



BRIEFING PAPER

Number 07167, 10 October 2019

Religious Education in Schools (England)

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Inside:

1. Religious Education: Regulations
2. RE in the Curriculum
3. Inspection and teaching
4. Other relevant issues
5. Recent Reports on RE



Contents

Summary	3
1. Religious Education: Regulations	4
1.1 Introduction	4
RE GCSE Entries	4
1.2 RE in local authority-maintained schools	5
1.3 RE in academies and free schools	6
1.4 RE in faith schools	7
2. RE in the Curriculum	8
2.1 GCSE and A level RE	8
2.2 RE in performance tables and the English Baccalaureate A strengthened EBacc	8 10
2.3 The 2014 consultation on revised GCSE, AS and A Level RE content	10
2.4 The 2015 Government response to the consultation	11
2.5 Fox v. Secretary of State on the exclusion of Humanism from the GCSE syllabus	13
2.6 Government guidance following Fox v. Secretary of State	14
2.7 Religious Education Council of England and Wales review and non-statutory programme of study	15
3. Inspection and teaching	17
3.1 Reserved teachers	17
3.2 How well is RE taught? Inspections	18 18
Ofsted report (2013)	18
3.3 Training for RE teachers Government comment on teacher training	20 21
3.4 DfE statistics on RE teachers' qualifications and recruitment	21
3.5 Bursaries for RE teachers	22
3.6 Organisations providing resources for RE teachers	23
4. Other relevant issues	24
4.1 Right to withdraw a child from Religious Education	24
4.2 Collective worship	25
4.3 Teaching of creationism	27
5. Recent Reports on RE	28
5.1 A New Settlement? Clarke and Woodhead Report on Religion in Schools (2018)	28
5.2 Religion and World Views, Commission on RE (2018)	29
5.3 State of the Nation (2017)	30
5.4 RE for REal report, Goldsmiths College (2015)	31
5.5 Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (2015)	31

Summary

Religious Education (RE) must be taught in all state-funded schools in England. However, RE has an unusual position on the curriculum being part of the basic curriculum but not the National Curriculum, and one of two subjects (along with sex and relationship education) where parents have a legal right to withdraw their children from class.

This briefing introduces the rules around RE in state-funded schools, whether they are academies, free schools, or maintained by a local authority. It introduces concerns that have been raised about the quality of RE teaching, including the number of teachers with qualifications relevant to the subject. It also provides information on other related issues, such as the parental right of withdrawal from RE and the rules on collective worship in schools.

As schools policy is a devolved topic, this briefing provides information on the position in England. Information on the teaching of RE in [Scotland](#), [Wales](#), and [Northern Ireland](#) is available on the websites of the respective countries' Governments.

1. Religious Education: Regulations

1.1 Introduction

All state-funded schools must teach religious education (RE).

Maintained schools without a religious character must follow the syllabus agreed by the local Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC), an occasional body which local authorities are required to establish.¹ Each Local Authority has a statutory duty to establish a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) to advise it on the provision of RE and convene any ASC.² RE in a **school with a religious character** must be provided in accordance with the school's trust deed or, where provision is not made by a trust deed, in accordance with the beliefs of the religion or denomination specified in the order that designates the school as having a religious character.

The Department for Education's [Governors' Handbook](#) provides information on the teaching of RE in other schools:

Voluntary aided schools designated with a religious character should provide RE in accordance with the trust deed or religious designation of the school, unless parents request the locally agreed syllabus.

Foundation schools and **voluntary controlled schools** designated with a religious character should follow the locally agreed syllabus, unless parents request RE in accordance with the trust deed or religious designation of the school.

RE is compulsory in both **academies** designated with a religious character and those without (except Alternative Provisions academies); as set out in their funding agreement.³

RE GCSE Entries

RE entries in all schools in England have increased from around **176,400** in 2010, to **213,900** in 2018 (an increase of **21%**).⁴ However the increase has not been consistent over time. RE GCSE entries reached a peak of around **269,500** in 2015.

Over the same period total GCSE entries decreased by **8%**. This means that the most meaningful way of making comparisons over time is to compare the number of RE entries as a proportion of total entries. This proportion has increased over the period, from **3.8%** of entries in 2010, to **5.0%** of entries in 2018. The table below provides further details.

¹ Department for Children, Schools and Families, [Religious Education in English Schools: Non-Statutory Guidance 2010](#), pp. 14-15.

² [Education Act 1996](#), Sections 390-6.

³ Department for Education, [Governors' Handbook](#) (September 2019), p. 66.

⁴ Entries by pupils at the end of KS4, includes religious studies entries, in cases of more than one entry only the first entry is counted

Religious Education Entries		
All schools, England		
	Number of entries	% of total entries
2010	176,400	3.8%
2011	195,100	4.3%
2012	210,600	4.8%
2013	229,000	5.0%
2014	259,400	5.6%
2015	269,500	5.8%
2016	268,800	5.9%
2017	264,500	5.5%
2018	213,900	5.0%

Notes

Entries rounded to nearest 100 (entries by pupils at the end of Key Stage 4)

Religious education entries includes religious studies entries

Discounting has been applied where pupils have taken the same subject more than once, only the first entry is counted

Source

[Key Stage 4 performance: 2018, DfE](#) (Subject Time Series Tables)

1.2 RE in local authority-maintained schools

Religious Education is a component of the basic curriculum (but not the National Curriculum) and is compulsory for all pupils in local authority-maintained schools aged 5 to 18 years, unless they are withdrawn from these lessons by their parents or withdraw themselves if they are aged 18 or over. The provision applies to school sixth forms, but there is no equivalent provision for 16-18-year olds in sixth form colleges or other further education institutions.

Those seeking to withdraw are not obliged to give a reason, and the school is expected to comply with the request. The statutory provisions relating to religious education are contained in sections 69 and 71 and schedule 19 of the [School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#), as amended.

Non-statutory [guidance](#) for maintained schools provides further background on the position of the RE curriculum for maintained schools:

The key document in determining the teaching of RE is the locally agreed syllabus within the LA [Local Authority] concerned... Schools designated as having a religious character are free to make their own decisions in preparing their syllabuses. LAs must, however, ensure that the agreed syllabus for their area is consistent with [Section 375\(3\) of the Education Act 1996](#), which requires the syllabus to reflect that the religious traditions of Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the

teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.⁵

The guidance sets out the following on the agreed syllabus:

The locally agreed syllabus is a statutory syllabus of RE prepared under [Schedule 31 to the Education Act 1996](#) and adopted by the LA under that schedule. It must be followed in maintained schools without a designated denomination.

Once adopted by the LA, the agreed syllabus sets out what pupils should be taught and can include the expected standards of pupils' performance at different stages.

[...]

The law does not define what the principal religions represented in Great Britain are. ASCs [Agreed Syllabus Conferences] can decide which are the principal religions represented in Great Britain, other than Christianity, to be included in their agreed syllabus.

Agreed syllabuses in any community school and any foundation, voluntary-aided or voluntary-controlled school without a religious character cannot require RE to be provided by means of any catechism or formulary which is distinctive of a particular religious denomination.

This prohibition does not extend to the study of catechisms and formularies.⁶

Owing to its position as part of the basic curriculum but not the National Curriculum, RE was not included in the Coalition Government's National Curriculum review in 2011.⁷

1.3 RE in academies and free schools

Academies and free schools are state funded schools that are independent of the local authority. They operate in accordance with the funding agreement between the individual academy trust and the Secretary of State.

