

CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW REVIEW: CALL FOR EVIDENCE

Response from Humanists UK, November 2024



ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Since 1896, our work has been helping people be happier and more fulfilled. By bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Together with our partners Humanist Society Scotland, we speak for 130,000 members and supporters and around 100 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

We have many decades' history of work in education, children's rights and equality, with particular expertise in the 'religion or belief' strand. We provide materials and advice to parents, governors, students, teachers and academics, and school speakers, through our website Understanding Humanism: understandinghumanism.org.uk. Through it we provide presentations, activities, films, and assessment ideas. We train and accredit a network of school speakers across the country to visit schools and answer young people's questions about humanism – currently over 200 speakers in the network making over 700 visits in 2023. We train hundreds of teachers every year to support their subject knowledge about humanism and provide practical ideas for the classroom.

We have been involved in policy development around citizenship education, sex education and particularly religious education (RE) for over 70 years. We are a founding member of the RE Council for England and Wales in 1973, with one of our staff members on its Board ever since. For the last 25 years Humanists UK has also been represented on the steering groups of every major national initiative focused on reform of RE in England and Wales. 70% of standing advisory councils on RE and agreed syllabus conferences have humanist representatives as full members (in some cases for decades), including as Chairs and Vice-Chairs. Recent years have seen a rise in the number of humanists who are on SACREs, particularly following the Welsh Government choosing to legislate to make explicit in primary legislation the equal inclusion of humanists, and the 2023 judgment *Bowen* that made plain that human rights law requires equal treatment in England, too. As a result the vast majority of locally agreed syllabuses include humanism to some extent, and many do so to a high level of depth.

We advocate for inclusive assemblies suitable for all pupils, regardless of belief. Our Assemblies for All website provides access to hundreds of inclusive assemblies: assembliesforall.org.uk.

We have long been involved in relationships and sex education (RSE), and personal, social, health, and economic (PSHE) Education. We are longtime members of the Sex Education Forum (SEF) and PSHE Association and have in recent years had staff on the advisory group of the former. We were heavily involved in the successful campaign that led to the Children and Social Work Act 2017 making RSE compulsory in all schools.



Our campaign 'Teach evolution, not creationism' (supported by prominent scientists like David Attenborough and organisations like the British Science Association and Association for Science Education) led to the Coalition Government adding evolution to the primary national curriculum; and to it making clear that no state school should teach pseudoscientific ideas as scientifically valid. On the latter front, it did this through the introduction of a clause in academy and free school funding agreements, and through clarifying that the requirement for schools to teach a 'balanced' curriculum meant that creationism cannot be taught as science.

In this submission we submit that:

- RE should be reformed to be an objective, critical, and pluralistic National Curriculum subject of 'Religions and Worldviews' in line with modern pedagogy and human rights case law.
- Inclusive assemblies for pupil development should be introduced into the curriculum, replacing mandatory daily acts of Christian collective worship.
- There should be a compulsory content standard for Relationships and Sex Education, and for the subject to be taught in a standardised, unbiased manner regardless of the character of the school.

SECTION ONE: ABOUT YOU

1. Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation.

3. If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, which of the below best describes which part of the sector your organisation represents?

Charity.

4. What is the name of your organisation?

Humanists UK.

8. Are you happy to be contacted directly about your response?

Yes.

9. Would you like us to keep your responses confidential?

No.

SECTION TWO: GENERAL VIEWS ON CURRICULUM, ASSESSMENT, AND QUALIFICATIONS PATHWAYS



11. What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

We will address (a) curriculum here, although much of this will be discussed in detail in the course of our submission.

In general

- The curriculum should be underpinned throughout by human rights. That should both be true in terms of how the curriculum is developed, and in places it should be explicit – for example, in citizenship education, human rights should be taught about; in religious education, freedom of religion or belief should be taught about; and in relationships and sex education, pupils should be taught in a way that combats sexism and homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic bullying. UNICEF’s Rights Respecting Schools Award should be examined to see how it can best be mirrored in the curriculum proper.

Religious Education (RE)

- RE should be included in the review and made a National Curriculum subject. The subject should be taught in a consistent, broad, and balanced manner in all state-funded schools regardless of religious character.
- There should be further reform of RE in schools of no religious character so that it becomes impartial, objective, fair, and balanced, consistent with developing practice in the subject, that teaches the principal non-religious worldviews (e.g. humanism) on an equal footing with the principal religions. Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief should guide curriculum development. This reform would mirror some changes the Labour Government made already in Wales, and is necessary in England too due to new human rights case law .
- RE should be renamed to ‘Religions and Worldviews’ or something similar to reflect the above changes.
- This nationally determined subject should sit alongside other humanities subjects in the curriculum and with the same status as them, and be included in the Ebacc.

Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)

- There should be no parental right to withdraw children from any aspect of the RSE curriculum, and developmentally appropriate RSE including sex education should be a compulsory subject for all children, irrespective of religious background, from primary school onwards.
- RSE should be taught in an unbiased and impartial manner. There should be no allowance for schools of a religious character to teach RSE from a faith-based perspective.

School assemblies (collective worship)

- Mandatory daily Christian worship in schools of no religious character should be replaced by the introduction of inclusive assemblies for pupil development into the curriculum. This could be similar to the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) model the last Labour



Government pursued in the late 2000s when it did its curriculum review, and would be suitable for all pupils regardless of religion or belief.

Science

- In order for students to be able to understand the facts that the National Curriculum will impart to them, the science curriculum should make direct reference to the value of science as a way of finding out knowledge. Pupils should understand that the scientific method has provided a consistently reliable way of finding provisional answers to questions about the nature and behaviour of things. They should understand that it is rational, universal, enquiry-based, and one of humanity's greatest achievements.
- Students should be taught how scientists actually know what is true. This means covering things like the falsification theory, randomised controlled trials, double-blinding, statistical biases and fallacies, peer review, meta-analysis, and much more. Scientific discovery should also be an important component too. Practical science lessons are often about following instructions to reach a desired conclusion which reinforces what the 'facts' are, but not how we get to them. Pupils should also be taught how to plan experiments, including working out the appropriate controls, what resources they would need, and how to modify an experiment if at first they couldn't get a result. This is useful both for future scientists and to build critical thinking among all students, to help them as adults tackle misinformation they may encounter, particularly online.
- SRE including the basic principles of human reproduction and physiology should be included in the science curriculum from primary school. It is essential that all children are able to learn about the changes to the human body caused by puberty and how to respond to them in advance of them experiencing these changes. Good SRE reduces unwanted pregnancies, the incidence of abortion and sexually transmitted diseases.

Citizenship

- Citizenship education should be maintained within the National Curriculum and be a statutory element from primary school onwards. The subject has an important role imparting knowledge and understanding of human rights, civic responsibilities, democracy, and the rule of law. It is essential to enable all children from a range of backgrounds to participate fully in a free and open society. There is scope to reform Citizenship to cover freedom of belief and respect for the environment.

SECTION THREE: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND INCLUSION

13. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief etc.)

- **Non-religious pupils would benefit from an inclusive Religions and Worldviews curriculum:** An education that is exclusively about religions and what religious people think and believe risks alienating non-religious pupils who might view the subject as irrelevant to their lives and needs. The recent (April 2024) Ofsted review of RE, *Deep and meaningful?*, found that the subject 'often lacked sufficient substance to prepare pupils to live in a



complex world' (main findings – 1).¹ What is also interesting from this report is that pupils are actively asking for the inclusion of non-religious worldviews and humanism in their RE syllabus, with one pupil telling Ofsted (para 73) 'We learn what the Pope thinks about something, and that's fine. But what about other thinkers, such as humanists?'² Broadening the subject to one that teaches religions and worldviews, including non-religious worldviews such as humanism, would address this disconnect from the subject.

- **A Religions and Worldviews curriculum would promote inclusion:** An inclusive education can help build a strong, cohesive society where everyone is valued and respected. A religions and worldviews education would contribute to the promotion of inclusion and community cohesion by introducing pupils from a young age to different beliefs and views and fostering mutual respect, understanding, and inclusivity.
- **RE in schools with a religious character:** The current requirement for RE to be taught in all maintained schools but that faith schools are exempt from the statutory requirement for the curriculum to be 'non-confessional' means many state-funded schools with a religious character to meet their statutory requirement to provide RE by providing confessional instruction in the particular religion of the school. For example the guidance on RE in Catholic schools in England states that the purpose of RE is to 'stimulate pupils' imagination and provoke a desire for personal meaning as revealed in the truth of the Catholic faith.'³ It also remains the Church of England's policy to evangelise children and young people through the state school system.⁴ This opt-out option for faith schools results in many students currently not having access to RE that explores a wide range of views and opinions, including of people whose beliefs and values differ from their own. This negates one of the key arguments in support of the subject – the promotion of community cohesion – and does not adequately allow young people to develop critical thinking skills to evaluate the views and evidence they are presented with and form their own conclusions.

