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Faith, Fluency and the Future of Religious Education in Britain

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Executive Summary

Britain is becoming at once more religiously plural and less religiously affiliated. For most people the Religious Education (RE) classroom is the only encounter they will ever have with the structured study of faiths other than their own. The importance of what happens in the classroom contrasts with the modest place the subject occupies on the timetable. Yet the debate about RE has been conducted largely between institutions (regulators, examination boards, faith bodies and campaigning groups), but has less commonly been informed by the views of people of faith themselves. As the government prepares to bring RE into the national curriculum in England for the first time, this report seeks to bring these views to the forefront of the conversation.

Drawing on a nationally representative survey of 1,196 people of faith who have either received RE within the past decade or have a child receiving it now, and supplemented by fourteen in-depth interviews, the report presents a detailed, faith-aware picture of what RE actually does for people of faith. Its central finding cuts against the prevailing pessimism: on its own terms, RE is working. 56% reported a positive impact on their/their child's schooling against just 5% who reported a negative one, whilst seven in ten regarded the teaching they received/their child is receiving as factually accurate. 75% credit the teaching they/their child received with making them/their children more aware of the diversity within other faiths, thereby helping to counter one of the most persistent deficiencies in people's understanding of faith.

The most striking pattern is who benefits most. It is Britain's religious minorities, rather than its Christian majority, who report getting the most out of RE across almost every measure of literacy, confidence and compassion, and who most want faith communities brought further into the classroom. The explanation lies in the shape of a curriculum built around Christianity: where a Christian student is largely studying a tradition already familiar, a student of another faith is introduced to the beliefs of the majority around them, and credits the subject accordingly. Far from eroding belief, RE more often strengthens it; non-Christians are markedly more likely to say it made them think more positively about their own faith (52%), compared to Christians (40%).

Where RE falls short, the weaknesses are specific rather than systemic. Of the respondents who identified as Muslim (a numerically small group in the survey but whose responses nonetheless provide valuable insight), they were most likely to lack confidence in its credibility and most likely to feel RE reduced their faith to doctrine and ritual stripped of meaning. Examined RE can, for some Christian participants, flatten a living faith into revisable content. Whilst not statistically representative, interviews raised concerns that LGBTQI students can find the subject a source of exclusion rather than understanding. Additionally, data from respondents in Northern Ireland showed the lowest indicators on key outcomes.

What those who experience RE in schools want is notable. They do not seek to abolish, narrow or centralise the subject by a wide margin; the single least popular reform, among every group, is more government oversight, chosen by just four per cent. They want RE deepened and opened

outward. They want more time dedicated to unfamiliar faiths, more debate in the classroom, and above all more direct contact with the communities whose beliefs they study. Support for a national curriculum is real but shallow and varies by country.

This report therefore seeks to provide additional context to the discussion around RE as the government launches its consultation on a national curriculum for the subject in England. It finds that respondents to this survey, those with recent experience of RE in schools, want more substance and greater engagement with local faith communities.

Key Findings

On its own terms, RE is working

- Overall, 56% of all respondents reported a very or mostly positive impact of RE on their or their child's school experience, whilst only 5% reported a negative one.
- Seven in ten (70%) regarded the RE they or their child received as generally factually correct, against just 4% who disagreed.

There is support for a national RE curriculum

- When asked directly whether there should be a standardised national curriculum for RE, 48% said yes and 20% said no. However, 32% said they did not know.

Britons of faith want their communities inside the classroom

- The single most popular improvement for RE, by a wide margin, was increased engagement with local faith communities, chosen by 36% of all respondents and by half of all non-Christians.
- The least popular option was more government oversight, selected by just 4% overall.

Far from weakening faith, RE strengthens it

- Non-Christians were more likely than Christians to say RE made them/their child think more positively about their own faith (net 46% vs 32%).

RE is not a vehicle for playground prejudice

- 64% of respondents rejected the suggestion that RE contributed to them or their child being stereotyped or teased more at school, against just 8% who agreed.

Introduction

As Britain continues to become more religiously plural and, simultaneously, less religiously affiliated, interactions with people whose relationship with faith differs from their own is an increasingly common feature of people's lives. In this setting, the capacity to understand religion, both as a system of belief and as a lived reality, is not a check-box item, but a fundamental element of existing in civil society.

For most people in Britain, the Religious Education classroom is the only encounter they will ever have with the structured study of faiths other than the one they may have been raised in, if any. What happens in the classroom therefore matters more than the modest place RE generally occupies on the timetable would suggest. RE that is inadequate, incoherent or uninformative, translates into a failure to equip students for a religiously plural society.

This report proceeds from two principles. The first is that Britain's religious diversity means religious literacy is a shared social good. The second is that the people best placed to judge whether RE is meeting that need are people of faith who have experienced it recently, and parents of faith whose children are currently receiving it. Too much of the existing debate about RE is conducted between institutions (regulators, examination boards, faith bodies and campaigning groups) and too little of it is informed by the testimony of the people most impacted by the content of RE being taught. By engaging directly with those who have experienced RE, and by reading the survey data through a faith-aware lens, this report seeks to bring their views to the forefront of the conversation.

This report does not assume in advance that RE is broken. One of the more striking features of the evidence gathered here is how much of it is positive, and how much of the strongest endorsement comes from minority-faith communities whose dissatisfaction is often taken for granted. The picture that emerges is therefore not one of failure to be corrected but of a genuinely valuable subject whose value is unevenly delivered, and whose weaknesses can be identified and addressed.

Methodology

This study combines quantitative and qualitative research in order to build a representative and grounded picture of how RE is experienced by people of faith in Britain. It is worth noting that the data and interviews referenced throughout this report were collected prior to the announcement in July 2026 that RE would be included in the national curriculum in England.

Survey

Whitestone Insight surveyed a representative sample of 1,196 adults online between 31 March and 8 April 2026. To be eligible, respondents had to be a member of a faith group and either have a child currently receiving religious education or have themselves received RE in the past ten years. Whitestone Insight is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

Participants were asked 6 questions to capture views on key themes such as the perceived credibility of RE, its effect on religious literacy, ways in which it might be improved, and balance of the content taught.

The questionnaire was as follows:

1. The RE I received/my child is receiving... [Strongly agree to strongly disagree]

- a. Was/is generally factually correct, as far as I have been able to tell
- b. Made me/them more aware of religious sensitivities
- c. Made me/them more aware of diversity within other religions
- d. Made me/them better understand the similarities and differences between my faith and other faiths
- e. Made me/them better understand other religious practices
- f. Made me/them better understand other religious worldviews

2. What impact did the RE you received / your child is receiving have on your/ their overall school experience? [Very positive to very negative]

3. How did RE impact your experience / how has RE impacted your child's experience in school? [Strongly agree to strongly disagree]

- a. It had a positive impact on my/their relationships with friends from other faiths
- b. It had a positive impact on my/my child's outlook on faith
- c. It contributed to me/my child being stereotyped or teased more in school
- d. It contributed to me/my child being stereotyped or teased less in school
- e. It improved me/my child's confidence in interacting with people of other faiths outside of school
- f. It made me/my child think more positively about my/their own faith

4. In your view, RE curriculums could be improved by: [indicate all that apply]

- a. Containing more input from religious leaders
- b. Containing more on different sects/denominations within religions
- c. Relying more on student-led learning
- d. Having more government oversight
- e. Being more objective in subject material
- f. Increased engagement with local faith communities
- g. None of the above

5. RE curriculums in England/Wales/Scotland are not nationally set like other subjects, but designed with input from local authorities. Do you think there should be a standardised, national curriculum in England/Wales/Scotland for RE? [Yes/no/I don't know]

For respondents in Northern Ireland

RE curriculums are provided in accordance with the core syllabus. Do you agree with this system? [Yes/no/I don't know]

6. Thinking about your/your child's experience of RE, would you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? [Strongly agree to strongly disagree]

- a. The curriculum was/is too focused on doctrine/theology
- b. The curriculum was/is too focused on daily practices/rituals, with no context provided
- c. I am happy with the balance of doctrine/practice that was/is taught

Although every effort was made to capture survey respondents from a variety of backgrounds and faiths, the pool of respondents from Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist communities was considerably lower than Christian respondents. Throughout most of this report, analysis will be grouped as 'Christian' and 'Non-Christian' to ensure comparability between the two datasets and because these are the two groups whose sample sizes allow for conclusions to be made about their respective populations. However, where there are standout statistics from specific non-Christian respondents, these are included to represent the scale of views.¹ Owing to their small sample size, statistics from specific, non-Christian faiths only refer to

¹ Respondent numbers [by faith] are as follows:

Christians - 1084, Muslims - 43, Hindus - 14, Jews - 29, Buddhists - 13, Sikhs - 13

the findings from the respondents surveyed, and are not used to make conclusions about the wider population of each group.