Requirements for academies and free schools broadly reflect the provisions that apply to local authorities and schools in the maintained sector. The requirements, including the type of RE that an academy provides, is set out in their funding agreement. For schools without a faith designation, this will usually mirror the requirements for local authority-maintained schools without a religious character. For example, the [model funding agreement](#) for mainstream academies and free schools states:

...Where the Academy has not been designated with a religious character (in accordance with section [124B of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#) or further to [section 6\(8\) of the Academies Act 2010](#)):

⁵ Department for Children, Schools and Families, [Religious Education in English Schools: Non-Statutory Guidance 2010](#), p. 10.

⁶ [Ibid](#), p. 14.

⁷ Department for Education, '[National Curriculum Review Launched](#)', 20 January 2011.

7 Religious Education in Schools (England)

a) provision must be made for religious education to be given to all pupils at the Academy in accordance with the requirements for agreed syllabuses in [section 375\(3\) of the Education Act 1996](#) and paragraph 2(5) of Schedule 19 to the School Standards and Framework Act 1998;

b) the Academy must comply with [section 70\(1\)](#) of, and [Schedule 20](#) to, the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 as if it were a community, foundation or voluntary school which does not have a religious character, except that paragraph 4 of that Schedule does not apply. The Academy may apply to the Secretary of State for consent to be relieved of the requirement imposed by paragraph 3(2) of that Schedule.⁸

1.4 RE in faith schools

Schools with a religious character (often referred to as ‘faith schools’) in the state sector can be different kinds of schools, but which are associated with a particular religion. They will follow a similar position in relation to the curriculum to other schools of their type, except, as the Gov.uk website notes, “they can choose what they teach in religious studies.”⁹

RE in schools with a religious character must be provided in accordance with the school’s trust deed or, where provision is not made by a trust deed, in accordance with the beliefs of the religion or denomination specified in the order that designates the school as having a religious character. RE in a foundation or voluntary controlled school with a religious character must be provided in accordance with the locally agreed syllabus for the area. However, where parents request it, provision may be made in accordance with the school’s trust deed or, where provision is not made by trust deed, in accordance with the beliefs of the religion or denomination specified in the order.

Requirements for academies broadly reflect the provisions that apply to local authorities and schools in the maintained sector. The requirements including the type of RE that an academy provides will be set out in the funding agreement between the individual academy trust and the Secretary of State.¹⁰

⁸ Department for Education, [Mainstream Academy and Free School: Single Funding Agreement](#) (March 2018), p. 25.

⁹ Gov.uk, [Faith Schools](#) [accessed 17 September 2019].

¹⁰ Funding Agreements available at [School and College Performance Tables](#)

2. RE in the Curriculum

2.1 GCSE and A level RE

Alongside its broader curriculum reforms, the Coalition Government undertook reforms of subject content at GCSE, AS and A level. The Library briefing on [GCSE, AS, and A level reform](#), provides details.

In February 2019, the Department for Education confirmed that it had a “commitment to make no changes to the curriculum” for the remaining lifetime of the Parliament elected in 2017, other than those already announced.¹¹

2.2 RE in performance tables and the English Baccalaureate

Government Policy

The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) is a performance measure for schools in England. It measures the achievement of pupils who have gained Key Stage 4 qualifications in ‘core’ academic subjects:

- English
- mathematics
- history or geography
- the sciences
- a language

The English Baccalaureate was introduced in the 2010 performance tables. Full information is available in the Library briefing on the [English Baccalaureate](#).

Both the Coalition and Conservative Governments stressed that although the English Baccalaureate does not include RE, the teaching of RE in schools remains compulsory. The response to a Parliamentary Question in 2019 sets out the Government’s position on the inclusion of RE in the English Baccalaureate:

Mr Gibb: All state funded schools are required by legislation or by their funding agreements to teach religious education (RE) to all registered pupils aged 5 to 18 years. Teaching RE is also part of schools’ activity to meet their legal duty to promote young people’s spiritual, moral and cultural development.

Each area is required to have a locally agreed syllabus for RE that maintained schools without a religious designation must follow. This is monitored by each area’s Standing Advisory Council for RE (SACRE). As part of school inspections from September 2019, as set out in Ofsted’s published School Inspection Handbook, inspectors will take account of the religious education taught as part of assessing the quality of education provided by the school. It is not Ofsted’s role to inspect denominational religious education in faith schools as part of its inspections. This provision is inspected separately under section 48 of the Education Act 2005.

¹¹ [PO 218805 \[Religion: Education\]](#), 8 February 2019.

The requirement for state funded schools to teach RE did not change with the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc).

Many schools choose to teach RE in key stage 4 through offering Religious Studies GCSEs, which are not included in the EBacc. Information on entries to the RE GCSE can be found at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-4-and-multi-academy-trust-performance-2018-revised.¹²

Criticism of the EBacc on RE provision

Concerns have been raised that exclusion from the English Baccalaureate had adversely affected RE provision. A *Times Educational Supplement* report on a National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) poll of 625 schools in 2012 reported that:

One in four schools is cutting back on specialist RE teachers after the subject was excluded from the English Baccalaureate portfolio of desirable GCSEs, new research shows.

...More than 80 per cent put the cut down to the EBacc, awarded to pupils achieving grades A*-C in five traditional core subjects.¹³

An [analysis of the survey](#) of teachers by NATRE, published in July 2013, discussed the impact of the EBacc on the take-up of RE at GCSE level, as well as the position of RE courses on school league tables:

Religious Studies in the curriculum continues to decline since the introduction of the English Baccalaureate, especially at key stage 4 where the impact of the EBacc is at its greatest. The problem has become even more acute since the announcement that GCSE short courses would no longer count towards a school's average point score. This impact is seen in the reduction of specialist teaching staff, the reduction of past and planned examination entries, but also in the time provided on the timetable where schools report that even though the subject is legally compulsory for all students unless withdrawn by their parents, students, are not always receiving their entitlement to a religious education.¹⁴

The 2013 Ofsted report on RE, [Realising the potential](#), also drew attention to the absence of RE from the EBacc as one of the causes of decline in RE in schools:

Other changes to education policy, such as the introduction in 2010 of the English Baccalaureate (the EBacc), have led to a decline in RE provision in some schools.¹⁵

[...]

In relation to the exclusion of RE from the list of EBacc subjects and the removal of short courses from the headline measures of school performance, it is too early to come to a definitive conclusion about their impact on GCSE entries. Ofsted's survey evidence is inconclusive. However, the overall numbers entered for a GCSE qualification in religious studies in England fell from around 427,000 in 2012 to 390,000 in 2013. There has also been a significant shift away from short-course to full-course GCSE. In

¹² [PO 282362 \[Religious Education\]](#), 25 July 2019.

¹³ ['RE Doesn't Have a Prayer After Ebacc Omission'](#), *Times Educational Supplement*, 28 September 2012.

¹⁴ NATRE, [An Analysis of a Survey of Teachers on the Impact of the Ebacc on Student Opportunity to Study GCSE RS: A Fifth Survey](#) (July 2013), p. 2.

¹⁵ Ofsted, [Religious Education: Realising the Potential](#) (October 2013), p. 4.

2013 full-course GCSE numbers in England rose by around 10% in 2013 to nearly 240,000, but short-course numbers fell by almost 30% to 150,000.

