



Religious Education  
**Network**  
Theology, Philosophy, Religion

**ISRSA**

# The Development of the Proposed National Curriculum for Religious Education

**A briefing from the Religious  
Education Network (REN)**

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July 2026

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## ABOUT ISRSA

The ISRSA affirms that Religious Studies, Theology and Philosophy are academically rigorous subject of vital relevance with a challenging and timeless voice.

We exist to support RS teachers in British independent schools, to provide networking and training opportunities.

We are also the voice for our teachers. We vigorously defend the value of our subject and present our views to educational decision makers.

We carry out cutting-edge research into our subject

We hold a a national annual conference and other smaller regional conferences

We are always keen to welcome new members to our organisation or our Council. Please contact us at [admin@isrsa.co.uk](mailto:admin@isrsa.co.uk) if you would like to join.

Our patron is Liam Gearon, Associate Professor in Religious Education at Oxford University.



# Purpose

This paper was written by Cristo Rodriguez and Julie Arliss and is based on the first hand experience of REN members who were part of the religion and belief reference group and the teacher reference group:

**Guy Hordern MBE**  
(Member of Birmingham SACRE)

**Cristo Rodriguez**  
(Trust Wide Subject Leader in Religious Education,  
the David Ross Education Trust)

**Lizzie Harewood**  
(Executive Officer, the Association of Christian Teachers)

It sets out concerns about both **the process** used to develop the proposed National Curriculum for Religious Education and **the resulting draft Programmes of Study**.

The purpose of this paper is to inform teachers, school leaders, policymakers and others participating in the forthcoming public consultation.

Many teachers may assume that representatives from across the Religious Education sector worked collaboratively to develop the proposed Programmes of Study. **That is not what happened.**



# Executive Summary

The principal concern raised in this paper is not simply disagreement over aspects of the draft curriculum. It is the process by which the draft was produced.

Reference Groups were not established to write or collaboratively develop the proposed National Curriculum.

Instead:

- members were invited to comment briefly on Programmes of Study that had already been substantially drafted;
- opportunities for detailed scrutiny and discussion were limited;
- documents could generally not be retained or circulated for detailed examination;
- the identity of those who drafted the Programmes of Study was not disclosed to the wider reference groups;
- the basis upon which those individuals had been selected was not explained;
- alternative draft programmes were not considered alongside the published drafts.

These features of the process make it difficult to reconcile participants' experience with subsequent public statements that the proposals emerged through “**genuine consensus**” across the Religious Education sector.

REN also raises a number of substantive concerns regarding the content of the proposed curriculum, including its underlying conceptual framework, the role of personal worldview, and the implications for the future of locally determined Religious Education.



## Background

As part of the Curriculum and Assessment Review, the Department for Education established a Task and Finish Group together with a number of Reference Groups to support work on Religious Education.

Many teachers may reasonably assume that these groups were brought together to develop the proposed National Curriculum collaboratively.

They were not.

Reference Group members were **not invited to draft, co-author or collaboratively develop** the proposed Programmes of Study. They were not asked to work through successive drafts, debate alternative curriculum models or collectively shape the content in the way normally associated with curriculum development.

Instead, members were invited to attend relatively short meetings during which they viewed documents that had already been substantially prepared. Their role was to comment on those drafts rather than create them.

This distinction is fundamental.

A process in which representatives **create** a curriculum is fundamentally different from one in which representatives are invited to **comment on a curriculum already written by others.**

## Transparency and Governance

Participants were never provided with a clear explanation of how the draft Programmes of Study had been produced before they reached the Reference Groups.

In particular, the wider groups were not informed:

- who had written the draft Programmes of Study;
- how those individuals had been selected;
- what expertise, mandate or representational basis they brought to the drafting process;
- what instructions or remit they had been given;
- whether alternative drafting groups or competing curriculum models had been considered before the drafts were presented.

For proposals of such national significance, these are important questions.

Teachers, schools and the wider Religious Education community are entitled to know how the proposed National Curriculum came to be written, by whom, and through what process.

This is not a question about individual personalities. It is a question of transparency, accountability and confidence in the development of national policy.

## The Consultation Process

Reference Group members also experienced significant limitations in the consultation process itself.

These included:

- limited opportunities to scrutinise draft documents;
- restrictions on retaining or sharing drafts for wider discussion;
- unequal access to documents across different organisations;
- limited opportunity to propose alternative approaches;
- insufficient time for detailed discussion and revision.

The process therefore differed significantly from the collaborative drafting process that many teachers would reasonably expect when developing a National Curriculum.

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## Representation of the RE Sector

Public statements have described the proposals as sector-led.

REN believes that description requires careful scrutiny.

The legally recognised structures through which Religious Education has traditionally been developed, including SACREs and Agreed Syllabus Conferences, were not involved in drafting the Programmes of Study in the manner many would expect.

Nor were Reference Groups given the opportunity to fulfil that role.

Instead, a comparatively small number of individuals prepared the draft curriculum before it reached the wider groups.

The identity of those individuals, the basis upon which they were selected and the process by which their work came to represent the proposed National Curriculum have not been made transparent to the wider sector.

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## Concerns about the Draft Curriculum

The concerns outlined above relate to process. REN also has substantive concerns about aspects of the draft curriculum itself. These include:

### PURPOSE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

- the central role given to pupils' personal worldview;
- the relationship between this aim and assurances that RE is not intended to shape pupils' beliefs.

### KNOWLEDGE STRUCTURE

- the move away from a knowledge-rich disciplinary model grounded in theology, philosophy and religious studies;
- continued reliance upon a worldviews framework and sociological approaches.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- assumptions about religion, knowledge and truth embedded within the proposed framework;
- concerns raised by academic commentators regarding epistemological relativism.

### INDICATIVE CONTENT

- the balance and proportionality of indicative content;
- the inclusion of humanism and paganism within a curriculum with limited teaching time.

These issues deserve careful consideration during public consultation.

## Why this Matters

The introduction of Religious Education into the National Curriculum represents one of the most significant changes to the subject for decades.

The integrity of that reform depends not only upon the quality of the final curriculum but also upon confidence in the process by which it has been developed.

Where participants are invited to comment on drafts rather than help create them, it is important that this distinction is clearly understood when claims are made about consultation, collaboration and consensus.

Similarly, where a draft has been prepared before wider consultation begins, transparency about how that draft came into being is essential if confidence in the process is to be maintained.



# Recommendations

REN recommends that the forthcoming consultation should include clear information about:

- how the draft Programmes of Study were developed;
- who was responsible for drafting them;
- how those individuals were appointed;
- the remit under which they worked;
- why alternative curriculum models were not developed alongside the published draft.

The consultation should also provide sufficient opportunity for meaningful consideration of alternative proposals before any final decisions are reached.





## ABOUT RELIGIOUS EDUCATION NETWORK

The Religious Education Network is committed to providing high-quality Religious Education in the UK. We include Faith leaders, theologians, independent organisations, teacher trainers, teachers, members of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education and school governors, drawn from both the maintained and the independent sectors.

Our aims in coming together are:

- To maintain the place of religion, and religions, at the heart of Religious Education
- To support the current legal status of the subject named 'Religious Education'
- To promote National Standards for the effective provision of Religious Education
- To identify, explore and share examples of excellent provision in schools and colleges
- To support the processes which ensure local determination for any RE syllabus
- To provide a forum that links providers, organisations and individuals who share these aims

At a time when there is much public debate about the place and importance of religion and spirituality in society, and in the world as a whole, we believe an exciting and well-grounded religious education is vital for our children's and young people's spiritual and social well-being, with religions themselves at the heart of this.



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