

MERTON STANDING ADVISORY COUNCIL ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**Minutes of the SACRE meeting held at 5.00pm on Tuesday 21 March 2023****At the Baitul Futuh Mosque, 181 London Road, Morden, Surrey SM4 5PT****Present:**

Group A	Christian, Other Faiths and Beliefs	
Ms Kamontip Evans	Buddhism	KE
Mr John Carter	Humanism	JC
Mrs G Maheshwaran	Hinduism	GM
Mr Waleed Ahmad	Ahmadiyya Muslim Association	WA
Group B	Church of England SDBE	
Mrs Jane Savill		JS
The Revd. Andrew Williams		AW
Group C	Teacher Associations	
Mr Dimos Kechagias	RE Teacher, Co-opted	DK
Group D	Local Authority	
Cllr Mike Brunt	Councillor	MB
Cllr Klaar Dresselaers	Councillor	KD
Cllr Laxmi Attawar	Councillor	LA
In attendance		
Keith Shipman	LA Adviser; Education Inclusion Head of Service, Merton	KS

The meeting was quorate, as members from each faith group and sector were present.

The following papers were circulated prior to the meeting:

Item 4 – Minutes of SACRE meeting on 22.11.22

1. Merton 6th form Interfaith Dialogue Project feedback

Sixth form students from Merton schools had earlier discussed the question, How does our faith or belief shape our lives today? They met the SACRE members at the Ahmadiyya Mosque to discuss the Project's progress. KS asked what they thought about the theme, and what they had learned from the process so far.

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Students from the first group said it had had an impact on their values and beliefs, and had made them think about how similar their values were to those of other people. They had also discussed the impact of doubt on faith. They said that doubt was a hurdle that had to be overcome, that it was something everyone goes through, and that it could make faith stronger.

They had also talked about the way that Covid lockdowns had broken the habit of practicing a religion, so that for some, where this might have been a regular habit pre-Covid, they were less involved after, to the extent that some had turned away from their religion. They also said it was difficult to find a way to faith at a time when huge disasters happened. They suggested that one improvement might be to involve more schools to ensure more religions were represented.

The second group agreed: one student said that although her family background had given her a very good knowledge of her own religion, there was not very much exposure to in-depth knowledge of other faiths, so it had been very interesting to see the process of worship in other temples and churches. Another agreed: she said that visiting the Hindu temple and seeing the shrine had made her realise how other religions worship their deities: she had not known anything about these rituals before.

A further, largely atheist group said they had enjoyed the whole programme. They said it had been lovely to hear from everyone else, as no matter what their religious background, everyone was still human and shared very similar human values and beliefs about what made things right or wrong. They also agreed that the groups could be mixed further to make the debates more wide-ranging.

KS said SACRE would definitely work to broaden the representation of faiths. He also said that at the June meeting at Wimbledon Synagogue, the groups would be mixed to encourage more variety in discussions. He asked the students for any other comments.

The students said they had found the Roman Catholic Priest's account of his religion and how he became a priest very moving.

KS said that it had been a very personal, honest and brave testament, not just one of blind faith. He said that as a gay man, Father David understood the issues, but wanted to challenge these by being in church, as although he believed in God, he also believed in the reconciliation of being gay with belief in God.

The SACRE members also had the opportunity to ask the students some questions about their experience.

Q – I've been really impressed with the comments I've heard: the programme has clearly had an impact on many of you and sounds as though it may have sparked a real interest and desire to know more. I was interested in the comment about Father David and his faith journey. Maybe for future visits, we could also ask other faith leaders if they will talk about their faith journey as personal testament?

A – We could look at how that could be done, as the Imam has done today, and as Gita did when she talked about worshipping in the family home. For each session, people are given a different theme to think about, which makes each slightly different.

Q – Would anyone like to say one thing they were really surprised to find out or didn't expect, that expanded their understanding of any faith?

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A – I was very surprised when the Imam said today that anyone of any faith can come and pray at the Ahmadiyya Mosque – I found the level of acceptance in this invitation really unusual.

A – I was really surprised about the priest talking about being gay – I have friends who were Christian, and are still religious, but who have left their religion because of their sexuality.

A – Yes, people often find out that who they are doesn't sit easily with their faith and he's finding a way to try to reconcile that: it's not easy, as he said, but it's encouraging to hear about someone trying to do it.

Q – How will you share with your peers in the schools you go to what you have learned from the different places you have visited and people you have met? Also, we're good at visiting cathedrals, churches and temples when we're on holiday, but perhaps we should do this closer to home – do you think we should be encouraging people of all faiths and none to visit?

