

# Replace RE with new national entitlement, says NSS

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The National Secular Society has called for a new national entitlement for religion and belief education in England to ensure all pupils learn about a diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews.

The NSS also called for an end to local determination of religious education and stressed the need to "liberate" the subject area from vested interests.

Its call came in response to a consultation held by the [Commission on Religious Education](#) (CoRE) on its interim report on [Religious Education For All](#). The Commission has been established by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) to review the legal, education, and policy frameworks for RE.

The interim report stresses that RE in England faces "a perilous future" unless it is subject to "[strategic, urgent intervention](#)". The report suggested a new national entitlement for RE and said the subject should cover non-religious worldviews as well as religious ones. "RE in schools should enable students to engage in an intelligent and informed way with the ideas, practices and contemporary manifestations of a diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews," it says.

The call for evidence gave the opportunity for individuals and organisations to give their views on the future direction of RE.

The NSS, which is advocating reform of religion and belief education through its '[21st Century RE For All](#)' campaign, is broadly supportive of many of the report's recommendations. In its response to the consultation, the Society welcomed CoRE's proposal to replace current laws with a national entitlement for religion and belief learning.

The NSS argues that a new national entitlement would end the current 'postcode lottery' resulting from locally-determined RE syllabuses with privileged control by religious organisations. If applied to faith schools, it would also ensure that such schools take a more broad and balanced approach to the teaching of religion and belief.

The NSS said the requirement that agreed syllabuses must 'reflect the fact that religious traditions in Britain are in the main Christian' should be scrapped. It also suggested that rather than focusing on an in-depth study of specific religions, the entitlement should take a wider view on the concepts of religion and belief, and examine them from a variety of viewpoints.

The consultation additionally sought views on the future of [Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education](#) (SACREs), which provide advice on the local education authority's agreed syllabus for RE. The NSS advised that SACREs be abolished, because a national entitlement would negate the reason for their existence.

"SACREs are not suitable bodies for the task of advising on, delivering or supporting a national entitlement for objective, critical and pluralistic religion and belief education," the NSS said in its

response. "A major motivation of those joining SACREs has been to represent their faith or belief tradition in the most positive light. This is educationally inappropriate. Such groups should not be permitted to undermine the secular ethos of the national entitlement."

The NSS stressed that the construction and content of any programmes of study covering religion and belief should be determined by the same process as other subjects – by senior educationalists, subject specialists and teachers, and not by religious groups. Similarly, the responsibility of setting up RE networks should be given to RE teachers and relevant education professionals, and not SACREs or religious groups with a vested interest in promoting their faith.

It strongly warned the Commission against its own suggestion of "leaving the market open for schools, groups of schools, dioceses, commercial providers and other relevant groups to write their own programmes of study", which the NSS said would risk undermining the whole endeavour of a national entitlement and would result in continuing inequality in provision and quality of religion and belief education.

The NSS cited the Church of England's [Understanding Christianity](#) project as an example of how religious groups could produce confessionally-orientated school resources for RE if they were afforded the right to create programmes of study for schools.

On the subject of [inspectors for RE](#), the NSS said that Ofsted, and not religious authorities, should be responsible for inspections in all schools, regardless of their faith ethos. It also said that no RE teachers in training should leave training thinking it is ever appropriate for them to teach or promote their own religious beliefs in the classroom.

The interim report discussed ending the right that parents currently have to withdraw their pupils from RE. The NSS responded that provided RE is delivered in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner, the [right of withdrawal could be repealed](#). However, it went on to add that with RE in its current state, the right of withdrawal is necessary to protect freedom of belief due to the prevalence of schools and [external evangelical groups](#) using RE as a platform to proselytise.

Finally, the NSS questioned the assumption that RE should remain a distinct subject. "The interim report appears to accept the status quo uncritically by asserting that 'RE remains a vital academic subject for education in the 21st century' but fails, in our view, to justify that position," it said.

"Teaching children about a diversity of worldviews, and giving them space to consider moral and ethical issues, is a legitimate educational objective, but there is no reason to assume that we have to have mandatory religious education classes to achieve that."

Should RE be retained as a distinct subject, the Society recommended that the name of the subject be changed to emphasise "philosophy", "ethics", "worldviews", "beliefs" and "values", rather than "religion", in order to reflect its inclusive nature.

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