

Making sense of religion

A report on religious education in schools and the impact of locally agreed syllabuses

Some progress has been made in enhancing the provision for religious education (RE) in recent years. Pupils' achievement has improved. Developments nationally have contributed substantially to this improvement, but the overall quality of RE is still not consistently high enough.

Recent world events have raised the profile of religious education significantly and schools have new responsibilities to promote community cohesion. Those with responsibility for RE therefore have the task of ensuring that children and young people are able to make sense of religion in the modern world and issues of identity and diversity.

The inspection evidence on which the report is based does not include voluntary aided faith schools. However, the data about examination results at GCSE and A levels is drawn from all schools.

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Religious education and the law

The legal requirements governing religious education (RE) were set out in the Education Reform Act of 1988 and confirmed by the Education Acts of 1996 and 1998. RE must be provided for all registered pupils in maintained schools, including those in reception classes and sixth forms. In community and voluntary controlled schools, RE must be provided in accordance with the local agreed syllabus.

Uniquely, although RE is a statutory subject, it is not part of the National Curriculum. The content of RE is determined at the level of the local authority (LA) and each LA must review its agreed syllabus every five years.

An agreed syllabus should 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teachings and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (Education Reform Act (ERA) 1988 Section 8 (3)).

Each LA must set up a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) to advise the LA on matters connected with RE.

Parents have the right to withdraw their children from RE and this right should be identified in the school prospectus.

RE in voluntary aided schools must be provided in accordance with the trust deed of the school and the wishes of the governing body.

In 2004, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) produced, on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, the non-statutory framework for RE (the Framework)¹. Its purpose is to support those with responsibility for the provision and quality of RE in maintained schools. The framework gives local authorities, SACREs and relevant authorities with responsibility for schools with a religious character a clear and shared understanding of the knowledge and skills that young people will gain at school in religious education.

¹ *The non-statutory national framework for religious education (QCA/04/1336)*, QCA, 2004.

Executive summary

This report draws on evidence about religious education (RE) from whole-school inspections over the period 2001 to 2006. It also draws on the programme of subject visits by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) and Additional Inspectors (AIs) to 30 primary schools and 30 secondary schools each year over the period 2003 to 2006. In 2006, these visits focused specifically on eight local authorities that had recently adopted a revised agreed syllabus. The inspection evidence on which the report is based does not include voluntary-aided faith schools.

The past few years have seen an overall improvement in RE. Much greater consensus exists about the nature and purpose of the subject, reflected in the publication of the Framework in 2004. Fewer schools fail to meet the statutory requirement to teach RE and in many schools the profile of RE is positive. Although there is some very good practice, including high quality teaching, standards overall are not high enough and there are wide variations in the quality of provision. Achievement by pupils in RE has improved over the past five years but remains very inconsistent.

The growth of examinations in RE means that an increasing number of schools meet the statutory requirements at Key Stage 4, in part because more pupils follow accredited courses in the subject at GCSE. In 2006, more than half of all 16-year-olds achieved a national qualification in religious studies. The number of pupils achieving an A-level qualification has more than doubled since 1996. Compliance with the statutory requirements for RE provision post-16, however, remains very limited and has not improved.

At its best, RE equips pupils very well to consider issues of community cohesion, diversity and religious understanding. It contributes significantly to pupils' academic progress and their personal development. This is one reason why pupils' attitudes towards the subject have improved. Older pupils, in particular, believe that RE provides opportunities to discuss issues which matter to them and encourages them to respect differences of opinion and belief.

Despite these improvements, important weaknesses remain. Many locally agreed syllabuses for RE still do not define progression in the subject clearly enough and therefore do not provide a secure basis for effective teaching and learning, curriculum planning and assessment. Because assessment is often weak, subject leaders do not have enough reliable evidence about pupils' progress and are not able to analyse strengths and identify priorities for improvement. SACREs and Agreed Syllabuses Conferences find it difficult to gather robust evidence about trends in

standards and provision in order to evaluate the impact of the agreed syllabus and undertake its five-year review.²

The Framework has gone some way towards resolving the problem of defining progression in RE. However, a number of factors limit its impact. This report examines these factors and discusses the need for change. It identifies the current trends in RE within community schools and analyses some of the factors helping and hindering pupils in doing better.

