

## **Report on SEEFF Conference *The Place of Faith in British Schools***

The annual Conference and AGM of South East England Faiths Forum (SEEFF) took place at Winchester University on Thursday September 3rd 2015. There was a good attendance of 85 people

The High Sheriff of Hampshire and the Leader of Hampshire County Council opened the conference. This was followed by a key note speech from Alan Brine, former lead HMI for Religious Education with OFSTED, and an interfaith panel which included representatives from the Muslim, Hindu, Jewish and Baha'i communities plus an Anglican and a Roman Catholic.

Before lunch we had brief presentations on the *Who AM I?* DVD, on the religious identity of young people, a co-production between the Oxford Diocese of Interfaith Concerns and Art Beyond Belief, and on a Hampshire Youth Voice Conference.

The afternoon was given over to workshop sessions which included: SACREs Today, Governors and RE, SMSC, Multi-faith Schools, Preventing Radicalisation, Do the legal Arrangements for RE need Reform?, and Iqra, a Muslim Faith School. We concluded with a Plenary Session and the SEEFF AGM.

Alan Brine's talk had two main themes. The first was the so-called Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham and its impact on public thinking ; the second and much longer theme focused on the history of RE in schools, the dual system of faith and non-faith schools inherited from the 1944 Act, daily acts of collective worship, RE and the exam system and the unresolved cross currents in thinking today both politically and professionally.

In relation to the Trojan Horse affair, he pointed out that 21 schools were visited of which 4 were secondary, 16 primary and one all-through. 8 were academies and none was a 'faith' school. In only five were there serious concerns about over-emphasis on Islam in RE, and governors pursuing a narrow faith-based agenda in a non-faith school. There was little reference to extremism or radicalisation. In the panel discussion after Alan Brine's talk there was an interesting and heated exchange between Zafar Ali, Chair of governors at the Iqra School in Slough and the Co-Chair of Slough Faith Partnership and Dr Ramsey of the former Iqra School in Oxford in which Zafar Ali argued that the Trojan Horse affair was an important wake up call for Islamic Schools in that they had a responsibility to abide by and teach in line with British law and help Muslim communities to engage with such issues as human sexuality and the UN Declaration on Human Rights.

The nub of Alan Brine's main theme was that the current situation in relation to RE and related issues was the result of a series of decisions, or lack of decision, which had grown up over years and had not been thought through clearly. So, for example, a daily act of collective worship of a mainly Christian character was widely ignored without anyone in authority saying whether this was appropriate or what it might be replaced with in an increasingly mixed faith society. RE had been seen as key in promoting respect, understanding and diversity and preparing young people for life in wider society – well within the government's avowed agenda one might have thought. Yet funding is low, there is a paucity of specifically trained RE teachers, 60% of schools are judged to be 'not good enough' in RE and few are outstanding. Meanwhile the increasing number of academies, which do not have to follow any prescribed curriculum whether from SACREs or government, has made it increasingly difficult to get a consensus as to what needs to be done.

September 17<sup>th</sup> 2015