Similarly, the third section includes nation-specific data from respondents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, due to the small sample sizes from these nations, these statistics do not refer to broader trends in each country, and instead only reflect data from this survey's respondents.²

Interviews

The survey's findings were contextualised through a series of in-depth interviews with fourteen participants. These were drawn from the same two populations as the survey: adults of faith who had received RE within the past ten years, and parents of faith who have children currently receiving it. The two groups were asked separate but parallel sets of questions, reflecting their different vantage points on the same subject.

Interview questions for participants who received RE in the past 10 years:

1. Can you share a bit more about your background and the setting in which you received RE?
2. Thinking back to the RE you received, can you identify any positive experiences, or benefits of RE in your life as an adult today?
3. Did RE have an impact, positive or negative, on your relationships with others? If yes, how?
4. Did the content you were taught in RE impact your own faith experience? If yes, how?
5. If you could change one thing about the RE you received, what would it be?
6. What is one thing you learned in RE that has stayed with you to this day, if anything?

Interview questions for participants who are parents of children currently receiving RE:

1. Can you share a bit more about the background and setting in which your child is receiving RE, and the extent of your involvement?
2. Based on discussions with your child, have they identified any positive impacts of RE on their daily life? Is there any instance in which you have observed RE having a direct impact on their actions?
3. Thinking about the RE your child receives, how does it fit with the faith practised at home?

2 Respondent numbers [by country] are as follows:
England - 1019, Scotland - 74, Wales - 39, Northern Ireland - 64

4. Do you think the RE material your child is learning is at the right level to impact their personal faith journey?
5. What are some of the ways you think the RE your child is receiving could be improved?

The qualitative component in this report serves to complement and expand on the findings of the survey. The interview participants' backgrounds are summarised below.

Qualitative interview participants

Gender	Age	Faith	Country	Perspective
Male	22	Anglican	England	Received RE in the last 10 years
Female	25	Hindu	England	Received RE in the last 10 years
Female	18	Sunni Muslim	England	Received RE in the last 10 years
Male	47	Jain	England	Parent of a child currently receiving RE
Female	19	Muslim (converted from Christianity)	England	Received RE in the last 10 years
Female	24	Anglican	England	Received RE in the last 10 years
Female	18	Christian	England	Received RE in the last 10 years
Queer	23	Non-denominational Christian	England	Received RE in the last 10 years
Female	24	Anglican	England	Received RE in the last 10 years
Female	46	Jain	England	Parent of a child currently receiving RE
Male	26	Christian (converted from Hinduism)	England	Received RE in the last 10 years
Male	19	Baptist	England	Received RE in the last 10 years
Female	21	Catholic	England	Received RE in the last 10 years
Female	21	Christian	England	Received RE in the last 10 years

Structure

The report opens with a review of the existing literature and policy context. It then turns to its three analytical sections. The first examines the ways in which RE is working, asking who it serves well and which aspects score most highly. The second considers the scope for improvement, reading the data and interviews together to identify where RE falls short and what its recipients would change. The third examines data from the four nations of the United

Kingdom, including attitudes towards a standardised national curriculum. Each section combines quantitative analysis, used to establish the overall picture and the differences between groups, with qualitative material from the interviews, used to contextualise the statistics and introduce the range of perspectives behind them. The report concludes by drawing the findings together and setting out their implications.

Background

The Institute for the Impact of Faith in Life's August 2024 attitudes tracker revealed concerning statistics for religious literacy across the general population.³ 36% of the general public reported that they felt they had a poor understanding of most religions, and 40% said they had learned most of what they knew about other religions from how those religions are represented in films, books and television. More than one in four 18 to 24-year-olds went further, agreeing that it does not really matter whether people understand what the major religions are about.

These figures raise two distinct concerns. The first is about awareness itself: a substantial minority of the population feels ill-equipped to understand the role that faith plays in their fellow citizens' lives. The second is a concern about where people derive their understanding of faith from. A reliance on dramatised media portrayals, which are frequently caricatured, exaggerated or simply mistaken, is a poor substitute for structured education, particularly given that for many religious people, their faith is a central rather than incidental part of their identity.

Concerns about the formal provision of Religious Education are longstanding and have been articulated forcefully by the schools inspectorate. Ofsted's 2024 subject report on Religious Education identified a series of weaknesses in provision across England.⁴ It found that many schools did not meet the statutory requirement to teach RE at all stages; that students were rarely taught enough substance to prepare them to engage in a complex, multi-religious and multi-secular society; that too often schools did not teach topics in the curriculum deeply enough for students to develop a substantive understanding of the subject matter; and that non-examined RE was typically not of high quality.⁵

Additionally, Religious Education in Britain has historically centred on Christianity, which remains the most frequently taught tradition across school syllabuses, with Islam and Judaism the next most widely covered.⁶ This reflects both the country's religious history and the legal framework within which agreed syllabuses are drawn up. The weighting is significant for this report, because it shapes the very different ways in which Christian and non-Christian students encounter the subject: where a Christian student is, in large part, studying a tradition already familiar to them, a student of another faith is more often being introduced to faiths beyond their own. That asymmetry, returned to throughout the sections that follow, helps explain several of the divergences between Christian and non-Christian respondents that the survey reveals.

3 Review of *Britain's Attitudes to Faith in Public Life – August 2024*. 2024. IIFL. Institute for the Impact of Faith in Life. August 23, 2024. <https://iifl.org.uk/reports/britains-attitudes-to-faith-in-public-life-august-2024/>

4 Ofsted. 2024. "Deep and Meaningful? The Religious Education Subject Report." GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-religious-education/deep-and-meaningful-the-religious-education-subject-report#religion-in-schools>

5 Ibid

6 Ibid

Criticism of RE has not come from one direction only. The content of the curriculum has been contested from across the faith spectrum. Some parents have reportedly withdrawn their children from RE lessons in weeks when Islam was being taught, exercising the statutory right of withdrawal in a way that cuts directly against the subject's purpose.⁷ At the same time, campaigning groups have pressed for better-quality teaching of particular traditions, with one widely cited claim that a very large majority of the Hindu community regarded the study of Hinduism in RE as 'low quality and deficient'.⁸

Taken together, these strands frame the questions this report sets out to answer. If the public's religious literacy is thin and partly media-derived, and if the curriculum's content is contested from several directions at once, then the next step is to ask the people of faith who have experienced Religious Education what they made of it, what it did for them, and what they would change.

