



Commission on  
Religious Education

INTERIM REPORT **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR ALL

SEPTEMBER 2017





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This interim report is published with the intention of creating an opportunity for as many people and organisations as possible to engage with the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) about our developing thoughts on RE in schools in England. The interim report explores a number of issues which have emerged during our deliberations on the evidence presented to us during the initial consultation, at the evidence gathering sessions held around the country and in written submissions received during the 2016/17 academic year. It sets out initial recommendations alongside a range of issues on which we are seeking to consult further before drawing any conclusions. We hope that there will be a full and vigorous consultation on the content of this interim report, and that this will help to inform the final report of the Commission, due to be published in 2018.

RE remains a vital academic subject for education in the 21st century. Studying RE gives young people the knowledge, understanding and motivation they need to understand important aspects of human experience, including the religious, spiritual, and moral. It gives insights into the arts, literature, history, and contemporary local and global social and political issues. It provides them with a space in the curriculum to reflect on their own worldview and to engage with others whose worldview may be different. The young people that we have spoken to have told us that RE enables them to have better friendships and to develop greater respect and empathy for others. RE is highly valued by many employers, who increasingly understand that in a globalised world, understanding others' worldviews and their impact on people's lives is essential to success.

The knowledge gained through studying RE is central to good local, national and global citizenship. It enables young people to have a nuanced and informed understanding of key political and social issues that they will need to face as they grow up in an increasingly globalised world. RE helps pupils to deal positively with controversial issues, to manage strongly held differences of belief, and to challenge stereotypes.

As local and global demographics have changed, including patterns of affiliation to religious and non-religious worldviews, today's students will encounter people with a much more diverse range of beliefs, lifestyles and backgrounds than did the previous generations. Understanding religious and non-religious worldviews, and their impact on individuals, communities and wider society, has never been more essential to good citizenship than it is now. For these reasons, we argue throughout the report that all pupils, regardless of background or the type of school they attend, are entitled to high quality RE which enables them to develop the nuanced and informed

understanding of worldviews that they will need as citizens.

We were impressed by the evidence of high quality and innovative approaches to RE that were presented during our consultations.<sup>1</sup> At its best, the subject offers great educational benefit for pupils and the British model of RE is highly regarded and has earned international esteem. Of particular note has been the appearance in recent years of local and national support networks for teachers and also the high level of examination entry at GCSE and A level.

Having said that, we are unanimous in the view that RE faces a perilous future without strategic, urgent intervention. Examination entries fell for the first time in 2017, and many who gave evidence saw this as a sign of further decline in years to come. Amongst the many challenges the subject faces, the following are identified as particularly significant:

- The changed patterns of religious and non-religious belief from the time when the current system was enacted in 1944 present a requirement to ensure that RE's structures reflect the realities of contemporary society. The religious landscape in the UK has diversified with fewer people identifying as Anglican and more identifying with other Christian denominations or other religious traditions. Moreover, the number of people identifying as non-religious has increased: in 2017, 53% of the population described themselves as not having a religion.<sup>2</sup> The global religious landscape has also been undergoing rapid change, where religion is highly significant in many societies.
- There is inconsistency in the quality and provision of RE, with increasing numbers of schools not even meeting the basic legal requirement. Pupils are experiencing a lottery in their access to high quality RE. Evidence presented to the Commission made clear the impact that the type of school had on the extent to which RE is provided: while 6.5% of schools that follow an RE curriculum determined by their religious character devote no part of their curriculum time to RE at key stage 4, the figure is 20.7% for schools required to follow a locally agreed syllabus for RE and 43.7% for academies without a religious character.<sup>3</sup> This inequality of provision means that many children are being disadvantaged by being denied RE.
- As more schools become academies, leaving ever fewer under local authority control, the current framework of determination of RE via local authorities and agreed syllabuses is ceasing to be fit for purpose. A decrease in local authority funding has exacerbated this problem.

<sup>1</sup> Please see Appendix 1: Evidence received by the Commission for details of how we collected evidence.

<sup>2</sup> NATCEN (2017). *British Social Attitudes Survey*.  
<http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/1469605/BSA-religion.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> RE Council & National Association of Teachers of RE (2017, forthcoming). *The State of the Nation*.



