

HARROW SACRE
(STANDING ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION)
MINUTES OF THE MEETING ON 4th DECEMBER 2012

Attendance:

Group A: (Religious traditions and Christian Churches)

~ <i>Mr Zia Baig</i>	* Ms Beverley Wilson
*Ms Mercedes Afnan	* Mr Neville Ransley
* Mr Mike Bishop	<i>A Ms Angela Clapham</i>
* Dr Julie Crow	* Mrs Gill Ross
~ <i>Mrs Niru Desai</i>	* Mrs Doreen Samuels
* Mrs Phiroza Gan-Kotwal	~ <i>Mr Paramjit Singh-Kohli</i>
* Mr Vijay Hirani	<i>A Ven Sumana Sramaner</i>
* Varsha Dodhia	* Zafar Khalid
<i>A Councillor Asad Omar</i>	<i>A Ananda Caitanya Das</i>

Group B: (Church of England)

* Mrs Mary Abbott	* Rev'd. Matthew Stone
* Rev'd Philip Barnes <i>from 8.10pm</i>	

Group C: (Teachers' Associations)

~ <i>Ms Bhavita Pandya</i>	~ <i>Mrs Manju Radia</i>
	* Mrs Alison Stowe (Chair)

Group D: (Local Authority)

Councillors:	
<i>A Nana Asante</i>	* Camilla Bath
	* Sasikala Suresh

Officer

*Rachel Bowerman (Senior School Improvement Professional & Adviser to SACRE, nominated by the Director of Education)

Visitors / observers

* Observer from the Rastafari, accompanying Beverley Wilson

Clerk

*Vivian Wright (Clerk to SACRE)

** denotes presence*

A denotes absence with apologies

~ denotes absence without apologies

1. Welcome and introductions: the Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting especially Mercedes Afnan, a new member and representative of the Baha'1 faith. Rachel Bowerman apologised for the late circulation of the papers: this was due to the postponement of the Chairs' group meeting originally scheduled in good time.

2. Apologies for absence:

RESOLVED: To note apologies for absence from Ven Sumana Srimaner, Ms Angela Clapham,

Ananda Caitanya Das and Cllr Asad Omar.
The meeting was quorate.

The following members were also absent:

Group A: Zia Baig, Niru Desai, Paramjit Singh-Kohli

Group C: Bhavita Pandya, Manju Radia.

Mrs Mary Abbott reported that she had not received papers for the last meeting and thought it had been cancelled. The Clerk apologised and would check that her details were on the distribution list used by HSIP.

Action: Clerk

4. Minutes of the meeting held on 10th October (pages 1-5)

Apologies: Mrs Mary Abbott's apologies would be recorded retrospectively

p.3. 8 lines from end: Mathew Stone *should read* Matthew Stone

With these amendments the minutes were agreed and signed as a true record.

5. Matters arising from the minutes

8.Sewa Day: Rachel Bowerman would welcome contributions from members describing examples of Sewa in their own faith communities. Doreen Samuels, Jewish representative, described Mitzvah Day on 18th November. This was very similar to Sewa Day in its ideals of service and community action. It incorporated many projects and collaboration with other faiths. Doreen Samuels agreed to send Rachel Bowerman details of next Sewa day scheduled for 17th November 2013 nearer the time, so that they could be circulated to schools. Doreen Samuels pointed out that "mitzvah" means "commandment". Phiroza Gan-Kotwal, Zoroastrian representative, mentioned a similar celebration in her community which had generated a good response.

There were no further matters arising from the minutes

Business Items: Improving standards in RE and collective worship

5. Annual report (pp7-12 and tabled at the meeting)

Rachel Bowerman reminded members that two sections of the Annual report remained to be completed.

