

Response to Commission on Religious Education consultation on the interim report



The National Entitlement for RE

24. How far do you agree with each of the following recommendations?

a. There should be a national entitlement statement (see below) for RE which sets out clearly the aims and purpose of RE and what pupils should experience in the course of their study of the subject.

Agree

b. This entitlement should become normative through non-statutory guidance as early as possible, and should ultimately become statutory, either to supplement or to replace current legislation on agreed syllabuses.

Strongly agree

c. The national entitlement should apply to all state-funded schools including academies, free schools and schools of a religious character.

Strongly agree

d. Independent schools should consider adopting the entitlement as an undertaking of good practice

Strongly agree

25. Please comment on any of your answers above, in particular your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the recommendations.

Answer to a: Every pupil should have the same entitlement to high quality, non-partisan education about religion and belief. All schools should prepare young people for life in modern Britain by teaching pupils about the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews.

Answer to b: Making the entitlement statutory to replace current legislation is the only means of achieving a consistent and modernised approach to religion and belief learning introduced in all schools.

Answer to c: Education about religion and belief should be offered to all children wherever they live; there are simply no grounds for discriminating according to school type. If a programme of study covering religion and belief deserves to be included in the school curriculum, it should be offered to all as a basic entitlement for every future citizen.

Answer to d: This would help to eliminate some of the problems arising in Independent schools, particularly independent faith schools, surrounding confessional religious education.

Here is the proposed national entitlement for RE:

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

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

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

- a. the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews and ways of life that exist locally, nationally and globally.***
- b. the ways in which communities and individuals holding different worldviews interact, change and maintain continuity in different times and contexts and as the surrounding culture changes.***
- c. the different ways that people interpret and respond to texts and other sources of authority.***
- d. the ways that people communicate their beliefs, experiences, values and identities through verbal and non-verbal means (eg prose, story, poetry, art, music, dance, ritual, architecture).***
- e. How people seek moral guidance from religious and non-religious worldviews and how they interpret this guidance in their lives.***
- f. the importance of experience, including extra-ordinary experiences, in shaping people's worldviews and how worldviews are used to interpret experience.***
- g. the role of religious and non-religious rituals and practices in both creating and expressing experience, beliefs, values and commitments.***
- h. the relationship between people's worldview and their thinking and actions concerning political, public, social and cultural life.***
- i. both the positive and negative exercise of power and influence resulting from people's worldviews.***
- j. the important role that worldviews play in providing people with a way of making sense of their lives and in forming their identity.***

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

- 1. experience meeting and visiting people from their local community from a range of worldviews including those different from their own and that of the school.***

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

26. Is the above national entitlement at the right level of specificity?

About right

Please comment on your response, in particular to explain what should be added or removed.

We are in broad agreement with much of what is set out in the suggested national entitlement. The actual entitlement should however be determined by educationalists rather than the pre-existing 'RE community'.

One significant criticism is the inclusion of theology as a desired approach to the study of religions. Religion and belief learning should engage pupils in an impartial, objective study of religion and belief. Encouraging children to 'think theologically' would undermine this approach and risk turning the subject into theological enquiry. Theological concepts are highly contested and quite legitimately seen by some as meaningless. As Stephen Prothero observes, *"Theology and religious studies...are two very different things. While theologians do religion, religious studies scholars study religion."*¹

Theology should remain the pursuit of religious enthusiasts and not the focus of religion and belief education in schools.

We also question the use of "non-religious worldviews" rather than "philosophical outlooks". The use of "Non-religious worldviews" risks restricting the subject of enquiry to an 'atheist' or 'humanist' outlook. The secular outlook extends far beyond that. It should be noted that many people's worldview is neither religiously or even specifically non-religiously based. And this significant demographic is ignored in the words and concepts discussed.

The concept of 'religious education' has for too long allowed religion to dominate and sideline every other human explanation for the meaning of life. The use of philosophical outlooks rather than narrower 'non-religious worldviews' would allow other valuable worldviews that have been marginalised by religious dominance to be considered.

