

HARROW SACRE
(STANDING ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION)
MINUTES OF THE MEETING ON 6th MARCH 2013

Attendance:

Group A: (Religious traditions and Christian Churches)

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

Group B: (Church of England)

* Mrs Mary Abbott	A Rev'd Philip Barnes
	* Rev'd Matthew Stone

Group C: (Teachers' Associations)

~ Mrs Manju Radia
* Mrs Alison Stowe (Chair)

Group D: (Local Authority)

Councillors:
~ Nana Asante

	* Camilla Bath
	* Sasikala Suresh

Officer

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

Visitors / observers

* Judy Lethbridge, Head Teacher, Welldon Park Junior School
* James Simmons, Deputy head Teacher, Welldon Park Junior School

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 Judy Lethbridge and James Simmons, headteacher and deputy, Welldon Park Junior School. Mr Zia Baig was also welcomed back after a long absence because of ill health.

2. Apologies for absence:

RESOLVED: To note apologies for absence from Mr Neville Ransley, Rev'd Philip Barnes, Mr Paramjit Singh Kohli, Mr Mike Bishop, Mrs Gill Ross, Mr Vijay Hirani and Ms Doreen Samuels.

The meeting was quorate.

The following members were also absent:

Group A: Mrs Niru Desai, Mrs Phiroza Gan-Kotwal, Ms Beverley Wilson and Ven Sumaner Sramaner
Group C: Ms Bhavita Pandya, Mrs Manju Radia.
Group D: Cllr Nana Asante

3. Order of the Agenda:

Agreed to take item 6c as the next agenda item, so that the visitors could leave after their presentation.

Clerks' note: for the minutes I have followed the original order of the agenda.

4. Minutes of the meeting held on 4th December 2012 (pages 1-7)

The minutes were agreed and signed as a true record.

5. Matters arising from the minutes

There were no matters arising from the minutes not covered elsewhere on the agenda.

Business Items: Improving standards in RE and collective worship

6. A Space for prayer in schools: guidance document and illustrations

Context: 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 last year, Claire Ali made a presentation to SACRE. Claire had recommended that advice to schools should be 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. This guidance document came to the last SACRE meeting. Rachel Bowerman has revised and updated the guidance in accordance with suggestions received from the Chairs' group and SACRE members, and this will be considered as item 6.a). In addition, Rachel Bowerman, Cllr Camilla Bath and Zafar Khalid have visited a prayer room at Rooks Heath School. Their report will form item 6.b). The third section of this item (which was actually taken first at the meeting) comprises a report by Judy Lethbridge and James Simmons on their experience of setting up a space for prayer and reflection.

a) Draft Guidance for Schools *(revised draft tabled at the meeting)*

As mentioned above, Rachel Bowerman has updated and revised the guidance document in line with suggestions received from the committee and included a cameo from Rooks Heath. She apologised for the late arrival of this revised draft: she will email it to members and invite any additional comments. **It was agreed that unless any major alterations were requested, the document should then go forward for publication. The deadline for responses is 31st March.**

There was some discussion about how best to promote and publicise the guidance. The following points were made:

- If the document were to be posted on the website, there would be no incentive for schools to buy it. It was agreed that a better alternative would be to announce the document on the website and provide it free to Harrow Schools and make a modest charge to schools outside Harrow.
- Rachel Bowerman will request an agenda item on the May briefing for headteachers with Catherine Doran, Corporate Director Children and Families. At this meeting Rachel will launch the Guidance and signpost them to other SACRE Guidance publications. She will also signal the difficulties of finding school representatives (group C) despite considerable efforts to recruit members for this group. Attendance from groups A, B and D, on the other hand, is consistently good.

Members made the following comments on the guidance:

Ms Varsha Dodhia wondered if it would be useful to include demographic information for children as well as for the population as a whole. Rachel Bowerman explained that accurate information would be difficult to obtain as it is not found in the Census statistics.

Mr Zia Baig suggested that there should be more advice on the kind of venue suitable for a prayer room. He cited an example where a gym was being used which was not entirely appropriate. Rachel Bowerman explained that the provision of a prayer room is not a requirement and schools might be put off if SACRE's advice is too prescriptive and the provision of the prayer room and its supervision become too much of a burden. At Rooks Heath, normally two classrooms are used, one for girls and one for boys, but at Ramadan the school hall is made available to accommodate more pupils. This has repercussions as other activities which would normally take place in the hall have to be cancelled.