7 Smalley, Paul. 2018. "Parents Are Pulling Children from RE Lessons – so They Don't Learn about Islam." Comment Blog. <https://blogs.edgehill.ac.uk/comment/2018/05/09/parents-are-pulling-children-from-re-lessons-so-they-dont-learn-about-islam/>

8 Review of *A Report on the State of Hinduism in Religious Education in UK State School*. 2021. Insight UK. https://insightuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Hinduism-in-RE_Project-report.pdf

Section I: What is working?

It is tempting, given the weight of criticism surrounding Religious Education, to begin from the assumption that the subject is failing and to search the data for confirmation. The evidence does not support that starting point. On measure after measure, RE emerges as a subject that people of faith regard as mostly credible, that demonstrably broadens their awareness of other faiths, and that leaves a majority feeling more confident and more compassionate in their dealings with different religions. This section discusses where RE is working, and, just as importantly, for whom.

Credibility

Before the wider effects of RE can be assessed, it is worth establishing whether those who experience it regard it as truthful. A subject that is not trusted to be accurate cannot do its other work, however well intentioned. Therefore respondents were asked whether the RE they received, or that their child is receiving, is generally factually correct, as far as they have been able to tell.

70% of all respondents agreed, against a combined 4% who disagreed, confirming a majority felt the RE they or their child received is generally factually correct.

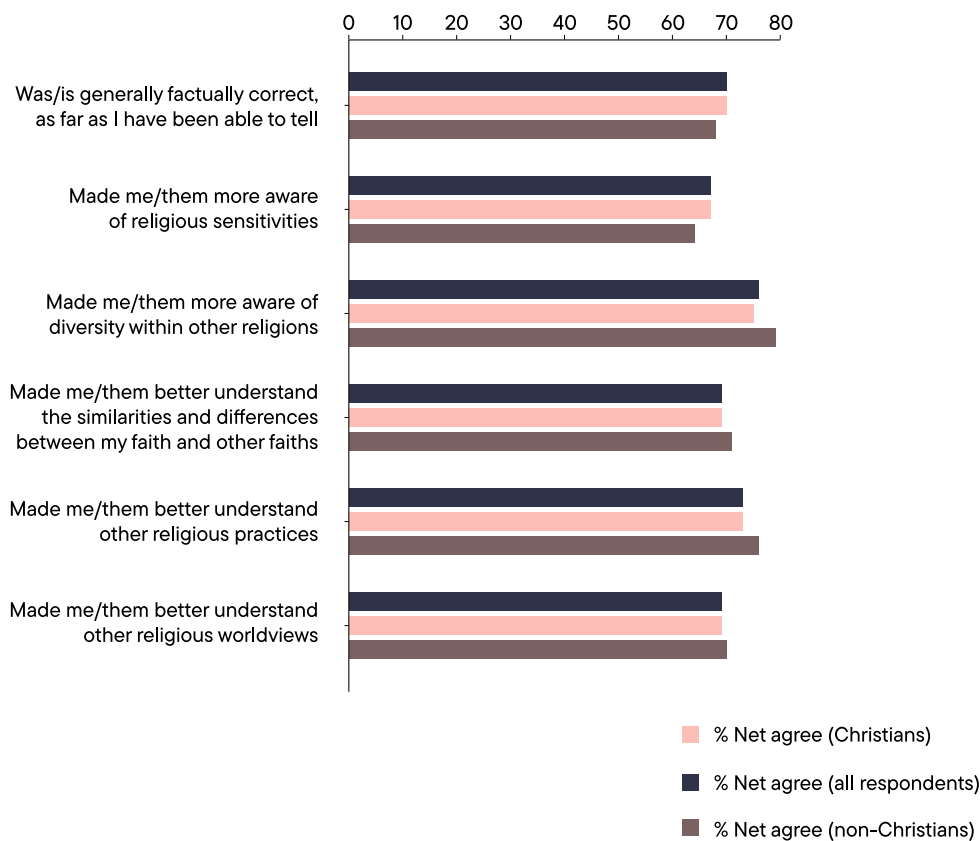
Two features of this picture deserve attention. The first is the strength of endorsement among most minority faiths. Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu survey respondents all registered agreement at or above the all-respondent average of 70%, with Hindu and Sikh respondents recording no disagreement in the sample. The second, and more troubling, is the position of Muslim respondents, who are the least likely of any group to regard RE as factually correct: only 56% agreed, well below every other minority faith. In a similar manner, 14% of Jewish respondents stated the view that RE is not factually correct.

This fragmentation suggests the issue is unlikely to be a generalised hostility of faith groups towards RE. Instead, it can be taken to point towards specific concerns around specific traditions/religions and how they are represented – a theme that the next section discusses.

Religious literacy

The central purpose of RE is to build religious literacy: to leave students more aware of, and better able to understand, the beliefs and practices of others. Respondents were asked whether the RE they received/their child is receiving had any of five effects and the results were consistently positive.

The RE I received/my child is receiving:



Awareness of the diversity that exists within other religions scores highest of all, at 76%, which is a meaningful result in itself: one of the most persistent failures of popular religious understanding is the tendency to treat each faith as a monolith, and RE appears to be actively countering that. Awareness of other religious practices follows at 73%, with the remaining measures clustered around 67% to 69%. It is worth noting, however, that awareness of other faiths, which depends on exposure to faiths other than one's own in the classroom, an experience more common for non-Christian students, does not necessarily translate into awareness of the diversity within a given faith. The two are distinct, and the second is itself shaped by which traditions a syllabus covers: for instance, a Muslim student whose RE learnt heavily on Christianity would likely emerge more aware of the denominations within Christianity than of Buddhism.

The most instructive pattern, however, lies in the breakdowns. On every measure of non-self faith literacy, non-Christian respondents reported equal or greater benefit than Christians, and on awareness of diversity the gap is widest among minority faiths. The fact that RE curriculums are most likely to include Christianity, and that the Curriculum and Assessment Review's recent report claimed that 'understanding the tenets of Christianity unlocks a wider understanding of British culture in terms of Christianity's historic influence and how it has shaped modern-day Britain' adds further context to Christian and non-Christian students' engagement patterns.⁹

⁹ *Curriculum and Assessment Review: Building a world-class curriculum for all*. Department for Education. 2025, pp. 107-108. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report>.

85% of Sikh and Buddhist respondents, and 83% of Jewish respondents, say RE made them/their child more aware of the diversity within other religions. When asked whether the RE they/their child received made them more aware of religious sensitivities, 85% of Buddhist respondents, 72% of Jewish respondents and 69% of Sikh respondents agreed with the prompt. In other words, for respondents who aren't Christian, RE appears to deliver the most.

There is one consistent exception to the upbeat picture, and it concerns Muslim respondents and respondents from Northern Ireland, both of which recur as the weakest cases throughout this report. Only 53% of Muslim respondents and 58% of respondents from Northern Ireland say RE made them/their child more aware of religious sensitivities, far below the all-respondent figure. These are not contradictions of the broadly positive story so much as signposts to where it breaks down, and they are taken up in Section 2 and Section 3 respectively.

A clear gender pattern also runs through the literacy data. Women report more benefit than men on every measure: 72% of women say RE improved their/their child's understanding of other worldviews against 62% of men; 75% against 68% on understanding other practices; 72% against 62% on grasping similarities and differences between faiths; and 78% against 71% on awareness of diversity within other religions. The consistency of the gap suggests a real difference in how the subject is received – a subject worthy of further exploration.

Confidence and compassion

Beyond knowledge, RE is often hoped to leave a tangible impact on the lives of those who receive it, leaving them more confident and more generous in their dealings with people whose belief system differs to theirs. The survey provides hope on this front. Overall, 56% of respondents reported a very or mostly positive impact of RE on their/their child's school experience, against only 5% who reported a negative one. (Based on responses to the question, 'What impact did the RE you received / your child is receiving have on their overall school experience?') Once again the effect is stronger among non-Christians, 62% of whom reported a positive impact against 55% of Christians, and stronger among women than men (58% against 50%).

