

## **The Ofsted RE Subject Report 2024: Who is ready to take the deep dive?**

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### **Introduction**

The long-awaited religious education (RE) subject report, *Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report* was published in April 2024. This thorough and research-informed report examined the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and its teaching. It is based on Ofsted's visits to 50 schools in England between September 2021 and April 2023. The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) is responsible for regulating school standards in England.

Like its predecessor subject report (Ofsted, 2013), this latest one prominently presents RE as a rigorous, challenging and personally inspiring subject for young people growing up in Britain. Through RE, it asserts, pupils encounter ancient and living traditions that have shaped the world. They explore foundational texts and the way that individuals and groups live in the world, as well as the values, beliefs and ideas that bind people together. Pupils consider deep questions that have inspired human thought throughout history, and that still challenge children and adults alike today (Ofsted, 2024). Building on their research review into RE (Ofsted, 2021), it considers the curriculum content that pupils learn in RE lessons; pedagogy and how schools teach and implement the curriculum; assessment and how RE is organised in schools and teacher education and professional development.

In relation to the report, the aim of this article is three-fold: to review responses from key RE stakeholders; to highlight critical issues impacting the subject; and to critique the shaping of a particular discourse by Ofsted that impacts the way RE is being conceptualised nationally.

To address these, this article discusses the following topics: (1) Responses from RE communities; (2) the legal status and contribution of RE in England; (3) a comparison of Ofsted 2013 and Ofsted 2024; (4) Curriculum matters; (5) the significance of timetabling RE; (6) other reports on RE beyond Ofsted;

(7) Calling the Government to act; (8) Holding schools accountable for RE; (9) reflections on the National Plan; (10) a consideration of the national content standard; and (11) Diving into the future.

### **Responses from RE communities**

Major RE organisations have welcomed the report revealing their hopes for an action-orientated response to their findings and recommendations. For example, Deborah Weston OBE (Weston, 2024), Chair of the Religious Education Policy Unit, stated:

We are pleased to see the Ofsted subject report, which recognises the need for high-quality RE for every young person in every school. It asserts the potential that religious education has in helping young people make sense of the complex, multifaceted nature of belief in modern Britain, while providing them with personal and intellectual development.

From the influential Culham St Gabriel Trust, their chief executive admitted that the report was a sobering read, nevertheless, there was hope for the subject (Wright, 2024). The report, Wright noted, foregrounds issues which those working directly in RE have raised for years and have lobbied the government about. In addition, the Chair of the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) was pleased to see the emphasis given to subject-specific professional development for all those teaching RE in primary and secondary schools (Freeman, 2024). In their response to the report, Humanists UK, called for the UK Government to carry out a long overdue reform of the teaching of RE to meet the needs of modern society. For them, the report shows that the curriculum often lacks sufficient substance to prepare pupils to live in a complex world (Humanist UK, 2024).

Aside from these organisations, *The Church Times* reported the chief education officer of the Church of England, the Revd Nigel Genders, say that Ofsted's concerns "deeply resonate" and urged educators and policymakers to heed the recommendations by refining the curriculum content, enhancing teacher training and ensuring consistent assessment practices (Martin, 2024).

These positive and enthusiastic responses demonstrate that RE is indeed an important subject for the education of all children in England. It also exposes some of the fault lines that exist between the various stakeholders vis-à-vis the nature of the subject. The report records that while the RE sector generally agrees that RE contributes to pupils' personal development, it does not agree on "the distinct body of knowledge that pupils learn in RE" (Ofsted, 2024). Thus, the report explores the content and substance of what pupils learn in RE. It is worthy of mention that it is rare to find someone in the RE world who would disagree that RE does not need some change. However, what

that change should be is debated. Therefore, it is heartening to find an exposition of what good quality RE looks like, of challenges, shortcomings and recommendations for improvement.

### **Legal status of RE in England**

Historically, RE has been secured in the school curriculum as the only mandated subject before 1988 and whose compulsory nature was retained in the 1944 legislation (Barnes, Lundie, McKinney, Williams, Cullen, 2024). This has remained unchanged and RE maintains its compulsory status. However, it is unsurprising to read that “a notable proportion of schools did not meet the statutory requirement to teach RE to pupils at all stages of their schooling” (Ofsted, 2024), as these concerns have been raised previously (Ofsted, 2013; APPG, 2016). Moreso, across all school types, 33.4% offered no RE at all in KS 4 in 2016. This represented almost 900 schools offering no RE (REC, 2018). However, in 2022 a different situation was reported in a survey among 500 teachers which showed that 96% of respondents reported that legal requirements were met in their school (NATRE, 2022).