The Rev'd Matthew Stone expressed his appreciation of the cross reference on page 1 to the RRSA (Rights Respecting Schools Award).

Action: members of the committee should make any additional responses to Rachel Bowerman by Sunday 31st March

Agreed: unless any major alterations were requested, the Guidance should go forward for publication.

b) Visit to Rooks Heath

The previous day, Cllr Camilla Bath and Mr Zafar Khalid had visited the prayer room at Rooks Heath High School. Rachel Bowerman had joined them later.

Cllr Camilla Bath opened the report by explaining that the pupils attending the prayer room had assured the SACRE visitors that they did not put any pressure on other pupils to attend the prayer room. Pupils felt it was more likely that pupils might once have been discouraged by their peers but that this had changed as the prayer room became more firmly embedded in the school culture. The visitors were informed that there were generally about 10-12 pupils and many more during Ramadan. The visitors had found the school very accommodating of pupils' religious requirements. Cllr Bath felt that this reinforced the importance of provision for collective worship in schools, which is a statutory requirement.

Mr Zafar Khalid added that the prayer room had previously been in a space used for drama, but the drama staff had reclaimed it for lunch time drama activities, so the pupils now used adjacent classrooms. Although pupils had to rearrange tables and chairs they were very relaxed about this. In answer to a question about how they felt if they missed a prayer session, they replied that they would feel guilty. The opportunity to pray was important to them.

Rachel Bowerman added that as they were teenagers, they had not been as communicative in their responses as younger children might be (cf the responses of children at Welldon Park below). However, this might also have been because they were genuinely surprised at the interest shown by the visitors; fitting prayer into their daily routine was perfectly normal. They felt it was their responsibility to organise the room, behave responsibly and lead the prayer themselves. Fatima Ibrahim, a Muslim member of staff at Rooks Heath felt that there were many benefits for the school community. It was particularly valuable that children of other faiths or none should see Muslims in ways that challenged stereotypes, showing Muslims as calm, prayerful and attentive to school work. The operation of the prayer room also demonstrated harmony between the diverse Muslim community and provided opportunities for non-Muslims to learn about the daily obligations of Islam.

c) Prayer Room at Welldon Park Junior School

James Simmons explained that the drafting of the SACRE guidance on prayer rooms had been timely for their school as they had received a request from three Y6 children for a space to pray at lunchtime. 40% of the school community is from a Muslim background; this includes various ethnic groups. The school also has several Muslim members of staff.

The prayer room request was initially granted by placing the small hall at the disposal of Y6 children for 15 minutes at the beginning of lunchtime between 12.20 and 12.35. This space was easy to supervise and the children were very responsible.

Word spread through the families and younger children wished to join in. The school needed to consider how to widen the scope of this provision to include younger children as well as both girls and boys. They wanted to make a coherent and organised response that would show that the school placed value on the children's faith obligations while at the same time keeping their response low-key. The school wished to be inclusive and also take account of what other schools were doing in this respect. The school needed to consider how best to contact parents, where the rooms should be located, how they should be supervised and how to maintain inclusiveness both across the school

community and within the different traditions of Islam practised within the school. It was a good learning journey.

Feedback from parents was positive. They felt that the school was supportive of their families. The school continued to provide the small hall, divided between boys and girls. Any child could come along between 12.20 and 12.35 for reflection and prayer time. There was space to accommodate the Muslim children with their prayer mats, but there was also seating round the edge for children of other faith traditions or none. The atmosphere was calm and reflective. There was a clear code of conduct and the children were quiet and respectful.

The initiative had been very well received by the children. A positive behaviour change had been noticed among some Year 5 boys who had been disengaged in Year 4. One child who had previously led other children astray, now leads them to the prayer room! This has improved his status. Children have said that the prayer room helps them, makes them “feel good” and improves concentration in the afternoon. One year 4 child remarked, “It helps me to reflect on what I’ve done and what I could change for the better.” Today there were 21 children using the prayer room including one Christian boy.

