

# The evolution of religious education: A reflective analysis of the latest Curriculum and Assessment Review

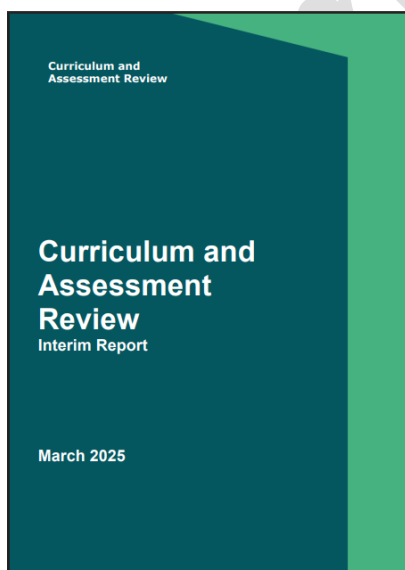
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## Introduction

The last time the national curriculum (NC) in England underwent a review was in 2011. It is now over a decade, and so the government in England decided that a comprehensive review of it was due to ensure it remained innovative and effective. Thus, in July 2024, the government commissioned Professor Becky Francis CBE to convene and chair a Panel of experts to conduct the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

On Tuesday 18 March 2025 the curriculum and assessment review interim report, was published (DfE, 2025). The Review was informed by research evidence, data, a wealth of perspectives from experts, stakeholders and the public, including over 7,000 responses to their Call for Evidence and a range of research and polling. This gives it much credibility and seems to have been welcomed in many quarters. The Interim Report presents their initial findings and insights.

In this article, I reflect on and critically analyse some key messages presented in the report, within the wider context of religious education (RE). The reflection considers RE as it was excluded from the previous review (DfE, 2013) and welcomes RE into the future framework.



## Building on strengths

I gained satisfaction from knowing that the Interim report proposed to build on existing strengths rather than making root and branch changes to the NC. It confirmed that many aspects of the curriculum and assessment system are working well.

Nevertheless, it found that the current system is not delivering for every child. Thus, it emphasises the need for proper support for pupils with special educational needs and disability (SEND) and for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (p. 6). This is significant for an education system that aims to provide the best opportunities to all its pupils to achieve the best that they can and more.

## RE has featured

Unlike the previous review (DfE, 2013), the current Panel has included RE as part of its review of the curriculum. Philosophically, this is encouraging as it is likely to indicate the holistic approach to education adopted by the Panel members. However, the inclusion of RE is welcomed on principle as well, because Ofsted reports (2021, 2024) and others (Conroy, et al., 2014; REC, 2018; Mogra, 2024a) have expressed concerns for improvements and change to happen in RE. Not only that, but it is also noteworthy that some Panel members may have played a role in ensuring RE was included. One panel member had been a primary teacher with expertise in religious studies and another was a member of the Commission on Religious Education (DfE, 2024) which reported a national plan for RE (REC, 2018). The report has also been positively received by two influential RE based organisations (CSTG, 2024; REC, 2024),

## Reduction in the curriculum

One of the concerns raised by the Panel across the subjects is about the specificity, relevance, volume and diversity of content (p. 9). As a result, the Panel intends to conduct a closer analysis to diagnose each subject's specific issues and explore and test a range of solutions. I wonder what this will mean for RE and what solution/s they will propose.

Primary practitioners and subject experts informed the Panel that “the curriculum at key stages 1 and 2 is not effectively balancing depth and breadth” (p. 21), meaning that the amount of content prescribed at primary level is likely to be reviewed and/or reduced. An overloaded curriculum is reported “to lead to a struggle to cover all content with sufficient depth and negatively affects pupils’ ability to master foundational concepts” (p. 21). For RE, the depth of understanding is important as RE often deals with complex and abstract concepts, and encourages critical thinking and analysis of different viewpoints, which require time and thoughtful engagement. Thus, in its next phase, the Panel will look at the “volume of specified content at key stages 1 and 2 to ensure that a good level of breadth across the curriculum is achievable, while continuing to drive high and rising standards in all subjects” (p. 21).

Questions of depth and breadth have been long standing issues in RE. Locally agreed syllabuses and schools are expected to consider of the need to offer breadth of content, depth of learning and coherence between concepts, skills and content (DCSF 2010). Recently, the REC (2023: 6-7) presented the breadth, depth and ambition of the curriculum that is required in a curriculum that would meet the National Content Standard. Moreover, Ofsted's (2024) RE subject report also explored these matters and emphasised the importance of a comprehensive approach. It will be interesting to see how this balance is achieved in the context of diverse belief systems, statutory requirements, local diversity, educational goals, ambition and practical matters.