There is evidence, however, of a more significant reduction in the provision for RE in some schools. The headteachers of these schools cited decisions about the EBacc and short-course GCSEs as reasons for the changes they were making.¹⁶

A [2019 Report by Liverpool Hope University](#) found that 701 schools stopped entering pupils for GCSE RE in 2018 compared to 2017.¹⁷ The report stated that an:

Examination of the 701 schools which entered students in GCSE Religious Studies in 2017 but not in 2018 reveals that these schools' measures against Progress8, Attainment8, and even against the EBacc measure, were lower than the averages of schools which participated in GCSE Religious Studies in 2018. Working on the hypothesis that schools dropped RS to focus on EBacc subjects, this data suggests such a strategy is counter-productive. There were also higher percentages of disadvantaged pupils (measured by FSM [Free School Meals]) among these schools than among schools entering students in GCSE RS in 2018.¹⁸

A strengthened EBacc

The Conservative Government elected in May 2015 announced plans to increase uptake of the EBacc significantly.¹⁹ It is current Government policy that 75% of pupils study the EBacc subject combination at GCSE by 2022, and 90% by 2025.²⁰

2.3 The 2014 consultation on revised GCSE, AS and A Level RE content

In November 2014, the Coalition Government launched a [consultation](#) on revised content for GCSE, AS and A level religious studies, to be introduced from September 2016.

The [draft subject content](#) for GCSE religious studies proposed that the subject's specifications would require students to:

- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of **two religions**
- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of key sources of wisdom and authority including texts which support contemporary religious faith
- understand the impact of religion on individuals, communities and societies

¹⁶ [Ibid](#), p. 20.

¹⁷ David Lundie and Mi Young Ahn, '[GCSE Religious Studies: At a Crossroads](#)' (2019), p. 9.

¹⁸ [Ibid](#), p. 2.

¹⁹ Department for Education, [Consultation on Implementing the English Baccalaureate](#), (November 2015), p. 19.

²⁰ Department for Education, [Guidance: English Baccalaureate](#) (accessed 24 September 2019).

- understand significant common and divergent views between and within religions and beliefs
- apply knowledge and understanding in order to analyse questions related to religious beliefs and values
- construct well-informed and balanced arguments on matters concerned with religious beliefs and values set out in the subject content [...] ²¹

The [proposed subject content](#) for religious studies at AS and A level stated that the qualifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge, understanding and skills through two of the following approaches, with each requiring an equal amount of teaching, learning and assessment: systematic study of one religion; philosophical, ethical and social scientific studies of religion; textual studies (one religion, not necessarily a religion studied for the other two approaches). ²²

The proposals were welcomed by many religious leaders, although concerns were raised about diminishing space on the curriculum and about the possible impact on faith schools in teaching their own faith. ²³ The absence of humanism from the curriculum was also criticised. In February 2015, a letter was published in the *Times*, signed by religious leaders including the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Baron Williams of Oystermouth, calling for humanism to be provided as an option for study at GCSE, AS and A level. ²⁴

2.4 The 2015 Government response to the consultation

The [Coalition Government response](#) and [analysis of the responses](#) to the consultation was published in February 2015. ²⁵

Content for [GCSE Religious Studies](#) and [AS and A level Religious Studies](#) was made available in 2016.

The Government stated that at **GCSE level** it had decided that the study of two religions was “the right approach for GCSE as it will ensure students acquire both breadth and depth of knowledge,

²¹ Department for Education, [Religious Studies: GCSE Subject Content](#) (November 2014), pp. 3-4.

²² Department for Education, [GCE AS and A level subject Content for Religious Studies](#), (November 2014).

²³ ‘[Religious Studies: Pupils Must Study Two Faiths for New GCSE](#)’, *Times Education Supplement*, 7 November 2014; ‘[Nicky Morgan’s Trojan Horse Curriculum “Could Lead to Collapse of Religious Studies”](#)’, *Telegraph*, 1 February 2015; ‘[Faith Lacking in Religious Studies Plan](#)’, *Jewish Chronicle*, 2 October 2014.

²⁴ ‘Pupils Should Have the Option for the Systematic Study of Humanism in GCSE, AS and A Level Religious Studies, These Religious Leaders Say’, *Times*, 5 February 2015. Text available at [Humanism.org.uk](#)

²⁵ Department for Education, [Reformed GCSE and A level Subject Content](#) (February 2015); Ofqual, [An Analysis of Consultation Responses: Developing New GCSE, A Level and AS Qualifications for First Teaching in 2016 \(Parts Two And Three\)](#) (February 2015).

providing them with a broad and rigorous study of religions.”²⁶ The Government decided not to make humanism or other non-religious beliefs an option for study, stating that

Students already have the opportunity to learn about non-religious worldviews, such as humanism and atheism, alongside religious beliefs and we have emphasised this opportunity in the content. However, as these are qualifications in Religious Studies, it is right that the content primarily focuses on developing students’ understanding of different religious beliefs. This is to stop current practice whereby students are rewarded for engaging in topical debates with virtually no understanding of religious teachings, beliefs or texts. A simultaneous focus on humanism would detract from an in-depth treatment of religion and the comparative study of two religions, and thus on the overall rigour and standard of the qualification. Introducing a systematic study of humanism at GCSE and A level could potentially lead to qualifications that are predominantly focused on the study of humanism at the expense of religion. Thus, whilst the subject content provides for the study of non-religious world views, it is intended that this should not form the focus for the majority of study.²⁷

The Coalition Government gave similar arguments for not including humanism or non-religious beliefs on the AS and A-Level course.²⁸

Some **adjustments were made to the original proposals**, notably that the option to study ‘Philosophical, Ethical and Social Scientific Studies of Religion’ would be split into two separate areas of study: ‘Philosophy of Religion’ and ‘Religion and Ethics’. Students would now choose three out of four areas of study (rather than two out of three previously) from the following:

- Systematic study of one religion;
- Philosophy of religion,
- Religion and ethics, and
- Textual studies.

The Government noted that:

The fields of philosophy and ethics can therefore now form up to 66% of A level study, rather than 50% of study previously, which allows for greater focus in these areas, whilst ensuring at least a third of time is spent engaging with the study of a religion or religious texts.

At the same time, we have strengthened the religious content and reference to primary texts so that students develop a solid grounding of religion whilst studying philosophy and ethics.²⁹

²⁶ Department for Education, [Reformed GCSE and A level Subject Content: Government Consultation Response](#) (February 2015), p. 23.

²⁷ [Ibid](#), p. 23.

²⁸ [Ibid](#), p. 29.

²⁹ [Ibid](#), p. 29.

2.5 Fox v. Secretary of State on the exclusion of Humanism from the GCSE syllabus

In November 2015 the British Humanist Association [announced](#) that three humanists and their children were taking the Government to court to challenge the decision to not include non-religious worldviews in the latest subject content for GCSE Religious Studies.³⁰

The court ruled on 25 November 2015 that the then-Education Secretary Nicky Morgan had made an “error of law in her interpretation of the education statutes.”³¹ The [judgment](#) made clear that the conclusions were arrived at with reference to the position of schools or academies which do not have a religious character.³²

The British Humanist Association welcomed the decision and [responded](#):

While the Government will not be immediately compelled to change the GCSE, religious education syllabuses around the country will now have to include non-religious worldviews such as humanism on an equal footing, and pupils taking a GCSE will also have to learn about non-religious worldviews alongside the course.

In his judgment, Mr Justice Warby said, ‘In carrying out its educational functions the state owes parents a positive duty to respect their religious and philosophical convictions... the state has a duty to take care that information or knowledge included in the curriculum is conveyed in a pluralistic manner... the state must accord equal respect to different religious convictions, and to non-religious beliefs; it is not entitled to discriminate between religions and beliefs on a qualitative basis; its duties must be performed from a standpoint of neutrality and impartiality as regards the quality and validity of parents’ convictions.’

He found that GCSE specifications drawn up along the lines recommended ‘would give priority to the study of religions (including some with a relatively very small following and no significant role in the tradition of the country) over all non-religious world views (which have a significant following and role in the tradition of the country)’ and would therefore risk being unlawful.

