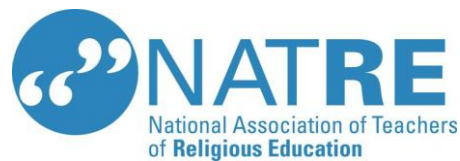


Implementing a Strategy of Regional Support for RE: Report and recommendations



Report and recommendations jointly agreed by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, the National Association of Teachers of RE and Culham St Gabriel's Trust

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Implementing a Strategy of Regional Support for RE: Report and recommendations

Executive Summary

The RE Council's Professional Development Committee, the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) and Culham St Gabriel's Trust (CSTG)¹ collaborated in planning a Roundtable to consider how the RE community might implement Recommendation 4 of the Review, to 'ensure that there are more robust arrangements for training and supporting teachers of RE'². The Roundtable took place in central London and attracted 25 professional leaders in the RE community, each of whom was invited on the basis of his/her experience and skills in capacity-building and supporting others in the current, changed context of RE.

Recommendation 4 suggests that regional hubs could offer some solutions to several issues of quality and support for teachers, by facilitating exchange of information between teachers, policy makers and researchers, by providing alternative sources of support for teachers who are not able to benefit from SACREs, and by becoming regional centres of continuing professional development (CPD).

The **purpose** of the Roundtable was to consider the implementation of Recommendation 4 by making strategic connections between several strands of RE activity. The activity includes action research, quality improvement, professional membership and social media use. The goal was to make connections in a way that would place a central focus on the RE teacher's needs and intentions in improving teaching and learning, building outwards from that focus.

The **aims** of the Roundtable were:

- To consider how the changing context of RE gives opportunities to focus on collaboration between schools, universities and agents of change in RE
- To identify specific forms of regional collaboration that focus on RE teachers' needs and intentions to improve teaching and learning, creating space and time to reflect on pressures, preconceptions, theoretical perspectives and practical professional experience
- To agree next steps, costs and partnership tasks

The **desired outputs** were:

- An agreed contextual statement that gives a rationale for regional collaboration focussed on the needs and intentions of RE teachers and trainees

¹ See Appendix 1 for the websites of the three organisations and a reference to the RE support systems they offer.

² RE Council, *A Review of RE in England*, 2013, p38, <http://resubjectreview.recouncil.org.uk/re-review-report>

- Decisions to pilot regional collaboration in specific areas, with identified partners
- Action points for individuals and organisations, costed and time-specific

After welcomes from the three organisations and a context-setting keynote from Kathryn Wright and Dave Francis³, the Roundtable members spent much of the day on group work aimed at pooling knowledge and generating the outputs of the day.

This report is not a ‘good practice guide’, nor does it offer one single ‘recognised’ way of organising and providing regional support. The plurality of ideas on the day was seen as something to be celebrated. Most of the proposals generated do not need anyone’s permission to be implemented. It is very much hoped that all parts of the RE community will work with others to put their ideas into practice, in ways appropriate to their context.

The day opened and closed with some Youtube footage of starlings in murmuration, an example of how the RE community could work together:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eakKfY5aHmY>

Contextual statement: a rationale for regional collaboration

This statement is based on the post-it notes, verbal contributions and messages submitted by participants, together with the insights of the RE Review itself. The underlying aspirations of the participants, for better RE and a better structured RE community, had remarkable unanimity, and can be seen in detail in Appendices 2 and 3.

Regional collaboration for RE takes place in a context of deregulation, austerity and rapid reforms to the curriculum, qualifications and school governance. These factors are unlikely to change before or after a general election. In the RE community there is a need to create sustainable, effective structures that build on RE’s strengths and address its weaknesses. In this context, regional strategies for training and supporting teachers of RE can help by:

- Placing the quality of teaching and learning centre stage
- Complementing existing provision, for example building on resource centres (places and people)
- Bringing together new energies and networks to compensate for the weakness and sometimes the collapse of existing structures at national and local levels
- Developing close links between training schools and specialist sources of wisdom in other schools and/or universities
- Connecting the expertise of practitioners, researchers and policy makers into conversations that generate classroom-relevant research projects and opportunities
- Restructuring RE nationally and regionally without dependence on government

³ The slides can be accessed at <http://www.reonline.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Dave-and-Kathryn-keynote-Final-17.1.14.pdf>

This kind of rationale could be used as the basic 'stem' for justifying the initiation of regional activity in specific areas. It could be adapted to reflect conditions in specific regions.