There is a long history of the existence of religion in education (Fancourt, 2022), therefore, I hesitate to imagine that RE would be taken out of the curriculum. Otherwise, it would result in a seismic shift in the English education system. In fact, I am optimistic that it remains secure (see below). Nevertheless, I have some reservations that in striking a balance between an overloaded current and subject specificity, RE might be made a bedfellow of the humanities, specifically history and geography. Whilst I can see this being a possibility, it may still mean some dismantling of some of existing national legal and local structures that have been upholding RE for many decades. Having considered some general matters, I turn to the specifics of RE in the section below.

## What is on offer for religious education?

In the context of the NC the reports says that the national curriculum plays “a crucial role in providing the knowledge and skills required to build a prosperous economy and flourishing civil society, as well as promoting social cohesion and sustaining democracy” (p. 5). Whilst a contentious aim (Conroy, et al. 2014; Orchard, 2015), I would argue that RE is an important subject that is well positioned to make valuable contributions to civic education, social harmony and democratic principles.

Looking forward, the report has identified four areas to focus on in the next phase. According to the Panel, these four areas are where the greatest opportunities and need for improvement lie. The Panel also heard that in some subjects the current construction and balance of content are inhibiting the secure mastery of subjects and reduces the time available for breadth of learning, with a knock-on impact on time for other subjects (p. 27). There is evidence that RE is one of the subjects that might be suffering from this situation. In secondary schools, only 44% met the threshold of curriculum time with 34% of all academies reporting no timetabled RE (NATRE, n.d. [a]), that RE is undervalued and that it is an afterthought (Tudor, 2024). Thus, it is encouraging to read that this issue is gaining prominent and will be considered closely.

Moreover, the Panel will ensure the national curriculum is “inclusive so that all young people can see themselves represented in their learning, as well as seeing others’ perspectives and broadening their horizons” (p. 6). Here again, RE provides many

opportunities to learners to listen and learn through, for example, direct encounters with individuals and communities from religious and non-religious backgrounds. Any future curriculum that tries to ensure that its learners do not feel alienated would be wise to incorporate religious and non-religious material in its content so that learners feel represented and have their outlook on life expanded. For the first time in a census of England and Wales, less than half of the population (46.2%) described themselves as “Christian” and “No religion” was the second most common response (37.2%). There were increases in the number of people who described themselves as “Muslim” (6.5%) and “Hindu” (1.7%) (ONS, 2021).

There is another paragraph which gives hope that RE will be (re)positioned to where it belongs. It states that the Panel “will review the volume of specified content at key stages 1 and 2 to ensure that a good level of breadth across the curriculum is achievable” (p. 21). The phrase “across the curriculum” (I surmise) includes RE, since the report recognises the subject as a basic component of the curriculum which schools are required by statute to provide. Still, it will be interesting to see how/if this will be applied to RE.

## Subjects not on the national curriculum

### National agreed content standards

It is most gratifying that a specific section has been dedicated to subjects which do not feature in the national curriculum (one of which is RE). The report refers to the *Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report* (Ofsted, 2024) and states that

Despite the fact that RE is compulsory for all pupils up to the age of 18 (unless they are withdrawn), evidence suggests that a lack of *national agreed content standards* [emphasis added] has led to national disparities in the quality of provision (p. 29).

1. To begin with, the position of RE as a subject in schooling is highlighted by drawing attention to its current statutory requirement. RE, it reinforces, is a compulsory subject for all pupils up to the age of 18 (unless they are withdrawn). This is an important reminder for all phases of education, including further education colleges and sixth forms, as there is evidence (Ofsted, 2024) that some secondary schools are not meeting this statutory requirement, which is illegal.

2. This paragraph has captured a crucial issue facing RE. Currently, in the absence of a national curriculum for RE, local authorities provide a locally agreed syllabus for the schools that they maintain (Mogra, 2024b). The absence of agreed standards is a factor leading to inconsistencies in the design of these syllabi (Ofsted, 2021; Smalley, 2024). In addition, the Panel sees the lack of nationally agreed content standards impacting the quality of RE being taught. However, Barnes (2020) questions the attribution of this

to the Agreed Syllabus since matters relating to the level of subject knowledge or the expertise of teachers are not curricular issues. These could be due to weaknesses in teacher training (Barnes, 2020). On the other hand, it may be argued that an agreed national syllabus solution would aid teacher trainers, since they would only have one curriculum to train teachers for (Smalley, 2024). Thus, this acknowledgment is significant as it indicates an intention to address a key challenge that many in the RE community are concerned about. By recognising this issue, the Panel appears to validate the experiences of RE educators, perhaps making them feel heard. Thus, the recognition of this disparity in provision at a national level is welcomed.