On confidence specifically, 41% of respondents agreed that RE improved their/their child's confidence in interacting with people of other faiths outside school. The headline figure is modest, but the breakdown is revealing: 54% of non-Christians agreed compared to just 40% of Christians.

Looking more specifically at minority faith groups, 60% of Muslim, 62% of Sikh, 50% of Buddhist and Hindu, and 45% of Jewish respondents said RE improved their/their child's confidence in interacting with people of other faiths outside school. The pattern is consistent with the literacy findings, and is, in part, a function of the syllabus itself. Ofsted's 2024 report notes that

Christianity and the Christian tradition are the most frequently taught content in RE, followed by Islam and Judaism.¹⁰ Non-Christian students therefore encounter faiths other than their own as a matter of course, while for Christian students the subject carries an element of familiarity, covering, in large part, a tradition they already know. For students from minority backgrounds, RE may not be an abstract survey of other people's beliefs but a resource for navigating a society in which they are themselves a minority, and they credit it accordingly.

The same logic extends to friendship. Asked whether RE had a positive impact on their/their child's relationships with friends from other faiths, 46% of all respondents agreed, but the figure rises among the minority faiths: Non-Christians as a whole were more likely than Christians to report a positive effect on such friendships (50% against 46%), while Christians were correspondingly more likely to report no effect either way. An important consideration to take into account on this point is that in classrooms where Christianity is the majority, a minority-faith student's friendships across religious lines will, by definition, more often be with members of the majority, so the opportunity for RE to shape such friendships is simply greater for them than for their Christian peers.

A further, quieter signal of RE's social value lies in what it does not do. Respondents were asked whether RE contributed to their/their child being stereotyped or teased more at school, and a clear majority rejected the suggestion: 64% disagreed, against just 8% who agreed.

The converse question – whether RE actively reduced teasing, draws a much weaker response. 17% of non-Christians, against 10% of Christians, agreed that RE contributed to their/their child being stereotyped or teased less in school, suggesting that RE's mitigating effect lies in explaining minority (most often non-self) faiths to students, addressing some of the challenges that can arise due to misinformation or from simply being perceived as 'different'. Overall, the demonstrable takeaway is that while RE is not a one-size fits all solution to teasing/stereotyping, with some groups finding it more beneficial than others, it also isn't contributing to it.

From the interviews: What did you gain from RE?

To understand the human experience behind these figures, interview participants were asked to reflect on the benefits of RE in their lives as adults, on its impact on their relationships, and on the one thing they had learned that stayed with them. There were two key themes that stood out.

¹⁰ Ofsted, 2024.

Theme 1: Empathy, compassion and a shared sense of faith

The most widely shared reflection among participants, cutting across both Christian and non-Christian participants, was that RE had left them with a greater capacity for compassion, understanding and empathy, and with more confidence in engaging people whose beliefs differed from their own. This echoes the survey finding that a majority credit RE with improving their cross-faith confidence: participants did not describe an abstract tolerance so much as a practical ease in conversation and a willingness to ask and to listen.

“Even though a lot of my friends didn’t end up religious, the baseline morality of what’s good and what’s bad [established in RE classes], through us being able to reflect on it in a safe learning environment, gave us a more positive general temperament.” – (Female, 21, Catholic)

“RE gave me an outline sketch of ethics, which I really value. Even if you don’t agree, you get to debate and discuss, which was never discouraged. It made me see religion as the architecture and moral compass of peoples’ worlds and let me get an understanding of what that would mean.” – (Queer, 23, Non-denominational Christian)

“I feel as though the values and morals that come from religions that I learned in RE are engrained in me. It’s not necessarily made me a better person but rather put in subliminal rules that play into things I would and wouldn’t do. Also, a bit of empathy – I remember learning about the 10 commandments, and this has stayed with me. – (Female, 25, Hindu)

A more unexpected strand within this theme concerned the faith of the teacher. Several participants observed that knowing their RE teacher was themselves a person of faith, of whatever religion, improved the quality of the education they received. The explanation offered was not doctrinal but relational: a sense of camaraderie in the simple fact of having faith, which lent the teaching a credibility and a warmth that participants felt a purely detached treatment of religion would have lacked.

“I think being taught about religion from someone that believed in religion would have given me more security in what I was taught.” – (Female, 18, Christian)

“I would’ve loved to have had more on the relationship Christians have with God and what that means. This can only be delivered by RE teachers that are of faith. You can only really preach what you practice. It’s difficult to explain if you’re not part of it, and to comprehend that there is more to faith than the factual evidence.” – (Male, 19, Baptist)

In both these strands, students have demonstrated an acute awareness of the sincerity of faith and the value of lived knowledge and experience – key themes which will make an appearance in the next section of this report around discussions on the scope for improvement.

Theme 2: Questioning and strengthening

A second theme, reported specifically by non-Christian participants, was that RE often prompted them to question their own faith. Far from being experienced as destabilising, this questioning was frequently described as the beginning of a process that ended in a firmer rather than a weaker commitment. Through the work of articulating and defending their beliefs, and of reconciling their values with their faith through reasoning, several participants felt they had emerged with a more considered and resilient religious identity than they had brought to the classroom.

This finding sits alongside the survey evidence that non-Christians are more likely than Christians to say RE made them/their child think more positively about their own faith (a net 46% against 32% for Christians), and it complicates any simple worry that exposure to other faiths erodes a student's own. For these participants, exposure was precisely what allowed their faith to be held by conviction rather than by default.

"Particularly when we were studying my own religion, the content we were taught often led me to reflect more upon what it is that I personally believe in. Especially on the more miniscule aspects of my faith that I wouldn't have considered previously, it made me question my beliefs. I've now got more solid ground [in my faith] and feel more confident in explaining my beliefs." – (Female, 18, Christian)

"Classroom debates in RE can push students to learn more and critically engage with their faith. We should try and learn as much as we can and not be biased towards our own faith. Doing this strengthened my faith. – (Female, 18, Sunni Muslim)

In a similar light, parents described RE as broadly complementary to the faith practised at home, opening conversations that might not otherwise have arisen and prompting children to ask questions about their own tradition as well as others.

"RE is very important in terms of identifying the values, learning more about empathy, compassion, and forgiveness. It's increased [my children's] self-confidence and allows them to hold their ground in challenging situations." – (Female, 46, Jain)

A consistent thread runs through these breakdowns, and indeed through the survey as a whole: non-Christians appear to gain more from RE than Christians do. The pattern is not confined to one question. Non-Christians report greater gains in confidence interacting with people of other faiths (54% compared to 40%), are more likely to say RE left them/their child thinking positively about their own faith (a net 46% against 32%), report a more positive overall impact (62% compared to 55%), and are more likely to credit RE with reducing the teasing or stereotyping they/their child experienced (17% compared to 10%). On the literacy measures examined earlier, they match or exceed Christian respondents at almost every turn.

The most likely explanation returns to the shape of the curriculum. Where RE centres on Christianity, its core offer, structured exposure to unfamiliar traditions and the confidence to engage across difference, is, for a Christian student, partly an account of a world they already

know. For a student of another faith, the same lessons are an introduction to the beliefs of the majority around them, and the benefit is correspondingly greater. RE is not failing its Christian students so much as offering them less that is new; the subject's distinctive value accrues most to those for whom its content is least familiar. That is a strength worth recognising, but it also suggests that serving Christian students as well as the subject serves others would mean giving them, too, a richer encounter with faiths beyond their own.