In 2004 a Department of Education (then DfES) survey found that 65% of 12-19 year olds described themselves as non-religious, and in 2018 research by academics at St Mary's University Twickenham and the Institut Catholique de Paris (ICP) found that 70% of 16-29 year olds were non-religious.⁵ Many of these students will have attended state schools with a religious character. An RE that is confessional or taught from the perspective of one faith may lead students to feel that they have no meaningful perspective to bring to debates on key moral issues or that 'values' or 'morals' have nothing to do with them. This is ultimately damaging for the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development of these young people.

It is also a denial of their freedom of religion or belief. Clearly for young children their FoRB rights sit with their parents. But as they mature and become Gillick competent those rights

¹ Yougov (2024), 'How important is it to teach Religious studies at secondary school?' <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/trackers/how-important-is-it-to-teach-religious-studies-at-secondary-school>

² Ibid.

³ 'The Catholic Education Service, (2012), 'Religious Education Curriculum Directory for Catholic Schools and Colleges in England and Wales', https://humanists.uk/wp-content/uploads/RECD_singlepage.pdf

⁴ Humanists UK (2024), 'Millions of pounds spent by Church of England to evangelise school children', <https://humanists.uk/2024/06/11/millions-of-pounds-spent-by-church-of-england-to-evangelise-school-children/>

⁵ Humanists UK (2018), '7 in 10 young people in the UK are non-religious, new research finds', <https://humanists.uk/2018/03/21/7-in-10-young-people-in-the-uk-are-non-religious-new-research-finds/>



transfer from parent to child. Most secondary-age children will be Gillick competent with respect to their religion or belief. And yet the decision as to the type of school they attend was made by their parents, as is any decision as to withdrawal.⁶ In other words, there is a massive issue with the school system denying young people's FoRB.

- **Creationism:** We are pleased that the government is clear that 'creationist' views of the origin of living things such as 'intelligent design' are not science and have no place in the science curriculum. We remain concerned however that while state-funded faith schools are able to teach their own syllabus of RE, creationist ideas about the origin of life will be presented. If evolution is not taught in science lessons throughout the key stages then children will not have the opportunity to develop understanding of the difference between scientific theories and religious myths, such as young earth creationism. The basics of evolution and the wider story of our origins should be included in Key Stage One when children learn about other, religious, creation stories. A robust National Curriculum that fully supports the teaching of evolution will provide a vital guide to parents of children.
- **RSE in schools with a religious character:** The religious character of a school or pupils' religious backgrounds more generally should not deprive children of their entitlement to comprehensive, evidence-based, and age-appropriate teaching in this area. However, while schools of a religious character continue to be legally entitled to deliver the subject in line with the tenets of their faith ethos and determine whether they consider certain topics (same-sex relationships, for example) to be 'appropriate', many children will miss out on a comprehensive and unbiased RSHE. We have previously raised with ministers the issue of schools of a religious character using faith-based RSE resources that say contraception is wrong, gay and lesbian people cannot marry and must entirely abstain from sex, and that men were 'created to initiate sexual relationships' and women to be 'receiver-responders'.⁷ One resource, *A Fertile Heart*, was criticised by the then Shadow Minister for Domestic Violence and Safeguarding Jess Phillips MP who called it 'dangerous' and fostering a 'culture that ends in gross levels of sexual violence'. Although the then UK Government condemned the material, the choice of content was left in the hands of schools.⁸ There is a clear need then for RSE to be standardised, unbiased and impartial and we unequivocally support making RSHE/RSE a statutory part of the curriculum. We urge the panel to consider proposing the government remove faith-based opt-outs from RSE and prevent biased resources being used in schools. Only then will the subject be able to truly ensure that every child is able to grow up healthy, happy, and above all, safe.

SECTION FIVE: CURRICULUM AND QUALIFICATION CONTENT

⁶ At least until sixth-form.