Moreover, evidence submitted to the Commission makes clear that the current approach of relying on the requirements of academy funding agreements is not sufficient for ensuring the proper provision of RE across all academies. If no action is taken, there is a serious risk of increasing numbers of pupils leaving school with an inadequate level of knowledge and understanding of religious and non-religious worldviews at precisely the time when such understanding is becoming more important.

- RE has suffered from a policy environment that has not encouraged headteachers to regard it as a high-status subject. This environment includes insufficient processes to hold schools to account for their provision of RE and the omission of RE from key performance indicators published by DfE.
- There has been diminishing access to adequate training and support for teachers. This is particularly acute at primary level where the Commission heard that on average a primary trainee receives less than three hours of RE-specific training during a one-year PGCE or School Direct course.<sup>4</sup>
- The quality of RE is variable across schools. Low standards predominate across too many schools, including schools with and without a religious

character. Teachers are not always clear on the purpose of the subject and many lack the subject knowledge necessary to teach about sensitive and crucial issues with skill and nuance. Locally agreed syllabuses are also variable in quality. One

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issue that we have noted is the fact that religion is often presented in an essentialist mode that fails to help pupils understand the complexity, diversity and historicity of religious ideas, institutions and practices. This was most often mentioned in relation to the Dharmic traditions (i.e. Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh traditions) in the written and oral evidence but affects the presentation of all religions and worldviews in resources and in the classroom.

The Commissioners have therefore made initial recommendations in four areas:

4 Fiona Moss, oral evidence submitted to the Commission. See also NATRE (2016). *An analysis of the provision for RE in primary schools*. [www.natre.org.uk%2Fuploads%2FAdditional%2520Documents%2FNATRE%2520Primary%2520Survey%25202016%2520final.docx&usg=AFQjCNFDWLUicovE8LOQEgZiiuHF7fFcAA](http://www.natre.org.uk%2Fuploads%2FAdditional%2520Documents%2FNATRE%2520Primary%2520Survey%25202016%2520final.docx&usg=AFQjCNFDWLUicovE8LOQEgZiiuHF7fFcAA)

1. **A national entitlement for RE.** This would set out clearly the aims and purpose(s) of RE and what pupils should experience in the course of their study of the subject. This national entitlement should be for all pupils at all state-funded schools and we seek to consult with independent schools about whether they should adopt it. We are advocating RE for all not because children belong to religious traditions or not, but because in our age a nuanced understanding of the role of worldviews must be a part of citizens' intellectual make-up. It is to do with their ability to function effectively as citizens and as human beings. This is as important an aspect of education for pupils in schools of a religious character as it is in those without a religious character. It should be introduced through non-statutory guidance as early as possible with a view to it ultimately becoming statutory, either to supplement or replace the current legislation on agreed syllabuses. This national entitlement provides a reinvigorated vision for RE for all pupils in the future, drawing on the very best of the RE that we know happens in some schools. It seeks to be a basic statement of what all pupils are entitled to, but is not a national syllabus or curriculum. We hope that the flexibility of the proposed national entitlement will ensure that a diversity of high quality approaches will emerge and that this will best suit the landscape of a school-led system. We recognise that schools will need guidance and support to translate this entitlement into curriculum planning and we are reviewing where this guidance and support should come from.
2. **Holding schools to account for the provision and quality of RE.** The evidence presented to us indicates that at present too many schools are not being held to account for failing to provide adequate RE. Schools should be required to publish details on their website of how they meet the national entitlement for RE. Inspection frameworks should be revised to ensure that inspectors monitor whether schools meet the national entitlement for RE. The Commission has also given thought to how schools should provide for those Key Stage 4 pupils who are not taking the GCSE in Religious Studies and would like to consult on the possibility of a revised qualification for these pupils to ensure that their work can be accredited.
3. **A National Plan to improve teaching and learning in RE.** The Commission would like to develop a National Plan for developing teaching and learning in RE, along the lines of the National Plan for Music Education. The National Plan will bring together the Commission's recommendations for improving teacher subject knowledge and confidence and we seek to consult on how this can best be achieved.
4. **A renewed and expanded role for Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs).** The evidence we have received suggests that SACREs can have an important role in promoting and supporting RE and in promoting good community relations more broadly, but that their capacity to deliver this role fully has been diminishing in many local authorities. The Commission's suggested recommendations, which are

consultative at this stage, call for consideration to be given to adding the promotion of improved community relations to the remit of SACREs and make proposals for the securing of resources for their work. There are also recommendations that seek consideration of the composition of SACREs with a call to ensure that they are fully representative, with representatives of non-religious worldviews as full members.