3. This paragraph appears futuristic. It seems to indicate what is to come for RE in the final report as a way of moving the subject forward from being hyper-localised and confusing (Ofsted, 2024). They are intimating a move towards work at national level. That does not necessarily mean the demise of locally agreed syllabuses, but were a national framework to be published, then one would expect all syllabuses, whatever their origin, to demonstrate how they meet these standards. A path that RE has trodden before with the Non-Statutory National Framework of RE (QCA, 2004).

4. Moreover, the phrase “national agreed content standards” appears to endorse the call from some major RE organisations. These include the Religious Education Council of England and Wales who have supported a non-statutory benchmark, entitled National Content Standard for RE in England (REC, 2023). However, it is important to clarify that this is not a curriculum but a standard by which different RE curricula, content, pedagogy, and provision can be benchmarked. In 2018, the Commission on Religious Education, an independent commission established by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, published a report setting out proposals for a national plan (REC 2018). The National Association of Teachers of Religious Education called for an urgent need for a national plan, as one in five schools report including no lessons of the subject on their timetables (NATRE, 2022). The plan proposed the introduction of a statutory national *entitlement* [emphasis added] which would set out what all pupils in publicly funded schools should be entitled to be taught up to the end of year 11.

5. In the eventuality that a nationally agreed content standard materialises, a serious matter that would be required is that holding schools accountable to it. This is because even though currently RE is a compulsory subject, some schools fall short of fulfilling this legal requirement (Weston, 2022). I wonder what mechanism, if any, the Panel would propose towards this end. In any case, there is hope that having some kind of national standards might make for better quality of RE.

6. Finally, apparently, it alludes to the idea that Panel may not be thinking of proposing a national curriculum for RE as it has referred to standards rather than to curriculum. If

so, there may then be many Early Career Teachers who might be disheartened (Mogra, forthcoming).

## Quality and flexibility in curricula

Within the same section, the Report recognises the need to strike

a balance between securing an entitlement to high-quality content for all, and, particularly in the case of RE, the need for flexibility to be retained for different school types (i.e., schools with a religious designation and those without (p. 29).

1. To begin with, balancing the entitlement to high-quality content for all, while retaining the existing flexibility for different school types presents complexity and challenges. Should the current flexibility be retained, then the question of consistency might persist, since faith designated schools have specific requirements for RE that differ from the maintained school, and academies have a choice in determining their curriculum (Long, Loft, Danechi, 2019).

In relation to maintained schools striking a balance between standardised content, which might ensure high-quality curriculum content may prove challenging as local needs and contexts are different. This variation is currently manifested in about 140 locally agreed syllabi in operation, admittedly, with some overlap between them.

Consistency between academies and maintained schools might be addressed relatively easily. One option would be to use the nationally agreed content standards to create common grounds. Faith designated schools, could still operate with these standards with some tailoring of context to meet their specific needs. In this way, a benchmark for all types of schools like that provided by the REC (2023) could come into existence for all schools. This is important as the REC maintains that the National Content Standard could be used to clarify the regulations about the nature of provision required in Academy schools. It may helpfully provide non-statutory guidance for the arms-length curriculum bodies, like Oak National Academy and others, in the development of a fully resourced curriculum in RE. Likewise, it may support SACREs and others with responsibility for RE to play their part in raising standards for all children (REC, 2023: 3).

2. The Panel proposes to consider an entitlement to high-quality content for all children in their analysis of RE before publishing their final report. Curiously, the word entitlement appears only once in the entire report and that is in the context of RE and RSHE. In referring to entitlement, here again, the Panel seems to have drawn from the Big Ideas Project (Wintersgill, Cush, & Francis, 2019) and/or the report of the Commission on RE (REC, 2018). Recently, it has been proposed that the National Statement of Entitlement sets out (i) a benchmark for standards in a religion and worldviews curriculum about how worldview(s) work in human life, and (ii) a pedagogical tool for the selection of content and of appropriate teaching and learning

approaches to enrich and deepen pupils' scholarly engagement with religion and worldviews (Pett, 2024).

3. It is commendable that RE will continue to feature in their deliberation at the next stage. This is important if some of the persisting issues, such as non-compliance by some schools and what high-quality in RE looks like and assessment are to be addressed.

