

# 21st Century RE for All

**We want every pupil to have the same entitlement to high quality, non-partisan education about worldviews. We want to see all schools preparing young people for life in modern Britain by teaching pupils about:**

- The diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews.
- How people's worldviews may influence their thinking on philosophical, moral and cultural issues.
- Worldviews and rights: how the freedom to manifest religion and belief interacts with the rights of others.

Any form of confessionalism/religious instruction should be separated from this subject, and should only take place in a voluntary - non-state funded environment.

We're campaigning for legislative change to replace current laws surrounding RE with a new national entitlement for religion and belief learning. The entitlement should be determined and inspected by educationalists, and apply in all schools equally, including faith schools.

In 2018, our [research](#) with *Censuswide* found that just 14% of the public disagreed with the statement: "State-funded faith schools should be obligated to teach RE in a way that is inclusive of all religious and non-religious belief systems".

## What's the problem?

Religious education is out of date and in need of reform. Almost thirty years after the introduction of a national curricular entitlement for all pupils, one subject remains exempt: religious education. Unlike any other compulsory subject RE is determined at a local level.

In each local authority the local agreed syllabus for religious education (RE) is determined by the Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC). ASCs are made up of four committees representing the Church of England, other religions, the local authority and teacher's groups. In some ASCs/SACREs non-religious representatives (usually Humanists) are excluded from or are not voting members of the committee which represents other religions

ASCs consists of the same committees that make up Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs), which monitor religious education and collective worship in the local authority's area.

Even worse, many faith schools don't even need to follow the locally agreed syllabus, and can instead teach their own syllabus and teach religion from their own exclusive viewpoint.

There should be a broad debate over whether education about religion and belief should take place in a dedicated subject or absorbed as part of a wider subject.

If there is a body of knowledge called 'Religious Education', which is worthy of being taught at all, it should be offered to all children wherever they live. There are simply no grounds for discriminating on grounds of geographical location or 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. This is simply a matter of fundamental justice and equality.

Importantly, the subject must be broad, balanced and inclusive. Religious interest groups should no longer determine what gets taught. As with other subjects, the syllabus should be nationally determined by independent educationalists without an agenda motivated by a specific religion or belief.

As with other subject areas, networks of teachers, supported by their local authority, can share local learning and resources, but special interest groups should have no privileged role.

***The structures that underpin the local determination of the RE curriculum have failed to keep pace with changes in the wider educational world. As a result, many local authorities are struggling to fulfill their responsibility to promote high-quality religious education.***

**OFSTED report ('Religious Education: Realising the Potential')**

## **What are we doing?**

- We're campaigning for fundamental reform of religious education to ensure that every pupil has the same entitlement to high quality, non-partisan education about religion and belief.
- We regularly provide support and advice for parents who are experiencing issues related to RE at their school, including exercising their right of withdrawal. If you would like advice from us, [please get in touch](#).
- In addition to playing a vocal part in the national debate over RE in schools, we've made numerous submissions, including, for example to the [Commission on Religious Education](#) and to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education's [call for evidence on the importance and development of 'Religious Literacy'](#).
- In 2017 we again called for Ofsted to inspect religious education in faith schools and revealed that [millions of pounds of public money has been paid to religious organisations](#) to carry out their own inspections of denominational RE. We have been engaged throughout the Commission on Religious Education's current review of RE. We submitted evidence ahead of the [interim](#) and final reports.
- In 2018 we held a successful [21st Century RE For All conference](#), which brought together teachers, NSS supporters and members of the public to discuss how RE can be reformed and improved.
- When the Commission on Religious Education published its [final report](#), we gave it qualified support. While it contains many good recommendations, the perceived need to appease religious groups means it continues to support the dual system where faith schools can teach RE from their own perspective.
- We are actively involved in the debate over RE reform in Wales, meeting with policy makers and consulting on the new curriculum.
- In September 2020, [we submitted evidence](#) to the Children, Young People and Education Committee of the Welsh Senedd about the proposed new curriculum. We testified before the committee in October 2020.
- In July 2020 we [submitted evidence](#) to and helped supporters lobby the Welsh Senedd on draft legislation for RVE reform.
- In November 2019 we [submitted evidence](#) to a Welsh government consultation on

"ensuring access to the full curriculum". While supporting all pupils' rights to critical and pluralistic education about worldviews, we raised serious concerns with proposals to end the right to withdraw.