Thus, the latest report has delivered to schools a strong reminder that they continue to be duty-bound to make provision for the subject. Children are entitled to RE unless withdrawn by their parents. Sir Martyn Oliver, Ofsted’s chief inspector, reiterated this legal position stating a “strong RE curriculum is not only important for pupils’ cultural development,” but also “a requirement of law and too many schools are not meeting that obligation” (Oliver, 2024). Therefore, schools must include RE as part of a broad and balanced curriculum offered to their pupils, otherwise, they may well be taken through the justice system.

### **The contribution of RE**

It is concerning to read that “the RE curriculum often lacked sufficient substance to prepare pupils to live in a complex world” (Ofsted, 2024). The demographics of the United Kingdom and the faith and non-faith landscape of England continue to change. Children, like their counterparts across the world, are experiencing a different milieu, where fake news, artificial intelligence, and ideological warfare are the order of the day. For this reason, it is important to understand the purpose of RE in the state sector.

Currently, in England, RE is an educational endeavour. It is no longer a subject for catechism, propaganda or indoctrination of the past century, though its aims are multiple (Orchard, 2020) and contested – a problem in itself. RE is foundational to an understanding of what it is to be a citizen of global Britain in a rapidly changing world. RE prepares young people to live in modern societies

(Ofsted, 2024). Thus, Ofsted’s recommendation to the Government that it “should urgently update guidance for schools about its statutory expectations for RE” rather than regard RE as an afterthought is commendable (Ofsted, 2024). Equally significant is Ofsted’s allusion that the subject should be treated in its own right. Otherwise, if it is not taught as a standalone subject, pupil outcomes might suffer (Freeman, 2024).

Having discussed two fundamental features of RE, i.e., its statutory status and its potential to contribute to children’s personal, social, cultural, moral and spiritual development, other matters are considered.

### Comparing Ofsted 2013 with Ofsted 2024

The current report highlights deficiencies in the RE curriculum in many schools despite efforts to improve. Over the decade, there appears to have been little progress since its previous report. It is therefore prudent to revisit some of the key features of that report so that recurring themes of concern and the need for urgent action in these areas become evident.

In their 2013 survey, Ofsted found not enough that had been done since Ofsted (2010). In other words, some issues have persisted for over 14 years, making the current recommendations critical, if the subject is to truly serve its numerous purposes. The evidence base of the previous report was much larger than the current one. The *RE: Realising the Potential* report was based on evidence drawn from 185 schools visited between September 2009 and July 2012. It also drew on evidence from a telephone survey of a further 30 schools, examination results, other reports published by Ofsted, extended discussions with teachers, members of SACREs and other RE professionals, and wider surveys carried out by professional associations for RE (Ofsted, 2013). Eight major concerns were discussed then. Parallel findings from the current report are juxtapositioned in Table 1.

Ofsted 2013	Ofsted 2024
low standards	Teaching was rarely enough for pupils to make sense of religious and non-religious traditions.
weak teaching	Long gaps between lessons hindered pupils’ recall. When pupils had regular RE lessons, they remembered more.
problems in developing a curriculum	Curriculum often lacked sufficient substance to prepare pupils to live in a complex world. The content selected rarely was collectively enough to ensure that pupils were

	well prepared to engage in a multi-religious and multi-secular society.
weak leadership and management	A few subject leaders had visited classes as a way of supporting their colleagues. Most did not receive any dedicated leadership time to improve the quality in their school.
weaknesses in examination (assessment)	In most schools visited, there was no assessment in place.
gaps in training	Over 60% of teachers in the primary sample had not received any professional development in RE about what they were supposed to teach or how they should teach it.
the impact of recent changes in education policy.	Just under half of the schools visited had recently introduced new curriculums. Leaders of several other schools were refining existing curriculums.

Table 1: Comparing Ofsted 2013 and Ofsted 2024

In other words, when Ofsted 2013 is considered in light of the current report, according to Ofsted itself, the potential of RE remains a potential rather than a reality. This is because “the unrealised potential of the subject remains now, as it was then” (Ofsted, 2024).