Conclusion

On its own terms, RE in Britain is working for people of faith. It is trusted as broadly accurate by seven in ten of those who experience it, it measurably broadens awareness of other faiths and of the diversity within them, and it is associated with greater confidence and compassion in dealings across different religions. Most strikingly, these benefits are felt most strongly not by the majority but by minority-faith students. The interview testimonies further contextualise the statistics: participants describe a subject that gave them empathy they still draw on, teachers whose own faith lent the teaching life, and, for some, a route to a stronger rather than a weaker faith of their own. The achievements are real and should not be lost in the criticism that follows. But the same data carries early warnings in the lower credibility reported by Muslim respondents and the persistent weakness of outcomes by respondents from Northern Ireland, and it is those weaknesses that the report now explores.

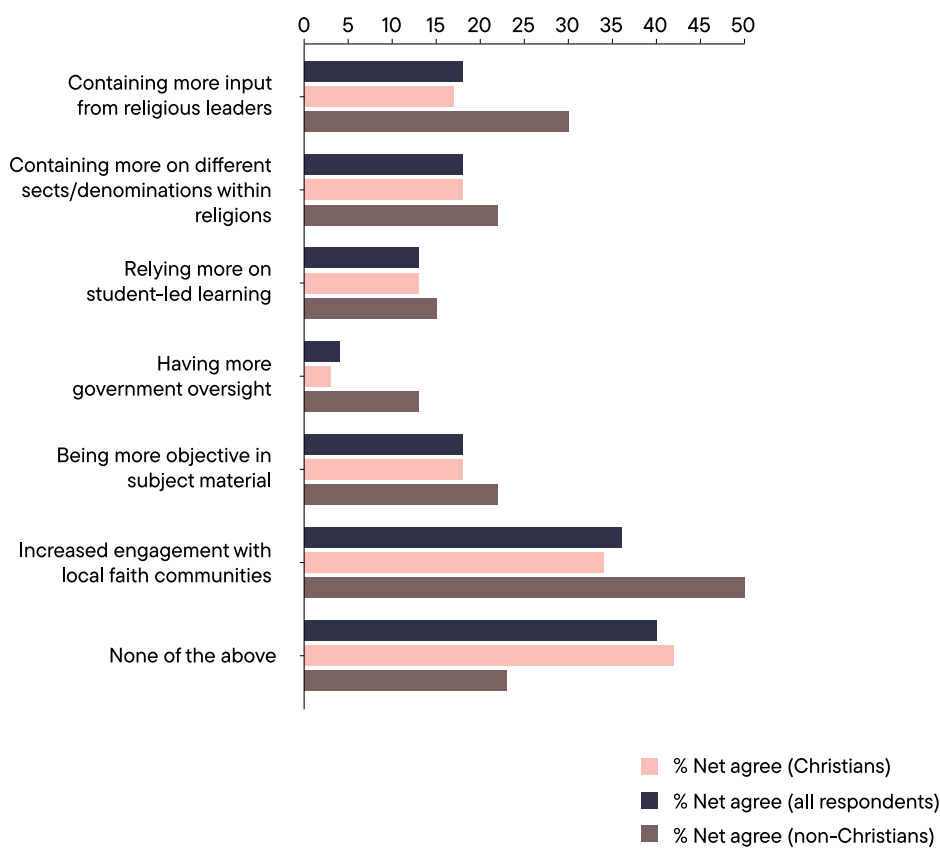
Section II: What could be better?

A subject can be valuable and still fall short of where it should be. The previous section established that Religious Education is, overall, working for people of faith. This section reads the same body of evidence for its weaknesses, asking where RE disappoints those who experience it and what they would change. The picture that emerges is not of a subject in crisis but of one held back by a small number of recurring shortcomings: a lack of depth, an uneven credibility among particular communities, a contested balance between doctrine and practice, and a set of specific exclusions that leave some feeling unseen. Encouragingly, the improvements its recipients most want are constructive rather than punitive.

In numbers: what should change?

Respondents were asked how RE curriculums could be improved, and invited to select all the options that applied. The single most popular answer, by a wide margin, was increased engagement with local faith communities, chosen by 36% of all respondents and by 50% of non-Christians. The least popular, everywhere and among every group, was more government oversight, selected by just 4% overall. The shape of that result is itself a finding: there is an appetite for opening the classroom to the lived reality of faith.

In your view, RE curriculums could be improved by:



The breakdowns again reflect a distinction between Christian and non-Christian respondents. 42% of Christians selected 'none of the above', against just 23% of non-Christians, indicating greater appetite for change among minorities. Non-Christians were more likely to want increased engagement (50% against 34%), more input from religious leaders (30% against 17%) and, from a low base, more government oversight (13% against 3%).

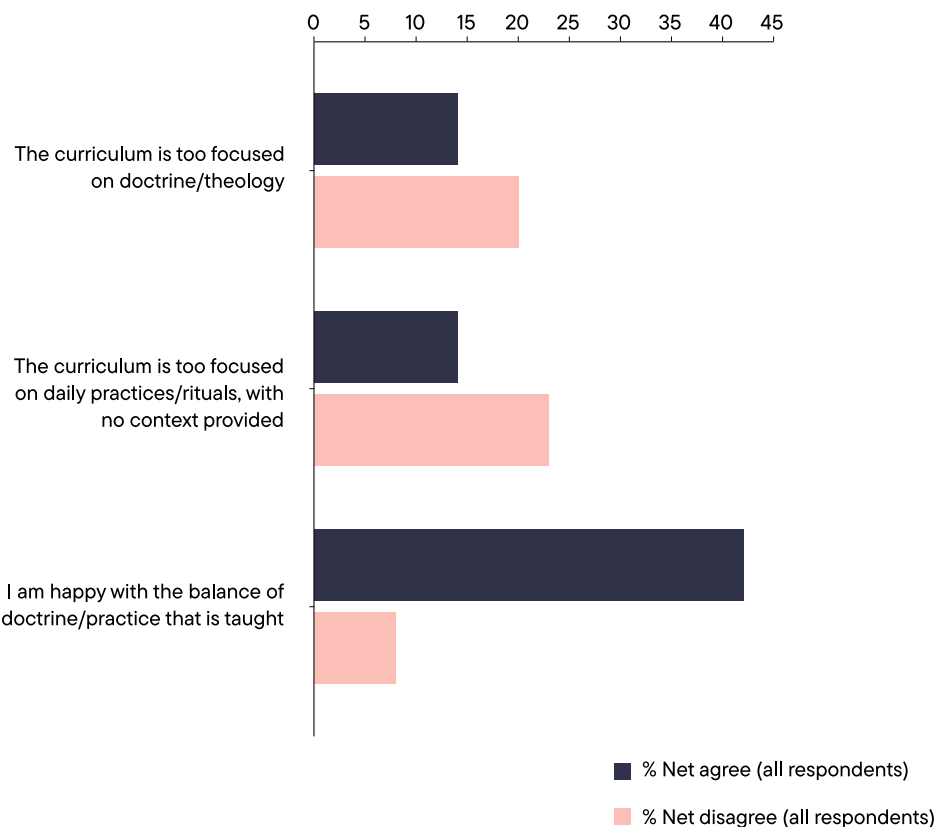
Among Muslim respondents specifically the top three priorities were increased community engagement (58%), more input from religious leaders (30%) and more objective subject material (21%), a combination that reads as a desire for RE about Islam to be more authentically sourced. Respondents from the three Dharmic faiths surveyed - Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist - stood out for placing student-led learning among their top priorities at rates above other faiths, with Sikh respondents ranking it equal first alongside engagement and religious-leader input. The desire for objectivity, meanwhile, was shared widely, appearing in the top three for Buddhist respondents.