Finally, he found that, if schools relied on the GCSE to deliver their legal obligation, ‘the state would need to afford some additional educational provision [which included non-religious worldviews such as humanism] or fail in its duties.’³³

Following the judgement, the Department for Education published a [statement](#) that the GCSE syllabus would not be amended as a result of the court’s judgment:

There is no problem with the RS GCSE subject content. Today’s judgment related to the introduction to the RS GCSE subject content. It concluded that a particular paragraph suggested that a

³⁰ British Humanist Association, [Parents Sue Government Over Exclusion of Humanism From GCSE Curriculum](#), 9 November 2015.

³¹ [R \(Fox\) -v- Secretary of State for Education \[2015\] EWHC 3404 \(Admin\)](#)

³² [Ibid.](#) Verdict discussed in ‘[Education Secretary Nicky Morgan Made “Error of Law” Over Religious Studies GCSE](#)’, *Times Education Supplement*, 25 November 2015.

³³ British Humanist Association, ‘[Judge Rules Government Broke the Law in Excluding Humanism From School Curriculum](#)’, 25 November 2015.

school could rely entirely on the content of an RS GCSE syllabus to discharge its obligations with respect to teaching the basic curriculum subject of RE at key stage 4. The judge found that whilst that might be the case, it might not always be the case - and so it was wrong. The department will act to correct any misunderstanding.

Despite the claims in the BHA's [British Humanist Association] press notice, the judge explicitly said that there was nothing unlawful in the RS GCSE subject content itself. The judge made clear that there was "no challenge" to the content of the GCSE. He also made clear that it would be lawful to give priority to the study of Christianity in the curriculum if we wanted to do that.

The judge made clear that there was no requirement in either domestic or human rights law to give "equal air time" to all shades of belief (directly contradictory to what BHA have said in its press release).

This judgment does not require the department to amend the content or structure of the reformed RS GCSE.³⁴

2.6 Government guidance following Fox v. Secretary of State

In December 2015, the Government published a [guidance note](#) for schools and awarding organisations about the GCSE, which stated that the judgment related to "a narrow, technical point," and that:

The Government considers the judgment to have no broader impact on any aspect of its policy in relation to the RE curriculum or the RS GCSE subject content for schools with or without a religious character, nor on the current inspection arrangements.³⁵

In July 2016, the Government published [further guidance](#), which aimed to clarify what the Department saw as confusion about the curriculum. It stated that only Departmental guidance should be followed in composing a RE curriculum:

Schools, local authorities and ASCs [Agreed Syllabus Conferences] are not under any obligation to have regard to guidance issued by other specific bodies, groups or individuals and should instead follow the Department's Guidance when making decisions about their RE curriculum. In particular, schools, local authorities and ASCs should not follow what purports to be 'guidance' issued recently by those associated with the British Humanist Society (including [views on the law](#) of Dr Satvinder Juss dated 28 April 2016) – that guidance and those views have no official status and are contentious.³⁶

³⁴ Department for Education, '[Statement on the Religious Studies GCSE Judicial Review](#)', 26 November 2015.

³⁵ Department for Education, [Guidance For Schools and Awarding Organisations About the Religious Studies GCSE](#) (28 December 2015); Department for Education, [Faith Groups Back Move to Protect Religious Education Freedom](#) (28 December 2015).

³⁶ Department for Education, [Further Guidance for Schools, Local Authorities and Agreed Syllabus Conferences About the Religious Studies GCSE and the Religious Education Curriculum](#) (6 July 2016), p. 1.

The publication reiterated that there was “no obligation for any school or ASC to give equal air time to the teaching of religious and non-religious views,” and that:

Curriculum balance (and, therefore, compliance with statutory requirements) can be achieved across the key stages. There is no obligation on any school to cover the teaching of non-religious world views (or any other particular aspect of the RE curriculum) in key stage 4 specifically. Rather it is for schools and ASCs to determine how they meet their wider obligations across the key stages.³⁷

A brief [debate](#) was held in the House of Lords on 30 June 2016, in response to the High Court ruling.³⁸

2.7 Religious Education Council of England and Wales review and non-statutory programme of study

The Religious Education Council of England and Wales’ [Review of Religious Education in England](#), published in October 2013, provided a new [non-statutory national curriculum framework for RE](#) (NCFRE), and an analysis of the context and challenges facing RE. The document had a foreword by the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove, who welcomed the framework “as a national benchmark document for use by all those responsible for the RE curriculum locally.”³⁹

The non-statutory framework provides a structure for RE education from early years through to Key Stage 4 comprising a non-statutory programme of study designed to:

- I. Complement the government’s National Curriculum Review, the aims of which are:
 - to ensure that the new curriculum embodies rigour and high standards and creates coherence in what is taught in schools
 - to ensure that all children are taught essential knowledge in the key subject disciplines
 - beyond that core, to allow teachers greater freedom to use their professionalism and expertise to help all children realise their potential.
- II. Promote high-quality RE, which will inspire young people in the years ahead.
- III. Provide a basis for developing locally agreed syllabuses and RE syllabuses in academies and free schools.
- IV. Support RE provided in schools with a religious character.⁴⁰

The [framework document](#) includes information on what would be taught within the framework in early years education, at key stages 1-4

³⁷ [Ibid](#), p. 2.

³⁸ [HL Deb 30 June 2016 c1661-3](#)

³⁹ Religious Education Council of England and Wales, [A Review of Religious Education in England](#) (October 2013), p. 5.

⁴⁰ [Ibid](#), p. 11.

and also in 16-19 education. It states that the curriculum framework is designed to ensure that pupils:

- Know about and understand a range of religions and worldviews;
- Express ideas and insights about the nature, significance and impact of religions and worldviews;
- Gain and deploy the skills needed to engage seriously with religions and worldviews.⁴¹

⁴¹ Religious Education Council of England and Wales, [A Curriculum Framework for Religious Education in England](#) (October 2013), pp. 11-12.

3. Inspection and teaching

3.1 Reserved teachers

Certain types of faith schools are required to have teachers who have been chosen because of their suitability for teaching RE. These are known as 'reserved teachers'.⁴² Other teachers cannot be required to teach RE. Non-statutory [guidance on religious education](#) states:

Foundation or voluntary-controlled schools designated as having a religious character must have teachers who have been selected for their suitability to teach RE ('reserved teachers'), but no more than one-fifth can be selected on that basis. No-one who is not a 'reserved teacher' can be disqualified from employment on the grounds of their religious opinions or practices. No teacher who is not a reserved teacher can be discriminated against in terms of pay or promotion on the grounds of their religious opinions or practices or on the basis of whether or not they teach RE. In dealing with reserved teachers, preference may be given when appointing or promoting teachers, or deciding about their remuneration, to teachers whose religious opinions or practices are in accordance with the tenets of that religious character or who are willing to teach RE at the school in accordance with those tenets.

In appointing a headteacher for such a school (where the head is not also to be a reserved teacher), the person's ability and suitability to preserve and develop the religious character of the school may be taken into account.

In **voluntary-aided schools designated as having a religious character** preference may be given when appointing or promoting teachers, or deciding about their remuneration, to teachers whose religious opinions or practices are in accordance with the tenets of that religious character or who are willing to teach RE at the school in accordance with those tenets.

Certain teachers cannot be required to teach RE. The category extends to teachers in community and foundation and voluntary schools without a religious character, and teachers in foundation and voluntary-controlled schools with a religious character who are not 'reserved teachers'.⁴³

The Department for Education's [Equality Act Guidance](#), which is non-statutory advice, includes the following further information on reserved teachers, and other teachers and non-teaching staff:

8.12 VC [**Voluntary Controlled**] and **foundation schools** must include reserved teachers where the number of teaching staff is more than two. Reserved teachers are selected according to their competence to teach RE according to the tenets of the school's faith and are specifically appointed to do so. This may include the headteacher.