### Curriculum matters

The legal position for RE is such that its curricula are determined locally. This means that its content, the structure of this content and its quality vary from one local authority to another. Unlike other curriculum subjects, where the content and how the subject is taught are micromanaged, RE has flexibility and independence. Within this localised system, there are a growing number of academies operating using their own syllabi. Given this complex phenomenon, the report has placed the matter of the curriculum at the heart of its call for quality. The most telling feature is its conclusion that there is a lack of clarity on the RE curriculum and its suggestion that the government should provide better guidance about what should be taught and when (Ofsted, 2024).

The report is primarily concerned with the school RE curriculum considered through the lens of the quality of education judgement. Some of its main findings included:

- a superficially broad curriculum does not always provide pupils with the depth of knowledge they require for future study

- The RE curriculum rarely enabled pupils to systematically build disciplinary knowledge or personal knowledge

The report highlights that the quality of RE is not determined by the type of school or the source of its curriculum. In other words, it could be any and not necessary a locally agreed syllabus. Ofsted found better quality RE in a range of schools, from small primary schools to non-selective and selective secondary schools. The factors that contributed towards this include:

- strong teacher subject knowledge
- access to professional development
- regular time for RE lessons
- a well-organised curriculum containing knowledge chosen by leaders to enable pupils to deepen their understanding term by term

Thus, there is a clear implication for primary schools, in particular, to raise the status of RE, develop their curriculum and assessment and provide training. School leaders must find ways to improve teachers' subject expertise and share good practices. A coordinated effort is needed by stakeholders to address the quality of RE. Importantly, it highlights that the source of the curriculum does not determine its quality. These issues have not been addressed for fourteen years and the latest report appears to signal that this will continue. Policy in that respect appears to be about the acknowledgement of weakness and then inertia. This means that RE may well be left to take its course until such a time that most or all schools convert to academies, which in turn might eventually lead the structures that sustain RE dismantling.

#### **The significance of timetabling RE**

One of the most concerning and frequently raised issues that RE faces relates to the time allocated to teaching. The legal requirements for the provision of RE in maintained schools do not specify any particular time allocation. Schools are expected to make their own decisions about how to divide curriculum time. However, they must ensure that sufficient time is given to RE so that pupils can meet the standards and expectations set out in their respective syllabi.

In some schools when RE is provided often the time allocated for it is 'squeezed' in both primary and secondary schools due to a variety of factors. This lowers the status of the subjects and pupils are left with reduced opportunities to gain deep knowledge about and engage critically with different religions and beliefs. They may come to regard RE as being of trivial importance (APPG, 2016:13). In

contrasting schools, there is irregularity in teaching. Research indicates that RE in schools, which did not have a religious character, was less likely to be taught regularly (NATRE, 2018). This suggests that trainee teachers may be less likely to teach or observe RE while on placement and this has implications for their preparedness and confidence to deliver the subject.

However, the current situation from Ofsted is encouraging. In most schools they visited RE was taught for around 36 hours at KS1 and 45 hours at KS2 over the academic year. This is the minimum recommended time in many syllabi across the country (Mogra, 2023). However, in schools where teaching time was less than this, the quality of RE was weaker. Importantly, the quality of RE was not decided by time allocation alone. In some schools where the timetable did allow for this amount of time, the curriculum did not have the impact that leaders intended. But, in the schools where the quality of the planned and taught RE curriculum was stronger, RE was featured on the timetable weekly for at least an hour at KS1 and KS2 (Ofsted, 2024). In other words, both the delivery of regular RE lessons and a coherent, rigorous, distinct, and challenging curriculum are needed to raise the quality. Schools are therefore urged to “organise the timetable for RE so that gaps for pupils between teaching are minimised (Ofsted, 2024).

There is a variety in the way in which time allocations are organised in schools. In some, where RE was solely taught through special RE days, the quality of RE was weaker. However, to enhance the quality of RE in such schools, there would need to be timetabled weekly lessons as well. In over 30% of schools, RE was taught fortnightly or in blocked half terms, alternating with PSHE. RE was weaker in these schools. In cases where RE was not taught weekly, pupils remembered less as pupils did not have the opportunities that they needed to return to important content and recall it. They also found that in almost a third of primary schools, RE was taught in other ways. These included fortnightly lessons, a half-termly rotation with PSHE or drop-down days. Where RE was not as strong, these ways of organising the timetable for RE were more prevalent (Ofsted, 2024). Thus, there is a need for a distinct curriculum so that pupils have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge progressively over time.