⁷ Humanists UK (2021) 'Exposed: Catholic school resources say 'man was created to be the initiator in sexual relationships', women 'receiver-responders', <https://humanists.uk/2021/01/24/exposed-catholic-school-resources-say-man-was-created-to-be-the-initiator-in-sexual-relationships-women-receiver-responders/>

⁸ Humanists UK (2021), 'UK Government slams Catholic RSE resource over 'gender stereotypes' that 'could normalise non-consensual behaviour' <https://humanists.uk/2021/06/14/uk-government-slams-catholic-rse-resource-over-gender-stereotypes-that-could-normalise-non-consensual-behaviour/>



22. Are there particular curriculum or qualifications subjects* where:

- a) there is too much content; not enough content; or content is missing;**
- b) the content is out-of-date;**
- c) the content is unhelpfully sequenced (for example to support good curriculum design or pedagogy);**
- d) there is a need for greater flexibility (for example to provide the space for teachers to develop and adapt content)?**

Please provide detail on specific key stages where appropriate. *This includes both qualifications where the government sets content nationally, and anywhere the content is currently set by awarding organisations.

RE

- **The content is out of date and guidance needs updating:** Failure to update statute and guidance on the teaching of RE in maintained schools is leading to a failure to adequately reflect case law on the inclusion of non-religious worldviews. The last update of the non-statutory guidance⁹ was in 2010, although we acknowledge that the guidance was supplemented in 2023 to reflect new guidance issued by the DfE on membership of Standing Advisory Councils on RE (SACRE) following the landmark High Court Bowen judgment which ruled that Kent County Council's exclusion of a humanist from its SACRE was unlawful.¹⁰ As such, the aforementioned 2015 High Court *Fox* judgment on curriculum content is not included in it. We believe this should happen as a matter of urgency to make sure non-religious worldviews, such as humanism, are given 'equal respect' to other major world religions in the teaching of RE, in line with what human rights case law requires. What 'equal respect' means in practice is set out by Professor Satvinder Juss as part of his legal commentary on High Court rulings on Religious Education and the Composition of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education. Professor Juss writes that 'RE syllabuses should include humanism to the same extent as the major non-Christian world religions in both systemic and thematic study, at each key stage (paragraph 7).'¹¹ Juss goes on to define this further in paragraph 22 of his legal commentary:

'The need to accord equal respect means:

⁹ DfE (2010), *Religious Education in local authority maintained schools*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/religious-education-guidance-in-english-schools-non-statutory-guidance-2010>.

¹⁰ *Bowen v Kent County Council* (2023), <https://humanists.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023-05-26-R-Bowen-v-Kent-CC-Judgment.pdf>.

¹¹ Satvinder Juss (2023), 'High Court rulings on Religious Education and the Composition of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education: Legal guidance on what these mean for local authorities, Agreed Syllabus Conferences, and SACREs', <https://humanists.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023-Legal-Commentary-on-SACREs-and-RE-Professor-Satvinder-Juss.pdf>.



'a. If at any key stage it is compulsory to systematically study a module on one or more of the principal religions (other than Christianity), then it should also be compulsory to systematically study a module or modules on one or more principal non-religious worldviews (which, in practice, means humanism).

'b. Similarly, if there is an option to study a module or modules on one or more (non-Christian) principal religions, the choice should include a module or modules on one or more principal non-religious worldviews (again, in practice, humanism).

'c. If there are thematic modules, those modules should include or allow for the study of principal non-religious worldviews to the same extent as any of the non-Christian principal religions.

'd. At Key Stage 4, given that (as explained above) the examination boards' GCSE courses do not (owing to the Department for Education specification) provide for the study of non-religious worldviews in the way specified in the previous paragraph, the GCSE course cannot be used as the entirety of the RE syllabus. Additional teaching on non-religious worldviews must be provided alongside the GCSE, and agreed syllabuses cannot simply direct schools to follow the GCSE or a similar accredited qualification as the specified content for Key Stage 4. This is obviously not an ideal situation, but it is, regrettably, the unavoidable consequence of the relegation of non-religious worldviews in the GCSE specification.¹²

Our call for updating the guidance is supported by Ofsted who in its 2023 Annual Report stated that the subject was of 'poor quality' and called for non-statutory guidance for RE to be updated to 'include clear information for schools about the breadth and depth of the syllabus they are expected to teach'.¹³

- **Not enough content or missing entirely: limited teaching of non-religious worldviews, including humanism:** In 2015 we supported three humanist families in successfully challenging the exclusion of non-religious worldviews and humanism through the courts. This led to a High Court ruling, *Fox* (2015) which looked at the relegation of non-religious worldviews in the latest subject content for GCSE Religious Studies and established that religions and non-religious worldviews had to be afforded equal respect in RE syllabuses.¹⁴ In his ruling, Mr Justice Warby said that the government had made an 'error in law' in leaving non-religious worldviews such as humanism out of mandatory teaching, amounting to 'a breach of the duty to take care that information or knowledge included in the curriculum is