Section 1 – Public examination entries and results 2012 (pp7-12)

This data had not been available at the time of the previous meeting. Pages 9-10 will form an appendix to the report: summarising Local Authority-level RS examination data. The national figures will be added if the data arrives in time.

p.11 comprises school-level RS examination data; this is relevant to SACRE members but will not be included in the report, so that individual schools cannot be identified. Rachel Bowerman pointed out that all but one of the non-denominational schools is now an academy. In response to a question, Rachel Bowerman informed members that she is continuing to press the academies to nominate a representative to the newly created vacancies for associate SACRE members.

In response to a question about the relationship of SACRE to denominational schools Rachel Bowerman explained that the voluntary aided faith schools do not follow the locally agreed syllabus.

There followed some discussion about whether SACRE should scrutinise results for all those schools at which pupils are entered for an RS GCSE, in order to reflect whether there is an increasing proportion of pupils gaining accreditation in RS through routes such as weekend religion schools. Rachel Bowerman explained that it would be very difficult to collect such information.

The RE Council can identify national trends concerning the numbers of pupils taking short courses, full courses and A levels, but cannot give its constituent members a more detailed picture. Overall it seems as though numbers taking RE may have decreased nationally. Rachel Bowerman undertook to provide members with the national picture when the data becomes available.

Action: Rachel Bowerman

Locally, entries have gone down slightly in the short course, but it is not a dramatic decrease. SACRE should monitor results in 2013 – 14 to consider whether this is becoming a trend. The change in status of the short course may mean that numbers taking RS GCSE will decline; on the other hand, it is possible that schools will introduce the full course RS GCSE.

In response to a question about what accounted for this decrease in short course entries, Rachel Bowerman explained that Harrow High had entered 66% of the 2012 cohort compared with 94% in 2011. There had also been a decrease in entries at Bentley Wood and Park High but at these schools there were slight increases in entries for the full course. Rachel Bowerman agreed that she could refer to this, without identifying the school concerned, in the Annual Report.

Rachel Bowerman summed up by saying that it is encouraging to note that there has not been a dramatic decline in RE short or full course entries. This may be because the effects of the changes in legislation – the introduction of the International Baccalaureate and the change in status of the short course – had not been brought into effect at the time when these students were entered for exams in year 10; on the other hand, it is possible to hope that school leaders and students in Harrow continue to regard RE as important.

The Chair thanked Rachel Bowerman for presenting this part of the Annual report.

Section 3 - Financial Report for SACRE (*tabled at the meeting*)

Rachel Bowerman invited members to consider the document tabled at the meeting. She explained that ESSO commissions HSIP on behalf of the LA to deliver certain services and one of these services is to provide professional advice and support to SACRE. In the tabled document, the left hand column describes the brief that SACRE is commissioned to deliver and in each section is a notion of the days needed to deliver that part of the service.

The right hand column of the document was initially prepared as a response to a Freedom of Information request from *Christians in Parliament* about how the LA supports SACRE. This column outlines what has been covered giving a list of presentations and documents produced. Rachel asked members if they were in agreement to include this document in its present form in the annual report as statement of services provided.

Doreen Samuels proposed that the document be included in the Annual report. This was agreed.

Doreen Samuels also wished to record a vote of thanks to Rachel Bowerman for her work on behalf of SACRE.

8.10pm The Rev'd Philip Barnes arrived at the meeting

In response to a question about representing the rest of SACRE's work - the part played by the committee and the communities it represents – Rachel Bowerman pointed out that this is the subject of the entire SACRE Annual Report. At the last meeting it had been requested that the report makes reference to Harrow's diverse multicultural community and this will be included as a contextual paragraph at the beginning. In addition a list of members of the SACRE committee and the groups they represent will be included as an appendix to the report.

Action: Clerk

6. SACRE Guidance: a space for prayer in schools (*pp.13-18*)

Context: Rachel Bowerman set the context for this item. Earlier in the year, Grange School had contacted SACRE asking for advice regarding a request from a group of Muslim parents that the school provide a space for prayer. In the summer term this year, Claire Ali made a presentation to SACRE. Claire had recommended that advice to schools was pragmatic so that school leaders were not daunted by what appeared to be prescriptive and demanding requirements. Following this, SACRE commissioned Claire Ali to draft guidance, showing that a space for prayer and reflection could be truly inclusive for all pupils of diverse religious faiths or none. The guidance speaks of the benefits for children and schools.