#### **Other reports beyond Ofsted**

Moreover, the need to act is further compounded as RE has been subjected to criticism in two other important recent reports.

The Bloom Review was one of the largest public calls for evidence the government has had into how it engages with faith. It called the government to “look again at why religious education (RE) in schools has become the ‘Cinderella subject’ and should consider methods for improving the teaching of faith literacy and RE, both in schools and society as a whole (Bloom, 2023:20).

In addition to the provision of RE being considered unfit and undervalued, another debate in the House of Lords was legitimately critical of the demise of RE in England. A former President of the Methodist Conference, who had spent 40 years involved in school governance, reported that, in that period, “the situation has become ever more dire” (Griffiths, 2024). This is a reflection and an assessment based on vast experience and finds echo in another Christian tradition. A former head teacher of a Church of England school said that 25% of schools use teaching assistants to deliver the subject, while 20% of RE teachers have received no training and only 63% of teachers feel confident in teaching the subject—a worse situation than three years ago” (Storey, 2024).

This is not a new phenomenon as previous research has reported similar concerns. RE in primary schools is often taught by someone other than the class teacher, a practice that is out of step with most other subjects (APPG, 2016; NATRE, 2013). However, in the latest sample of schools, Ofsted (2024) found that in nearly 70% of schools, RE had at least a weekly timetabled lesson and, in almost all cases, these lessons were taught by the class teacher. This stark reality raises critical questions about the training and experiences afforded to future teachers as it is at this foundational stage that confidence is enhanced.

However, before proceeding to reflect on the other substantive matters of the report, it is important to acknowledge that teachers and schools across the country work hard to offer high-quality RE. Many schools go unreported. However, a snapshot from the awards which schools have achieved through the RE Quality Mark, which celebrates the work of RE staff and students, reveals that in the last three years, a total of 157 schools have gained either a bronze, silver or gold award (REQM, 2024). The REQM award recognises high-quality RE and good practice in all schools. It is awarded based on the REQM criteria and schools gather evidence for an assessment according to the level they apply for.

### **Calling the Government to act**

Many of the challenges identified in RE are long-term and structural. With the academisation programme, the capacity of local authorities to support RE has reduced considerably. Although there

are subject associations, organisations, networks and charities which advocate for RE, the report highlights that there is no centrally coordinated support for RE teachers.

Thus, at the highest level, it is gratifying to see that Ofsted (2024) records the importance of government action in bringing about change. However, it could be argued that even this may be insufficient for the desired actions to be realised, as discussed hereunder. As noted earlier, the previous report (Ofsted, 2013) had also called on the then government to improve RE, but it resulted in minimum action, if any.

Granted that RE sits outside the National Curriculum (NC), as a school curriculum in the last review of the NC, RE had been left adrift (DfE, 2011a). It left the Religious Education Council of England and Wales to produce *A Curriculum Framework for Religious Education in England* (REC, 2013). This framework, according to Michael Gove, the then Secretary of State for Education, had “the endorsement of a very wide range of professional organisations and bodies representing faiths and other worldviews” and provided a rigorous model (Gove, 2013:5). This is all that this framework received from the government, even though it had had wide currency and had influenced many locally agreed syllabi. Be that as it may, within the RE community, the *Framework* was criticised for missing an opportunity to articulate a model of RE that was appropriate to the aims of liberal education in a democratic, increasingly diverse English society (Barnes and Felderhof, 2014).

Following this and other concerns about RE and national developments, to improve the quality and rigour of RE and its capacity to prepare pupils for life in modern Britain, an independent Commission on RE was established by the REC in 2016. Its remit was to review the legal, education and policy frameworks based on a wide-ranging, inclusive and evidence-based process designed to inform policymakers about these areas. Accordingly, in September 2018, the Commission released its final report, *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward. A National Plan*. This set out a National Plan for RE comprising 11 recommendations and called on the Government to consider and adopt it (REC, 2018). Aside from the criticisms levied against the review process and the secularising approach to RE adopted by the REC (Barnes, 2022), the curriculum for RE had received a lukewarm response from the government perhaps due to its reform agenda or the assumption that its statutory special status was sufficient. Equally, recommendations from other reports (Clarke and Woodhead 2018) about structural and curricular reform have all but been ignored. Presumably, this is because the Government stated in February 2019 that it had a “commitment to make no changes to the

curriculum” for the remaining lifetime of the Parliament elected in 2017 (Long, Hubble, Danechi and Loft 2019).