James Simmons concluded his report by saying that he values the fact that the request came initially from the children. There will be input from parents and governors over the next few weeks but children would always be at the centre of this initiative. Judy Lethbridge added that the space for prayer feels like a normal part of the school day. She values the way it enables children to see and appreciate other forms of prayer.

Rachel Bowerman invited questions and comments.

Mr Zia Baig expressed his pleasure at what he had heard. He emphasised that a space for prayer should not be exclusively for Muslim pupils. He complimented the school on their positive approach.

Cllr Asad Omar thanked Judy Lethbridge and James Simmons for their presentation. He asked if the timing of the room’s availability will change with the advent of British Summer Time. James Simmons replied that this is something the school is considering at the moment.

The Rev’d Matthew Stone enquired how the space will be supervised as numbers increase. James Simmons explained that there is currently a rota of volunteers who “hover near the door”. The room is central so it is easy for teachers to keep an unobtrusive eye although the whole initiative is essentially child led.

Ms Mercedes Afnan asked whether the school had written to parents and how they approached the issue with them. James Simmons explained that a general letter had been prepared to inform parents about the pupils’ request and how the school was accommodating it. The code of conduct was printed at the bottom. This letter was available in classrooms for children to take home if they wished. A display is planned in time for the next parents’ evening, so that parents who were not given a letter will be informed. James Simmons said that the school’s approach was characterised by a “light touch”. It was regarded as part of the school’s inclusive culture.

Rachel Bowerman expressed her thanks to Judy Lethbridge and James Simmons. She had particularly appreciated the indication of the children’s voice and was impressed by their maturity. The prayer room would contribute to children being equipped to reflect on their own thoughts and feelings. Other requests for prayer rooms have come from parents; this may not necessarily reflect the children’s wishes. She asked the speakers’ permission to use this example as a cameo in the guidance document and especially to quote some of the children’s remarks. This permission was gladly given and James Simmons tabled a summary of his report which included some quotations from children’s feedback.

On behalf of the SACRE committee, Rachel Bowerman formally thanked Judy Lethbridge and James Simmons who then left the meeting.

7. Authorised Absence for Religious Festivals: SACRE Guidance for Head Teachers and Governing Bodies. (Revised draft tabled at the meeting)

This draft, which strengthens the previous version, has already been circulated and approved. SACRE firmly supports the LA view that absence for religious festivals should be kept to a minimum. Head Teachers are pleased to hear that SACRE's policy endorses schools' rigorous approach to attendance. Rachel Bowerman has added a direct quote from the Education Act 1996 which sets out the legal obligations on school attendance.

The five bullet points at the bottom of the first page constitute the strengthened wording of the document.

In response to a question about the phrase "exclusively set apart by the religious body" which occurs in the first bullet point, Rachel Bowerman explained that this is a direct quote from the Education Act of 1996 cited in the document.

Dr Julie Crow pointed out that the two sentences from "Individual circumstances" to "visits/holidays abroad" on the second page of the guidance do not relate to religious observance. It was agreed to remove the first sentence and move the second sentence to the context paragraph.

Rachel Bowerman explained that in the past, SACRE has published a list of festival dates that fall on weekdays in term time. Previously, it was not made clear whether it was necessary to take these days as holiday in order to comply with religious observance. Rachel Bowerman tabled a grid where she has started to record those days when absence is absolutely necessary to fulfil the requirements of religious observance. She would like to ask each faith group to contribute to this list which could then be sent to schools as a supplement to the guidance.

Mr Zafar Khalid pointed out one problem with this: in the Muslim community there are two schools of thought about the date of a particular festival and it is celebrated on consecutive days at the two mosques. Rachel Bowerman explained that this instance could be explained in a note as she has already done with regard to a Jain festival, in response to an email received from Ms Varsha Dodhia. There are also some examples of festival days, for instance in the Zoroastrian tradition, where a whole day's absence is not necessary, but children might be late because of a festival breakfast.

Cllr Sasikala Suresh, speaking as a Hindu, although she is not a SACRE representative of the Hindu faith tradition, explained that there are variations in festival dates in the Hindu calendar. Rachel Bowerman has received responses from Vijay Hirani and Ananda Caitanya Das and requested Cllr Suresh's support in ensuring that South Indian Hinduism is reflected .

Members felt that this list would be very useful to schools.

