be sufficiently diverse? If the school added Buddhism or Sikhism would that now pass the diversity test? If the school taught something about all of these different worldviews but did little to explore the diversity within them would it not have still failed to be sufficiently diverse? Does it matter how much time is given to teaching about Buddhism, Hinduism, Humanism, Islam, Judaism, or Sikhism? One or two lessons about each of these worldviews might be thought to be tokenistic but would five or six lessons be adequate, or would ten or fifteen, or twenty lessons be closer to the mark? To meet the diversity requirement of the entitlement statement should the school also be teaching about the Bahá'í faith, or about Rastafarianism, or Shintoism, or Taoism, or modern Paganism, or Scientology?

Far from being specific, straightforward and easily understood the entitlement statement is generic, vague and opaque. So vague is the statement it is difficult to imagine that there are many state-funded schools that could, with perhaps a few tweaks here and there, easily evade being accused of failing to meet the entitlement requirement. More specifically when it comes to schools which currently do not fulfil the statutory requirement for RE, particularly in Key stage 4, what the entitlement statement offers that is better than the legislation that currently exists is at best marginal. Pressing for a change in legislation is an uncertain business. Few parliamentary bills survive the process without amendments. I cannot honestly see any clear advantages to be gained by seeking a change in legislation but I can see how unexpectedly things can go wrong and we can end up in a situation which is a great deal more detrimental to RE.

## **(3) Neglects significant educational research**

The entitlement statement and the interim report does not reflect the evidence provided by significant educational research. Leading educational thinkers like Tim Oates and Dylan William base their views on research. They are particularly attentive to the work of people like William Schmidt

and Richard Prawat<sup>2</sup> who researched systems that achieve high educational outcomes and identified what these systems were doing that enabled them to be successful. The case for teaching fewer things in greater depth and for identifying age related specific content is not based on arm chair theorising. It is based on what consistently is shown to work. When teachers are clear about what they should teach because the content is described in age related straightforward language it should come as no surprise that teachers become more confident and effective teachers. When content is specified assessment becomes a good deal less complicated. Teachers know more clearly what outcomes they are looking for. The feedback teachers give to pupils becomes much more precise and this improves the chances of genuine and real progress. It is research evidence of this kind that informed the national curriculum changes in 2013. This is evident if one looks at the age related specific statements that are in the science, maths and English national curriculum documents. However, none of this evidence into what actually raises the quality of teaching and learning appears to have had any influence on the CoRE. The Commission just ignores it as if it doesn't exist. Instead, what is proposed is yet another 'something for everyone' RE curriculum. All representatives of religious and non-religious worldviews can comfortably support what is proposed in the entitlement statement because by using phrases which are so vague and non-specific all religious and non-religious lobbies may suppose that their worldview has been given its proper place in the subject. Anthony Towe during his keynote presentation at the joint conference noted that the approach adopted in the entitlement statement is different from the 'content driven' approach that is used in the GCSE RS and the A Level RS specifications. This is very obviously true. He specifically asked delegates if they were sympathetic to this different approach. Unfortunately his question was not one which the conference really took up and discussed.

I can understand why the CoRE might be wary of describing what pupils should learn about in RE in anything other than generic terms. Anything that is specific is vulnerable to criticism or complaint that this or that worldview hasn't been adequately represented, or this or that aspect of a religion or a non-religious worldview has been omitted. However, as Tim Oates put it, 'generic statements of content may appease different educational lobbies, but simply because each can find what they want in such statements'<sup>3</sup>. The CoRE might well give serious consideration to the thought that producing sketchy, generic statements about RE as in the 2004 Framework and in the 2013 NCFRE and now again in the CoRE entitlement statement has not served RE well. Using ambiguous statements that lack detail may gain a sort of consensus however within RE we need to learn lessons from the pass. We need to appreciate that regardless of all the good intentions with which they were published, documents like the 2004 Framework and the 2013 NCFRE failed to live up to expectations. They have in reality been of little help and may indeed be proving to be a barrier to good RE and in the proposed entitlement statement there is little to suggest that the CoRE is thinking along lines that will alter this history of failure.