8.13 The number of reserved teachers must not exceed one-fifth of the teaching staff (including the headteacher). For these purposes, where the total number of teaching staff is not a multiple of five, it will be deemed to be the next higher multiple

⁴² Department for Children, Schools and Families, [Religious Education in English schools: Non-Statutory Guidance 2010](#), p. 17.

⁴³ [Ibid](#), p. 17.

of five. For example, if there were eight teachers at a school, for this purpose the total number would be deemed to be ten and the maximum number of reserved teachers would be two.

8.14 These teachers must not be appointed unless the foundation governors are satisfied that they are suitable and competent to give religious education. The foundation governors can insist on dismissing a reserved teacher who fails to give suitable and efficient religious education.

Other Teachers and Non-teaching Staff

8.15 Non-teaching staff and teachers other than those appointed as reserved teachers must not be treated unfavourably in any way because of their religion. This means they cannot be dismissed because of their religious opinions or attendance at religious worship, they cannot be required to deliver RE and cannot be subjected to a detriment for not giving RE or attending worship.⁴⁴

In respect of **Voluntary Aided schools, Independent schools, Academies and Free Schools with a religious character**, the guidance notes that “a teacher appointed to teach RE may be dismissed by the governing body without the consent of the local authority if [they] fail to give such education efficiently and suitably.”⁴⁵

3.2 How well is RE taught?

Inspections

In 2019, the Education Minister Nick Gibb stated that from September 2019, Ofsted inspectors will now take account of the religious education taught as part of assessing the quality of a school’s education, if it is a school without religious character.⁴⁶ In schools with a religious character, denominational worship and education are inspected by a body appointed by the maintained school’s governing body under [section 48 of the Education Act 2005](#) or as provided in the academy’s funding agreement.⁴⁷

Ofsted report (2013)

In October 2013, Ofsted published [Religious education: realising the potential](#), which was critical of the quality of teaching of RE in English schools. The sample of schools visited for the report did not include voluntary aided schools or academies with a religious designation, owing to separate inspection arrangements being in place.⁴⁸

Ofsted stated that:

The report finds low standards; weak teaching; a confused sense of purpose of what religious education is about; training gaps; and weaknesses in the way religious education is examined.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Department for Education, [Equality Act Guidance](#), June 2018, p. 43.

⁴⁵ [Ibid](#), p. 44, paragraph 8.18

⁴⁶ [PQ 282362 \[Religious Education\]](#), 25 July 2019.

⁴⁷ Ofsted, [School Inspection Handbook](#) (September 2019), pp. 10-11.

⁴⁸ Information on the varying inspection arrangements currently in place relating to schools with a religious character is available in Ofsted, [School Inspection Handbook](#), (September 2019), pp. 10-11.

⁴⁹ Ofsted, [‘More Than Half of Schools Failing Pupils on Religious Education’](#), 6 October 2013.

The quality of teaching of RE at both primary and secondary levels was criticised:

7. RE teaching in primary schools was less than good in 6 in 10 schools visited because of:

- weaknesses in teachers' understanding of the subject
- poor and fragmented curriculum planning
- weak assessment
- ineffective monitoring
- limited access to effective training.

8. In the secondary schools visited, the quality of teaching was rarely outstanding and, at Key Stage 3, was less than good in around half of the lessons observed. Common weaknesses included:

- an over-emphasis on a limited range of teaching strategies, which focused mainly on preparing pupils for assessments or examinations
- limited opportunities for pupils to reflect and work independently
- over-structured and bureaucratic lesson planning with insufficient stress on promoting effective learning.⁵⁰

The then Under Secretary of State for Education and Childcare, Elizabeth Truss, commented on the report in a response to a Parliamentary Question in March 2014:

Religious education (RE) remains very important for pupils' understanding of the rich diversity of faiths and communities in the UK and their part in shaping the values and traditions of this country. Since the publication of Ofsted's report the Department for Education has announced that we are establishing a subject expert group for RE, chaired by David Francis from RE:ONLINE. By working with schools to clarify the key challenges for them, the group will help make sure that teachers have the support and resources to deliver high quality RE teaching.

As part of reforms to non-EBacc subjects, Ofqual is considering how it could work with others to improve the content and rigour of the Religious Studies GCSE and A-level. Taken together, these represent significant steps towards improvements in the subject. In addition, we are working closely with the Religious Education Council (REC) in its efforts to improve the quality of teaching in the subject, in particular by highlighting best practice and helping teachers to strengthen their own approaches.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ofsted, [Religious Education: Realising the Potential](#) (October 2013), pp. 9-10.

⁵¹ [HC Deb 18 Mar 2014 c559W](#)

3.3 Training for RE teachers

The 2013 Ofsted report [Religious education: realising the potential](#) highlighted concerns that RE teaching suffered from a lack of teachers with specialist qualifications in the subject:

In around a third of the schools visited, a lack of subject expertise limited the effectiveness of the teaching of RE.

[...]

The evidence indicates a link between access to training in RE and the overall effectiveness of the subject, particularly in primary schools. In the majority of cases, this was directly linked to the capacity of the local authority to provide such training and support. In nearly every case where such support was not available, it had a direct and negative impact on the effectiveness of the teaching and subject leadership. RE was generally better where the locally agreed syllabus was well conceived with clear accompanying guidance, but too often the capacity of local authorities to provide this support was diminishing.⁵²

The 2017 [State of the Nation Report](#) by the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE), the Religious Education Council of England and Wales and RE Today on the provision of RE within 790 surveyed English secondary schools found that whilst around 77% of RE lessons in religious character schools were taught by a full qualified subject specialist, this was the case for 58% of lessons in agreed syllabus schools and 47% in academies.⁵³

A 2016 [survey](#) of primary schools by NATRE found that:

- Amongst those surveyed who had trained in the last 5 years, more than 30% of teachers of RE had no qualification in RE
- Amongst the surveyed schools, 50% had some RE lessons delivered by a higher-level teaching assistant.⁵⁴

A 2013 report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on RE, [RE: The Truth Unmasked](#) stated that “about a half” of primary school teachers and trainee teachers lacked confidence in teaching RE, and that more than 50% of RE teachers in secondary schools had “no qualification or appropriate expertise in the subject.”⁵⁵ It further stated that:

The inclusion of non-specialists in the total number of RE teachers given by the DfE gives the false impression that we have enough RE teachers and skews the statistics regarding the need to train more RE specialists.⁵⁶

⁵² Ofsted, [Religious Education: Realising the Potential](#) (2013), pp. 18-19.

⁵³ NATRE, Religious Education Council of England and Wales and RE Today, [State of the Nation: A Report on Religious Education Provision within Secondary Schools in England](#) (2017), p. 6.

⁵⁴ NATRE, [An Analysis of the Provision for RE in Primary Schools](#) (2016), p. 2.

⁵⁵ APPG on RE, [RE: The Truth Unmasked, One-Page Summary Document](#) (March 2013)

⁵⁶ [Ibid.](#)

The APPG report also raised the issue of continuing professional development (CPD) for RE teachers, particularly those in schools without a religious character, who were the “poor relations” of their counterparts in faith schools regarding CPD opportunities.⁵⁷ It argued that this was a particular concern considering the lack of subject training many RE teachers possessed:

Many young people in this country are for some of the time taught by teachers with no relevant qualifications or training, and there is more non specialist teaching in RE than in any other subject. This makes teachers' access to CPD even more important in RE, yet opportunities for this are fewer and are diminishing. This reflects the absence of any obligation on schools to match staff deployment to new subject areas with appropriate training.⁵⁸

The report also noted the withdrawal of bursaries for RE, and “a radical reduction in applicant numbers for 2013/14.”⁵⁹

Government comment on teacher training

The following Parliamentary Questions from January 2019 sets out the Government position on the training of RE teachers:

Lyn Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 7 December 2018 to [Question 197426 on Teachers: Qualifications](#), what steps he is taking to ensure that more teachers of religious education have a relevant post A-level qualification in that subject.