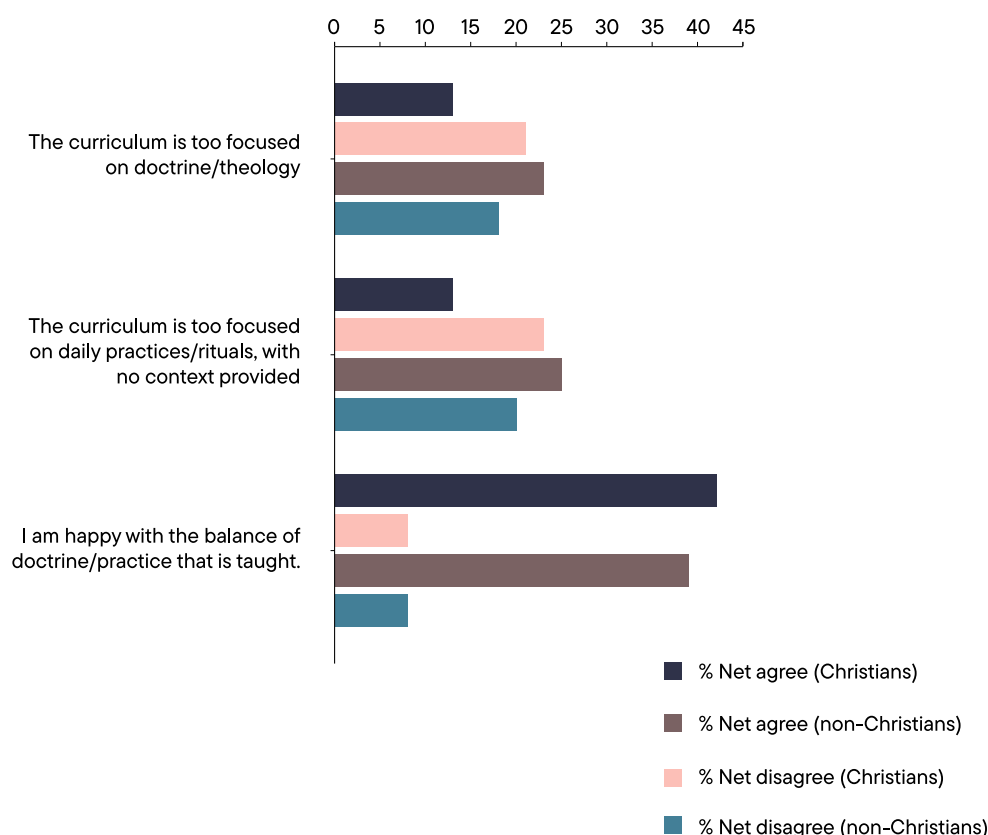
It's also worth noting the difference in engagement with the question between Christian and non-Christian respondents, the former for which RE appears to need little reform. This could well reflect the fact that RE has historically been built around Christianity, so that the majority's expectations are more fully met by default while minorities are left wanting more, and asking for it. The appetite for change, in other words, is not evenly distributed because the subject does not serve all faiths equally, and the pattern of who wants reform is itself a measure of who is currently underserved.

Subject material

Another question posed to survey respondents was whether RE is too focused on doctrine and theology, too focused on daily practices and rituals without context, or if they are happy with the balance of doctrine and practice taught.

Thinking about your/your child’s experience of RE, would you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?





Christians, on balance, did not feel RE is over-focused on doctrine; if anything they tilted the other way, with more disagreeing with the statement that the curriculum is too focused on doctrine, while non-Christians appear to take an opposite view.

For instance, survey data showed that 30% of Muslim respondents believed there is too much of a focus on doctrine and theology, and 28% believed RE is too focused on daily practices/rituals. Of non-Christian respondents, they were the most likely to hold this view. The data may be interpreted to demonstrate that RE, as experienced by Muslim respondents, presents Islam as a set of doctrines and observances, the beliefs to be listed and the rituals to be catalogued, without conveying the meaning and lived texture that animate them. That reading aligns closely with the lower credibility Muslim respondents assign to RE’s factual accuracy, examined in Section 1, and in interviews.

From the interviews: What could have been better?

The interviews gave participants room to describe the limitations of their RE in their own terms and there were three key themes that emerged.

Theme 1: Desire for depth

Across the board, and irrespective of faith, participants felt that the RE they were taught lacked depth. The single change most frequently wished for was more time and more substance devoted to learning about different faiths. This is the experiential counterpart to Ofsted's finding that schools too often do not teach RE topics deeply enough.

The most memorable moments of RE, for many, were the debates and discussions held in the classroom, and there was a clear appetite for more of them, alongside positive, direct encounters with faith-community leaders and with fellow students of faith willing to speak about their own experience where they felt comfortable doing so. Students' desired fix is not more facts but more genuine engagement, as seen in the statistical analysis as well.

"Understanding the actual religions would have helped my understanding of the world we live in (politically) as well. For instance, it would've been beneficial to hear about Muslim experiences. I would've liked to hear more from people of different faiths to comprehend the impact their faith has on their lives." – (Female, 21, Christian)

"Part of the reason that I enjoyed RE was the debates we had. Some of the stories we got told, and the discussions we had made religion feel more alive and less like words on a page." – (Male, 22, Anglican)

On a similar note, Christian participants expressed a wish to have learned more about the denominations within Christianity. The survey records denominational and sectarian depth as a chosen improvement, selected by 18% overall, and the interviews give it a face: students aware that their own tradition contains diversity they were never taught, and conscious that the same flattening likely applies to the other faiths they studied.

"The Catholic perspective through which we were taught Christianity didn't align with the faith I was taught about in the Church of England. I found that to be disruptive. I don't know as much about sects as I would like to have. What we were taught was more a 'patchwork' of ideas when it comes to Christianity." – (Female, 24, Anglican)

Theme 2: 'Religion' and 'faith'

A very interesting theme emerged among Christian participants who had taken RE at GCSE or A-Level. Several reported that RE had a negative effect on their own faith, in that the process of reducing their religion to study material, to be revised, structured and assessed, drained it of meaning and left it resonating less than it had before. For a student whose faith is the one being examined, RE may feel less like discovery and more like dissection.

"The fact that you need to take an exam on scripture, means you don't get the time to contemplate what you're learning. It can often feel like you're just being told what to believe. A lot of it feels redundant – you're practicing because it's directed, not because you have an attachment to the practice." – (Female, 21, Catholic)

“RE hindered my faith journey. I felt like a bad Christian. This was because I saw my faith as an academic pursuit that I wanted to succeed in. I wanted to know everything and have an answer to different challenges. This stemmed from me putting my value in academic results, and structuring my RE exam responses in a set structure. I learned later on that faith is more than just listing practices. There’s a difference between the religion you read as scripture and faith that is a living, breathing presence in my life.” – (Female, 21, Christian)

Theme 3: Exclusions and differences

Finally, participants raised a set of more difficult experiences that any honest assessment of RE must record. Some reported that LGBTQI students can feel excluded by conventional RE teaching, and that their identity, or the question of how it sits with the faiths under discussion, can be handled in ways that feel dismissive. A related concern was raised about the treatment, or avoidance, of sex education within or adjacent to RE, and a perceived ignorance around it.

RE may convey that a religion contains different branches – an earlier finding in this report notes that students most often credit it with awareness of diversity within faiths. But awareness that a tradition has denominations is not the same as awareness that it contains live disagreement on contested questions of identity and morality. RE can teach the former while leaving the latter untouched, presenting each faith's stance on questions like sexuality as settled and singular when in practice traditions hold a range of views – even when variety most certainly exists, demonstrated, for instance, by Father James Martin, a Catholic priest known for his outreach to LGBTQ Catholics.