I'm not suggesting that all of the content of RE should be tightly set down and prescribed. That would be ludicrous given how varied schools are particularly in their religious and non-religious composition. However, with some give and take it should be possible to agree on a limited core content which could be specified in clear detail which few schools would have any qualms about teaching. For example, does anybody seriously think an RE syllabus would be adequate if there was nothing in it about Christianity or the cross? Does anybody think an RE syllabus would be OK if it omitted anything about Islam and the Qur'an? Through the mechanism of an agreed syllabus a limited core could be prescribed while the remaining much larger content would be more discretionary enabling schools to select material to meet their particular requirements. This

approach may not appeal to everyone but ideas along these lines are worth exploring. The main point is there are alternatives which are more securely grounded in evidence compared to what is proposed in the entitlement statement. What is on offer I fear in the entitlement statement amounts to little more than timidly avoiding disagreement by stating virtually everything that might be featured in RE. Agreement might be seen as a good outcome for the Commission but it comes at the cost of leaving hard pressed teachers, with the much more difficult task of sorting out what in RE they should actually teach.

#### **(4) Too focussed on institutional religious and non-religious worldviews**

The entitlement statement and the interim report are too focussed on institutional religions and non-religious worldviews like, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Humanism, etc. Insufficient attention is given to an acknowledged feature of the lives of young people which is that in the journey from being a child to becoming an adult young people find themselves confronted for the first time in their lives with timeless questions about life itself, about suffering, death, the afterlife, justice, inequality, evil, guilt, faith, truth and reason. Young people ask themselves questions that have always been of universal concern - Why am I here? What do I stand for? What do I want out of life? What matters to me most? Many young may not be interested in 'religion' when that word is used in its narrow institutional sense but many are deeply interested in 'religion' when that word is used more broadly to refer to the striving to seek answers to questions which many humans, perhaps all humans, cannot at times in their life repress or ignore - What is it all for? Why do I exist? What is true? Is there a God? Is there a spiritual force in the universe that cares? Will I one day be answerable for how I have lived? Do I have a part to play in a much bigger story of life? Harold Loukes in 1961 wrote about how questions of this kind are of great significance in the lives of young people and promoted the idea that a fundamental aspect of RE was to help young people as they sought to make sense of life.<sup>4</sup>

Ten years after Loukes this idea significantly featured in '*Working Paper 36*'. In that booklet it described what was called the 'implicit religion approach'.<sup>5</sup> The idea was that in RE young people would engage with 'religion' as we use that word in its broader sense to refer to the perennial quest to make sense of life. Yes, of course RE can be an asset in the workplace. Yes, RE can help us avoid committing a crass social faux pas like offering a Muslim a bacon sandwich or printing an image of Ganesh on a pair of bikini bottoms. Yes, knowledge about religion is helpful if we are to understand much that goes on in the world. But the ambition of RE should be much more than this. Religious education in '*Working Paper 36*' it was argued was particularly important as the subject that principally, but not uniquely, assisted young people in their own personal quest for meaning. This was very deliberately not to be some sort of subtle version of confessional RE. There was emphatically to be no hidden nudging the minds of young people towards any religious or non-religious answer.

