



## **TOWARDS A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

*The RE Council calls upon the Government to launch a bold national strategy for RE. The need for it was acknowledged by the previous Secretary of State for Education. It is educationally necessary in its own right and it is also crucial in direct response to 7/7. Key elements of a strategy are identified here and a partnership approach to implementation is recommended. This paper is a 'first order' document. The next stage should lead to a more detailed version focussing on methods of implementation.*

### **Context**

The religious and spiritual dimension of human life remains a powerful force. At an individual level in this country, whilst certain forms of religious expression such as Church attendance may be on the decline, more selective and exploratory approaches especially among the young are certainly not. Talk of increasing secularization has been very much a West European phenomenon; viewed globally, with well over three quarters of the world's population asserting religious allegiance, religion is anything but on the decline. Indeed, it remains a potent force in society both for good and sometimes for ill.

In the UK the educational case for RE in the curriculum has been well argued for many years. However, over several decades it has had to contend with prevailing liberal/secularist assumptions that its subject matter is withering, with RE a mere remainder from another century. Recent events have shaken such assumptions

The growth in this country of Islamic self-consciousness, in its majority expression of asking for an end to discrimination and for its religious culture to be taken seriously and in its distorted form exemplified by 7/7, poses a considerable challenge to wider society. In response, it is easy for anti-discriminatory approaches to concentrate on race and ethnicity, but to fail to recognise the strength of religion as a key defining feature. Until the predominant culture fully recognises and appreciates the seriousness with which Muslims treat their faith, Muslims will continue to feel alienated. Whilst the issue is perhaps most starkly evidenced by Islam, other minority groups are affected and some still are. Christians too are looking for more deliberate attention in schools and colleges to deeper questions of meaning and purpose in both personal and social life and to religion's part in them.

### **Faith Communities and RE in Schools**

Many faith community members have concerns about how their faith is portrayed and treated in community schools. This undoubtedly leads to greater pressure for having their own schools, either inside or if necessary outside of the state maintained system. In either case, there is a significant risk that the RE becomes narrow and sectarian with all the associated risks. There are three ways forwards here:

1. Improve the quality of the RE taught in *community schools* so that faith communities can feel confident that their faith is being accurately and sympathetically portrayed.
2. Encourage those responsible for RE in *faith-based aided schools, academies and independent schools* to consult and use as appropriate the non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education (NFRE) in planning their RE syllabuses. Where these are rooted more specifically in one particular faith, they have the opportunity – or, as many would say the obligation - to accompany this with deliberate attention to the faiths of others.  
 [The Church of England is recommending that its aided schools follow the locally Agreed Syllabus, supplemented by additional material more directly addressing the Christian faith.]
3. Encourage schools generally to strengthen this inclusive approach to RE, by developing links with faith communities in their local areas.

### **The non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education**

The production and launch of the NFRE, actively promoted by Charles Clarke, was undoubtedly a major RE landmark. The unanimity of support for it from the RE associations and faith communities was unprecedented. It provides for the first time an agreed national rationale for the subject, as highlighted particularly in its ‘Importance of RE’ section. Whilst the contents of the Framework are couched in educational terms relating to the development of the individual learner, their relevance to social issues cannot be ignored. Essentially the Framework is the crucial foundation upon which further initiatives can be built.

### **The Nature of the Strategy**

Three key principles underpin the proposal:

1. There is a deficit to be addressed. RE has been *the Cinderella* subject for a long time. At secondary level it remains the subject with the highest percentage of lessons taught by non-specialists and at primary level the majority of classroom teachers feel insecure when teaching RE, partly because it was not given adequate provision in their training course (see Ofsted reports). Senior management often fails to acknowledge its premier league position as Basic Curriculum, and as more fundamental for schools even than NC Subjects. In consequence, RE is effectively demoted to a third division status and resourced accordingly.
2. There is no quick fix and no one particular action which will make all the difference. There needs to be a coherent strategy, inter-relating a number of complementary actions which together should have a multiplier effect.
3. The strategy should be rooted in the NFRE.

### **Elements of the Strategy**

1. **Training the existing teacher workforce (CPD).** This is the most significant element. There needs to be a major training and updating programme across the workforce targeting non-specialists in secondary schools, updating secondary specialists and equipping primary class teachers many of whom have had little or no RE training. Wherever possible, training should be certified and linked to career progression. Mixed mode delivery should include ICT based packages which can be used both individually and by trainers. Master’s level opportunities should also become realistically available.
2. Work on **disseminating the NFRE** needs to be pursued as fast and as rigorously as possible amongst key stakeholders, eg SACREs, governors and parents.

3. **Foundation stage.** There is a need to ensure that spiritual development is included in any revision of the foundation stage's early learning goals.
4. **Primary teacher training (ITT).** When the training standards are next revised, RE should be included in the list of subjects in which successful demonstration of classroom competence is required. As many primary training providers no longer have even one RE subject specialist, a national RE primary training programme needs to be created.
5. **Secondary teacher training (ITT).** Given that RE is recruiting additionally from allied subject areas such as philosophy and the social sciences, a subject knowledge enhancement programme should be developed. There should also be a new training route for teachers wishing to switch from a non-shortage subject to RE.
6. **Education 14 – 19.** There needs to be joined up planning here so that a properly accredited RE/spiritual development entitlement features in all future strategies. This entitlement should be for *all* students on both academic and vocational pathways. This is not evident in the Tomlinson proposals and it is so far virtually non-existent in FE.
7. **New types of school.** Academies should be required to follow either the agreed or a faith community syllabus according to their foundation. RE should be allowed as a lead subject for a Humanities College bid.
8. **Head teacher** and senior management attitudes to RE are sometimes professionally uninformed and/or personally negative. The National College for School Leadership is well placed to improve this situation and should be asked to include this as a mission priority. RE should also be included in governor training to enhance their understanding of the responsibility for RE compliance.
9. The delivery of the strategy should be through working with, and where necessary helping to further equip, **partners** who are in positions to implement the strategy.