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ofsted (2023), *Annual Report*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/655f2551c39e5a001392e4ca/31587_Ofsted_Annual_Report_2022-23_WEB.pdf

¹⁴ *Fox v SSfE* (2015), <https://humanists.uk/wp-content/uploads/R-Fox-v-SSfE-2015-EWHC-3404-Admin-251115.pdf>.



conveyed in a pluralistic manner.¹⁵ This has not been reflected in legislative changes and the teaching of humanism is still patchy. In 2022 we carried out a review of RE syllabuses – and we are now undertaking a new review – and found that while 90% of syllabuses did mention humanism very few of these covered it equally to other non-Christian world religions and much of it was cursory mention rather than in-depth teaching, although there were some notable exceptions. In its 2024 review Ofsted found that of half the secondary schools they visited in 2024, the RE curriculums did not include non-religious worldviews (para 71).¹⁶ This impacts the quality of RE teaching and leads to pupils questioning its purpose, and a recent poll by YouGov showed that 56% of respondents said RE was either ‘not very important’ or ‘not important at all’.¹⁷ This is perhaps no surprise given that England is now one of the least religious countries in the world according to the 2021 Census, which saw the number of people identifying with ‘No religion’ jumped by over 8 million, from 25% to 37% between 2011 and 2021. The 2021 Census also found that 44% of 0–15 year olds have no religion.¹⁸ As we have stated above in Question Three (13), there is a clear need then to make sure RE is relevant for our more non-religious and more complex society.

- **The current lack of an RE national curriculum leads to patchwork provision:** When taught well, an RE curriculum that is fully inclusive of non-religious worldviews such as humanism is a vital tool for promoting mutual understanding and challenging prejudice in modern Britain. However, despite being a compulsory subject, RE is not set nationally but syllabuses are devised individually at local authority level, or in the case of academies by the schools themselves. This leads to a patchy network of syllabuses which can vary in quality from local authority to local authority. Some of these are inclusive, but many are not. Without a coherent national curriculum for RE, a narrowly focused RE often on offer can be worse than no RE at all: this leads to young people questioning the relevance of the subject to their day-to-day lives. Again, Ofsted’s *Deep and meaningful?* found that the ‘accuracy of the representation of traditions in the RE curriculum varied’. It was also found that there was a misconception among some teachers that teaching a religion from a neutral stance equated to teaching a ‘non-religious worldview’, which is simply not the case (main findings – 8).¹⁹ RE should be included in the review and made a National Curriculum subject, making sure the subject is taught in a consistent, broad, and balanced manner in all state-funded schools regardless of religious character.

¹⁵ Humanists (2015), ‘Judge rules Government broke the law in excluding Humanism from school curriculum’, <https://humanists.uk/2015/11/25/judge-rules-government-broke-the-law-in-excluding-humanism-from-school-curriculum/>

¹⁶ Ofsted (2024) *Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-religious-education/deep-and-meaningful-the-religious-education-subject-report#main-findings>.

¹⁷ Yougov (2024), ‘How important is it to teach Religious studies at secondary school?’ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/trackers/how-important-is-it-to-teach-religious-studies-at-secondary-school>

¹⁸ Humanists UK (2022), ‘Non-religious surge: 37% tick ‘No religion’ in 2021 Census – UK among least religious countries in the world’, <https://humanists.uk/2022/11/29/non-religious-surge-37-tick-no-religion-in-2021-census-uk-among-least-religious-countries-in-the-world/>

¹⁹ Ofsted (2024) *Deep and meaningful?* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-religious-education/deep-and-meaningful-the-religious-education-subject-report#main-findings>.



