

## **Oxfordshire SACRE:**

**Meeting with the RE Commissioner (Dr Joyce Miller), Monday 6<sup>th</sup> November 2017**

### **Notes of discussion following presentation**

The meeting broke into groups to consider the information presented by the RE Commissioner, and provided feedback for further discussion:

- **What is the Commission's view of the usefulness of SACRES?** Joyce Miller explained that local conditions vary and all evidence will be examined when making the final analysis of the interim report. She also drew attention to the Goldsmiths' College study, 'RE for Real' which recognises that the notion of religion extends beyond the RE curriculum. The Commission is conscious that headteachers often struggle to differentiate between religion and culture. There is not enough capacity within local authorities to support schools on these aspects and there is therefore a clear continuing role for SACRES.
- **Isn't it the case that with better support and training for RE teachers, the profession would be providing the necessary support?** JM responded that these challenges tend to be more common in primary schools, where responsibility for RE often falls to a single staff member. However good support across all stages is vital, and this aspect needs to be included in teachers' training.
- **Will the Commission also be looking at how academies support RE teaching?** JM replied that academy organisation is complex and there are many different approaches to RE which means it is difficult to obtain reliable data. There is also no single academies body that the Commission can work with. Discontinuation of Ofsted subject reports has also meant the loss of another valuable way of gathering information. SACRES will not be able to monitor an increasingly fragmented situation.
- **Is it logical to continue to have SACRES which are now so clearly out of step with the current situation?** Bill Moore explained that there are some good examples of SACRES engaging successfully with academies and we should look at these to help define the best way forward. It is also crucial that schools provide support for their local SACRE.
- **Which current problems are unique to RE as a subject, and which are due to the situation we are now in where different branches of education don't communicate effectively with each other?** JM suggested that the government needs to decide if education should be a national or local service before any real progress can be made to resolve many problems. Church schools also complicate the picture. Ideally academy funding agreements should include something about RE and collective worship.

- **What should high quality RE look like?** JM considers that high quality RE could be delivered in many different ways to meet the national entitlement set out in the interim report. The RE Quality Mark is also helpful and many schools have used the criteria to assess their provision without necessarily applying for the award. A SACRE member suggested that the list in the report is helpful although there are some gaps. It should also include looking at how modern Britain has been shaped by religious and non-religious thought.
- **What is the difference between a national entitlement and the current situation where RE must be taught?** JM explained that work is in hand to add further detail to this framework, recognising that there can be a variety of successful approaches. The Commission is not content with a general compliance approach to RE provision and the finished recommendations will go beyond that, but without listing exactly what should be taught. Professional development is also an important consideration, and teachers should have opportunities for reflection and review.
- It was pointed out that people who consider they have no religion may include many who would call themselves spiritual but do not practice a recognised religion, as well as atheists. Some references will therefore need to be suitably nuanced to include those who may never have considered whether they are religious or not.
- It was also suggested that we should not seek to lay claim to spirituality in RE teaching because this is a whole school responsibility.
- None of us has enough experience or knowledge to answer all questions so it is essential to maintain breadth and depth of support. Teachers also need to feel confident to say when they don't know the answer to something, and this can be valuable if it leads into another conversation.
- A secondary teacher observed that students often shy away from RE at GCSE and A level and it suffers from not being included in the government's progress measures. Their school is taking an approach based on critical thought so that RE goes beyond factual learning.
- **Is it a concern that the right to withdraw diminishes the status of RE as an academic subject?** JM confirmed that this concern is recognised, however the right to withdraw serves to protect schools from litigation if parents object to RE teaching.
- Good quality RE needs to be on the school curriculum so that children and young people can gain genuine understanding and make informed choices. **Has there been any research in to religion as a cause of problems in society?** JM explained that the term 'religious literacy' has deliberately been left out of the report because it means different things to different people. RE must go further than understanding the beliefs of different religions, and really look at both positive and negative influences. There is a trend for RE teachers to try to sanitise everything but they need to feel confident to address the impact of some very negative implementation of religion. We know that children want to talk about these concerns, and RE teachers often find themselves leading a school's response to national or international events.