“RE made me internalise a hatred for myself – and why I didn’t fit into the way of life taught in the classroom. It was damaging for my self-esteem, thinking there was something wrong with myself. My identity was actively challenged, my existence, personality, and position within Christianity was not respected.” – (Queer, 23, Non-denominational Christian)

“There were students that wanted to volunteer for Amnesty International, and the school I went to shut it down because of AI’s stance on abortion. We never touched on this in RE. The area I lived in had high rates of teen pregnancy, but we were never taught about sex-education either. There was a certain ignorance on conflict areas.” – (Female, 24, Anglican)

Separately, Muslim participants gave examples of being confronted by their peers about contested or caricatured aspects of Islam, being challenged, for instance, on the permissibility of a man having four wives, in a way that placed the burden of explanation and defence on the individual Muslim student rather than on the teaching.

These are some of the ways in which RE, intended to foster understanding, can instead expose students to discomfort or exclusion, and they could help to explain the credibility gap among Muslim respondents documented in Section 1. A student repeatedly made to answer for a stereotype is unlikely to experience the lesson as a fair representation of their faith.

“Sometimes, when teaching about other religions, there would be some offensive remarks, seen as ignorant. I did report it, and it was handled. As a Muslim, I was questioned by fellow students about women’s issues in Islam.” – (Female, 18, Sunni Muslim)

Conclusion

There is genuine and sincere scope for improvement when it comes to RE. People of faith do not want the subject dismantled or seized by the central government; the least popular reform of all is more government oversight. They want it deepened and opened up: more time on other faiths, more classroom debate, more direct contact with faith communities and their leaders, and a fairer, more contextual treatment of traditions that some students feel are reduced to a list of doctrines or a catalogue of rituals. The sharpest warnings come from particular quarters, from Muslim respondents who find RE less credible and more doctrinaire, from Christian students whose faith was flattened by examination, and from LGBTQI and minority students who can feel exposed or excluded. None of these is an argument against RE. Each is an argument for doing it better, and for doing it with the depth and the human contact that those who experience it say they value most.

Section III: Geographical breakdown

Religious Education is not a single national subject. The United Kingdom's four nations operate distinct arrangements, and RE has, until now, been locally rather than nationally determined in England, Wales, and Scotland.

England has no single national syllabus. The subject is compulsory in state-funded schools, but what is taught is decided locally, with maintained schools following a syllabus agreed by their area's Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE).¹¹ By law, those syllabuses have to reflect that the country's religious traditions are 'in the main Christian', while also accounting for the other principal faiths present in Britain.¹²

However, this is now changing. In July 2026, the government confirmed that RE would, for the first time, form part of the national curriculum in England.¹³ A consultation on the content is due to follow, with faith schools retaining the freedom to build on the new national requirements and long-standing arrangements for church schools preserved.

Northern Ireland is already centralised: rather than leaving content to local bodies, it works from a single compulsory core syllabus defined by the Department of Education and the four main Christian churches.¹⁴ Non-Christian faiths are introduced only at secondary school level, with a consultation currently underway to introduce Islam and Judaism earlier following a Supreme Court judgement that the 'RE Core Syllabus in Northern Ireland was not sufficiently objective, critical and pluralistic.'¹⁵

Scotland takes a broader frame, delivering the subject as Religious and Moral Education within the Curriculum for Excellence, built around three strands: Christianity, other world religions, and a more open strand of philosophical and moral enquiry.¹⁶ This leaves individual schools considerable latitude to reflect their own communities.

Wales has changed most, and most recently. Since 2022 the subject has been renamed Religion, Values and Ethics and rebuilt to take in non-religious as well as religious worldviews, while the specific syllabus is locally agreed.¹⁷

¹¹ Ofsted, 2024.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ [Religion news 6 July 2026 - Religion Media Centre](#)

¹⁴ "Religious Education | CCEA." <https://ccea.org.uk/key-stages-1-2/curriculum/religious-education>. <https://ccea.org.uk/key-stages-1-2/curriculum/religious-education>

¹⁵ [Christianity still 'core element' of new Religious Education syllabus](#); "Consultation opens on revised RE Syllabus following Supreme Court Judgment". 2026. Department for Education. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/consultation-opens-revised-re-syllabus-following-supreme-court-judgment>.

¹⁶ [National Association of Teachers of Religious Education](#)

¹⁷ Ibid

It would be surprising if such varied arrangements produced uniform results, and they do not. This section examines how the experience and outcomes of RE differ across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and considers what respondents think about the prospect of a standardised national curriculum.

Credibility and literacy

The clearest national contrast concerns the perceived factual accuracy of RE. Scottish respondents recorded the highest confidence of any nation, with 78% agreeing that RE is generally factually correct, while Welsh respondents recorded the lowest, at 56%. The twenty-two-point spread between them is among the widest national gaps in the entire survey and suggests that the credibility of RE is experienced very differently depending on where a student happens to be taught.

On literacy measures the standout finding is from respondents in Northern Ireland. Respondents there reported the weakest outcomes of any country across the board. Only 64% said RE made them/their children more aware of diversity within other religions; only 58% said it improved their/their child's awareness of religious sensitivities; only 58% that it helped them/their child grasp the similarities and differences between their own and other faiths; only 58% that it improved their/their child's understanding of other religious practices; and, again, only 58% that it improved their/their child's understanding of other religious worldviews.

Respondents from Wales told another story – 74% reported a broad awareness of diversity, 56% regarded RE as factually accurate and 51% reported a positive overall impact.

Meanwhile, respondents in Scotland demonstrated the highest confidence in accuracy with strong literacy outcomes. Although based on a small sample size, respondent data suggests Scotland is the country where RE is, on these measures, best regarded, even though as the next section shows, Scottish respondents are the least enthusiastic about standardising it.

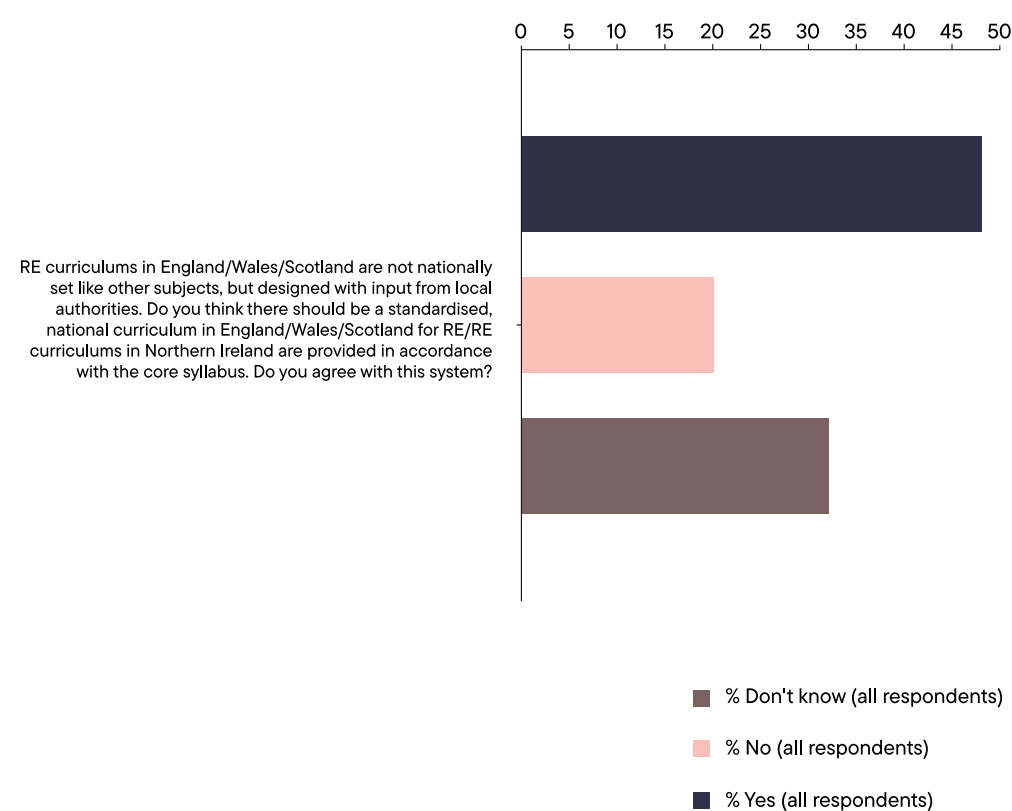
Question of a national curriculum

Respondents in England, Wales and Scotland were asked directly whether there should be a standardised national curriculum for RE in their nation. This data is particularly important given locally set curriculums have long been one of the defining features of RE in England, Scotland and Wales, and in light of the government's recent announcement that England will move to a national curriculum. Across all respondents, 48% said yes, 20% said no, and a substantial 32% said they did not know. The headline support is therefore real but soft, tempered by a large undecided bloc that suggests the question is not one most people have settled views on or have properly considered.