RSE

- **Lack of compulsory content leads to patchwork provision:** the lack of any compulsory content means that while RSE has to be taught, the quality and comprehensiveness of the subject varies from school to school, which can result in pupils not receiving the education and knowledge they need to live healthy and happy lives.
- **Faith-based teaching limits education:** good quality, age and developmentally appropriate relationships and sex education is vital. There is overwhelming evidence that by giving them the support, skills, and knowledge they need to navigate the world they live in, quality RSE helps protect children's rights and freedoms to a childhood free from abuse. Independent research from a wide range of academic sources in the UK and further afield has found that young people who receive RSE are: more likely to seek help or speak out; to practise safe sex and have improved health outcomes; and to have consented to first sex. Young people were also found to be more likely to have an understanding of digital safety in regard to relationships and sex; be more knowledgeable and aware of discrimination, gender equity and sexual rights; and be less likely to be a victim or perpetrator of sexual violence.²⁰

In 2020 RSE became compulsory in all English secondary schools and relationships education is compulsory in all primary schools. Schools of a religious character can teach RSE from a faith-based perspective. Three recent reports from the Department for Education found that some faith schools refused to teach about same-sex marriage and pupils were concerned about 'homophobic' external speakers.²¹ This clearly impacts the quality and content of the education students are being provided. RSE should be taught in an unbiased and impartial manner. There should be no allowance for schools of a religious character to teach RSE from a faith-based and pupils' should not be deprived of their entitlement to comprehensive, evidence-based, and age-appropriate teaching in this area. Only then will the subject be able to truly ensure that every child is able to grow up healthy, happy, and above all, safe.

- **Parental right to withdraw limits education:** parents also maintain the right to withdraw their child from some elements of this education providing it is not part of the science curriculum, nor can they be withdrawn from relationships education. There should be no parental right to withdraw children from any aspect of the RSE curriculum, and developmentally appropriate RSE including sex education should be a compulsory subject for all children, irrespective of religious background, from primary school onwards. This would mirror changes made in Wales.²²

²⁰ Sex Education Forum (2022), 'Relationships and Sex Education: The Evidence', <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/RSE%20The%20Evidence%20-%20One%20page%20summary.pdf>

²¹ Humanists UK (2024), 'Government reports reveal homophobia in faith schools',

<https://humanists.uk/2024/10/16/government-reports-reveal-homophobia-in-faith-schools/>

²² Humanists UK (2020), 'Wales to scrap right to withdraw from RE and RSE, rename RE to 'Religion, Values and Ethics' <https://humanists.uk/2020/01/21/wales-to-scrap-right-to-withdraw-from-re-and-rse-rename-re-to-religion-values-and-ethics/>



Personal, Social, Health, and Economic Education (PSHE)

- **Bereavement education should be included:** There are good, practical reasons for taking a head-on approach to death and bereavement. For example, it is sensible to discuss death with children and young people before one occurs in the family. We believe bereavement education should be included in PSHE education and that this can be approached across all key stages in an age-appropriate and sensitive manner. The teaching of beliefs around death should also include non-religious, including humanist, views of death, dying, and consolation.

Philosophy and ethics education

- **Children and young people should have access to a broader philosophy and ethics education:** Philosophy and ethics is often a neglected subject in schools and when covered at all, it is often on religious themes in context of philosophical arguments for and against the existence of gods and goddesses, and the afterlife. An education in philosophy and ethics that introduces pupils to a variety of philosophical and ethical perspectives, and the works of key thinkers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Mill, can help students develop critical thinking skills, understand the world around them, and engage in respectful debate.

23. Are there particular changes that could be made to ensure the curriculum (including qualification content) is more diverse and representative of society?

- **A new name to reflect modern society:** The name 'Religious Education' has exclusivity connotations. We believe that it should be replaced with a more inclusive title such as 'Religions and Worldviews'. In 2018 we welcomed the final report of the Commission on Religious Education (CORE) which also recommended (recommendation 1) the same change.²³ The replacement of 'Religious Education' with 'Religions and Worldviews' or similar would mirror this thinking in Wales.

24. To what extent does the current curriculum (including qualification content) support students to positively engage with, be knowledgeable about, and respect others? Are there elements that could be improved?

- **Supporting teachers to deliver RE inclusive of non-religious worldviews:** we would like to see a subject which helps young people to form and explore their own beliefs and develop an understanding of beliefs and values different from their own. Disappointingly, this is not always the case with RE provision and the teaching of non-religious worldviews inevitably loses out. Ofsted's *Deep and meaningful?* report identified gaps in how students were taught about non-religious worldviews, including humanism, with teachers stating that this omission was a result of various actors such as lack of time or limiting the content to 'what they thought that pupils needed to know to be successful in public examinations at the end