The full recommendations are set out on pages 8 to 12.

In addition, the Commissioners are seeking to undertake further consultation in these areas and have set out the issues that they are particularly interested in exploring. These areas for consultation are set out on pages 12 to 14.

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### A NATIONAL ENTITLEMENT FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

- a. There should be a national entitlement statement for RE which sets out clearly the aims and purpose of RE and what pupils should experience in the course of their study of the subject. A draft statement for consultation is overleaf.
- b. This entitlement should become normative through non-statutory guidance as early as possible, and should ultimately become statutory, either to supplement or to replace current legislation on agreed syllabuses.
- c. The national entitlement should apply to all state-funded schools including academies, free schools and schools of a religious character.
- d. Independent schools should consider adopting the entitlement as an undertaking of good practice.

#### **The National Entitlement for Religious Education**

Overleaf is the draft text of the proposed national entitlement for RE. This draft is for consultation. We welcome comments on and refinements to the text.

## **A National Entitlement for RE**

RE in schools should enable students to engage in an intelligent and informed way with the ideas, practices and contemporary manifestations of a diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews. It should enable them to understand how worldviews are inextricably woven into, influence and are influenced by, all dimensions of human experience. It should prepare pupils for life in modern Britain by enabling them to engage respectfully with people with worldviews different from their own. RE should equip pupils to develop their own beliefs, practices, values and identity in the light of their reflections on the worldviews they have studied.

Through their study of worldviews, pupils should develop a lifelong motivation to enquire into questions of meaning and purpose, and investigate others' worldviews and what they mean for individuals, communities and society. All of this will enable them to become responsible citizens and members of diverse and changing local, national and global communities.

Throughout their period of compulsory schooling, pupils should learn about, understand and engage with:

- a. The diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews and ways of life that exist locally, nationally and globally.
- b. The ways in which communities and individuals holding different worldviews interact, change and maintain continuity in different times and contexts and as the surrounding culture changes.
- c. The different ways that people interpret and respond to texts and other sources of authority.
- d. The ways that people communicate their beliefs, experiences, values and identities through verbal and non-verbal means (eg prose, story, poetry, art, music, dance, ritual, architecture).
- e. How people seek moral guidance from religious and non-religious worldviews and how they interpret this guidance in their lives.
- f. The importance of experience, including extra-ordinary experiences, in shaping people's worldviews and how worldviews are used to interpret experience.



- g. The role of religious and non-religious rituals and practices in both creating and expressing experience, beliefs, values and commitments.
- h. The relationship between people's worldview and their thinking and actions concerning political, public, social and cultural life.
- i. Both the positive and negative exercise of power and influence resulting from people's worldviews.
- j. The important role that worldviews play in providing people with a way of making sense of their lives and in forming their identity.\*

As part of a balanced programme aimed at meeting this provision, it is expected that pupils will:

- 1. Experience meeting and visiting people from their local community from a range of worldviews including those different from their own and that of the school.
- 2. Develop core skills for researching the beliefs, values and practices of individuals and groups in society.
- 3. Experience a range of approaches to the study of religions (e.g. phenomenology, philosophy, sociology, textual studies, theology).
- 4. Engage with questions of meaning and purpose and of the nature of reality raised by the worldviews that they study.
- 5. Think through and develop a reflective approach to their own personal responses and developing identity and learn to articulate these clearly and coherently while respecting the right of others to differ.
- 6. Develop the core skills and dispositions of careful listening, critical thinking, self-reflection, empathy and open-mindedness required for making wise judgments.
- 7. Learn to discuss controversial issues and work with others (including those that they disagree with) with the intention of securing a healthy and peaceful society in the context of significant diversity.