RE curriculums in England/Wales/Scotland are not nationally set like other subjects, but designed with input from local authorities. Do you think there should be a standardised, national curriculum in England/Wales/Scotland for RE?

For respondents in Northern Ireland

RE curriculums in Northern Ireland are provided in accordance with the core syllabus. Do you agree with this system?



Support for standardisation amongst respondents was fairly spread out. For instance, respondents in Scotland had the lowest support for a national curriculum (28%), and the largest share of undecided responses (42%). The Scottish respondents' apparent reluctance to standardise sits naturally alongside their high satisfaction with the accuracy and literacy outcomes of its current arrangements. Therefore, the data from respondents indicates there is little appetite to reform what is felt to be working.

Meanwhile, respondents in Northern Ireland showed the firmest appetite for standardisation (66%), with only 20% stating they were undecided. Interestingly, Northern Ireland already operates the most centralised, nationally set arrangement of the four nations. Paired with respondents' lower scores in terms of literacy and positive impact, it's possible to state that the support of 66% of respondents from Northern Ireland towards a national curriculum is not necessarily an endorsement of a system in place, but rather an abstract desire for improvement.

Despite the small sample sizes across the four nations, there is a broader theme here. The survey suggests that support for a national curriculum is not, in itself, a settled popular demand: it is soft, uneven, and shaped in response to where provisions can be improved. Looking now at England proceeding with such a change ultimately implies that the curriculum's success will be judged less on the fact of standardisation than on the content it delivers. The signal from respondents is that a national framework will be welcomed to the extent that it broadens and deepens what is taught, and met with indifference or resistance to the extent that it does not.

From the students: the case for common standards

While the interviews were not statistically representative of each nation, and national attribution of individual accounts should be treated with care, reflections on the setting in which RE is received provides an added layer of insight.

Theme: Minorities and representation

Minority-faith parents argued that the range of faiths taught in RE should not be determined by the religious composition of the particular school. A school whose students happen to be only Christian and Muslim, on this view, should not for that reason teach only Christianity and Islam. The purpose of RE, these parents contended, is precisely to prepare children to encounter faiths beyond those present in their immediate community, and a curriculum narrowed to the local intake defeats that purpose, leaving children unprepared for the fuller diversity of the country and the world they will enter.

The point connects directly to the survey's finding that awareness of diversity within and between religions is among RE's strongest achievements.

"In a different school, even though the demographic was almost entirely white, we were taught about many different religions across different geographies. We were taught that other people don't live in a set bubble. I was very comfortable to express my personality and my beliefs. It was when I moved to a different school that covered a more limited range of religions that I started to fold into myself." – (Queer, 23, Non-denominational Christian)

"I understand the approaches to 'majority' and 'minority'. The importance of a religion shouldn't be reduced to the number of kids following that religion in the school. My children are the only Jains in their school – learning and talking about minority religions will have a huge impact on society in general. The values of other religions should also be brought to the table and given equal opportunity to learn and discuss." – (Male, 47, Jain)

"We focused on Buddhism and Christianity in school, which I found really interesting, and I think is quite rare. We did a bit of Islam and a bit of Judaism, but I would've liked a lot more on them. We also did the odd lesson on Sikhism, but not very much." – (Male, 22, Anglican)

Conclusion

Religious Education in the United Kingdom is four subjects as much as one, and the differences between the nations are worth considering. While respondents in Scotland demonstrate the highest satisfaction, they are most opposed to a national curriculum. Respondents in Northern Ireland (which already has a standardised curriculum in place) show support for a national curriculum despite low RE literacy rates. The appetite for a national curriculum is genuine but uneven and heavily qualified by uncertainty, and it appears to be driven less by an abstract preference for uniformity than by dissatisfaction with provision where that provision is felt to be failing.

Conclusion

This report set out to bring a faith-aware perspective to a debate about Religious Education that has too often been conducted without the people most impacted by the content of RE being taught. Reading a nationally representative survey alongside the testimony of those who have lived through RE, it has tried to answer a simple question: what does Religious Education actually do for those who have experienced it, and where does it fall short? The answer is that RE is a genuinely valuable subject whose value is unevenly delivered, and whose shortcomings can be identified and addressed.

The achievements are substantial and deserve to be stated plainly, because they are so often drowned out. Seven in ten people of faith regard RE as factually credible. Three quarters say it made them/their child more aware of the diversity within other religions. A majority report that it improved their/their children's confidence and their/their children's compassion in dealings across religious differences.

However, Religious Education can be held back by a lack of substance, for example through insufficient engagement with people of faith themselves. Its credibility is unevenly distributed, lowest among Muslim respondents, who also experience it as more focused on doctrine and ritual without the meaning that animates them in contrast to Christian respondents. Examined RE can, for some Christian pupils, reduce a living faith to revisable content. Particular pupils, LGBTQI students and members of minority faiths put on the spot for caricatures of their tradition can find the subject a source of exclusion rather than understanding.

What people of faith want is strikingly constructive. They do not call for RE to be simply standardised by the government; the least popular reform of all is more government oversight. They instead ask for the subject to be deepened and opened outwards: more time on other faiths, more classroom debate of the kind participants remembered most fondly, more direct contact with faith communities and the people who lead and live within them, and a fairer, more contextual treatment of every tradition. The minority-faith parents who insisted that a child's curriculum should not be confined to the faiths that happen to be present in their school articulated the underlying principle: the purpose of Religious Education is to prepare people for a plural society and a plural world, not only for the corridor they walk down each morning.

If there is a single thread running through both the data and the interviews, it is that Religious Education works best when it is least like a recitation of facts and most like an encounter, between pupils and other faiths, between pupils and teachers who hold a faith of their own, and between pupils and the communities whose beliefs they study. That is also, not coincidentally, what its recipients say they want more of. The task for policymakers, syllabus-setters and teachers is not to rescue a failing subject but to give a valued one the depth, the breadth and the human contact that would allow it to do consistently, and for everyone, what it already does well for many.

That task has rarely been more immediate. With England now committed to bringing RE into its national curriculum for the first time, and a consultation on its content to follow, the question this report has examined, what those who have experienced RE actually value in it, is about to be answered in practice as well as principle. The evidence assembled here points in a consistent direction. What those who experience it want is not more central control but more substance: more time on unfamiliar faiths, more debate, more contact with the people who live the traditions being studied, and a treatment of every faith that conveys its meaning rather than cataloguing its doctrines. A national curriculum built to those specifications would not merely standardise RE; it would deepen it. That, on the evidence of the people who have experienced it, is what would make the difference.

In an increasingly diverse and interconnected Britain, there are few investments in social cohesion more quietly consequential than getting Religious Education right.



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