From this it might be possible to generate the following aims for regional hub activity:

- (a) To create informing, connecting, inspiring and energising regional networks of teachers of RE;
- (b) To promote practical wisdom through two-way engagement between RE research and RE pedagogy, leading to improvement in standards of teaching and learning in RE;
- (c) To build capacity of RE leadership locally, regionally and nationally, by developing confidence, expertise and vision.

During the day it became clear that regional hubs were definitely not intended to be a new organisation and should not become a new bureaucratic structure.

Piloting regional collaboration in specific areas with identified partners

The Roundtable conducted a mapping exercise to ascertain what activity is already happening on the ground in the regions. This activity brought together NATRE networks, RE Quality Mark schools, existing networks such as Learn/Teach/Lead in the south-west, 3forRE universities and other partnerships. From this it was possible to identify:

- Areas where much is already happening and is already coordinated
- Areas where much is already happening but is not joined up
- Areas where more needs to happen

The maps can be seen in Appendix 4.

Next the Roundtable worked in groups to develop a 'sample regional strategy' and present it to each other. What follows is a digest of the recurring points, in the form of a diagram placing the teacher of RE at the centre. This can be seen in Appendix 5.

The groups also identified practical points that regional networks could think about and address:

- The central focus of regional activity needs to be the RE teacher's needs and intentions in improving teaching and learning.
- Hubs can be started and maintained by any RE partner but need a leader whose time to coordinate the activity is identified, recognised and paid for – a professional partner to 'hold the ring'.
- Hubs can be as small or large as they like. There is no 'right' size. It might help to think of regions as hubs, subdivided into smaller action research sets or action learning networks. Hubs and sets can be territorial but they can also link teachers in

schools that are statistical neighbours, members of an academy consortium, partners with the same university or RE teachers living in the same area.

- Linking teachers locally and nationally through carefully integrated use of social media, such as #Teachmeets, @reonline_tweets, @rethinkREnow and #REchatuk can support and build insights.
- The difference that hubs can make to teachers' capacity could be crucial. Hubs can transcend discussions about 'what works in the classroom' and get to 'why it works' and 'how it can work better'. The action research element of critical questioning and quality assurance can be had through university/school interaction.
- Pedagogical understanding and commitment in teachers needs openness and inclusivity. Hubs may decide to focus on a particular pedagogical model offered by a nearby university; but it is also good to encourage teachers to be versatile pedagogically, and to keep developing their repertoire of different pedagogical models.

Because local circumstances vary, the ways in which regional strategies to support teachers of RE could start and develop will also be diverse. For the sake of illustration only, two possible starting 'scenarios' are briefly described here:

- Region A: densely populated, consisting of two cities and a number of outlying towns. A total of fourteen local authorities. An RE tutor in local university, a partner in the 3forRE scheme, volunteers to host a regional meeting which is used to generate regional CPD and action research priorities. However, attendance from outlying towns is limited. The tutor agrees with a local NATRE rep that sub-regional cells will be developed, so that meetings are happening closer to where people need them. Those participating agree that a priority is to involve teachers in primary-secondary liaison to promote a coherent model of attainment and progression.
- Region B: mostly rural, with three small cities. There are two large counties and five unitary authorities. One local consultant has a database of schools participating in the RE Quality Mark, and uses this to host a series of RE Teachmeets with the question: how can we help to spread good practice and build capacity in RE? Because of the large distances involved, meetings are kept to a minimum. NATRE networks, RE Today and RE:ONLINE are used for online communication and sharing of ideas. Two local universities, offering Farmington Fellowships and the 3forRE scheme, are invited to join the online conversation.

Next steps

1. The RE Council, NATRE and CSTG will work together on allocation of resources to support regional activity, probably beginning with pilots in specific areas with identified partners.
2. The three organisations and partners in the regions will work together to learn from the pilots and support effective professional development networks, focussed on the quality of teaching and learning, in every area.

An aspiration expressed by one participant in the Roundtable:

Ensure that there is a network group within 10 miles of every teacher of RE.

Appendix 1: The organisations that hosted the Roundtable

RE Council of England and Wales: <http://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/> The authors of the RE Review; managers of the Young Ambassadors Scheme; secretariat for the all-party parliamentary group on RE; authorises the RE Quality Mark.

National Association of Teachers of RE: <http://www.natre.org.uk/> NATRE affiliated local groups and membership groups; partnered with RE Today Services, membership includes the RE Today termly mailing.

Culham St Gabriel's Trust: www.cstg.org.uk owns and runs www.reonline.org.uk; manages the Teach RE Course; runs the 3forRE scheme and the RE Quality Mark.