Review by Chairs' group: the Chairs' Group has already reviewed the guidance. The group felt that the guidance could be somewhat shortened, especially in the sections on potential benefits to pupils and schools where there is a certain amount of overlap. In addition, other SACRE representatives might offer advice specific to their faith tradition.

Muslim children and staff: as befits her role as a Muslim consultant, Claire Ali has included specific guidance regarding the needs of Muslim staff and pupils.

Hindu children: Vijay Hirani explained that Hindus do not have specific rules about prayer: a statement to this effect could be included in the guidance.

Jewish children: Doreen Samuels and Gill Ross explained that Jewish boys over 13 are required to say the afternoon prayer and this is optional for girls. It need not be said at a specific time or in a specific place. Doreen Samuels will write a short paragraph to this effect.

Action: Doreen Samuels

Inclusiveness: a Church of England representative felt that the guidance was helpful in that it addressed teachers' concerns about cohesion. The Humanist representative also felt that the guidance was very inclusive but expressed some misgivings about how this would work in practice, when small groups of individuals seeking a quiet space for prayer or reflection might feel overwhelmed by a larger dominant group praying together. Rachel informed the committee that had contacted Rooks Heath, where a prayer room had been successfully established for some time, and hoped to visit to see how it operates. She does not envisage large groups of children wanting to use the room in primary schools. One of the Jewish representatives cited an example of a very successful and inclusive prayer room in a Hertfordshire school. A council representative mentioned that Harrow High School, where she is a governor, have had a prayer room for a long time. **It was agreed that it would be a valuable experience if she and Rachel Bowerman could arrange a visit to see how it worked in practice.**

Action: Rachel Bowerman and Camilla Bath

Practical considerations: the Zoroastrian representative expressed concerns that schools may not have the space to set up a prayer room. Rachel Bowerman explained that there is no need to relinquish a classroom for this: the guidance makes clear that the room only needs to be set aside for prayer and reflection for a very short space of time during the lunch hour.

This concluded the discussion and the committee agreed that Rachel Bowerman would incorporate the suggestions received and the Chairs' group would finalise the wording. The guidance would then be circulated by email for the committee's final agreement.

Action: Rachel Bowerman

It was agreed that an appropriate way to launch the guidance would be to hold a seminar for school leaders, head teachers, deputy head teachers, RE leaders and interested governors. This could also be an opportunity of reminding schools of SACRE's other publications.

In response to a recommendation from the Jain representative that the Niland Centre is a very suitable venue for this launch because of its spiritual and inclusive ethos. Rachel Bowerman agreed that she would explore this venue, but indicated that, for busy school leaders, distance from school is an important consideration.

7. School attendance and absence for religious observance: reviewing SACRE guidance to agree strengthened wording (pp19-20)

At the previous meeting, Paddy O'Dwyer, professional lead at ESSO, had put forward a request from head teachers that SACRE should strengthen its guidance on absence for religious observance. This request was made in the context of the LA consulting on its own procedures regarding parents whose children are persistent absentees, even considering the possibility of legal sanctions. Attendance is an important issue, being one of the criteria by which the school is judged. In addition, in published data there is no longer a distinction between authorised and unauthorised absence.

There were three areas in the field of religious observance where headteachers requested clarification:

- The three days allowance for religious observance was taken by some parents to be an entitlement to be taken in full.
- Parents were taking compensatory weekdays when festivals fell at weekends.
- Some parents were taking their children out of school for extended periods. This could often mean going abroad. While the authorities recognised the value of keeping in touch with extended families and the importance of cultural heritage, this practice was not good for attainment and progress.

The 1996 ruling makes it clear that absence is only to be authorised for the day set aside for religious observance. These are "high holy days" and are usually identified in the SHAP calendar and validated by members of SACRE groups A and B.