A – I think we should definitely encourage our generation to explore beautiful monuments of religion. I live close to the Ahmadiyya Mosque, but would never have visited if it had not been for this programme. People would also especially enjoy the Hindu temple. The way Gita spoke about the way the religion appeals to your senses was amazing.

Q – I feel encouraged, listening to what everyone has said, that this programme has been worth doing, to bring people together and open their eyes to different cultures, and to understand one another.

Q – Do you also think you have gained any skills from being part of the programme? Do you look at the world differently?

A – I think so – it has changed the way I think regarding the division between “their” / place of worship and “my” place of worship: it's not not as segregated, and I have an appreciation of the real world rather than a projected image.

Q – As this is an interfaith group focusing on diversity, would it be appropriate to have some formal input from humanists?

A – Yes, that's a good idea: we can arrange a session at the Civic Centre. We should also organise a session about Sunni Islam.

KS said that SACRE would like to add sessions about Humanism, Sikhism and Bhuddism to the programme, but did not want to overload the students. All agreed they could do one or two more, but not too many.

KE said that all would be welcome to the Buddhapadipa Temple for Thai Buddhist New Year in April, and that the details were on the Temple website. She would also be happy to welcome the students later, to hear a talk about Buddhism.

MB asked the students if they would happy to be part of explaining and promoting the project to next year's Year 11s. All agreed they would be happy to help.

KS said that as more schools had participated this year, the programme had been more wide-ranging, representing the diversity that characterised Merton as a borough. He said that capturing the participants' comments and thoughts would be very valuable in promoting the initiative to younger school years. He would e-mail mini-surveys to all at the close of the programme.

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MB thanked all the students for coming and said he was proud of all the participants for asking such thoughtful questions.

A photograph was taken of the SACRE members and students, before the students departed for a tour of the mosque.

This part of the meeting ended at 6.20pm.

The SACRE meeting began at 18.30.

2. Welcome and apologies for absence

There were apologies from Ro Maybury, Mike Freedman and Rachel Norman. MB welcomed the attendees and thanked their hosts at the Ahmadiyya Mosque for offering their library for the meeting.

MB said he thought the young people on the Interfaith 6th form programme had been inspirational. The SACRE members agreed.

KS said that it had become easier to get people feeling safe to talk to one another about serious issues such as faith and certainty, and it had been interesting to see the crossover between the groups of girls and boys about different beliefs. The aim for the next session would be to get the groups to mix more.

KS said the students were bright young people who had sustained some very good quality discussions, and that the co-ordinators should be pushing them to towards debating the issues at a high level. He said that one of functions of SACRE was to find out how RE was working in the Borough, and there was nothing better than listening to pupils talking to reveal this. He thought the Interfaith programme had been a very healthy initiative in this respect.

GM thought that the students had been very strong in their faith, and had evolved to a stage where they were not fearful about talking about their beliefs. She thought they were confident enough to realise that questioning was not an attack on their beliefs, so were open to exploring the issues further.

MB said he had been interested in the way in which the students had talked about interfaith friendships, relationships and marriage.

KS said that with people from all sorts of different backgrounds in the borough, interfaith friendships were inevitable and the students were lucky to be in Merton, as they didn't experience the kind of isolation they would elsewhere.

MB asked if it might be appropriate to repeat the programme with younger children.

KS said that something similar had been done at Abbotsbury Primary School, where children had formed a cultural and faith ambassadors' group. They had attended a Black Lives Matter meeting at which KS had interviewed them on camera.

Abbotsbury Head Teacher Ro Maybury had been unable to attend that evening's meeting, but KS said it might be plausible for SACRE to do a similar meeting at Abbotsbury and meet their cultural and faith ambassadors. This was agreed. **ACTION**

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Regarding the 6th formers, KS said he hoped the experience had prepared them for thinking about where they wanted to go next and hoped the programme would influence what and where they studied at University. The last session would be about their journey, and what opportunities they might seek out in future.

KS asked DK how his students had responded to the programme.

DK said some of his students had been there that evening and they had loved the programme: they had felt inspired by the conversations they had had and blessed to be able to participate. Some of them characterised the programme as the most important initiative taking place across the borough of Merton. They had had the idea of making some short videos advertising SACRE to tell future students about the programme, about how skills in interfaith dialogue can act as a toolkit to help them progress better in life, and to encourage them to take part.

The SACRE members agreed that some short videos at the end of the programme would be a very good idea. **ACTION**

KS said that the co-ordinators would also ask for final feedback at the end of the programme, via a SurveyMonkey questionnaire.