¹ Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know-And Doesn't by Jeffrey R. Thibert

27. Should the entitlement be accompanied by expected standards of attainment at each Key Stage?

Yes

Please comment on your answer below

This would help to ensure that RE was being consistently delivered in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner at all schools, included those with a religious character or faith ethos.

28. Please comment further on the national entitlement in the box below.

29. Should the requirement for local authorities to produce locally agreed syllabuses be removed?

Yes

30. If the requirement to produce locally agreed syllabuses were removed, what do you think would happen to SACREs and why?

A national entitlement would remove SACREs *raison d'être*. 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. In our view, it has not been helpful that teaching and learning in this area has been so heavily influenced – and even determined – by faith and belief communities who could be regarded as constituting groups with a vested interest. A reformed subject should be supported and inspected in exactly the same way as any other academic subject.

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.

Naturally, if SACREs are to continue to play any role (and we are adamant they should not) the discriminatory way in which SACREs are constituted will need to be addressed.

31. How should the entitlement statement be translated into detailed programmes of study?

There should be one single national set of programmes of study to apply to all schools.

32. Please comment further on who should develop programmes of study and how this can best be organised to meet the needs of all schools. Please explain your response to the question above on how the national entitlement should be translated into detailed programmes of study.

The construction and content of any programmes of study subject covering religion and belief should be determined by the same process as other subjects – by senior educationalists, subject specialists and teachers. If this is a genuine academic subject area this should not be “vexed question”, as the interim report suggests. Crucially, curriculum design should be an academic, rather than a religious pursuit.

The Commission must not be swayed by religious groups who seek ‘freedom’ to undermine secular education by pressing for the retention of biased or confessional teaching of religion. The national

entitlement must be appropriate for pupils of all faith backgrounds and none, regardless of any given school's "immediate community".

If faith schools wish to provide optional denominational religious teaching in addition to the entitlement, that is something they could pursue with the DfE and it should be outside the compulsory school hours and it must be conditional on no pupil suffering any disadvantage by virtue of non-attendance.

We are deeply alarmed by the Commission's 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." This risks undermining the whole endeavour of a national entitlement and would result in continuing inequality in provision and quality of religion and belief education. If the low status, poor quality, dysfunctional character and negative perception of RE is to be addressed, 'leaving the market open' for groups with a faith (or non-faith based) agenda to develop programmes of study must be resisted.

It is for example, entirely inappropriate that at present many local agreed syllabuses used in non-faith based academies, community and voluntary controlled schools are written by RE Today Services, the trading arm of the Christian Education Movement. The same organisation works in partnership with Church of England dioceses to provide partisan syllabuses for church schools.

To continue this approach would particularly serve the wishes of well-established religion and belief groups that regard the subject as advertising space and an opportunity to evangelise in schools and have the capacity to develop such resources.

One example of the total inappropriateness of this approach is the Church of England's *Understanding Christianity* 'resource' which many schools are using to plan significant elements of their RE provision. This is an evangelism project commissioned by the Church of England Education Office with the financial support of various explicitly evangelical organisations.

Understanding Christianity was originally called 'The Christianity Project' but the name was changed because, as Derek Holloway (CofE School Character and SIAMS Development Manager) explained in 2016, "it was felt this sounded more educational and less like an evangelism course."

Despite the National Society's insistence that Understanding Christianity is simply "a resource", it fits the description of a syllabus as laid out by legislation and as commonly understood by teachers. It contains at least 29 units of work from Reception to KS3. It lays out what is to be taught, it gives the approach to take and suggested materials. It also includes the training requirements for the scheme.

A 2014 Review of Religious Education in Church of England Schools, states that the Christianity Project will provide "curriculum models which promote the progressive development of theological thinking within the study of Christianity".