²³ Commission on RE (2018), Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward, a National Plan for RE', <https://humanists.uk/wp-content/uploads/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf>



of key stage 4' (para 71).²⁴ Clearly then there is a need to support teachers in both their delivery of RE and on how to teach non-religious worldviews. This requires an investment in teacher training. In 2018 the Commission on RE identified a lack of adequate teacher training in RE at both primary and secondary level, with the number of non-specialists teaching RE in secondary schools at almost three times higher than for history.²⁵ There should be higher bursaries for graduates training to be an RE teacher, comparable to other specialist subject bursaries, as well as funding for Subject Knowledge Enhancement courses, which enable graduates with a wide variety of degrees to apply for RE teacher training.²⁶ Furthermore, a minimum standard regarding timetabling and resourcing would help set out clearly what students should be taught about in relation to non-religious worldviews, and give teachers the time and scope to deliver it. These were recommended by the *Bloom Review*, a government-appointed independent review into religion (recommendation 7).²⁷

- **Supporting teachers to teach about different religions or beliefs without fear of reprisal:** we support the recommendations of the Walney Review, particularly recommendation 25 which called for 'statutory guidance on managing blasphemy-related incidents in schools. This should include commitments to upholding teachers' freedom of expression and not automatically suspending teachers involved in such incidents or revealing their identity.'²⁸ Greater protections for teachers would assist in the teaching of material for the benefit of understanding other beliefs.
- **Making sure all schools, regardless of character, teach a broad, balanced, and impartial curriculum on RE and RSE:** at present, schools of a religious character are allowed to teach RE and RSE according to the tenets of their religious foundation. Those students attending a state-funded faith school are being subject to a biased education. We would like to see faith-based opt-outs removed to make sure all students are receiving an education that is broad, balanced, and impartial, and equips them with the knowledge of other cultures and beliefs.
- **Improving citizenship education to foster respect and tackle extremism:** since 2001 citizenship education has been a compulsory part of the national curriculum in England for secondary schools. In primary schools, citizenship education is part of a non-statutory framework. We believe that the original formulation of citizenship education should be expanded to cover freedom of belief and respect of the environment. We are supportive of Lord Harries of Pentegarth's Private Members' Education (Values of British Citizenship) Bill,

²⁴ Ofsted (2024) *Deep and meaningful?* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-religious-education/deep-and-meaningful-the-religious-education-subject-report#main-findings>

²⁵ Commission on Religious Education (2018) 'Religion and worldviews: The national way forward', www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-of-the-Commissionon-RE.pdf

²⁶ Religious Education Council (2018), 'Chronic shortage of RE teachers in schools', <https://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/2018/02/chronic-shortage-re-teachers-schools/>

²⁷ Colin Bloom (2022), *Does government 'do God'? An independent review into how government engages with faith* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1152684/The_Bloom_Review.pdf

²⁸ Lord Walney (2024), 'Protecting our Democracy from Coercion', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66473eddf34f9b5a56adc9e3/E03131940_HC_775_Lord_Walney_Review_Accessible.pdf



which is now in committee stage in the House of Lords, as a valuable contribution to the further development of civic education in schools.²⁹ Citizenship education would also be an appropriate place to teach human rights education. As mentioned previously, UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools Award should be examined to see how it can best be mirrored in the curriculum proper.

25. In which ways does the current primary curriculum support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for life and further study, and what could we change to better support this?

- **Unbiased and impartial RSE:** we believe all children and young people should have access to high-quality, objective, factually accurate content. This ensures young people grow up healthy, happy, and safe.³⁰ On that basis we think there should be flexibility on when certain topics are taught to enable teachers and educators the chance to respond to any potential safeguarding issues as they arise. This flexibility should exist throughout RSE and all topics can be covered in an age-appropriate way. We would warn against the setting of arbitrary age limits as an inappropriate and unnecessary step which could potentially restrict a teacher's discretion for flexible teaching on these subjects – especially if they are having to respond to an immediate safeguarding issue.

26. In which ways do the current secondary curriculum and qualification pathways support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work, and what could we change to better support this?

Our response on RSE to Question 25 also extends to Question 26.