MB thanked KS and his team for all the work that had gone into making the 6th form Interfaith Project a success.

3. **SACRE Committee administration**

Vote on co-opting Dimos Kechagias as a member of SACRE

MB asked DK if he was happy to be co-opted. DK said he would be very happy, He said that it would be an honour to work with the SACRE members and he would be extremely dedicated. The SACRE members unanimously agreed that DK should be appointed to the Council.

4. **Minutes and Actions from the SACRE meeting on 22.11.22**

The Minutes were approved as a true and accurate record. JC asked if Minutes could be circulated sooner after a meeting. The Clerk said she would be happy to do this as soon as the Minutes were signed off as Final.

Action 1 – Complete: DK had invited to join SACRE as a co-opted member.

Action 2 – KS said the children had not been filmed, but they had done interviews online at the Black Lives Matter forum (composed of head teachers, teachers, teaching assistants and governors looking at how to improve equalities in education in Merton) and had been interviewed online. This was the first time religion had been the Forum's theme so this had been very popular and well received.

Action 3 – This action was complete.

Action 4 – Meeting Abbotsbury pupils during summer term: this was ongoing, and needed agreement as to how and when it could be done. KS would contact RM to agree a date. GM emphasised the importance of capturing this event on video.

Actions 5 and 6 – RE hours at Raynes Park and Ursuline schools: KS would circulate these and complete his report. **ACTION**

Actions 7 and 8 – This action was ongoing: the Clerk would check and confirm with MF that the summer SACRE meeting on 27 June at Wimbledon Synagogue, at which a Board of Deputies speaker would give a presentation, was confirmed. **ACTION**

Action 9 – KS said he had not yet asked Merton secondary schools for RE schemes of work, but would do so before the next SACRE meeting. **ACTION**

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Action 10a – Syllabus review survey – a meeting had been held but had not gone well due to technical issues. The survey questions had been prepared, though these needed circulating to JC. **ACTION**

The questions then needed to be sent to schools. KS said that despite this delay, the questionnaires would go via Rachel Bowerman to schools in summer term, so SACRE could obtain an idea of what schools think of the current syllabus and how it can be changed and adapted. **ACTION**

DK left meeting at 19.05 to dismiss his students.

11a – Attend Merton Primary School cluster and RE leads' meetings to promote syllabus survey. The questionnaire had not yet gone out, but once it had, SACRE members could attend the summer term session.

Q – We should announce that the questionnaire is about to go out. Also, is there a weekly secondary heads' meeting?

A – Yes, this is organised by Elizabeth Fitzpatrick. Someone from SACRE should attend, promote the survey and say we need schools' views on the RE syllabus.

JC and GM said they would attend. KS said that the separate short meetings took place weekly online, those for secondary schools on Tuesdays at 10.30am and for primary schools on Thursdays at 2.30pm. JC and GM could e-mail EF direct regarding arrangements for attending. **ACTION**

Action 11b – Secondary teachers had been invited to the training sessions to promote the syllabus survey and some had attended. The summer session would be on Judaism and equalities. SACRE members' visits to schools to promote the syllabus survey had not yet been organised. KS said it might be best for members to approach Head Teachers directly: he would be happy to write an introductory e-mail.

GM suggested that the SACRE members could sit in on a faith assembly to see some RE in practice rather than just talking to the HT. This was agreed. **ACTION**

DK returned to the meeting at 7.10.

The Members discussed which approach should be taken to school visits, bearing in mind that not all offered the Merton SACRE syllabus. All agreed with GM's point that they should go in to schools not as authority figures but with gentle curiosity and genuine interest in how they taught RE, with the aim of engaging schools if they were not doing what they should.

KS asked if members would prefer to be allocated several schools to visit. This was agreed. **ACTION**

5. Matters arising Actions from the meeting on 22.11.22

There were no matters arising.

6. Syllabus survey

This had been covered in the Actions, above. DK added that the questions had been devised so that they would be straightforward for busy heads of RE departments to answer. KS advised the members that it was not unusual for the number of responses to such surveys to be low, no matter how well devised they were.

7. SACRE members' visits to schools

This had been covered in the Actions, above.

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8. Note Interfaith Week dates (13-20 November 2023)

KS said that the first session of the 2023-24 6th form Interfaith project would fall in that week. JS suggested holding a SACRE meeting during that week in the following academic year.