Appendix 2: RE teaching in five years' time

Participants were asked to share brief sentences of twenty words each describing the kind of RE teaching they would want to see in five years' time.

I want to see RE recognised in all schools as the valuable, rigorous, challenging, fascinating subject I believe it to be.

- Integrative, non-confessional, 'religious studies' approach
- diverse religions/world views
- informed, articulate pupils developing their own beliefs, values and identity
- applied to major contemporary issues.

Exciting RE that makes children think, taught by passionate teachers and valued by all.

Relevant, real religion, contemporary, enquiry-led, depth not breadth, inclusive, slow food not fast food, based on pupils' interests, trained teachers, local, national, international.

Creative, relevant but academically rigorous. Genuine enquiry-based learning, encouraging criticality. Review of AT1 and 2.

Open, fearless, intellectually challenging, spiritually reflective, designed to give young people systematic understanding of religion, philosophy and ethics.

Focussed on the needs of children and young people.

Well thought-out, open-spirited RE reflecting both ideals and realities of religion and belief in all schools.

RE teaching that focuses learning on the search for and investigation of suggested wisdom, engaging feelings, experiences, creativity and reason.

Horses, not camels! Multiple, pedagogically coherent schemes operated in schools that have made difficult decisions about what RE is for.

- Multi-disciplinary: reflecting varied dimensions of religion
- Unstereotypical: representing religions fairly
- Developmental: genuinely aiding youngsters' values development
- Non-performative: not data-obsessed.

Spiritual/social science, exploring the phenomenon of faith and division, fused with psychological appreciation of the human condition locally, nationally and internationally.

Engaging, enquiring, encountering. Using knowledge of religions to support individual development and making sense of ultimate questions.

A confident enabler of understanding the impact of religion (positive/negative/complex) on individuals and society. Encouraging sensitively existential awareness.

Diverse in content and methodology, valued by the local, national and international community and well led by teachers in partnership with other stakeholders.

RE: an enhanced consolidated subject providing education through religion in schools that promote spiritual development, i.e. wisdom.

- Schools that have coherent understanding of religions and beliefs
- Children who can think theologically
- An exam system that is fit for purpose.

Pupils at the heart; deep and authentic learning taking place through creative pedagogies rooted in research to 'shape our world'.

Reform out of date GCSEs. Make them fit for 21st century. Make RE non-compulsory at KS4. Controversial.

If SACREs: commitment to ongoing research is essential. If statutory: challenging, relevant and intellectually satisfying. If examined: assessment demands excellent RE.

Challenging – Ownership – Higher order thinking – Empowered teachers – Significant – Inclusive – Valued and valid – Engaging

Academically demanding, personally challenging, conveying the dynamic of religion and not in the disguise of philosophy and ethics

Appendix 3: RE networks in five years' time

Participants were also asked to describe, in twenty words, the mechanisms and networks RE needs to make their teaching vision a reality.

Teachers! Specialist academic religious studies knowledge, pedagogical expertise. Training: primary ITT, CPD, funding, time, layered approach to national/regional/local/school. Collaboration not competition.

End of postcode lottery for RE.

Stronger national framework.

Centres of excellence to provide seriously discounted CPD.

Systems/mechanisms that provide full recognition of the subject's local provision with resources to support local democracy and effective learning.

Ensure that there is a network group within in 10 miles of every teacher of RE.

SACREs evolve or die; massive investment in ITT or CPD, strong links with universities, radical overhaul of assessment and curriculum.

Better research-practice links, clearer epistemology, new name. SACREs reformed, parents and employers supporting them.

Specialist RE teachers with relevant MAs, engaged in collaborative R and D with HEI partners. R and D regional networks. National dissemination of findings.

School leaders/government/parents/students understand RE's value for all; proper levels of training and support; a curriculum reflecting modern life.

Digital technology, utilised in and out of the classroom. Social networks online connecting like-minded educators.

Schools grouped regionally and philosophically (regardless of location). Affiliated with academics as 'schools of practice' pooling resources.

Locally led with a 'thin' national framework for the subject.

Active engagement between researchers and practitioners sharing effective practice, openness and new ways of working.

Publicity.

Good CPD for all who deliver RE.

Mechanisms in place to make sharing of best practice easy and more commonplace.

Local groups/LAs branching out, forging links.

The RE community using its diversity as its strength; establishing regional as well as local network groups.

Strategically driven vision of professional development, owned by the RE community, addressing local and national needs through collaboration and partnership.

Media campaigning, government ministers' commitment, NCTL, Ofsted, etc. Place deliberate emphasis on high quality RE and supporting CPD.