In the discussion that ensued the following points were made:

- Some important Jain festivals that take place at the end of a fasting period are not listed in the SHAP calendar. Rachel Bowerman would follow up this point individually with the Jain representative.
- The Jewish representatives were unanimous in feeling that the fact that observant Jews might need more than three days for religious observance was not sufficiently explained in the draft guidance. These days are obligatory and cannot be combined with work. This is mentioned in the paragraph third from bottom of p 19, but it should be given greater prominence and linked up to bullet point four on the same page. Rachel Bowerman will revise this and include some wording to the effect that "when a religious body authorises and requires absence of more than three days, SACRE advises schools to consider this sensitively." The Jewish representatives also felt that the guidance should include some reference to the *Board of Deputies Guidance on Days of Religion*
- The guidance does not include any reference to deaths in a family and funeral arrangements. This is really a separate issue unconnected with the days of observance that are the subject of the SACRE guidance. However, it might be possible to reinstate a paragraph on family commitments that had been taken out.
- It should be made clear that this guidance concerns children; references to staff should be removed, as this does not fall within SACRE's remit.
- The Hindu community does not have an overall authoritative body. Rachel Bowerman understood this but felt that head teachers would be aware of important Hindu festivals within their school community.
- Members acknowledged that school holidays are set around Christian holidays so that Christian families get more opportunities to extend religious or family festivities. However, parents must be mindful of the importance of their children's education. The Hindu community makes an effort to celebrate holy days in school holidays.
- It was felt that Ofsted and the DfE should recognise that absences due to religious observance might be beyond the control of school leaders. In a community as diverse as Harrow, one rule for all is not appropriate.
- It is important to have guidance on which festivals are essential days of religious observance while introducing restraints to prevent parents from taking unfair advantage of the system.
- Although absences are no longer separately categorised as authorised and unauthorised, schools can still analyse their attendance to show when religious festivals were taken. Extended holidays make a dramatic difference to attendance and this is what SACRE is trying to address.
- It is important to recognise the needs of the community while at the same time providing support to the schools to enable them to sustain a robust approach to absence.

Rachel Bowerman will make the suggested revisions to the SACRE guidance and circulate it to members for their final agreement. She will give a deadline for members' response. The guidance will not come to the committee again as it is important that it is available for head teachers as soon as possible.

Action: Rachel Bowerman

8. RE Council review of religious education – phase 1 (separate paper)

Rachel Bowerman introduced this item: the context had been explained at the last meeting. The membership of the expert panel is listed at the end of the report and the review has been conducted along the same lines as other subject reviews.

The review contains nine recommendations for SACRE to consider. There is also an online questionnaire. The deadline for response is 7th December so the time frame for consultation is very short.

The Chairs' group will meet on Thursday 6th December to formulate SACRE's response to this report. Members may also respond individually or as representatives of their group. The consultation document is on the RE Council website and Rachel Bowerman will email the website link to members.

Action: Rachel Bowerman

In the discussion that followed the following points were made:

- In the questionnaire the Rastafarian religion is not listed with the other religions. This omission can be pointed out in the comments section at the end of the questionnaire. This is the only space in the questionnaire that allows for comment.
- The language is vague: phrases such as “maximum intention” and “increasingly influential links” make it impossible for SACRE to decide whether or not it agrees with proposals. The aims and recommendations of the report are unclear, especially recommendation 9. Rachel Bowerman expressed the view that the language might be deliberately vague in order to negotiate the best possible outcome for RE. The committee however could express disappointment and even alarm at the vagueness with which aims, which it was asked to agree, were expressed. In the present educational landscape with the development of free schools and academies, there is no sense of accountability in this report. There is a giant hole around what SACRE can do to maintain standards.
- Rachel Bowerman explained that currently the Agreed Syllabus Conference is responsible for defining what is taught and when but not how the syllabus is delivered. Some SACREs also publish non-statutory guidance on the delivery of the agreed syllabus. The present context is one in which the role of LAs is diminishing and there is growth of establishments that will not have to deliver the agreed syllabus. These factors may reduce the status of RE. Up until now the local determination of the RE syllabus has been an enriching experience for schools, teachers and religious communities. This report suggests that those days are past and that RE needs to secure new ways of regaining its influence. Nationally there were some of the opinion that this could be achieved through the equivalent of a National Curriculum for RE. This move towards national determination is made in order to preserve RE and find a future for the subject. Rachel Bowerman expressed her own passionate commitment to local determination but recognised the vulnerability of RE if accountability was solely at a local level.
- Rachel Bowerman remarked upon the report’s concerns about lack of unity about RE aims and pedagogy amongst RE experts. She compared this to current and long-standing debates about the teaching of reading and phonics. Disagreement about how subjects are taught is not unusual so it is not surprising that there is disagreement about the teaching of RE. Rachel Bowerman referred to the implementation of the National Curriculum; even when the curriculum for every subject was nationally determined, some subjects were still not taught. The importance given to any subject depends on the emphasis given to it by the school leadership and this would remain the case whether the RE curriculum was nationally or locally determined.
- The committee’s response to the review needs to take account of these factors. Rachel Bowerman concluded her contribution to the debate by reminding members of the results of political definition of RE and Collective Worship in the Education Reform Act 1988 and Circular 1/94. Advisors have been trying ever since to mitigate the impact of legislation and DfE guidance. To seek government protection and support for RE in the curriculum was to risk further political ‘dabbling’ in its determination.
- A Christian representative referred back to a time when the Harrow locally agreed syllabus replaced the Middlesex syllabus. He felt that at that time teachers were listened to. The model syllabuses had been helpful in guiding the Agreed Syllabus Conference.
- Rachel Bowerman acknowledged the importance of these factors and also mentioned that Ofsted, when it had made specific subject inspections, had also contributed to the importance of RE as had the influence of school leadership referred to above.
- A Jewish representative suggested that the emphasis given by Ofsted to Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) education might be a pathway to further the status of RE in schools. A Jain representative criticised that way in which the English Baccalaureate had been implemented and the way in which it fragmented the body of knowledge.

This concluded the debate. Rachel Bowerman will collate her own and the Clerk’s notes in order to formulate a response to the review in time for the deadline on Friday. The Chairs’ group will meet to consider the response, but there will not be time for further consultation of the whole committee.

Action: Rachel Bowerman, Clerk and Chairs’ Group.

9. AOB

- There was no “any other business” listed on the agenda. This is because it not generally considered good committee practice to include “any other business” as an agenda item unless specific matters have been referred to the Chair in advance. Even then, it is better, if possible, to

refer these to the Chairs' Group as potential agenda items unless something arises as an emergency. **It was agreed that in future the clerk would circulate members asking for any items of any other business to be sent to her within a given deadline.**

Action: Clerk

- There was however a matter of any other business that Phiroza Gan-Kotwal wished to bring to the committee's attention. This was the meeting of the London and SE England SACREs. This took place on the 9th November at the Zoroastrian Centre in Harrow. Mrs Gan-Kotwal had attended as a representative of the Zoroastrian community and had been disappointed to find no representatives of Harrow SACRE at the meeting. Rachel Bowerman, the Chair and the Clerk were apologetic but explained that they had received no notification of the meeting. Rachel Bowerman explained that sometimes attendance at such a meeting could be taken as agreement with the report under consideration when in actuality there has been no real discussion or debate. Mrs Gan-Kotwal explained that in fact two of the subjects on tonight's agenda, absences in schools and prayer rooms, had been discussed. Unfortunately no written summary or report of the meeting was available.
- A Carol Service will be held at the Civic centre on 17th December at 6pm. All are welcome.
- Doreen Samuels passed round some Hanukkah chocolates. Committee members were invited to take two: one for themselves and the other to give to a deserving recipient.

10. Dates of Future SACRE Meetings:

Wednesday 6th March at 7.30pm at the Civic Centre: committee rooms 1 and 2.

The Meeting closed at 9.35 pm

Signed:

(Chair)

(Date)