9. NASACRE administration

Annual conference, 22 May 2023, Fishmongers’ Hall, London

KS said that NASACRE invited two members from each SACRE to attend. He asked members interested in attending to contact the Clerk, who would make the reservations and check if online attendance might be possible. **ACTIONS**

FoI request to Local Authorities on SACRE funding

KS said that Merton had received a Freedom of Information request from NASACRE. They would compile the information nationally and come back to local SACREs with results. The questions had been about how much local authorities spend on SACREs. KS explained that the grant the LA receives for running RE has been decreasing over the years, and NASACRE was interested in knowing what percentage of this figure was spent on running SACRE. KS said Merton had no single, ring-fenced SACRE budget as such, but funding was taken from different areas and allocated to SACRE. He said that Fols like this were commonplace and were the easiest and most efficient way for NASACRE to obtain the information. The request had been answered and the outcome was awaited.

10. Any Other Business

KS said he would produce the Annual SACRE report, which would need to be agreed at the next meeting on 27 June. **ACTION**

11. Dates and venues for 2023-24 SACRE meetings

1. 27 June 2023, Wimbledon Synagogue at 5pm
2. 14 November 2023, Ricards Lodge School at 5pm

The Clerk would check against the Council diary and circulate potential dates for the 2024 meetings. **ACTION**

MB thanked everyone for their attendance, and said it had been a very enjoyable and really productive meeting. He also thanked SACRE’s hosts at the Mosque for their generous hospitality.

The meeting ended at 7.40pm.

Baitul Futuh Mosque tour and presentation

Following the meeting, SACRE member Waleed Ahmad very kindly gave the SACRE members a guided tour of the Baitul Futuh Ahmadiyya Mosque.

Approved.....

Date.....

Xxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx – Chair

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Summary of Actions from the Merton SACRE meeting on 21 March 2023

Action	ref	description	by	date
1	5	Meet Abbotsbury Primary School Cultural Ambassadors at school.	All SACRE members	TBC
2	5.2	Make videos with 6 th Form Interfaith students to promote the project.	TBC	TBC
3	6	Circulate Raynes Park and Ursuline RE hours to SACRE members: complete Merton RE Hours Report.	KS	ASAP
4	6.2	Check and confirm details for 27 June meeting at Wimbledon Synagogue.	Clerk/MF	ASAP
5	6.3	Ask Merton secondary schools for RE schemes of work.	KS	27 June
6	6.4	Circulate RE syllabus survey questions to JC.	DK	ASAP
7	6.5	Send syllabus survey to schools in summer term.	KS	ASAP
8	6.6	Attend Merton primary school cluster and RE leads' meeting, and secondary school meeting.	JC/GM	TBC
9a	6.7	Promote syllabus survey in schools by attending faith assemblies.	All SACRE members	TBC
9b	7	Allocate secondary schools to visit to SACRE members.	All SACRE members	TBC
10	7.2	Contact Clerk to reserve attendance at the NASACRE conference. Check if online attendance is possible.	All SACRE members/Clerk	ASAP
11	7.3	Compile annual Merton SACRE report.	KS	By 27 June
12	7.4	Circulate potential dates for 2024 meetings.	Clerk	ASAP

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Appendix A - Merton SACRE members as at 22 November 2022

Group	Name	Initials	Title/organisation	Start date
A	Ms Kamontip Evans	KE	Buddhism	6.7.21
	VACANCY		Free Churches	-
	Ms Geetha Maheshwaran	GM	Hinduism	Pre-2016
	Mr John Carter	JC	Humanism	6.7.21
	Mr Saleem Sheikh	SS	Sunni Islam	-
	Mr Mike Freedman	MF	Judaism	Pre-2016
	Ms Clare Bennett	CB	Roman Catholic Church	00.05.22
	Mr Ajaib Singh Bahra	ASB	Sikhism	Pre-2016
	Mr Waleed Ahmad	WA	Ahmadiyya Muslim Association	4.10.16
B	Mrs. Jane Savill	JS	Church of England	10.10.17
	The Revd. Andrew Williams.	AW	Church of England	10.10.17
	Ms Rachael Norman	MC	Church of England	11.2.20
C	Ms Debra Beale	DB	NUT	21.2.17
	Mr Dimos Kechagias	DK	-	21.03.23
	VACANCY		NASUWT	
	Ms Ro Maybury	RM	NAHT	6.7.21
D	Cllr Laxmi Attawar	LA	Councillor	Pre-2016
	Cllr Klaar Dresselaers	KD	Councillor	30.5.18
	Cllr Mike Brunt	MB	Councillor	6.7.21

Groups

A - Christian, Other Faiths & Beliefs

B - Church of England

C - Teacher Associations

D – Local Authority