Nick Gibb: The Government is committed to supporting schools in recruiting well qualified teachers in religious education (RE), although the responsibility for making recruitment decisions rightly rests with schools, including what specialist qualifications and experience individual teachers are expected to hold.

To support recruitment efforts for postgraduate initial teacher training (ITT) courses the Department is offering a £9,000 bursary for all RE trainees with at least a 2:2 degree classification, starting in 2019/20.

RE ITT applicants are also now eligible for one to one support from our expert Teacher Training Advisers, to guide them through their journey into teaching. They can access this support by registering with Get into Teaching.⁶⁰

3.4 DfE statistics on RE teachers' qualifications and recruitment

In 2018, there were around **14,600** state-funded secondary school RE and philosophy teachers. Of these, around **7,900** did not have a relevant post A-Level qualification.⁶¹ This means **54%** of RE teachers did

⁵⁷ APPG on RE, [RE: The Truth Unmasked](#) (March 2013), p. 29.

⁵⁸ [Ibid.](#), pp. 33-4.

⁵⁹ APPG on RE, '[RE Teachers Lack Training And Support. Concludes Parliamentary Inquiry](#)', 18 March 2013

⁶⁰ [PQ. 205237 \[Teachers: Qualifications\]](#), 11 January 2019.

⁶¹ Includes a higher education degree, bachelor of education, diplomas, certificate of education, or higher education and further education, foundation degrees.

not have a relevant post A-Level qualification compared to **26%** of secondary school teachers across all subjects where data is published.⁶²

In 2018, around **117,000** hours of RE and philosophy were taught in state-funded secondary schools. Of these, around **28,500** (or **24%**) were taught by teachers that did not have a relevant post A-Level qualification. This compares to an average of **14%** across all subjects where data is published.⁶³

In 2018, the vacancy rate of RE teachers in state-funded secondary schools was **0.6%**, this was below the national average of **1.0%**.⁶⁴

3.5 Bursaries for RE teachers

Withdrawal⁶⁵

The Government provides bursaries for students taking initial teacher training courses in priority subject areas. Priority areas are subjects considered to be of national importance or where there is an under-supply of teachers. In the 2012/13 academic year RE was classified as an 'other priority' subject and trainee teachers who met specified eligibility requirements could access bursaries of £9,000 pa only if they had a 1st class degree or £5,000 pa for a 2:1 degree. The RE bursary was withdrawn in 2013/14 and in 2014/15.⁶⁶ Four charities established a fund in response.⁶⁷

Reinstatement

For **2015/16**, the RE bursary was reinstated and eligible students are able to access £9,000 with a 1st class degree or a PhD and £4,000 with a 2:1 or a Master's degree (as in 2012/13 students with a 2:2 degree or below are ineligible for a bursary).⁶⁸ The re-introduction of the RE bursary was [welcomed](#) by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales and the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE).⁶⁹

In both **2018/19 and 2019/20**, trainees with 1st, 2:1, 2:2 undergraduate degree, Masters, or PhD were eligible for bursaries of £9,000 to train as a RE Teacher.⁷⁰ This was less than those training to teach History, English and Classics. In 2016/17, those training to teach

⁶² [Department for Education, School Workforce in England: Nov 2018](#) (Main Tables, Table 12)

⁶³ [Department for Education, School Workforce: Nov 2018](#) (Main Tables, Table 13)

⁶⁴ [Ibid.](#) (Main Tables, Table 15)

⁶⁵ Section by Sue Hubble, Social Policy Section

⁶⁶ National College for Teaching and Leadership, [Training Bursary Guide 2013/14](#) (April 2013), p. 41; [Initial Teacher Training: Training Bursary Guide 2014/15](#) (April 2015), p. 44.

⁶⁷ '[Charities Step in to Fund RE Teacher Training After DfE Rejects Bursary Plea](#)', *SecEd*, 6 March 2014.

⁶⁸ Department for Education, [The Initial Teacher Training Bursary Guide Academic year 2015/16](#) (September 2015), p.11.

⁶⁹ [Government Offers New Funding for Trainee RE Teachers](#), *Independent Catholic News*, 1 October 2014.

⁷⁰ Department for Education, '[Bursaries and Scholarships](#)' (13 October 2018); '[Bursaries and Scholarships](#)' (2 September 2019).

English, History, RE and music had all been eligible for the same level of bursary if the candidate had at least a 2:1 or Master's degree.⁷¹

3.6 Organisations providing resources for RE teachers

The [National Association of Teachers of Religious Education](#) (NATRE) provides resources and training for RE teachers.

[RE:ONLINE](#) provides advice on policy and teaching practice for RE.

⁷¹ Department for Education, ['Funding: Initial Teacher Training \(ITT\), Academic Year 2016 to 17'](#)

4. Other relevant issues

4.1 Right to withdraw a child from Religious Education

Section 71 of the [School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#), as amended, provides for the right of withdrawal from Religious Education or collective worship in local authority maintained schools. There is no requirement to provide a reason and the school must comply with their request. Academies and free schools are bound by their funding agreements. Generally speaking, the DfE's model funding agreements include clauses that reflect the statutory provisions relating to religious education and collective worship. In independent schools, the school's policy on such issues determines whether parents or pupils have a similar opt-out.

The [guidance on RE](#) provided by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families in 2010, which remains in force, includes some additional information:

[...] the right of withdrawal does not extend to other areas of the curriculum when, as may happen on occasion, spontaneous questions on religious matters are raised by pupils or there are issues related to religion that arise in other subjects such as history or citizenship.

The use of the right to withdraw should be at the instigation of parents (or pupils themselves if they are aged 18 or over), and it should be made clear whether it is from the whole of the subject or specific parts of it. No reasons need be given.

Parents have the right to choose whether or not to withdraw their child from RE without influence from the school, although a school should ensure parents or carers are informed of this right and are aware of the educational objectives and content of the RE syllabus. In this way, parents can make an informed decision. Where parents have requested that their child is withdrawn, their right must be respected, and where RE is integrated in the curriculum, the school will need to discuss the arrangements with the parents or carers to explore how the child's withdrawal can be best accommodated. If pupils are withdrawn from RE, schools have a duty to supervise them, though not to provide additional teaching or to incur extra cost. Pupils will usually remain on school premises.

Where a pupil has been withdrawn, the law provides for alternative arrangements to be made for RE of the kind the parent wants the pupil to receive. This RE could be provided at the school in question, or the pupil could be sent to another school where suitable RE is provided if this is reasonably convenient. If neither approach is practicable, outside arrangements can be made to provide the pupil with the kind of RE that the parent wants, and the pupil may be withdrawn from school for a reasonable period of time to allow them to attend this external RE.⁷²

⁷² Department for Children, Schools and Families, [Religious Education In English Schools: Non-Statutory Guidance 2010](#), p. 28.