- In March 2019 we [submitted evidence](#) to a Welsh government consultation on the legislative framework for the new curriculum. We supported efforts to make religious education more pluralistic and critical, while criticising concessions to faith schools which would maintain many of the flaws in the current RE settlement. We criticised plans to end the right to withdraw prematurely, pointing to the significant human rights concerns this raised.
- In November 2017 we [submitted evidence](#) to the Commission on Religious Education's consultation on their interim report. We 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.
- In April 2016 we [submitted evidence](#) to the APPG on Religious Education's consultation on the importance and development of Religious Literacy. We reiterated our support for improved religion and belief education in schools but warned that concerns over poor 'religious literacy' are being used as a Trojan horse to elevate religion's status in public life.
- In July 2015 we [submitted evidence](#) to a Public Bill Committee consultation on the Education and Adoption Bill. We correctly predicted that without adequate safeguards academisation could increase religious organisations' influence in faith and community-ethos schools.
- In December 2014 we [submitted evidence](#) to a DfE consultation on reforming the GCSE and A level subject content for religious studies.

## What you can do:

## Write to your MP

Support our campaign to ensure every pupil has the same entitlement to high quality, non-partisan education about religious and non-religious worldviews.

Enter Postcode: \_\_\_\_\_

[Every pupil to have the same entitlement to high quality, non-partisan education about worldviews. Support the campaign to reform RE.](#)

[Click to tweet](#)

## Share

You can use the share buttons on the right to share this campaigns page with your social networks. Help show the importance of this campaign by sharing your story.

- [Share your story](#)

## Parents, pupils, and teachers: need advice?

Do you have concerns about biased RE in your school? Our campaigns pages have plenty of

information, but if you need more, please:

- [Visit our advice page](#)
- [Get in touch](#)

## More information

- [Supporters' comments](#)

A selection of comments from the petition. Supporters on what this campaign means to them and the need to reform religion and belief education.

[Read More](#)

## Religious Education and the law

RE is a statutory part of the basic curriculum in all schools, but is often shaped by local religious groups and faith schools.

RE is a statutory part of the basic curriculum and all maintained schools by law and academies by virtue of their funding agreement must provide RE for all children attending school.

Parents have the right to withdraw their child from all or any part of RE. This includes parents whose children attend a faith school. If pupils are withdrawn from RE, schools have a duty to supervise them, though not to provide additional or alternative teaching.

RE is the only statutory subject that is not part of the National Curriculum.

Community schools and voluntary controlled faith schools follow a locally agreed syllabus drawn up by local committees (known as Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, or [SACRE](#)) comprising of teachers, local churches, faith groups and the local authority.

In voluntary aided faith schools the syllabus is a matter for the governing body to decide – and may be of denominational character. This means that a significant number of state funded 'faith schools' are permitted to teach RE from a selective, exclusive or confessional viewpoint, more analogous to religious instruction than education.

As a condition of their funding agreements, all academies and free schools have to provide RE for their pupils. The type of RE specified in the funding agreement depends on whether or not the academy has a religious designation, and for converter academies, on whether the predecessor school was a voluntary controlled (VC), voluntary aided (VA) or foundation school.

Other than for academies where the predecessor school was a VC or foundation school, the model funding agreement specifies that an academy with a religious designation must provide RE in accordance with the tenets of the particular faith of the school. They may, in addition, provide RE that is in line with a locally agreed syllabus and teach about other faiths if they choose.

As education is a devolved subject, arrangements differ across the UK and in different types of school.

## Your rights: Withdrawal from RE and Collective Worship

How the right to withdraw works across the UK, how pupils/parents can claim it, and how schools can accommodate it.

We advocate comprehensive non-partisan reform of religion and belief education and an end to compulsory worship in schools, so no one has to withdraw from any part of the school day.

However, successive governments' reluctance to end compulsory worship or to make meaningful RE reforms mean that changes may take some time. Parents/pupils may therefore want to consider the option of withdrawal.

If you have concerns about worship or biased RE at your school please don't be afraid to raise them, concerns being addressed without the need to withdraw could be more impactful.

### **England and Wales**

Parents have the statutory right under [Section 71 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#) to withdraw their children from RE lessons and acts of Collective Worship at all maintained schools, including faith schools. Parents are not obliged to give a reason for requesting withdrawal.

The parental right to withdraw a child should be freely exercisable and the school must give effect to any such request.

Currently, very few parents exercise this right. Many parents are reluctant to separate their child from classmates. Also, while schools are supposed to keep worship separate from other elements of assembly, many schools fail to do this, and parents may not wish for their child to miss the entire assembly.

Before exercising any right of withdrawal we would recommend discussing your concerns with the Head Teacher.

Requests for withdrawals are best made in writing, the simple text below should be perfectly adequate.

*As parents of **[Child's name]** we formally request that **he/she** is withdrawn from **worship/RE** of any kind in future, without any detriment.*

"Parents have the right to withdraw their children from all or any part of religious education. They do not have to give a reason to the school and the school must comply with their request.