## **Partners**

**The RE Council** is the national umbrella organisation for RE and brings together the RE professional organisations and faith communities. It was the lead organisation for the last review of Collective Worship and it provided the basis for the membership of the NFRE's Steering Group. It should have a key role in the implementation of a national strategy and would provide an 'insurance policy' role in relation to Government action in RE.

There are **four national associations** representing teachers (PCfRE), advisers and inspectors (AREIAC), teacher trainers (AULRE) and SACREs (NASACRE) all of which played very significant roles in bringing about the NFRE and are well placed to do the same for a national strategy.

The **Church of England** is committed to the full implementation of the NFRE and to actively assisting in the development of high quality RE in all schools - community and church alike – especially through its diocesan education teams.

The **Free Churches**, the **Roman Catholic Church** and **other Churches, including the Orthodox**, working especially through the Churches Joint Education Policy Committee (the

Church of England is also a member), have actively supported the NFRE and see it as the first stage of a more strategic development.

**Other Faith Traditions, including the Bahai's, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs** welcome the increased significance and seriousness being given to RE and would see a major strategy as upholding the importance they accord to their own faith positions. So too do **Humanists** in relation to their non-theistic world views.

**SACREs and ASCs**, as statutory bodies in every LEA, have the remarkable strength and breadth of being constitutionally rooted in the local faith, educational and political communities. This makes them vital local agents for promoting RE and for assisting faith communities acquire a fuller understanding of the nature and value of the NFRE. They are well placed to monitor the effective implementation of any National Strategy for RE. They already complement Home Office initiatives in encouraging inter faith dialogue as relevant for social cohesion.

### **Timing**

The time is right for a bold strategic initiative in RE.

Religious, spiritual and ethical issues are of increasing interest to the young, and to society at large. The growth in GCSE take-up rates, now over half the age cohort, is one indicator of this; the increase in Religious Studies entries at A Level is another. The launch of the NFRE and the recent decision to increase the bursaries and award 'golden hellos' to secondary RE trainees have boosted the self-confidence of the RE community.

There is also growing realisation at European (eg Council of Ministers) and international (eg UNESCO) levels that an educational understanding of the religious and spiritual dimension is fundamental to our common humanity. Many of these countries do not currently have a place in their school curriculum where this happens and are increasingly looking (reflected in international conference agendas and official visits) at the English and Welsh model as an exemplary way forward.

In the light of current events, an early announcement of a national RE strategy would send an important signal both to those communities who feel their faith is misunderstood and also to the wider community who will be reassured that something is being done to tackle the on-going threat at a 'hearts and minds' level. This would also be welcomed by Muslims, who seek trust, self respect and mutual understanding as a peaceful means to defeat any violent forms of extremism. This RE strategy would be a key part of the Government's co-ordinated, whole community response to our current world condition.

### **Costs**

For the strategy to be properly effective a considerable budget will need to be allocated along the lines of other recent initiatives such as those in modern foreign languages, music and sport.

**THIS OUTLINE OF A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION WAS APPROVED UNANIMOUSLY BY THE RE COUNCIL ON 11 SEPTEMBER 2005**

## MEMBER ORGANISATIONS OF THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION COUNCIL OF ENGLAND & WALES

The Council is representative of the full range of faith communities and professional associations with an interest in Religious Education throughout the educational system. It was founded in 1973 and meets twice yearly in May and November.

Acorn Trust	Institute of Jainology
Al-Khoei Foundation	Inter Faith Network for the UK
Association of Christian Teachers - ACT	International Society for Krishna consciousness Educational Services - ISKCON
Association of Jewish Teachers	Islamic Academy
Association of RE Inspectors Advisers and Consultants - AREIAC	Islamic Cultural Centre
Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies	Methodist Colleges and Schools
Association of University Lecturers in Religious Education	Muslim Council of Britain
Baptist Union of Great Britain	Muslim Educational Trust
Bloxham Project	National Association of Standing Advisory Councils for RE - NASACRE
Board of Deputies of British Jews	National Council of Hindu Temples (UK)
British Humanist Association	National Society
British Sikh Education Council	National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United Kingdom
Buddhist Society	Norham Foundation
Catholic Association of Teachers, Schools and Colleges	Professional Council for Religious Education - PCFRE
Catholic Bishops' Conference	Religious Education and Environment Programme - REEP
Catholic Education Service for England and Wales	RE Today Services
Church of England Board of Education	Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Clear Vision Trust	Roman Catholic National Board of RE Inspectors and Advisers
Council of African and Afro-Caribbean Churches	Russian Orthodox Diocese of Sourozh
Council of Christians and Jews	Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education
Culham Institute	Stapleford Centre
Farmington Institute for Christian Studies	Union of Muslim Organisations of UK and Eire - UMO
Free Church Education Unit	Vivekananda Centre
Independent Schools Religious Studies Association	Wales Association of SACREs - WASACRE
Institute of Jainology	Working Group on Sikhs in Education
Inter Faith Network for the UK	World Congress of Faiths
ISKCON Educational Services	