In 2019, the academics David Lundie and Cathal O’Siochru found, based on a survey of 450 school leaders and RE co-ordinators, that 71% believed that the right to withdraw from RE was no longer needed and that there was a misconception by around 27% that parents had to provide children with an alternative syllabus if they chose to withdraw them from RE.⁷³ Of 83 responses to a question on reasons why children were withdrawn, 56 related to anti-Islam sentiments.⁷⁴

This conclusion echoed the claims of the 2018 Association of Teachers and Lecturers conference (ATL) that withdrawal from RE was “increasingly fuelled by antisemitism and Islamophobia”. The ATL conference in 2018 voted to urge the Government to take steps to prevent parents from selectively withdrawing their children from RE.⁷⁵ The National Association of Head Teachers had adopted this as its policy in 2016.⁷⁶

4.2 Collective worship

The general position on collective worship in English schools is set out in the Department for Education’s [Governors’ Handbook](#):

All maintained schools without a designated religious character must provide a daily act of broadly Christian collective worship for their pupils. In community schools and non-faith foundation schools, the executive leader is responsible for arranging this after consulting the board. In voluntary aided schools, VC schools and foundation schools designated with a religious character, the board is responsible for arranging collective worship in accordance with the trust deed or religious designation of the school after consulting the executive leader.

In some maintained schools without a designated religious character, the family backgrounds of some or all pupils may lead the executive leader and board to conclude that broadly Christian collective worship is not appropriate. The executive leader can apply to the local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) to have the broadly Christian requirement disapplied and replaced by collective worship distinctive of another faith and should consult the board before doing so.

Academies that do not have a designated religious character (except for Alternative Provision academies) must also provide a daily act of broadly Christian collective worship by virtue of their funding agreement. An academy wishing to be exempted from the requirement to provide broadly Christian collective worship should apply to the Secretary of State via the ESFA.⁷⁷

In academies and free schools, the exact requirements for collective worship will be detailed in the school’s funding agreement with the

⁷³ David Lundie and Cathal O’Siochru, ‘[The Right of Withdrawal From Religious Education in England: School Leaders’ Beliefs, Experiences and Understandings of Policy and Practice](#)’, *British Journal of Religious Education* (2019), pp. 6, 8.

⁷⁴ [Ibid](#), p. 9.

⁷⁵ Camilla Turner, ‘[Teachers: “Racist” Parents Pull Children From RE Classes Because They Don’t Want Them Learning About Islam](#)’, *The Telegraph*, 11 April 2018; Freddie Whittaker, ‘[ATL: “Keep Parents From Selectively Withdrawing Pupils From RE”](#)’, *Schools Week*, 11 April 2018.

⁷⁶ NAHT, ‘[Parents Should Not Have the Right to Remove Children From RE](#)’ (n.d)

⁷⁷ Department for Education, [Governance Handbook](#) (March 2019), pp. 66-7.

Secretary of State for Education. Generally, the current model funding agreements contain clauses that reflect the statutory provisions relating to religious education and collective worship in maintained schools.

Parents have a right to withdraw their child from collective worship at a maintained school in accordance with section 71 of the [School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#), as amended. Sixth form students can withdraw themselves.

[Government guidance](#) on this issue provides more detail on what worship of a 'broadly Christian character' is taken to mean:

60. In the light of the Christian traditions of Great Britain, section 7(1) of the Education Reform Act (and the corresponding section of the Education Act 1993) says that collective worship organised by a county or equivalent grant-maintained school is to be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'.

61. The [relevant legislation] then further defines collective worship of a 'broadly Christian character' as being worship which reflects the broad traditions of Christian belief. Any such worship should not, however, be distinctive of any particular Christian denomination.

62 It is open to a school to have acts of worship that are wholly of a broadly Christian character, acts of worship that are broadly in the tradition of another religion, and acts of worship which contain elements drawn from a number of different faiths. Section 7(3) of the Act qualifies section 7(1) by providing that within each school term the majority of acts of worship must be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character, but it is not necessary for every act of worship to be so (see also paragraph 124). Thus, whatever the decision on individual acts of worship, the majority of acts of worship over a term must be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character.

63 Provided that, taken as a whole, an act of worship which is broadly Christian reflects the traditions of Christian belief, it need not contain only Christian material. Section 7(1) is regarded as permitting some non-Christian elements in the collective worship without thus depriving it of its broadly Christian character. Nor would the inclusion of elements common to Christianity and one or more other religions deprive it of that character. It must, however, contain some elements which relate specifically to the traditions of Christian belief and which accord a special status to Jesus Christ.⁷⁸

A judicial review on the provision of an alternative to school assemblies if a child is withdrawn from them is due to be held at the High Court in November 2019, in the case of *Lee and Lizanne Harris v. Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust*.⁷⁹

It was reported in October 2019 that 48 schools had applied to their local SACRE to opt out of the daily act of worship in the previous three years, and 42 were successful. This was found after *Schools Week*

⁷⁸ Department for Education, [Collective Worship in Schools](#) (31 January 1994), p. 21.

⁷⁹ Local Government Lawyer, [High Court Grant permission to challenge School's Daily Act of Christian Worship](#), 30 July 2019.

received 134 responses to their Freedom of Information Requests. Only 1 of the 42 schools opted for assemblies with no faith.⁸⁰

4.3 Teaching of creationism

The following PQ from 2017 provides the Government's position:

Mr Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the number of publicly funded schools that are teaching creationism. [70286]

Mr Gibb: The Department does not collect data about the number of schools that are teaching creationism. Creationism does not accord with the scientific consensus or the very large body of established scientific evidence; nor does it accurately and consistently employ the scientific method. Outside of science lessons, there is scope for young people to discuss beliefs about the origins of the Earth and living things in religious education, providing that these discussions do not undermine the teaching of the established scientific consensus around evolution.

The Government expects pupils in all state funded schools to study the nature of, and evidence for, evolution by the end of Key Stage 4. The Government's expectations are set out in the National Curriculum, which maintained schools are required to follow, and in the funding agreements to which academies must adhere. The Department investigates complaints made about schools that are teaching creationism as a scientific theory contrary to the National Curriculum or their funding agreement.⁸¹

⁸⁰ ['More schools opting out of Christian worship for "multi-faith" alternatives'](#), *Schools Week*, 5 October 2019.

⁸¹ [PO 70286 \[Creationism: Education\]](#), 13 April 2017.

5. Recent Reports on RE

5.1 A New Settlement? Clarke and Woodhead Report on Religion in Schools (2018)

In 2018, Charles Clarke, the former Education Secretary, and Linda Woodhead, professor of sociology of religion at Lancaster University, called for a “new settlement” for religion in schools, both in the teaching of RE and more broadly. Their [2018 pamphlet](#) updated their report of 2015.⁸²

The 2018 report argued that:

The 1944 settlement [in the Education Act] reflected a different era and no longer served its purpose—to such an extent that there are now many areas of educational practice where the law is honoured more in the breach than the observance – with the effect that the best developments in the way religion is handled in schools were being inhibited, and the worst were going unchecked.⁸³

The first two recommendations of the report were that:

The Religious Education syllabus in county and voluntary controlled schools should no longer be set by a system of agreed local syllabuses, but by an agreed national syllabus which would have a similar legal status to the requirements of other subjects in the National Curriculum.

The nationally-agreed syllabus would be determined by the Secretary of State in agreement with a newly created ‘National Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (NASACRE)’ comprising experts on religion and education, and after formal consultation and input from the relevant established professional bodies and representatives of religions, humanism and other belief systems. This nationally-agreed syllabus should be reviewed every 5/7 years.⁸⁴

The report made a total of 16 recommendations, including changing the name of RE to “Religion, Relief and Values”, the need for agreement of a national syllabus for the subject similar to the requirements of other subjects in the national curriculum, removing the right of parents to withdraw their children from the revised curriculum, reducing the number of faith schools where faith is a criterion for admission, and the abolition of Local Agreed Syllabus Conferences.⁸⁵ One substantial difference between the 2015 and 2018 reports was

⁸² Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead, [A New Settlement Revised: Religion and Belief in Schools](#) (2018)

⁸³ [Ibid](#), p. 10.

