

Strong SACREs, Good RE
Development Workshop for SACRE Chairmen / Officers
Sponsored by QCA, RE Council and NASACRE
Jury's Inn Hotel, Bristol - 28 November 2006

The stated aims were:

- To disseminate good practice among SACREs nationally in a way that deals positively with developmental issues
- To generate awareness of QCA, NASACRE and RE Council strategies for supporting and improving SACREs
- To initiate piloting of new SACRE monitoring and reporting processes

The organisation was fairly efficient in a good hotel, although the room booked would not have been large enough to accommodate everyone if all participants had turned up, so the room was full with approximately 30 people and the workshop sessions were spread around different parts of the hotel.

Presenters / facilitators were:

Mark Chater (QCA); Denise Chaplin (NASACRE); John Keast (REC); Alan Brine (Ofsted); Dave Francis (REC) and Alan Brine (Ofsted). [Note: Alan Brine accompanied Barbara Wintersgill when Ofsted evaluated Bracknell Forest SACRE in 2003]

After opening remarks by Mark Chater, John Keast, Deputy Chairmen of REC, made a presentation about the REC. He advised there was a new 'RE Partnership' between DfES and REC and that the former had funded the latter for 2006-07. We were told that REC encompassed faith communities and the professional and subject associations. It was working to develop proposal for a national strategy for RE, although he emphasised there was no certainty that there would be one. REC had been granted charitable company status, would commission RE teacher training led by Dave Francis, aim to strengthen SACREs and have a 14-19 subcommittee with Learning & Skills Council representatives.

Denise Chaplin is Deputy Chairman of NASACRE and spoke about strengthening and supporting SACREs. There was a perceived need to recruit members from the 'minority' faiths and suggested that 2 or 3 local SACREs might share the same faith member if one could be found. The aim was to provide further support for new chairman and officers, probably via the Internet, and mentioned NASACRE's "roving ambassador" who could attend SACRE meetings.

We were then split *ad hoc* into three groups, each to discuss the same three sets of subjects:

1. Management of SACREs and partnership with the LA and other stakeholders (Ofsted self-evaluation guidance, section 2)
2. Standards and quality of provision in RE (Ofsted self-evaluation guidance, section 1)
3. Contribution of SACREs to diversity and social cohesion (Ofsted self-evaluation guidance, section 5).

Note: Prior to the event each participant had been sent a copy of the Ofsted SACRE SEF with the request that they evaluate their own SACRE.

The first two workshops took place before lunch, the third after the keynote presentation commented on below.

After a very acceptable lunch Alan Brine gave a presentation on "SACREs and their contribution to the diversity and social cohesion agendas".

He started off by saying how useful a tool the SEFs would be, going on to state that there was no expectation that all SACREs will progress through each level. He made the observation that there had been a huge change in the way schools were monitored (including now no reference to RE and the existence of few well-resourced LA officers).

He then touched upon the real focus of this area by saying there had been an extraordinary change in perceived social cohesion and the significance of religion in the eyes of the media. Ofsted had been asked to consider ways in which schools could add to social cohesion, so

'Short Reports' were likely to get longer. He suggested that it was crucial SACREs should know what their LAs are doing about social cohesion and that SACREs should move their focus towards this concept.

My group of nine people was led by Dave Francis and made up of individuals with mainly education or LA backgrounds (only 2 of us were 'lay') from a widely diverse number of SACREs, both geographically and in size. The group also included Graham Langtree, who used to be at QCA and is now RE adviser in Cornwall. Alan Brine joined the Group for Session 3.

Included in our packs was a copy of Lat Blaylock's list of 30 things a good SACRE can do and copies of some of the PowerPoint presentations made together with some relevant papers on evaluation and a survey of good practice of SACREs, none of which we had time to read or peruse properly.

New Annual Report format

Also slipped in was a copy of a pilot new format for SACRE annual reports. This was not discussed in any detail, in part because there had been no time given to look at it, but it was brought up in my group. Ironically, it had been created jointly by Alan Brine and Graham Langtree, both of whom were in my group when Graham Langtree admitted that it was based upon the SEF format and "...probably was too much to expect". He said that it was rather intimidating, especially the first section. *(It has to be seen to be believed. I am troubled by the fact that apparently these intelligent people allowed themselves to create and publish such a document without a little consultation or test marketing).*

Conclusion

In summary, my feeling is that little of real use came out of the workshops other than an awareness of the great diversity of size, funding and activities of the SACREs represented (this was the third of three identical events held in London, Leeds and Bristol) but perhaps I should await receipt of the summary points from all three workshops due to be distributed to all participants.

With 'social cohesion' taking up a significant portion of the time allocated it clearly is being driven from above. I find it difficult to accept at this stage that SACREs should be expected to challenge their LA about social cohesion and to seek representation on their LA's citizenship groups and other similar panels or committees, but this was seriously suggested.

I asked how social cohesion differed from social inclusion and the Every Child Matters agenda being pushed upon schools in every way possible. There was no meaningful response, so I suggested that this new cohesion agenda was based solely on ethnic origin and the media focus on Muslim fanaticism following the London bombings in July 2005. One member of my group, from Birmingham SACRE, said that they were writing something into their revised Agreed Syllabus about social cohesion.

Two key points are worthy of recording:

1. There is no expectation that all SACREs ought to progress through each level of the SACRE SEF with its incredibly aspirational targets in some areas.
2. It was stated in my workshop by Graham Langtree that SACREs can never be mini-Ofsted and cannot monitor schools in the way apparently expected *(this I consider to be a very significant comment coming from such a key person as him).*

Finally, after I had reminded my group that the mandate of SACREs is as an advisory body on Religious Education and Collective Worship it was suggested that there was a need for QCA to update its guidance document with regard to the role and responsibilities of SACREs. Yet more change to come, no doubt.

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