Section 18 of a report to the General Synod (2013)² stated::

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<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/1872428/gs%201920%20-%20the%20church%20school%20of%20the%20future%20update%20on%20the%20chadwick%20report.docx.pdf> Section 18 – page 4

“The rationale for the Project is that all children, of all faiths and none, should be offered the opportunity for a serious engagement with the Christian faith. That is the way schools participate in the mission of the church, as expressed in Going for Growth³:

- *‘The Church... is called to work towards every child having a life enhancing encounter with the Christian faith and the person of Jesus Christ’*
- *There is no expectation of commitment but learning about and engaging with the faith is a necessary pre-requisite for commitment especially for children and young people whose only experience of church is through the school.*

With its heavily theological Christian content the ‘resource’ is wholly unsuitable to be used to deliver the locally agreed syllabus. However, many voluntary controlled church schools are using this, often following advice/pressure to do so via SIAMS School Inspections. RE Today, which received just short of £200,000 to develop the Church of England’s ‘resource’, are encouraging this – and stand to profit from it. Given that the AS syllabus should take non-confessional approach, this strikes us as the ‘spirit’ if not the ‘letter’ of the law being abused.

Leaving the market open would inevitably leave the subject open to such evangelism, however disguised, and serve only to undermine this important area of learning and deprive children and young people of the high quality, non-partisan education about religion and belief that they should be entitled to.

We again emphasise that such education should be offered to all children irrespective of the type of school they attend; there are simply no grounds for discriminating on the basis of geographical location or making concessions to schools of a religious character. If a programme of study covering religion and belief is included in the school curriculum, it should be offered to all as a basic entitlement for every future citizen.

33. How should the national entitlement interact with the current statement in legislation that agreed syllabuses must ‘reflect the fact that religious traditions in Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain’ (UK Parliament, Education Act 1996, Section 375.2).

This requirement should be repealed and a new national entitlement should replace it.

Please comment on the reasons for your choice. If you have been asked to specify your answer, please do so in this box.

Recent surveys indicate that the UK’s religious landscape is changing, with the population becoming less religious and more religiously diverse. According to a 2016 survey by NatCen, 53% of people in Britain have “no religion.” Just 15% of people – and only 3% of those aged 18-24 – identified as Anglican in that study. It therefore seems unjustified to give Christianity a greater emphasis over other beliefs and worldviews in RE.

Replacing the statement from Section 375.2 of the Education Act 1996 with a new national entitlement is a precondition of RE provision being appropriate for the 21st century, balanced and pluralistic.

³ <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/59351/goingforgrowth.pdf> (Going for Growth: Transformation for children, young people and the Church January 2010)

34. Should the entitlement specify a number and range of worldviews?

No, we should avoid limiting RE to a specific number or range of worldviews

Yes, it should specify a minimum number of worldviews but nothing further

Yes, it should specify a minimum number of worldviews and that there should be one Abrahamic worldview, one Dharmic worldview and one non-religious worldview.

Yes, it should specify a number of worldviews and name particular worldviews that should be studied (please specify).

No comment

Other, please specify in the comment box below

Please comment on your response in the box below. If you were asked to specify your answer, please do so here.

At the very least, the entitlement should ensure that a broad range of worldviews are explored to prevent schools (particularly those with a religious character) teaching pupils a worldview solely from their own religious viewpoint. Furthermore, the teaching of religion should not be prioritised over the teaching of non-religious worldviews and secular philosophical approaches.

Rather than focussing on an in-depth study of specific religions, the entitlement should, as much as possible, take a wider view on the concepts of religion and belief, and examine them from a variety of viewpoints (for example, sociological, anthropological, philosophical etc.). This would not only help to resolve the issues surrounding which worldviews to teach and which to omit, but it would also help to resolve the issue identified in the Interim Report that “religion is often presented in an essentialist mode that fails to help pupils understand the complexity, diversity and historicity of religious ideas, institutions and practices.” Switching the focus from the details of the religions themselves to a more fundamental examination of the concept of “religion” would help to eliminate this essentialist approach. Excessive detail is unnecessary and a poor use of school time.

35. Should the entitlement specify a minimum amount of time to be spent on any one worldview?

No, a minimum time should not be specified

Yes, there should be a minimum time specified for one worldview

Yes, there should be a minimum time specified for more than one worldview

Yes, and there should also be a maximum time specified

No comment

Please comment on your answer below. If you have suggested that there should be a minimum or maximum time, please specify these below.