In response to the current report, the REC (2024) has pointed out that the Government has failed to make provision for a coherent approach to the subject and for an infrastructure to support it. They assert that for many years the subject has been underfunded. They too share the view that there needs to be serious attention and support given to reverse the fortunes of RE in schools.

Moreover, former HMCI, Amanda Spielman in her annual report also called for the Government to act. She lamented that RE still does not receive the attention it deserves and highlighted that the curriculum “pupils receive is of a poor quality and not fit for purpose”. Although it is a statutory subject, schools often consider RE as an afterthought, as there are different levels of what constitutes statutory. In other words, not all subjects are treated the same. As a subject on the curriculum, it is under-valued. RE is a complex subject, and the lack of clarity and support from government makes schools’ job harder” (Spielman, 2023). The focus of her concern relates to the relevance, and contemporariness of the curriculum and the extent to which it meets the current spiritual, moral and religious challenges.

Furthermore the report recognises that “statutory guidance has not kept pace with national changes, including the growth of multi-academy trusts” [MATs] (Ofsted, 2024). In addition to centralising tendencies in RE discussed earlier, the growth in MATs is further fragmenting the curriculum landscape for RE as more are being added to the collection of existing local ones which might prompt change. There is some optimism as this report acknowledges that the challenges faced by schools should not be underestimated and has called for some immediate action.

#### **Holding schools accountable for RE**

Consistent delivery of lessons over a long period helps pupils secure their current knowledge base and begin to see the developing bigger picture. Hence regular lessons are required for this. However, inspectors found that some RE was being taught in all the primary schools visited. In 3 schools, RE was not taught in every year group (Ofsted, 2024). For some years, research has found that some schools routinely flout their statutory obligations (APPG, 2016). This unfortunate situation was recently raised in a short debate in the House of Lords where the Government was asked what steps they were taking to improve the quality of RE.

Lord Harries observed that “the present situation was lamentable” (Harries, 2024). Referring to the school workforce data, he mentions that “one in five schools offers zero hours of RE in year 11; this equates to around 500 secondary schools.” In the absence of a national standard, he maintained that the current Government had no mechanism to challenge this. However Ofsted could if given government instruction. Nevertheless, in response, Baroness Barran (2024) stated that the Government “do not monitor each school’s compliance with the duty to teach RE”. However, “if there are concerns that a school is not teaching RE, they can be raised via the school’s complaints procedure. If they are not resolved, they can be escalated to the department.” In other words, the onus is on the parents and carers to ensure that their children, if they so wish, to receive their entitlement to religious education.

It is worthwhile reflecting on a case that became public in September 2018. A parent complained that an academy failed to comply with its Funding Agreement regarding the provision of RE. After a lengthy process, the ESFA wrote to the parents to inform them that the Academy had revised its provision in a way that was judged to be compliant with the Academy Funding Agreement. They provided the parent with full details including the decision that the Agreed Syllabus would be followed. The parent reviewed the 2020/2021 timetable and found RE had been reinstated as a distinct subject (NATRE, n.d.)

### **Reflections on the national plan**

Currently, it is apparent that the Government treats RE as being important, rather than an afterthought and acknowledges that it is a subject that has a contribution to make to the education of children in England. However, unlike, for example, music (DfE, 2011b), there is no national plan for RE.

In RE, the call for a national plan, framework, national curriculum or entitlement gathered particular momentum from 2010 onwards when radical calls began to be made. Some scholars and researchers, RE organisations and the independent commission set up by the REC urged the Government to consider changes at the national level (cf. Mogra, 2023). This galvanised a unity of purpose amongst the RE communities as some feared that the subject would not survive in its current state. It could be argued that the diversity and fragmentation of different interest groups and the lack of genuine ecumenism might be one reason why RE does not have the reach that it might have. Still, currently, there are no apparent plans for the government to centralise or nationalise RE.