*\* We are indebted to Barbara Wintersgill, who presented her project on Big Ideas in RE. Her work has informed much of the content of this list.*

## HOLDING SCHOOLS TO ACCOUNT FOR THE PROVISION AND QUALITY OF RE

- a. Schools should be required to publish on their website details of how they meet the national entitlement for RE.
- b. Inspection frameworks should be revised to ensure that inspectors monitor whether or not schools meet the national entitlement for RE, in the light of schools' duty to provide a broad and balanced curriculum.
- c. The DfE should either monitor, or give SACREs or other approved bodies the power and resources to monitor, the provision and quality of RE in all schools, including free schools, academies and schools of a religious character.
- d. The government should consider the impact of school performance measures, including the exclusion of RS GCSE from the EBacc, on GCSE entries and on the provision and quality of RE, and consider reviewing performance measures in the light of the evidence.

## A RENEWED AND EXPANDED ROLE FOR SACRES

We seek to consult on all our recommendations relating to SACREs. (See page 12)

## A NATIONAL PLAN FOR IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING IN RE

We are considering developing a National Plan for developing teaching and learning in RE, along the lines of the National Plan for Music Education. This plan is likely to include the following recommendations:

- a. A minimum of 12 hours should be devoted to RE in all primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses.
- b. Leading primary schools for RE should be identified and all primary trainees should be given the opportunity to observe RE teaching in such a school.
- c. Include under the Teachers' Standards, part 1, section 3 (Demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge), the requirement that teachers 'demonstrate a good understanding of and take responsibility for the sensitive handling of controversial issues, including thoughtful discussion of religious and non-religious worldviews where necessary.'
- d. Restore funded Subject Knowledge Enhancement (SKE) courses for those applying to teach RE and for serving teachers of RE without a relevant post A-level qualification in the subject.
- e. Restore parity of bursaries for RE with those for other shortage subjects.

- f. The government and relevant funding bodies should consider how funding of grassroots teacher networks can be made more sustainable.
- g. SACREs and local authorities should review existing good practice in developing and sustaining these grassroots networks and start their own if such a network does not exist in their local area.
- h. University performance measures should be updated to credit universities for their engagement with schools, including the provision of continuing professional development (CPD) and resource materials.
- i. University staff conducting research in areas related to RE should be encouraged to contribute to grassroots networks, lead teacher development days, develop resource materials or become SACRE members. This may provide opportunities for them to demonstrate the impact of their research or increase student recruitment.

## LIST OF AREAS FOR CONSULTATION

### A NATIONAL ENTITLEMENT FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

1. The entitlement is not a national syllabus or curriculum. It is a basic statement of what all pupils are entitled to, whatever type of school they attend. Many schools will need guidance and support to translate this entitlement into curriculum planning, particularly in relation to progression. We are still reviewing where this guidance and support will come from. We seek input on what bodies would be best placed to translate the entitlement into detailed programmes of study and how best to support schools to plan their curriculum in line with the entitlement. Several possibilities have been discussed by the Commission so far:
  - a. Removing the requirement for local authorities to hold Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs). In a context where every school will eventually become an academy, this requirement is no longer proportionate for many local authorities and will become even less so over time. However, it might be possible for programmes of study to be developed at regional levels. It would also be possible to include regional universities on this model. A regional system might not provide sufficient support to academies unless they were explicitly included. If the requirement for local authorities to develop a locally agreed syllabus were to be removed, it would not preclude those local authorities that had the resource and expertise from convening ASCs and developing programmes of study that could be adopted by those schools that chose to, within or outside that local authority.
  - b. Recommending the development of a national set of programmes of study compliant with the entitlement. This may or may not be government-funded. This has the advantage of providing consistency

across localities, which was requested by some teachers in the written and oral evidence. However, there are a number of potential difficulties with it. First, there is the vexed question of who develops programmes of study. Second, there is the justified criticism that in the era of a school-led system a nationally agreed set of programmes of study is too rigid and leaves schools insufficient freedom to undertake RE that is appropriate for their pupils and immediate community. Third, there is the question of how to ensure that the syllabus is appropriately independent of political interference. Many of those who gave oral and written evidence were concerned about excessive political interference in the scope and content of RE.