While the minimum and maximum times specified should be decided by the education professionals who design the programmes of study, all worldviews (both religious and non-religious) should be given an appropriate length of time.

Rather than focussing on an in-depth study of specific religions, the entitlement should, as far as possible, take a wider view on the concepts of religion and belief, and examine them from a variety of viewpoints (for example, sociological, anthropological, philosophical etc.).

36. Should the name of the subject be changed? If so, which option would best fit the entitlement statement?

Other (please specify)
See comments below

37. Please explain your reasons for your choice of name.

While we have no specific preference for the name, we believe that the concepts of “philosophy”, “ethics”, “worldviews”, “beliefs” and “values” should be emphasised in the name, rather than “religion” to reflect the inclusiveness and exploratory nature of this area of learning.

38. If you have any other comments about the National Entitlement for RE, please enter them in the box below.

Holding schools to account for the provision and quality of RE

39. How far do you agree with each of the following recommendations?

a. Schools should be required to publish on their website details of how they meet the national entitlement for RE.

Strongly agree

b. Inspection frameworks should be revised to ensure that inspectors monitor whether or not schools meet the national entitlement for RE, in the light of schools’ duty to provide a broad and balanced curriculum.

Strongly agree

c. The DfE should either monitor, or give SACREs or other approved bodies the power and resources to monitor, the provision and quality of RE in all schools, including free schools, academies and schools of a religious character.

Strongly disagree that SACREs should have this role and the DfE should treat this subject like any other.

d. The government should consider the impact of school performance measures, including the exclusion of RS GCSE from the EBacc, on GCSE entries and on the provision and quality of RE, and consider reviewing performance measures in the light of the evidence.

40. Please comment on any of your answers above, in particular your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the recommendations.

Answer to a: This should be in-line with information they provide on their website about meeting requirements for other subjects.

Answer to b: Inspectors for RE should also be the same as those who inspect other subjects, i.e. Ofsted. Inspection of RE, regardless of the religious ethos of the schools, should not be inspected by separate ‘religious authorities’, which is what currently occurs at schools with a religious character under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005. Having all subjects inspected by the same authority is essential to ensure high-quality, objective and consistent RE is taught at all schools, regardless of location or type.

Answer to c: The DfE itself should monitor the provision and quality of RE in all schools. This power should not be given to SACREs. It is particularly inappropriate to give SACREs the duty of inspecting RE provision if the determination of RE provision is to be centralised, rather than locally determined. We cannot see any justification for the Committee's enthusiasm for retaining SACREs.

41. What are the most effective ways to hold schools to account for the provision and quality of RE, at both primary and secondary levels?

This should be in-line with all other compulsory subjects.

42. Should a revised Key Stage 4 qualification for those not taking GCSE RS be developed? This would need to meet the requirements of the entitlement and have currency in school performance measures.

Yes

No

Not sure

No opinion

Please comment on your answer and the reason for your choice.

Although we are neutral in this matter, a revised Key Stage 4 qualification for those not taking GCSE RS would have the advantage of ensuring pupils were being taught the national entitlement at all stages in education. Alternatively, at this level, the purposes of RE could be fulfilled through other subjects, including philosophy, citizenship, or politics. If it were the case that the main purposes of RE were being fulfilled elsewhere at KS4, an additional RE qualification would not be necessary.

43. Please add any further comments about holding schools to account for the provision and quality of RE in the box below.

A renewed and expanded role for SACREs

44. How far do you agree with each of the following recommendations?

a. The Government should publicly highlight and reaffirm the important role of SACREs in supporting and resourcing RE.

Strongly disagree

b. The Government should consider whether the role of SACREs should be expanded to include a duty to advise on all matters relating to religion and belief in schools.

Strongly disagree

c. The Government should consider ways of securing funding to resource SACREs adequately.

Strongly disagree

d. i. The Government should consider the composition of SACREs

Strongly agree if permitted to continue, but the Government should consider the abolition of SACREs

d. ii. The law should be changed to include representatives of non-religious worldviews as full members.