⁸⁴ [Ibid](#), p. 13.

⁸⁵ [Ibid](#), pp. 46-51.

that the original recommendation that the requirement to hold an act of daily worship be repealed, was withdrawn.⁸⁶

The report's recommendations of a national syllabus for RE and a change in the subject's name was strongly criticised by the Catholic Church as a "backhanded way of taking the Catholic out of Catholic schools".⁸⁷ The Church of England questioned the report's recommendations on the admissions process for faith schools.⁸⁸

5.2 Religion and World Views, Commission on RE (2018)

In 2018, the Commission on Religious Education, an independent commission established by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales and constituted of academics, journalists, teachers and ex-school inspectors, published [Religion and World Views: The Way Forward](#). The report argued that:

- Academisation and the move towards a school-led system have transformed the educational landscape. The structures and systems supporting Religious Education have not kept pace with these changes.⁸⁹
- Changes to accountability systems have created an environment where there is less and less incentive for schools to offer good RE, particularly at secondary level. These include Ofsted no longer inspecting individual subjects, the removal of GCSE Short Courses from school performance measures and the non-inclusion of Religious Studies GCSE in the Ebacc. This has led to a significant drop in students taking a Key Stage 4 qualification in RE.⁹⁰
- Successive Ofsted reports have highlighted that the quality of teaching and learning in RE currently is variable, and, in general, lower than that of History and Geography at both secondary and primary.⁹¹
- There is increased non-compliance with the law, with over a third of schools not offering any RE in Key Stage 4.⁹²

The three main recommendations of the report were that:

1. The subject should be called Religion and Worldviews
2. A statutory National Entitlement should apply to all schools and that this should be subject to inspection. Schools should be required to publish details of how they provide this Entitlement.
3. There should be a significant investment in ensuring two essential supports for this new way forward. First, highly qualified and knowledgeable teachers will be required to

⁸⁶ [Ibid](#), pp. 33-5.

⁸⁷ Carina Murphy, '[Report on Religion in Schools "An Attack on Catholics"](#)'. *The Tablet*, 18 July 2018.

⁸⁸ Church of England, '[Church of England Response](#)', 18 July 2018.

⁸⁹ Commission on Religious Education, [Religion and World Views: The Way Forward. A National Plan for RE](#) (2018), p. 4.

⁹⁰ [Ibid](#), p. 22.

⁹¹ [Ibid](#), p. 45.

⁹² [Ibid](#), p. 59.

achieve this new vision. A sustained programme of investment in teacher education and development is essential to achieve this. Second, local communities have played a significant role in supporting RE in the past. We propose that the structures that made this possible should be re-envisioned to enable this important contribution to continue.⁹³

The Jewish Board of Deputies described the report as “fundamentally undermined by the dilution of religious education through the inclusion of all world views in an already tight teaching timetable.”⁹⁴ The Church of England, Humanists UK and National Association of Teachers of RE broadly welcomed the report.⁹⁵ The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) also broadly welcomed the report, though expressed disappointment that the Commission did not recommend the removal of the right to withdraw from a reformed RE curriculum. The NAHT had adopted this as its policy in 2016.⁹⁶

In December 2018, the Government stated that accepting the commission’s main proposals would be incompatible with their commitment to make no changes to the curriculum during the lifetime of the 2017 Parliament, and would not be making any changes to the RE curriculum.⁹⁷ A House of Lords debate on the report was held in the same month.⁹⁸

5.3 State of the Nation (2017)

NATRE, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, and RE Today, published [A Report on Religious Education Provision](#) in 2017. Its survey of secondary schools found that:

- 28% of schools did not make full RE provision for all students, suggesting noncompliance with the statutory requirements⁹⁹
- In 49% of secondary schools fewer than half of the RE lessons are taught by a teacher with a relevant post A-Level qualification¹⁰⁰

On the teaching of RE, it made 15 recommendations. These included the Department for Education publishing data on RE provision routinely, clarifying and strengthening the mechanism by which complaints can be

⁹³ [Ibid](#), Foreword.

⁹⁴ Jewish Board of Deputies, [‘Commission on RE Report is Fundamentally Flawed’](#), 12 September 2018.

⁹⁵ Church of England, [‘Response to the Religious Education Commission’](#), 9 September 2018; NATRE, [‘NATRE Response to the Report of the Commission on RE’](#), (n.d), Humanists UK, [‘Humanist UK Welcomes Landmark Commission on RE’](#), 9 September 2018.

⁹⁶ NAHT, [‘School Leaders Respond to Recommended Changes to RE’](#) (n.d); NAHT, [‘Parents Should Not Have the Right to Remove Children From RE’](#) (n.d)

⁹⁷ Letter from Secretary of State for Education to Commission on Religious Education, 6 December 2018, [page 1](#) and [page 2](#), [PQ 218805 \[Religion: Education\]](#), 8 February 2019.

⁹⁸ [HL Deb 17 December 2018, c 153gc- 170gc](#)

⁹⁹ NATRE, Religious Education Council of England and Wales and RE Today, [A Report on Religious Education Provision \(2017\)](#), p.20.

¹⁰⁰ [Ibid](#), p.34.

made about RE provision, an increase subject-specific training, and reviewing the training of Ofsted inspectors.¹⁰¹

5.4 RE for REal report, Goldsmiths College (2015)

In November 2015, researchers at Goldsmiths College, University of London, published [RE for REal](#), a report that aimed to build on the Religious Education Council's review of Religious Education in England (see section 1.6) and find a way to clarify what it described as the "policy muddle" surrounding RE.¹⁰²

The report made several [recommendations](#), including that:

- A statutory National Framework for Religion and Belief Learning should be developed, applicable to all schools, balancing shared national approaches with school level determination;
- Religion and belief learning should be a compulsory part of the curriculum to age 16;
- The suggested framework content should reflect the real religious landscape of the UK.

5.5 Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (2015)

The Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life ([CORAB](#)), convened by the Woolf Institute, Cambridge, published its report [Living with Difference](#) in December 2015. The report was wide-ranging and dealt with issues across the UK, but made several recommendations relating to religious education in England, including that:

- The non-statutory curriculum framework produced in 2013 by the Religious Education Council should be made statutory as part of the national curriculum, but under a modified subject name, pending future reform;
- The requirements for schools to hold acts of collective worship or religious observance should be repealed;
- In teacher education the attention given to religion and belief should be of a similar level to that given to reading and maths;
- State inspectorates should be concerned with every aspect of the life of faith schools, including religious elements currently inspected by denominational authorities.¹⁰³

An [article](#) by Reverend Nigel Genders, the Church of England's Chief Education Officer, responded to the recommendations. The article supported a national framework for learning of the kind proposed in the Goldsmiths report, but was critical of the CORAB recommendations

¹⁰¹ NATRE, Religious Education Council of England and Wales and RE Today, [The State of the Nation: A Report on Religious Education Provision Within Secondary Schools in England](#) (2017), pp. 7-8.

¹⁰² Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw, [RE for REal: The Future of Teaching and Learning About Religion and Belief](#) (2015), p. 2.

¹⁰³ Report of the Commission on Public Life and Belief, [Living with Difference: Community, Diversity and the Common Good](#) (December 2015), pp. 37-8.

on admissions and collective worship, citing the popularity of Church of England schools and the importance of maintaining an opportunity for pupils to pause and reflect.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Rev. Nigel Genders, '[Church Schools Make a Difference](#)', 4 December 2015.

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