- c. Leaving the market open for schools, groups of schools, dioceses, SACREs, commercial providers and other relevant groups to write their own programmes of study. This would allow maximum freedom for schools but might not resolve the inequality in provision and quality discussed above. Non-statutory guidance or a range of model programmes of study might also be developed to support relevant groups in writing their own programmes of study.
2. There is likely to be a range of possibilities within these broad categories and other possibilities that we have not yet considered. We seek views on what would be most helpful to support schools with curriculum planning and ensure that all schools can meet the entitlement effectively.
  3. The question also remains as to whether the entitlement statement should replace or supplement the current legislation on agreed syllabuses, which requires that they must ‘reflect the fact that religious traditions in Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain’ (UK Parliament, Education Act 1996, Section 375.2). This legislative statement remains a statement of historical and social fact. Of those who identify themselves as having a religion, the majority are Christian, and Christianity has played a particular role in the history of Great Britain. However, the statement in and of itself does not specify how much time should be spent on any worldview. It also does not include non-religious worldviews. We seek views on whether the entitlement should specify a number and range of worldviews, or a minimum time to be spent on one worldview.
  4. We have also discussed whether the name of the subject should be changed, to signify the renewed vision for the subject. It is difficult to find an alternative name that appropriately captures the breadth and depth of the subject as outlined in the entitlement statement. We have discussed a number of options. A small majority of the Commission preferred to call the subject Religion and Ethics (or Religions and Ethics) while others wished either to preserve the current name, or to change its name to Religions and Worldviews or Religion, Philosophy and Ethics (or Philosophy, Religion and Ethics). We seek views on which of these options best captures the nature of the subject outlined in the entitlement. We

also seek suggestions on alternative names which fit the entitlement and the renewed vision for the subject.

## **HOLDING SCHOOLS TO ACCOUNT FOR THE PROVISION AND QUALITY OF RE**

1. We seek views on the most appropriate mechanisms for holding schools to account for the provision and quality of RE at both primary and secondary level.
2. We are considering recommending that a revised qualification at Key Stage 4, for those not taking Full Course GCSE RS, be developed. This would need to meet the requirements of the national entitlement for RE and have currency in school performance measures. This qualification would not be compulsory but would count in school performance measures and in individuals' applications for work or further study. We seek views on how effective this would be and what demand there would be for such a qualification.

## **A RENEWED AND EXPANDED ROLE FOR SACRES**

1. We seek views on the following recommendations on the role of SACREs:
  - a. The Government should publicly highlight and reaffirm the important role of SACREs in supporting and resourcing RE.
  - b. The Government should consider whether the role of SACREs should be expanded to include a duty to advise on all matters relating to religion and belief in schools.
  - c. The Government should consider ways of securing funding to resource SACREs adequately. Options for this may include:
    - i. Ring-fenced funding for SACREs.
    - ii. Funding for SACREs from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport or the Department of Communities and Local Government.
    - iii. Specifying a minimum amount of funding (perhaps per school or per pupil) to which local authorities must adhere.
  - d. The Government should consider the composition of SACREs and the law should be changed to include representatives of non-religious worldviews as full members.
  - e. The Government should publish all SACRE annual reports publicly on a dedicated website.
2. We seek views on what the duties of SACREs should be in relation to promoting good community relations, beyond matters relating to religion



and belief in schools.

3. We are still considering how the composition of SACREs should be adapted to be fit for purpose in a changed social and educational landscape. In particular, we are considering whether the committee structure should be changed or abolished. We seek views and evidence on this.
4. We seek views on which groups and organisations should be represented on SACREs.

## THE RIGHT OF WITHDRAWAL

1. We seek further evidence on the number of pupils being withdrawn from RE, and the reasons given, where these are given, as well as whether the number of cases and reasons given have been changing over time.
2. We seek views on the most effective ways to manage the right of withdrawal in practice.
3. We seek views on whether it is desirable to look to adopt an overall approach to the design of the RE curriculum in every school so that it is sufficiently 'objective, critical and pluralistic' as to render it capable of being compulsory without the right of withdrawal.

## A NATIONAL PLAN FOR IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING IN RE

1. We seek views on what should be included in the National Plan for RE, beyond the recommendations set out above.
2. We seek views on how the National Plan might best be implemented.
3. There are increasing expectations of teachers to be engaged with research, by keeping up to date with published research at minimum, and where possible by engaging in action research, lesson study and other forms of practitioner research. We seek views on the kinds of research which would be most helpful for RE teachers to engage with, and what mechanisms would support this.





## **Commission on Religious Education**

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