Action: Rachel Bowerman will complete the list of essential days of religious observance with input from SACRE members. This will form a supplement to the Guidance.

8. Improving Teaching and Leadership in RE: SACRE Commissioned Seminars for RE Leaders

The spring term RE subject leaders' seminar was hosted at the Harrow Central Mosque.

Rachel Bowerman thanked Zafar Khalid for hosting the visit with Imam Iftikahr Daad and Cllr Camilla Bath for attending the training. She asked for their feedback.

In response to request from Zafar Khalid, Rachel Bowerman set the context for the seminar. She explained that the termly seminars for RE subject leaders are part of the HSIP training offer for subject leaders across the core curriculum and some foundation subjects. The training in autumn 2012 – 13 had focussed on the September 2012 Ofsted framework and how to prepare for subject-specific inspections. There had also been an introduction to the RE Quality Mark and its criteria for evaluating provision and outcomes in RE.

In the spring term the seminar was held at the Harrow Central Mosque in order to model approaches to teaching about Islam in KS 1 and KS 2. Harrow's scheme of work was produced some time ago, many new teachers have joined Harrow schools since then and it was necessary to re-visit RE aims, pedagogy and resourcing. Rachel Bowerman had consulted Zafar Khalid and Iftikahr Daad about the units of work in advance and they had been very impressed with its authenticity and approach.

Zafar Khalid informed members that twenty-five RE leaders attended the seminar on 13th February . He noted that many schools are keen to visit the Mosque but the children are not always well prepared and

ask questions that are not relevant. He felt that participants at the seminar learned a lot about both Islam and about how to teach RE. He had been impressed by Rachel Bowerman's presentation and teachers' questions. The seminar ended with tea, coffee and sandwiches.

Cllr Camilla Bath added that she found the seminar very informative. She had, in fact, been on the committee that granted planning permission for the Mosque and had always wanted to visit it. She was interested to see the simplicity of the prayer hall. She liked the two prayer halls but wondered why the women's hall was so much smaller than the men's hall. Zafar Khalid explained that this is because it is compulsory for males to pray but not compulsory for females. Cllr Bath felt privileged to see inside the mosque.

Cllr Bath thanked Rachel Bowerman for organising the seminar. Its success was attested by the fact that attendance was good and another seminar has been requested also to be held in a place of worship. Mary Abbott had attended the seminar as a participant and added that she had experienced a very warm welcome and atmosphere. The sandwiches were greatly appreciated too!

The Rev'd Matthew Stone thanked Rachel for circulating SACRE members with the flyer for this seminar and asked that SACRE members should continue to be invited.

9. Review of Harrow Agreed Syllabus

Rachel Bowerman tabled a document outlining the statutory requirements relating to the review of an Agreed Syllabus. She explained that under the provisions of the Education Reform Act 1988 and subsequent legislation, it is a requirement that an Agreed Syllabus should be reviewed every five years. This does not necessarily mean that it should be rewritten, but it must be reviewed by an Agreed Syllabus Conference. The Agreed Syllabus Conference could be constituted with the same members as the SACRE. It would need to meet at least twice, once at the beginning of the process and at the end to agree the proposed syllabus. Between these meetings, a working group would draft the revised syllabus with regular submissions to the Agreed Syllabus Conference. The four committees of the ASC must unanimously agree for the draft to become the agreed syllabus.

It is necessary to take into account what is happening nationally across the curriculum. The National Curriculum is being revised. The consultation period for the revised draft ends in April and the completed curriculum will be sent to schools in September for implementation in September 2014.

RE is not a subject of the National Curriculum. It is determined locally, in the form of an Agreed Syllabus. The RE Council for England and Wales is conducting a review of RE. Its report is scheduled for completion by the end of June/beginning of July. This report will produce explicit recommendations regarding aims, pedagogy and content of contemporary RE. This could guide the Agreed Syllabus Conference when they determine the local syllabus. It seems advisable therefore to wait for the report of the RE Council.

The SACRE needs to make a decision this evening. Rachel Bowerman suggested the following options:

- a) Write to the Catherine Doran advising her that SACRE will defer taking action regarding a review of the local Agreed Syllabus until the RE Council has made its recommendations.
- b) Recommend that the Local Authority convene an Agreed Syllabus Conference which would commence its review once the RE Council has made its recommendations.