Nevertheless, to avoid confusion it is important to recognise that the proposal from the Commission on RE (REC, 2018) was for the introduction of a statutory 'national entitlement', rather than a curriculum. The entitlement set out what all pupils in publicly funded schools should be entitled to be taught up to the end of year 11. The report argued that implementation of the entitlement should be subject to inspection and schools should be required to publish details of how they provide this entitlement.

However, in response to the Commission's report, the government had said it was "not the time to begin these reforms" (Hinds, 2018:2). It said the government's priority was to "provide stability to schools" while embedding the "significant and necessary reforms" that were being made at that time to the curriculum and qualifications. Moreover, recently the Minister for the School System and Student Finance, Baroness Barran (2024), stressed that "There were no plans to introduce a national plan for RE", as the "policy remains that curricula should be determined locally." Some scholars too have problematised a national approach to RE and support the local determination for any RE syllabus (Barnes, 2022; RENetwork, 2024).

#### **Considering the national content standard**

Historically, the status of RE has been that of a mandatory subject but not part of the national curriculum, perhaps this positioning outside the NC is another way in which its statutory status is undermined. This has resulted in a significant variation in approaches to the subject as evident in the locally agreed syllabuses across the country. As such, it has been argued that this situation makes improving overall standards harder and creates inconsistencies in assessment and training.

Moreover, in the absence of a national standard for RE, it can be challenging for syllabus providers including SACREs, Academy Trusts and others to know if their RE provision is of high quality when compared to other subjects, schools, and regions. It can be difficult also to set targets for improvement in provision especially when Ofsted describes RE as lacking breadth, depth and/or ambition (REC, 2023a). Furthermore, Ofsted admits that a system that is increasingly hyper-localised is confusing for leaders and teachers to navigate (Ofsted, 2024)

Perhaps, to remedy this predicament a *National Content Standard for RE for England* was published in July 2023. It provides clarification and a benchmark for excellence in religion and worldviews/religious education. It offers a non-statutory benchmark for syllabus providers and other bodies to evaluate their work. However, it is not a curriculum and it does not determine precisely

what content schools should teach. It is a standard by which different RE curricula, content, pedagogy, and provision can be benchmarked. It uses the format of a National Curriculum Programme of Study (REC, 2023b).

The publication of Ofsted's (2024) report has provided further impetus and justification for a national initiative. Thus, following its publication, the REC (2024) notes the recommendation that the government should urgently update guidance and reinforce the significance of their *National Content Standard for RE in England*.

However, as is the case with the national plan, here again, there is no consensus among RE professionals on this much-publicised approach. The RE Network, for example, rejects it. In addition to being anxious about State control of RE, RENET asserts that this *Standard* represents an attempt to steer RE in the direction of a 'worldviews' agenda which promotes a secularised 'worldviews' direction for RE. Moreover, 'the Standard calls upon teachers to be agents of change in their pupils'. Such a stance, they maintain, 'seems to encourage a form of secular indoctrination, which goes against the principle of avoiding religious or non-faith-based indoctrination in RE'. They stress that 'the role of the RE teacher is not to impose beliefs on students' (RENetwork, n.d.).

### **Diving into the future**

RE is an important part of the curriculum on offer to pupils in England, and, likewise, there is an overwhelming willingness to teach it. However, the reality is that RE (with a few other subjects) gets pushed to the periphery by a combination of factors, a case in point is the Government's decision to exclude RE from the English baccalaureate and currently, there are no plans to include it. The marginalisation of this is connected to neoliberal hegemony concerning the purpose of education (Maisuria and Cole, 2017).

The report could be considered unrepresentative considering the 25,000+ schools in the country. Nevertheless, the report has rightly stressed that "in far too many schools across the country RE does not fulfil the subject's potential" (Ofsted, 2024). It has outlined many factors which can be addressed easily to support high-quality RE. The four main areas are strong teacher subject knowledge, access to professional learning, regular time, and a well-organised curriculum.

Strong teacher subject knowledge and access to professional development contribute towards better quality RE. To support teachers with their continuing learning development, Culham St Gabriel's

provides freely accessible subject knowledge material through RE:ONLINE and the e-learning platform. Their different scholarships, especially the leadership programme showcases curriculum subject knowledge, pedagogy and research.