Strongly agree, but our preference is for their abolition

e. The Government should publish all SACRE annual reports publicly on a dedicated website.

Strongly agree, but our preference is for their abolition

45. Please comment on any of your answers above, in particular your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the recommendations.

Answer to a: SACREs should no longer have a formal role in supporting and resourcing RE and should be abolished.

Answer to b: SACREs' roles in religion and belief in schools should be eliminated.

Answer to c: The Government should consider ending funding to SACREs, we do not consider them necessary or helpful.

Answer to d: If SACREs are to continue and play a role of religion and belief education in schools (which we oppose), their composition must be changed. It could be argued that only secularists (irrespective of their personal religious views) with a firm commitment to secular and objective religion and belief education should be permitted to serve on them.

Answer to e: Public services have a duty to be as transparent and as accountable as possible.

46. Should the role of SACREs be expanded to include promoting good community relations beyond matters of religion and belief in schools?

Interfaith initiatives already exist, so no expansion would be appropriate.

Please comment on your answer. If you answered yes, what should this role involve?

There are other bodies who are already performing this role, so there is no need for SACREs to do so.

47. SACREs currently have a committee structure. Should the committee structure be abolished?

SACREs should be abolished?

Please comment on your answer below.

N/A

48. Which groups and organisations should be represented on SACREs? Tick as many as apply.

The Church of England

Representatives of other Christian denominations

Representatives of the other five major religious worldviews commonly studied: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism

Representatives of smaller religious worldviews

Representatives of non religious worldviews

Teacher associations - please specify

Teachers

Parents

School governors

School leaders

MAT trustees

Universities

NATRE

AREIAC

Local heritage sites eg museums

Other (please specify. Add as many groups/organisations as you wish)

This question highlights the wholly inappropriate nature of SACREs.

49. If you have any other comments on the role and function of SACREs, please enter them in the box below.

The right of withdrawal

Parents and carers currently have the right to withdraw their child from all or part of RE. While the majority of those we consulted would like to see an end to the right of withdrawal, the legal implications of this are complex and difficult. Please see the interim report for more information on this.

50. Please comment on the most effective ways to manage the right of withdrawal in practice, given the legal issues discussed in the report.

Provided RE is delivered in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner, there should be no conflict between ending the right of withdrawal, and Article 2 of the first protocol to the ECHR. Objective teaching about religion is a completely different activity to teaching confessional religion, the latter being in conflict with Article 2.

51. Should the Commission be seeking an approach to RE that is 'objective, critical and pluralistic' enough to be compulsory, without the right of withdrawal?

Yes

Please comment on the reasons for your answer choice.

We agree in principle that parents shouldn't be allowed to pick and choose what subjects their children learn in school, particularly when the right to withdrawal can be divisive and implemented in order for parents to "shield" children from learning about worldviews, sometimes out of simple bigotry and generally of children most in need of these broader perspectives.

Nevertheless, with RE in its current state, the current opt-out is necessary to protect religious freedom. This is because faith schools can currently teach their own RE curriculum and are free to teach exclusively about their own religion, which results in many faith schools using the subject as a platform to proselytise. Furthermore, we regularly receive complaints from parents who are concerned about external representatives of evangelical groups being invited into schools, where they use RE as a platform to promote their own religion inappropriately.

Faith schools should lose the ability to teach about religion from their own exclusive viewpoint, RE should be reformed into a new academic subject that covers a variety of religious and non-religious worldviews, and religious representatives should not have undue influence over the subject content.

Once this is achieved and confessional teaching is totally removed, we believe that the right to withdrawal could be ended.

52. If you have any other comments on the right of withdrawal, or any further information about the right of withdrawal as currently practised, please enter them in the box below.

A National Plan for improving teaching and learning in RE

53. How far do you agree with each of the following recommendations?

a. A minimum of 12 hours should be devoted to RE in all primary initial teacher education (ITE) courses.

b. Leading primary schools for RE should be identified and all primary trainees should be given the opportunity to observe RE teaching in such a school.