Schools should ensure that parents who want to withdraw their children from religious education are aware of the religious education syllabus and that it is relevant to all pupils and respects their own personal beliefs. They should be given the opportunity to

discuss this, if they wish. The school may also wish to review such a request each year, in discussion with the parents.

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.

It is the responsibility of the school to supervise children who are withdrawn from religious education, although they are not required to provide alternative activities. They are not expected to incur additional costs through providing supervision for the child."

Department For Education

If you experience any difficulty or obstruction in exercising your right of withdrawal, or have any specific concerns about RE or Collective Worship in a particular school, we would like to [hear from you](#).

## Scotland

The law is covered in the [Education \(Scotland\) Act 1980](#). The Scottish Executive's policy on the provision of religious observance in Scottish schools is contained in [Circular 1/2005](#). Also relevant is the [Scottish Executive's 2011 letter](#) to the headteachers of all schools which includes reminding them of the right to withdraw and schools' responsibility to facilitate this.

On the subject Citizens Advice (Scotland) [notes](#):

*"If you do withdraw your child from religious observation or education, the school must make suitable arrangements for your child to take part in a worthwhile alternative activity. In no circumstances should a child be disadvantaged as a result of withdrawing from religious observation or education."*

## Academies

There is some specific guidance for academies in the DFE's [Free school application guide](#) which states: "Your school must provide a meaningful alternative for pupils whose parents wish to withdraw them from RE, collective worship or other faith-related studies."

## Sixth Form Pupils

Sixth-form pupils at mainstream schools and maintained special schools are able to withdraw themselves from collective worship, without the need for a parent's permission. [Section 55](#) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 amended [section 71](#) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 to ensure the right of sixth-form pupils to be excused from attendance at religious worship if they request so.

## Isle of Man

The [Isle of Man Education Act 2001](#) (Chapter 33, Section 14) provides for the right for parents to withdraw their children in whole or in part from religious education and worship, without detriment.

Parents have the right to withdraw their children from all or any part of religious education. They do

not have to give a reason to the school and the school must comply with their request. Schools should ensure that parents who want to withdraw their children from religious education are aware of the religious education syllabus and that it is relevant to all pupils and respects their own personal beliefs. They should be given the opportunity to discuss this, if they wish. The school may also wish to review such a request each year, in discussion with the parents. 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. It is the responsibility of the school to supervise children who are withdrawn from religious education, although they are not required to provide alternative activities. They are not expected to incur additional costs through providing supervision for the child.

Department For Education

## Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs)

Dominated by religious representatives, SACREs determine the RE syllabus at a local level.

Religious Education is the only compulsory subject which is locally determined largely shaped by religious groups.

Every local authority (LA) is statutorily obliged to appoint a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE). SACREs are responsible for advising local authorities on RE and Collective Worship.

Local Education Authorities were given the power to set up SACRES under the [Education Act 1944](#), but this became compulsory under the [Education Reform Act 1988](#).

Today, the RE Syllabus for each local authority is produced by its Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) which is a separate legal entity from the SACRE, but is made up of the same four committees (and often the same people). The agreed syllabus is reviewed every five years.

Every SACRE must have four committees: Committee A is made up of representatives of Christian denominations and other religions, reflecting the principal religious traditions of the area; Committee B comprises the Church of England representatives; Committee C is the teacher representatives (teacher associations) and finally, Committee D consists of local authority (LA) representatives.

SACREs do not require any non-religious representatives and any there are (usually Humanists), are often excluded from or are not full voting members of the committee which represents other religions.

- [Understanding Christianity and the study of religion and worldviews](#)

2020 research supported by the NSS shows how the Church of England uses its dominant

position within the RE community to advance its own theological approach to the subject.

[Read More](#)

- [Why Religious Education must be reformed before ending parental opt-out](#)

The right to withdraw from RE may sometimes be problematic, but is still necessary while vestiges of confessionalism, proselytization and poor practice remain.

- [Replace RE with 'religion and worldviews', says commission](#)

The National Secular Society has given a "qualified welcome" to the Commission on Religious education's recommendations to replace RE with a subject entitled 'Religion and Worldviews' and introduce a national entitlement to it.

- [Conference on the future of religion and belief education in schools](#)

In April 2018 we held a conference on 21st Century RE for All, bringing together experts from the RE community.

Click here for links to the speeches, write up and videos.

[Read More](#)

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## While you're here

Education is a huge part of our campaigning, policy and casework. Please consider a donation to enable us to continue making a difference.

- [Support us from just £1 a month](#)