Alongside the 'implicit religion approach' '*Working Paper 36*' also described what was called the 'explicit religion approach'.<sup>6</sup> The basis behind the explicit religion approach was that again RE was not to be confessional but was to be mainly the academic study of institutional religious and non-religious worldviews. '*Working Paper 36*' didn't nail its colours to either the 'implicit' or the 'explicit' versions of RE. Instead it embraced both approaches asserting that 'religious education must include both the personal search for meaning and the objective study of the phenomena of religion'.<sup>7</sup>

The intention of the CoRE in the interim report I think, is to include both the ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ in its account of what RE should be. It is odd that the report calls this a ‘renewed vision for RE’<sup>8</sup> as including both ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ have been central to RE in England for the last forty, getting on fifty years. Including both the ‘explicit’ and the ‘implicit’ I hope is the intention of the Commission. Certainly it is true the idea that pupils should reflect on their own fundamental values and beliefs is not ignored in the entitlement statement or in the interim report. There are in fact at least fourteen scattered references to the ‘implicit’ approach throughout the report.<sup>9</sup> However, they are all very brief and often appear at the end of a list of other statements about institutional religious and non-worldviews. There is no attempt to give much clarity to these statements or a rationale to explain why the ‘implicit’ approach must be included in 21<sup>st</sup> century RE. Religious education as a subject which assists pupils to think deeply and seriously about their own fundamental values and beliefs and to critically engage with the truth claims of religious and non-religious worldviews is not so much ignored in the report rather it is buried beneath a mountain of words about the academic study of religious and non-religious worldviews. This regrettable imbalance in the interim report was questioned by delegates at the NASACRE and AREIAC joint conference. One delegate for example asked why there was an absence of references to truth in the interim report. Another delegate noted that in the entitlement statement it was proposed that RE should ‘equip pupils to develop their own beliefs, practices, values and identity’ but the delegate questioned why the statement went on to say they should do so ‘in the light of their reflections on the worldviews they have studied’.<sup>10</sup> Clearly some young people might benefit greatly from what they learn about religious and non-religious worldviews and this may help them to develop their own personal values and beliefs – nothing wrong with that. But there is something wrong if we should make it a requirement that the personal beliefs and values of all young people must in some way be informed or shaped by institutional religious or institutional non-religious worldviews. That cannot and should not be something that we insist on in RE. As it stands the interim report lacks balance with far too much emphasis being given to the academic study of institutional religions and too little to assisting young people as they attempt sort out what they fundamentally believe and value most.

#### **(5) Links RE too closely with promoting community cohesion**

The interim report links RE too closely with promoting community cohesion.<sup>11</sup> Faced with the task of convincing a busy politician, or a DfE official, or while having a chat with a neighbour, it is an easy option to sell RE on the grounds that it promotes tolerance so that we can all get along and live together. However, there are two main problems with this. The first is if high priority is placed on RE as a means by which community cohesion can be promoted there is a tendency to distort the subject and sell it short. The second problem is whether RE is actually effective at promoting community cohesion as evidence suggests this is doubtful.

#### **Tendency to distort RE**

Using RE to promote community cohesion tends to focus attention again on ‘*the* religions’. This leads to fewer opportunities to help young people to explore ‘religion’ in its broader sense and to help pupils engage with questions about making sense of life. If RE is thought of as having a large contribution to make to community cohesion the danger is that it becomes a subject that is in the service of the state and not in the service of the child. RE is also at risk of reverting to another version of religious instruction (RI) by embracing characteristics associated with being confessional or semi-confessional. The subject is on educationally unsafe grounds if having abandoned religious instruction because its purpose was to instruct pupils into being confessing members of the Christian faith only to replace it with instructing young people into having a positive attitude towards religious

and non-religious worldviews in general. Although the aim is no longer just about one religion what is expected still involves instructing pupils into what they should think about religious and non-religious worldviews. The idea that RE is about helping pupils to develop the capacity to make up their own minds becomes blurred, or worse, is in danger of being lost. Teachers of RE would find themselves in the business not of educating but proselytising. They are no longer proselytising a particular religion but what they may well be doing is in effect proselytising the general message that religions have many positive features and pupils should respect and admire all religions and non-religious worldviews. At this point the educational credibility of RE becomes compromised as what is taking place no longer looks like education but instruction.