The report has called for clearer government guidance on RE curriculum requirements. Within existing legislation, if the government were to provide, for example, clear national expectations then these would be non-statutory, like the one issued previously (QCA, 2004). The purposes of that national framework were (i) to establish an entitlement (ii) to establish standards (iii) to promote continuity and coherence, and (iv) to promote public understanding. Likewise, the proposed framework can be one option to address inconsistencies and could be used by schools and curriculum developers to inform their rigorous, challenging and personally inspiring curriculum. The government must also continue with its bursaries and support the recruitment of teachers. At grassroots levels, it can provide support for RE hubs and networks which are at the forefront in offering professional learning opportunities to teachers.

The report highlights “the need for teachers to engage with subject-specific research” (Ofsted, 2024). Many schools subscribe to *REToday*, the termly full-colour magazine which offers not only all the latest RE news, developments and reviews along with classroom activities but incorporates *Professional Reflection – the journal of NATRE* which provides informed comment on the theory and practice of RE.

The report is unambiguous about the importance of offering teachers continued professional learning opportunities. It notes “Although a few teachers had received subject-based professional development in RE, the overwhelming majority had not.” It added that “given the complexity of the subject and the kind of misconceptions that pupils were left with, this is a significant concern” (Ofsted, 2024). Thus, schools should ensure, through regular training, that all teachers have the subject and pedagogical knowledge that they need to teach RE well. Those involved in training teachers should assist trainees gain the subject knowledge that they need. Those involved in providing professional development should increase access to training available to all leaders and teachers.

The report also reveals what Ofsted can do further. This report is based on 50 inspections and while it discusses 125 points (Ofsted, 2024), this low number of deep dives has the potential to imply to schools that RE holds a differentiated status. NATRE (2024) hopes that because of this report, Ofsted

will take responsibility for its role and there will be considerably more deep dives into RE during the ordinary inspection process.

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There is a wealth of information in the report. Schools, ITE providers and other training providers will need to consider these key findings and share them in their contexts. Beyond these local contexts, policymakers will want to heed the recommendations to support matters of the curriculum, teaching of RE in schools, training of teachers and ensuring consistent assessment practices.

However, on 4 May 2024, Ofsted announced changes: [‘Deep dives’ removed from ungraded inspections - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-announces-changes-to-its-approach-to-inspections), so the implication of this is awaited.

Looking to the near future, the REC has entered into a partnership with the NATRE and has created the Religious Education Policy Unit (REPU). This Unit represents more than 60 organisations and teachers in 4000 schools. In May 2024, the REC will launch a curriculum toolkit, based on research and good practice to assist schools in developing their syllabus and teaching practices.

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One of the most beneficial features of the report is that examples of effective RE curriculum practices have been included. These useful examples of good RE curriculum will assist schools in developing their own practices and support the development of a rigorous RE curriculum.

The toolkit was published in early June 2024. See here [Welcome to the Religion and Worldviews Approach to RE Toolkit – REC \(religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk\)](https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/press-releases/welcome-to-the-religion-and-worldviews-approach-to-re-toolkit)

The report is lengthy. Leaders and teachers are pressed for time. However, bearing in mind that it is the first subject report in a decade and during this period much has been done to RE and much is being done for RE, the reading of this report in conjunction with the RE research review (Ofsted, 2021) is relevant and the recommendations within them should be considered for appropriate action.

## Conclusion

Religious Education remains a statutory subject for maintained schools, academies and free schools in England. It is an important curriculum which supports the personal, social, cultural, moral and spiritual development of children and its inclusion contributes to the delivery of a broad and balanced curriculum for pupils in a complex and pluralistic country. Among other aims, it helps pupils to know what religion is and to understand what it means to have a faith and not have one.

The report has been welcomed by key stakeholders and there appears to be a consensus on the idea that ‘something’ needs to be done so that the true potential of RE can be brought into existence. However, what needs to be done to bring about that change is contested and controversial. The nature of the discourse appears to be heading towards centralising and nationalising the subject.

The conclusions do reflect important areas of development for the subject. The report affirms that high-quality RE is an entitlement for every pupil in every school. Granted that some challenges persist in RE, this report endorses the possibility of developing an ambitious, coherent, rigorous curriculum. Still, the report regrets that for over a decade little has changed to make the subject serve its full potential. Therefore, urgent support is needed to reverse this trend and make necessary improvements so that this important subject can have the desired positive impact not only on pupils' knowledge but also to foster respect, and critical thinking and help them navigate the complexities and uncertainties of contemporary life.

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