Audit and bring SACREs in line; change assessment. Online text/resources – no text books!; faiths to buy in to RE:ONLINE hub – just one!

SACREs as they are now and pupils, parents, academics, researchers, academies and other providers, focussed on pupils, served by consultants.

Appendix 4: Maps of regional RE activity

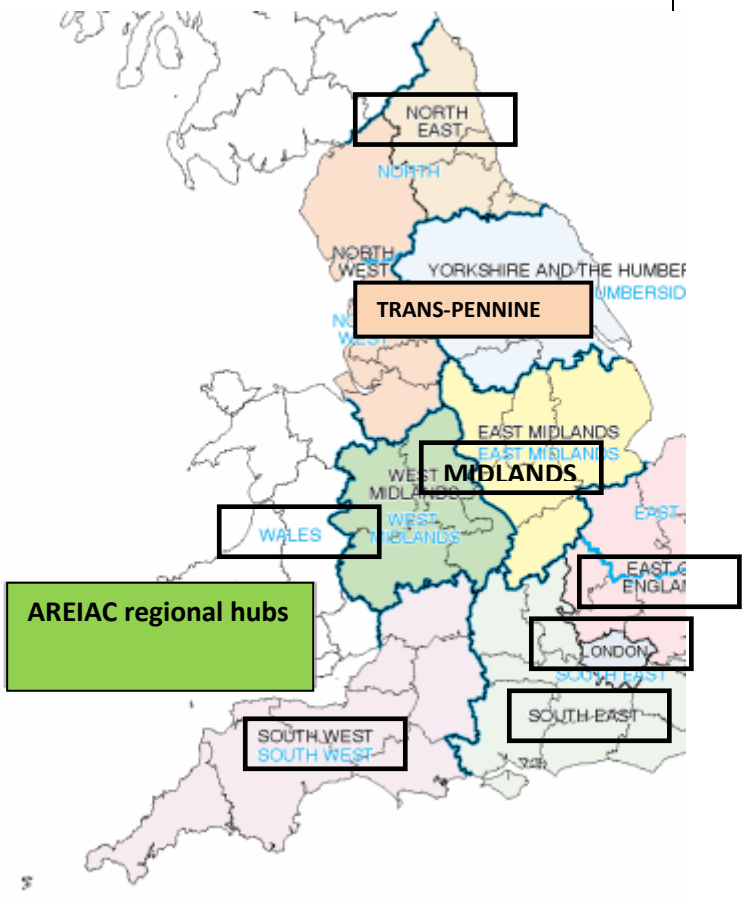
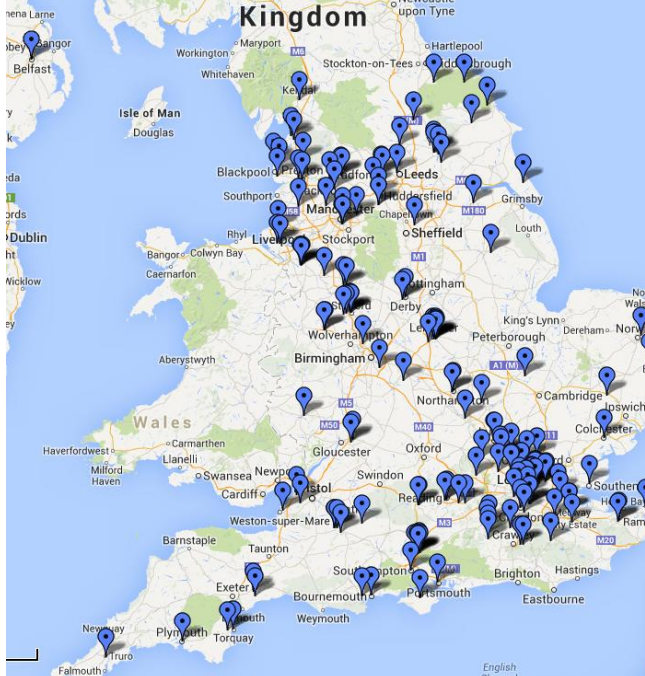
REQM Award Winning Schools



RE leaders: SLE, AST, LP



NATRE Affiliated local groups



Appendix 5: Conceptual diagram of potential partners in regional activity

This conceptual diagram places the teacher of RE in the centre, with the various potential partners gathered around. The partners that were mentioned most frequently have been highlighted in yellow as being essential to successful hubs, in the view of the participants. Hubs do not have to use all these potential partners to be successful.

