

RESPONSE TO THE NATIONAL CONTENT STANDARD for RE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Religious Education Network¹ (REN: See Appendix A) issues this public statement regarding the newly released 'National Content Standard for RE' (NCS)² by the Religious Education Council, to show that there is **no consensus** among RE professionals on this much-publicised approach. The REN maintains that this Standard represents yet another attempt to steer religious education in the direction of a 'worldviews' agenda and is to be rejected:

1. The concept of 'worldview' is flawed;
2. The intended radical change does not address the fundamental problems confronting RE;
3. It overloads the RE syllabus;
4. State control of religious education may run counter to freedom of religion and belief
5. The centrality of 'personal worldviews' to the NCS is detrimental to good learning;
6. The requirement that RE should educate for 'change' in pupils' worldviews is indoctrination;
7. The NCS requires teachers to be multi-disciplinary experts, unlike any other subject;

We call upon the DfE actively and overtly to provide more support for the subject, but without following the new direction that the REC now proposes.

INTRODUCTION

The background to the NCS can be traced to various publications, including the National Statement of Entitlement, the Draft Resource Handbook, and, underlying these, the 2018 Commission on RE report³. All of these promote a secularised 'worldviews' direction for Religious Education, reframing religions as examples of 'worldviews' to be understood alongside others, non-religious ones: 'worldviews' serve as the fundamental cornerstone of the entire framework.

The REN's collective perspective is firmly aligned with the existing legislation, and we stand united against any transition to the proposed 'worldviews' approach. This transition to a compulsory 'Worldviews' framework would not only lead to the disintegration of local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education and Agreed Syllabus (RE) Conferences (Education Act 1944) and local determination, but also dilute the academic rigor inherent in the study of religion, favouring a more secular model⁴.

CRITIQUE: Why we oppose the National Content Standard

1. **The notion of a 'worldview'** is a subject of contention and does not provide a solid foundation for a UK school subject curriculum (see footnote 4 below). The academic literature makes clear the confusing

¹ See Appendix A

² <https://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/resource/national-content-standard-1st-edition-2023/#:~:text=The%20RE%20Council%E2%80%99s%20National%20Content%20Standard%20provides%20a,not%20determine%20precisely%20what%20content%20schools%20should%20teach.>

³ <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf>

⁴ Cf 'Religion and Worldviews: the Triumph of the Secular in Religious Education' ed. P Barnes, Routledge 2023

definitions of the term and its minimalizing of the depth and richness of religious traditions. The NCS classifies religions as mere 'worldviews' to be placed on equal footing, though not necessarily equal curriculum time, with non-religious perspectives. While we recognise the significance of incorporating e.g. atheism as a counter to religious belief, it is imperative to understand that religion defies neat categorisation within the 'worldviews' framework. World religions encompass a rich tapestry of literature, traditions, ethical discussions, artistic expressions, and the profound elements of transcendence and revelation that render them unique and sui generis.

2. The **problems** facing religious education nationally have been well documented elsewhere. In brief, they involve recent legislative changes to examinations, poor funding for initial teacher training, inadequate curriculum time, lack of funding for Continuing Professional Development, low recruitment levels for teachers, and the closure of some Higher Education RE training departments. In these respects the REN support the REC's campaigns to improve religious education provision; however, the Worldviews approach does nothing to address these problems, instead raising more problems of its own.
3. It overloads the RE syllabus with a **smorgasbord of alternatives**, a mish-mash, as worldviews education diverts attention from a proper academic exploration of religion, threatening the academic integrity of Religious Education (the CoRE Report suggests twenty-five suitable non-religious worldviews);
4. **State control** of the religious education agenda is worrying – there are copious examples from both history and the contemporary world of what that can mean, and how undesirable that political control is⁵. Yet the NCS proposal is just that. The CoRE Report suggests small group of a 'maximum of nine professionals' to be in charge of the future of 'Religious and Worldviews', deliberately omitting representatives of the religions, funded by the Government (Commission on RE 2018).
5. The National Content Standard disproportionately prioritises the nebulous exploration of 'personal knowledge' and '**personal worldview**,' designating it as one of the three areas of subject content to be taught (NCS pp 6-7, also pp 24-25). This shift undermines the scholarly nature and knowledge foundation of robust RE education. High-quality RE naturally allows for personal reflection, as is the case with other academically rigorous disciplines; however, this should not be a primary aim;
6. The National Content Standard regularly calls upon teachers to be agents of **change** in their pupils. [It refers to this in the draft resource handbook⁶ (pp 8, 11, 23)]. Such a stance seems to encourage a form of **secular indoctrination**, which goes against the principle of avoiding religious or non-faith-based indoctrination in RE. The role of the RE teacher is not to impose beliefs on students.
7. The National Content Standard is supported by the draft resource handbook, which suggests **blending RE with various disciplines** such as academic theology, sociology, anthropology, history, art, literature. This approach blurs the distinctiveness of religious education, places unrealistic demands on teachers, and implies that RE alone is not a sufficiently worthy subject of study. Commonly, RE courses incorporate philosophy and ethics, which have traditionally been integral companions in fostering well-rounded and comprehensive study to the primary focus of RE which should remain the in-depth study of religion and religions, as prescribed in current legislation.

In conclusion, we earnestly urge the rejection of the National Content Standard for RE.

⁵ Universal Declaration of Human Rights articles 18 and 26

⁶ <https://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/rec/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/REC-Worldviews-Project-double-pages-Revised-cover-v1.2.pdf>

Appendix A

The Religious Education Network is an eclectic association of nearly forty organisations, university departments, teachers, SACRE members and governors. It has come about through a number of RE providers, concerned at the direction the subject is being led towards 'Religion and Worldviews', and aware that individuals and individual organisations needed more of a voice and an opportunity to share ideas, events, news and resources. The REN aims for the advancement of education by:

1. Maintaining the place of religion, and religions, at the heart of Religious Education
2. Supporting the current legal status of the subject named 'Religious Education'
3. Promoting National Standards for the effective provision of Religious Education
4. Identifying and exploring examples of current excellent provision in schools and colleges
5. Supporting the processes which ensure local determination for any RE syllabus
6. Providing a forum that links providers, organisations and individuals who share these aims

The Committee

Richard Coupe (Co-ordinator); Guy Hordern MBE; Professor Marius Feldderhof; Julie Arliss; Lizzie Harewood;
Ron Skelton; Seeta Lakhani; Steve Beegoo, [\[https://renetwork.co.uk/about/\]](https://renetwork.co.uk/about/)