SECTION SIX: A BROAD AND BALANCED CURRICULUM

28. To what extent does the current primary curriculum support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?

- **RSE/RSHE and 'age appropriateness':** As of September 2020 Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is mandatory in all secondary schools, and relationships education mandatory for all primary age pupils, in England. Sex education is not compulsory in primary schools, although individual schools may choose to offer it at their own discretion. We believe that children can benefit enormously from a comprehensive RSHE which can support them to make safe and informed choices. It can help tackle public health issues such as substance misuse and support young people with decision-making. It is important that children and young people are given the facts before they actually need them, so they are well prepared. There is also a strong safeguarding argument for providing this teaching ahead of time. Children and young people should know about healthy and unhealthy

²⁹ Education (Values of British Citizenship) Bill [HL] (2024), <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3746>

³⁰ SEF (2019) 'Relationships and Sex Education: Briefing for Parliamentarians', <http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/Briefing%20on%20RSE%20for%20Parliamentarians%20-%2025%20Feb%202019%20debate.pdf>



relationships, personal boundaries, how to resist pressure, how to seek help when they need it, and how to challenge and flag inappropriate behaviour. This can and should be taught in an age-appropriate way throughout a young person's education. We believe age limits on when certain topics become compulsory are unnecessary, and perhaps even potentially harmful, inclusion.

Our firm belief that all children are entitled to essential basic information about human reproduction and physiology in science and to broader and comprehensive RSE elsewhere in the curriculum means that we want it taught as a compulsory subject in all schools from primary age, with no parental opt-out. This is supported by the public, with a YouGov poll from 2019 finding that 80% of respondents agreed that sex education should be a mandatory part of the national curriculum.³¹

29. To what extent do the current secondary curriculum and qualifications pathways support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?

- **Including humanism and non-religious worldviews in the curriculum:** this also applies to question 28. As stated earlier, surveys consistently show that young people are increasingly non-religious. The 2003 Citizenship Survey found that 46% of 11-15 year olds did not have a religion compared to 44% who stated they were Christian.³² For RE to remain relevant as a subject, it is vital that it is as relevant to these young people as it is to their religious peers. Including non-religious worldviews in the curriculum also reflects consistent recommendations in international agreements such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights' *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (guiding principle 7).³³

SECTION NINE: OTHER ISSUES ON WHICH WE WOULD WELCOME VIEWS

54. Do you have any further views on anything else associated with the Curriculum and Assessment Review not covered in the questions throughout the call for evidence?

- **The introduction into the curriculum of inclusive assemblies for pupil development:** There is a clear need for legislative change. We believe the Curriculum and Assessment Review provides the opportunity to introduce into the curriculum of inclusive assemblies for pupil development. Such assemblies could explore topics such as happiness, sadness, beauty and the arts; encourage kindness, sharing and creativity; consider life, love, and death; and investigate what it means to be human. These assemblies could also delve into different religious and non-religious points of view, and create a space where no-one should

³¹ YouGov (2019), 'Do you think sex education should or should not be a mandatory part of the national curriculum in schools?', <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/education/survey-results/daily/2019/02/25/ba502/2>

³² DfE (2003), '2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey', <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20120919122719/http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/452490.pdf>

³³ ODIHR-OSCE (2007) 'Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools', <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/e/29154.pdf>



feel that their own beliefs are being contradicted, and that they are wrong for not sharing the religious views being presented by the teacher. These inclusive assemblies would be similar to the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) model the last Labour Government pursued in the late 2000s when it did its curriculum review, and would be suitable for all pupils regardless of religion or belief. This reform would replace mandatory daily Christian worship in schools of no religious character which has been law since 1944. As this current law stands every school, regardless of its religious character, is required to hold a daily act of collective worship. If the school has no religious character, this must be of a 'broadly Christian character'. Although schools without a religious character can apply for exemption (a determination) from the 'broadly Christian' requirement for some or all of their pupils, alternative worship must be provided for these pupils. Ofsted stopped inspecting collective worship in 2004 after concluding that over 75% of secondary schools were failing to comply with the law to hold an assembly every day,³⁴ but many hold them at least some days, and we at Humanists UK receive more complaints about this than anything else. Parents can withdraw their children from collective worship, but in most cases an alternative is not provided and children are often left in a classroom while the collective worship is happening. We have supported parents taking human rights-based legal challenges against their child's school's failure to provide such alternatives. Usually the school backs down before a challenge reaches pre-action stage, but in 2019 the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust did not do that and only withdrew after permission had been granted for the case to be heard. It then agreed to provide an inclusive alternative.³⁵

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³⁴ Guardian (2004), 'End daily worship in schools, says Ofsted head', <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/jun/11/schools.uk>

³⁵ Humanists UK (2019). 'School concedes in collective worship legal case – will provide alternative assemblies', <https://humanists.uk/2019/11/20/school-concedes-in-collective-worship-legal-case-will-provide-alternative-assemblies/>