One of the educational purposes of RE is that young people should become increasingly capable of autonomous thinking with respect to religious and non-religious matters. This enables them to become less vulnerable to disputed claims, alert to flawed information, aware of assumptions, inconsistencies, contradictions, unsubstantiated assertions and extremist views. An autonomous thinking person does not simply give themselves up to what others tell them. We do not make progress in RE if we tell children what they should think about religious or non-religious worldviews. We do not make progress in RE if we tell young people, or send out strong signals, that they should have a positive attitude towards Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Humanism or any other religious or non-religious world and then reward them if they parrot back to us what we have told them. Nor would we have advanced RE if religious or non-religious worldviews are presented consistently only in a positive light in the belief that scrutinising a religious or a non-religious worldview might be thought to be harmful to fostering positive relations. In RE we have to be more open to the idea that a child may not be impressed, or moved, or inclined to praise, or use warm words when expressing their views about a religious or a non-religious worldview. If a child is not positive about a religion or a non-religious belief this does not necessarily indicate ignorance, bigotry, or a lack of religious literacy, or evidence that they are not religiously educated. It may well be evidence that a child has thought deeply and seriously and is capable of arriving at their own informed view.

### **Is RE effective at promoting community cohesion?**

There is another reason for not linking RE too closely to community cohesion and that is the evidence is not at all secure that RE really does promote a more tolerant and cohesive society. It's true the interim report does cite the Warwick Diversity Project as providing evidence that the study of religions has a positive effect on social cohesion.<sup>13</sup> It also cites oral statements, provided by pupils who report that in RE they learn to accept differences. However, the claims made in the report that RE has a positive effect on social cohesion are inconsistent with the research findings described in *'Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity'*. This book provides a very full account of the research undertaken by the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU). The second chapter of the book written by Elisabeth Arweck and Julia Ipgrave describes the qualitative research findings of the project and this indicates that teaching RE does not necessarily increase tolerance. The following passage is particularly important.

“There was a commonly expressed view among pupils that knowledge about religions increases sympathy towards and understanding of the religiously ‘other’. However, there were reports from pupils showing this was not necessarily the case – instances where a multifaith RE had not obviously increased tolerance and where knowledge about religions provided fodder for religious teasing. Usually, schools were not seen by pupils to have a major impact on their values,

at least not relative to the influence of parents and friends.”<sup>14</sup>

In the first chapter of the book under a list of the main findings of the project Robert Jackson and Ursula Mckenna reported that, “pupils often expressed a tolerant attitude at an abstract rather than practical level. The tolerance expressed in the classroom was not always replicated in their daily life-worlds.”<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to imagine that all of the Commission members are unaware of this evidence. Joyce Miller as a member of the Commission provided a keynote presentation at the NASACRE’s 2017 AGM and it was clear she was very aware that teaching multifaith RE leads to religious tolerance is not a straight forward given. Following her keynote presentation at the AGM Joyce was asked by a delegate why there was so much anti-Semitism. In her reply she said, ‘it is easy for RE teachers and schools to think that as they are teaching children to understand religion...it will therefore contribute to community cohesion and a sense of fairness and justice. There is no evidence to support that and indeed there is evidence to suggest it’s just not working.’<sup>16</sup> The Commission appears to have received written evidence from WRERU that significantly qualifies earlier published findings. If that is the case it is important that this new evidence is made available so that it is possible to understand why there may have been a change of view. Meanwhile, on the basis of the evidence currently available it is not possible to claim that teaching RE necessarily promotes more tolerance or greater social cohesion.

By giving so much emphasis to social cohesion the interim report skirts over another much more important aspect of RE. That other important aspect is RE’s capacity, often when RE is at its best, to help young people to develop a mature capacity to think critically and seriously about their own fundamental values and beliefs and about values and beliefs in general. In an age when there are increasing numbers of competing beliefs and ideologies and a wide assortment of attention-grabbing and largely unregulated ways of propagating beliefs and views about the world there are sound reasons for ensuring that young people have an education so that they are not easy victims to all that they read, see, hear or are told. This aspect of RE is in danger of being overlooked and squeezed out by the fashionable but none to certain claim that RE can and should promote community cohesion.