4. Finally, this also suggests that distinct types of schools will continue to provide RE, as is currently the case, according to their religious character and deeds.

In the next section, two other matters which might impact RE are discussed.

### Knowledge rich-curriculum

With its focus on knowledge, the Panel appears to acknowledge the importance of teachers who support mastery of the subjects. In other words, they appear to be viewing subject knowledge as a way to put the values that they have identified in the Report into school-based action. Thus, the following two sentences have stood out and resonate closely and where RE can contribute to:

Education is inherently valuable and important for its own sake, but it also plays a crucial role in preparing young people to address the civic and economic needs of our country and the wider world (p. 5).

The other relates to the Panel seeking to support the Government's mission:

to break down barriers to opportunity by equipping children and young people with the knowledge and skills to adapt and thrive in the world and the workplace (p. 5).

In highlighting a knowledge-based curriculum, they seem to emphasise that RE, like other subjects will be expected to be an academically rigorous subject for pupils to engage with. But a knowledge rich curriculum should also be expected to move learners beyond their immediacy and include challenges they will face such as the ethics of economic instability, exploitation, ethical use of AI, natural disasters, climate change, peace, armed conflict, political oppression and to try make sense of an uncertain world and humanitarian crises.

### Curricula linked to identities

The focus on a knowledge rich curriculum is unambiguous, although the Review records that "securing mastery in a subject is vital for raising standards and enabling future expertise" (p. 6). This suggests that deep understand and competence is a foundation for future expertise. However, there is a phrase that needs to be highlight wherein it is

emphasised that learners will not be left out from the curriculum. In other words, there is a hint that social identity theory has worked its way into their thinking (Daniels, 2009).

We will also ensure that the curriculum (and related material) is inclusive so that *all young people can see themselves represented in their learning* [emphasis added], as well as seeing others' perspectives and broadening their horizons (p. 6).

Whilst the extent to which this is a realistic proposition is debatable, nevertheless, this evinces that learners might see themselves represented in their curriculum. A wise move to enhance their self-esteem and sense of belonging. If so, it also becomes a culturally responsive curriculum as it will recognise learners' backgrounds in the learning process. A wise move to reduce alienation and enhance respect and effective classrooms. For RE, this means that pupils will see their sacred beliefs, leaders, scriptures, spaces, festivals, rites and rituals in their curriculum. However, in their curriculum, learners will also see their peers' perspectives locally, nationally and globally. In this sense, RE is already there as RE is diverse.

## Procedural matters

The Review expects to recommend a phased programme of work across the subjects listed in the national curriculum. This will allow reforms to be made incrementally in a way that does not destabilise the system (p. 9). I wonder why RE was absent from being mentioned explicitly here, granted it is included as discussed above.

Since 2018, there has been considerable work gradually undertaken by RE communities, led by REC. This is akin to the evolutionary approach adopted by this Panel. Such an approach is pertinent for RE because the subject has a long historical entanglement with legislation, policy, the Church of England, and religious and professional stakeholders, and, indeed the spiritual, moral and social purposes of schooling. That said, a sudden and total overhaul of RE appears to be unlikely. This is probably because the previous Government stated in 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). However, in a cross-party Westminster debate, in 2022, then Shadow Education Minister Stephen Morgan said that a Labour government would deliver a 'well-rounded' education and challenged the Government for its failure to introduce a National Plan for RE (NATRE n.d. [b]). This would imply that the current Government might endorse a national agreed content standards were it to be recommended by the Panel.

## Conclusion

In the recent on-going development of education in England, this Interim report appears to be a significant milestone. It highlights evidence-based areas for improvement to

ensure the curriculum evolves with changing times, innovation and continues to be effective in achieving its purpose. It has emphasised the strengths of many aspects of the curriculum and assessment. Therefore, the Panel is committed to enhancing existing strengths, rather than starting anew.

The inclusion of RE within the Interim report suggests that it has significance for the Panel in the educational curriculum of the country. It shows that the Panel holds RE as a key subject for the education of the next generation of children in England. The affirmation that RE remains a compulsory subject for all pupils up to the age of 18 (unless withdrawn) is a vital aspect, which schools should take note of. The Report highlights the retention of the flexibility to cater to the diverse needs and contexts of different schools.

The Report acknowledges challenges in RE, specifically the absence of national agreed content standards which it suggests is contributing to disparities in the quality of provision across the country. Therefore, some recommendations having national bearing for RE is to be expected.

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