Agree

c. include under the Teachers' Standards, part 1, section 3 (Demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge), the requirement that teachers 'demonstrate a good understanding of and take responsibility for the sensitive handling of controversial issues, including thoughtful discussion of religious and non-religious worldviews where necessary.'

Strongly agree

d. Restore funded Subject Knowledge Enhancement (SKE) courses for those applying to teach RE and for serving teachers of RE without a relevant post A-level qualification in the subject.

Agree

e. Restore parity of bursaries for RE with those for other shortage subjects.

f. The government and relevant funding bodies should consider how funding of RE networks can be made more sustainable.

g. SACREs and local authorities should review existing good practice in developing and sustaining these RE networks and start their own if such a network does not exist in their local area.

Disagree

h. University performance measures should be updated to credit universities for their engagement with schools, including the provision of continuing professional development (CPD) and resource materials.

Agree

i. University staff conducting research in areas related to RE should be encouraged to contribute to RE networks, lead teacher development days, develop resource materials or become SACRE members.

Agree

54. Please comment on any of your answers above, in particular your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the recommendations.

a.

b. Children have the right to a high quality of education, in all aspects of their study. If RE is included in their statutory education, it should likewise be of high quality. Giving primary trainees the opportunity to observe best practice in RE would help to ensure that the subject is provided in a consistently objective, critical and pluralistic manner, and to consistently high standards.

c. Teachers in training must clearly understand that their role is to teach only the agreed programmes of study. No teacher should leave training thinking it is ever appropriate for them to teach or promote their own religious beliefs to children.

High quality learning is dependent on good teachers and good teaching. RE is often taught by non-specialists with no qualification or appropriate expertise in the subject. This is largely a result of RE being downgraded and marginalised in schools. The status of the subject is unlikely to improve unless the subject area is rethought, reformed and renamed.

d. This would help to ensure consistency in quality of RE provision, as described in the answer to b. and c.

e.

f.

g. SACREs and local authorities should not be the bodies responsible for setting up RE networks. RE teachers and other relevant education professionals should have primary responsibility for this. Responsibility to establish RE networks should in no circumstances be given to religious groups with their own vested interest in promoting their faith.

h. It is appropriate that universities (and not SACREs or other local authority groups) be involved in ensuring quality in RE provision.

i. It is appropriate and desirable that university staff conducting research in areas related to RE (or any other school subject) contribute to education at the primary and secondary level. It would be preferable for the staff to contribute to RE networks, lead teacher development days and develop resource materials without the need to involve themselves in SACREs (because SACREs should no longer play an essential role in RE provision).

55. What else, if anything, should be included in a National Plan to improve teaching and learning in RE?

56. How should the National Plan for RE be implemented in order to be most effective?

57. If you have any other comments on how to improve teaching and learning in RE, please enter them in the box below.

58. If you would like to comment on any other aspect of the interim report, or anything else that you think the Commission should be aware of, please enter your comments in the box below.

We are concerned that the starting point for the Commission appears to be that RE should remain as 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.

Teaching children about a diversity of worldviews, and giving them space to consider moral and ethical issues, is legitimate educational objective, but there is no reason to assume that we have to have mandatory religious education classes to achieve that. The continuation of religious education as a distinct subject should at least be subjected to greater scrutiny, and new ideas for introducing religious literacy in schools explored. For example, Luxembourg's plan to replace religious education in schools with 'life and society' classes deserves consideration.

We also urge the Commission to recognise that the stakeholders it engages with will primarily be coming from a faith perspective. This is made clear by the list of respondents to the call for evidence. Many of the views expressed are therefore likely to reflect the priorities of the people of faith, rather than the wider community. As parents and wider society become less and less religious this incongruity becomes increasingly unacceptable.

The Commission must recognise that the dysfunctional character of religious education is in part due to the ongoing privileging of special interest groups. Reform will upset many of the entrenched religious lobbies, but the time has come to liberate this subject from special interests. The educational needs of young people growing up in 21st century Britain must now be the primary consideration. Principled and decisive action is necessary.