### **A renewed and expanded role for SACRES?**

On a different but related matter to community cohesion is the proposal in the interim report that there should be a ‘renewed and expanded role for SACRES’ which involves SACRES playing ‘a key role in promoting positive community relations.’<sup>17</sup> At the joint NASACRE and AREIAC conference Charles Clarke strongly advocated this idea. The words in the interim report proposing ‘a renewed and expanded role for SACRES’ sound very positive and suggest a new role for SACRES which no SACRE would wish to decline. However, regardless of how the message is dressed up no SACRE should be fooled by this proposal. Linking SACRES with community cohesion is fraught with danger. As previously discussed there is no certainty that learning about religion results in pupils becoming religiously tolerant. Lat Blaylock at the joint conference was also quite right to suggest that the ‘expanded role’ for SACRE may be little more than a fig leaf that covered up the fact that one of the core functions of SACRES which is to write an agreed syllabus was in danger of being removed. My own view is that it is essential that SACRES retain their syllabus writing role and that agreed syllabuses should not be diminished by removing their statutory status. I agree again with Lat Blaylock who said at the joint conference that if the syllabus writing role was removed ‘SACRES would be subject to even more withering which the austerity policies of the last few years have subjected them to.’ Written evidence provided by WRERU to the Commission also supports this

view. Referring to a survey of SACREs conducted in 2014 the statement says...

'The survey results indicated that SACREs also carried the added and unintentional benefit of promoting interfaith dialogue and community cohesion and cautioned that diminishing the role and effectiveness of SACREs (either by taking away the religious education provided by the schools from SACRE control or by weakening the connection between SACREs and the religions and religious leaders within individual local areas) may undermine these particular benefits.'<sup>18</sup>

Weakening SACREs and removing local determination, or making the development of agreed syllabuses a vague option which an LA may or may not take up I think would be ruinous for the future of the subject. Equally the belief that there is some magic national document waiting to be written, whether it be another RE Framework or the proposed entitlement statement, or an extended version of that statement and that this offers a game-changing new vision of RE strikes me as being highly unlikely. It represents an unwillingness to acknowledge the very limited contribution national documents have made to the quality of RE taught in classrooms over at least the last fifteen years or so. SACREs, for all their weaknesses, they do nevertheless provide an alternative to a centralised system which lacks any serious checks and balances and is vulnerable to undue political interference. For all their flaws SACREs provide local teachers if they get involved with an opportunity to have a real say in what they are required to teach. It is this grassroot access, the willingness of SACREs and Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASC) to ask local teachers what they think and respond to what they say that has played a major part in improving and transforming RE over the last five or six decades. In contrast, government statements and documents that have come from national organisations like the QCA and the RE Council (REC) do not have a strong record when it comes to improving the teaching of RE. The statements and document they have come up with have in the main been cautious and have played catch up to changes that had already been largely accepted, or already pioneered by many SACREs and others involved in RE. Should RE become more centrally determined it would make RE more prone to the same cautionary and conservative influences. It would make RE subject to political whims as happened notoriously with Circular 1/94 which damaged and continues to damage collective worship. Or alternatively it might well be the case that RE that was centrally determined would lack innovation and energy, and be a waste land for new and creative ideas. Central control of RE might well lack the will to try something different, or radically new, or venture beyond the predictable. A system for RE that was more centralised becomes a system that hands down from on high its version of RE. It infantilises teachers who are expected to be mere recipients of what they are given rather than being pioneers and cultivators of what is new and best. Religious education would be framed by individuals knowing that they worked in circumstances largely free of competition or alternatives none of which offers the healthy rivalry that is often associated with work of the highest order. In short, weakening local determination still further and handing more power over to largely unchecked and top down central control offers little that is associated with fresh ideas, growth and the healthy flourishing of a subject. Other than a few references to political interference there is little recognition of these dangers and how they might be realistically prevented in the report.