Ms Varsha Dodhia suggested that the introduction of a new syllabus should coincide with the implementation of the new national curriculum in September 2014.

In answer to another question, Rachel Bowerman recapitulated the position regarding the revision of the National Curriculum and the report of the RE council. The National Curriculum is designed under the auspices of the DfE. The RE Council does not enjoy the same status; in fact it is even appealing for members to undertake sponsored walks to raise money on its behalf. However, the launch of a new RE curriculum would attract interest and funding and regenerate enthusiasm for the subject.

Members agreed to follow option b).

It is likely that the Agreed Syllabus Conference will have the same membership as SACRE unless the constituent faith groups and teachers' associations wanted to suggest different representatives. Once Catherine Doran had instructed Rachel Bowerman to convene an ASC, Rachel would write to the constituent bodies regarding their representation on the Agreed Syllabus Conference.

Action: Rachel Bowerman

Rachel Bowerman confirmed that membership of the Agreed Syllabus Conference need not involve frequent meetings. She undertook to send electronic copies of the existing Harrow Agreed Syllabus to new members, Angela Clapham and Mercedes Afnan.

Action: Rachel Bowerman

Business Items: Improving standards in RE and collective worship

10. Reports from National RE Associations

The REC newsletter was tabled at the meeting. See also minute 9 above.

11. Reports from SACRE partners

- a) **Harrow Interfaith Council:** Varsha Dodhia reported that some meetings known as “intuitive conversations” have taken place between members of different faith groups. There are some concerns that representatives of the council are presenting their own individual rather than corporate views and there is a move to ensure that members are considered representative of their faith community.
- b) **Faith communities:** Cllr Asad Omar reported that an exhibition about Islam will be held at the Harrow Central Mosque in the first week of May. He will email details, when known, to Rachel Bowerman so that schools can be informed.

Action: Cllr Asad Omar

- c) **Interfaith Week:** Varsha Dodhia reported that as part of Interfaith Week, a celebration of Faith expressed in the Arts had taken place at the Zoroastrian Centre, with readings, presentations, songs and dance
- d) **Pilgrimage:** Varsha Dodhia reported on a very successful pilgrimage between different places of worship in central London and wondered if a local pilgrimage of this kind could be arranged in Harrow.
- e) **Humanism:** Julie Crow informed members that Newton Farm School are holding a RE day and the Harrow Humanists will be participating and are always willing to visit schools and provide speakers.

12. AOB

- a) **Resources:** Rachel Bowerman thanked members for the responses she had received to her email about the RE resources at the Teachers' Centre. She explained for the benefit of members who did not know about this that, approximately four years earlier, the library at the Teachers' Centre had been cleared so it could be used as a training room. Since then, the RE resources had been stored in boxes in a cellar. However, the Teachers' Centre will be vacated at the end of the summer term, so these resources need to be rehoused. Rachel Bowerman feels that best use of them will be made if they are housed with the relevant faith community. They can then be used by the community and also loaned to schools. They will be useful for members going into schools to give talks.

Rachel Bowerman will organise some dates when she can hand over resources and she will prepare guidance notes if required.

Action: Rachel Bowerman

- b) **Apology:** Rachel apologised to members and especially to Phiroza Gan-Kotwal who was not present this evening. The annual meeting of the regional London and SE SACREs was held at the Zoroastrian Centre at Harrow, and Harrow SACRE was not represented. Rachel had informed SACRE that no notification of this event had been received, but had found on checking, that Harrow SACRE had been notified, but the event was not announced as a consultation. It was, in fact, an opportunity to be updated and informed about the work of the all-party committee, rather than an official consultation.

- c) **SACRE AGM 23rd May 2013:** this would take place in Birmingham. Two places would be funded and it might be possible to claim travel expenses. Members should contact Rachel Bowerman if they would like to attend. Mary Abbott expressed an interest in attending.

13. Dates of Future SACRE Meetings:

The next SACRE meeting is on Wednesday 12th June.

Future dates from the council were Monday 23rd September, Monday 2nd December and Thursday 6th March. The Clerk will confirm these dates after consultation with the Jewish representatives who were not present at the meeting.

Action: Clerk

The Meeting closed at 9.30 pm

Signed:

(Chair)

(Date)