#### **(6) Relies too much on INSET to improve the quality of RE teaching**

As one of its main proposals the interim report recommends that there should be a National Plan for improving teaching and learning in RE. The CoRE puts forward a number of proposals, for example, a minimum of 12 hours devoted to RE in all primary ITE courses, opportunities for trainees to



observe good RE teaching, restoring Subject Knowledge Enhancement courses, ensuring bursaries for RE have parity with other shortage subjects, giving consideration to how teacher networks can be more sustainably funded, etc. All of these are good and laudable recommendations and if all or some of them were introduced I'm sure they will do something to improve RE. At the very least it would send a signal that religious education counted for something and it should not be treated as a low-status subject. However, regrettably I have real doubts that more courses, more training, more INSET, more meetings will really make much difference.

My lack of confidence that more INSET and the other proposals will contribute much to improving RE is based on 'the conundrum' which is described in the Church of England Report '*Making a Difference?*'. In that report it notes that high priority was given to RE in almost all of the CofE schools visited, however RE was no better in these schools compared to primary schools with no religious designation. RE in about 6 out of 10 Church of England schools was less than good and Ofsted reported the same was true of RE in primary schools in general. While the low standards in primary schools without a religious designation might be explained as being due to a lack of priority given to RE, poor leadership, inadequate funding, lack of resources, limited access to INSET, staffing, etc., none of these reasons could be used to explain why RE in Church of England primary schools was no better. The report noted that most of the primary CofE schools had an enthusiastic RE subject leader, they had the support of senior leaders, good resources and dedicated curriculum time. In nearly three-quarters of the CofE schools 'the subject leader had access to some form of training through, for example, the support of the local adviser and/or network groups'<sup>19</sup>. Despite all of this RE in CofE primary schools had many of the same weaknesses Ofsted found in primary schools in general.<sup>20</sup>

This does not mean that INSET is not important and will not make any contribution to improving RE. INSET is of course important but if we are serious about raising the quality of RE what is needed is not simply more INSET but more **quality** INSET. There is little to be gained and much to be lost if the Commission merely produces a final report recommending that public money be spent on a National Plan unless a great deal more thought is given to the nature and content of the INSET that is provided. To improve the quality and rigour of RE, INSET must move beyond activities in the classroom that merely entertain. Quality INSET in the future needs to be specific, clear and resourced with a real focus on knowledge, understanding and helping pupils to learn and respond in a way that has rarely been attempted in the past.

### **Some final thoughts**

It is uncomfortable having to be so critical of the interim report but we should be ambitious for RE and regard it as one of the most stimulating and fascinating subjects in the curriculum. To move forward there is little point in repeating the same old generic, vague statements that we have tried in the past. We need to be more specific, clear and less mystifying in the words we use. We need to think about children and classrooms rather than imagining tinkering around with how the law might be changed, or pondering who sits on SACREs, or wondering what else we might call RE, that energy expelled on such issues is really going to make much difference. Telling politicians what they should do to help RE is not unimportant but it is not the heart of the problem. To improve the quality and rigour of RE the main solution is not to be found in telling the government what it should do. This might give us the satisfactory feeling that we are really making a difference but if we are serious about the quality of RE we should not be neglecting that much of the real work to be done is in our own hands. We need to think much more deeply and radically about what to do where things really

count and that primarily is in the RE classroom. We need to think more deeply and practically about how to support teachers in classrooms so that they may teach high quality RE more consistently. We need to think about what we should be doing so that RE lessons become opportunities where pupils talk, discuss and learn more effectively. We need to ensure that we do not place RE into the unsafe hands of central government. We need to maintain and strengthen local determination as, regardless of its weaknesses and limitations which are many, local determination is better than all the other alternatives. We need to be more ambitious. We need to raise our game.

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