The report reflects on the response of RE to the changes in the role and significance of religion in the modern world and to the current priorities of promoting community cohesion and educating for diversity.

Key findings

- Pupils' achievement in RE in primary schools improved over the period between 2001/02 and 2005/06. In 2004/05, achievement was good or better in 46% of schools and satisfactory in about 50% of schools. More recent survey visits confirm this picture. Inadequate achievement in RE in primary schools is rare.
- Pupils' achievement at Key Stage 3 is very inconsistent. In 2004/05 it was good or better in 61% of schools and satisfactory in 31% of schools. More recent survey visits have found achievements in RE to be good or better in only four out of 10 schools and satisfactory in about half of schools.
- There has been a substantial improvement in full course GCSE- and A-level results over the past five years, but short course GCSE results have remained static, with around half of the pupils entered achieving A* to C grades.
- Leadership and management of RE have improved. In 2004/05, they were good or better in 46% of primary schools compared with 39% in 2001/02. In secondary schools, they were good or better in 68% of schools compared with 59% in 2001/02. Self-evaluation in RE has improved substantially.
- More schools meet the statutory requirements for RE at Key Stage 4, in part because more pupils follow accredited courses in RE at GCSE. Compliance post-16 remains very limited and the arguments for retaining the statutory requirements at this stage are difficult to sustain.
- Aspects of teaching, assessment, curriculum and leadership and management are not good enough in many secondary schools. Too much teaching at Key Stage 3 is unchallenging. Serious weaknesses remain widespread in the way that levels of attainment are used in planning and assessment.

² SACREs are responsible for advising local authorities on RE and collective worship. Each SACRE in England comprises four representative groups: Christian and other religious denominations, the Church of England, teachers' associations and elected councillors.

- The impact of the National Strategies on RE in primary schools has been largely positive. However, whole-school development rarely focuses on RE. The subject depends heavily on the expertise and enthusiasm of individual teachers, and pupils' achievement is therefore inconsistent. In secondary schools, weaknesses in planning the RE curriculum frequently undermine the effects of fresh thinking about teaching and learning which the strategies have brought.
- There are not enough accredited courses to meet the needs of students between 14 and 19 years across the ability range. The provision for students in further education to take accredited courses in RE is inadequate.
- Training in RE is not always matched closely enough to teachers' needs, especially for curriculum planning and assessment at Key Stage 3. Although teachers are positive about the training that they receive, schools rarely evaluate its impact.
- Primary initial teacher training (ITT) courses provide very little training about teaching RE; later professional development does not compensate for this. Primary teachers' lack of secure subject knowledge is a key factor limiting the amount of good and outstanding teaching in RE.
- While recent changes in funding for secondary ITT in RE have had a positive impact, recruitment still does not meet the demand for specialist teachers of RE. Although many aspects of secondary ITT in RE are good, weaknesses in planning and assessment in some of the schools in which trainees are placed are reflected in the trainees' progress.
- The Framework has widespread support. Recent national initiatives to improve RE have the potential to raise standards and improve provision but the subject's statutory basis constrains developments (please see 'Religious education and the law' on page 4). The use of two attainment targets creates difficulties for planning and assessment.
- Many agreed syllabuses, including some recent ones, are not having a significant impact on improving standards and the quality of provision. Nearly half of the secondary schools visited in 2006/07 had not implemented their most recently published agreed syllabus effectively. Primary schools were more successful in implementing their agreed syllabus rigorously and systematically.
- SACREs provide valuable support for RE and community cohesion when they are managed and resourced properly. However, many local authorities do not ensure that SACREs have sufficient capacity to fulfil these responsibilities effectively.
- The curriculum and teaching in RE do not place sufficient emphasis on exploring the changing political and social significance of religion in the modern world. As a result, the subject's potential to contribute to community cohesion, education for diversity and citizenship is not being fully realised.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to bring about improvements to religious education.

The Department for Education and Skills (DFES) should:

- review whether:
 - the current statutory arrangements for RE, including those for post-16 provision, are effective
 - the Framework could become the statutory basis for locally agreed syllabuses, allowing for some local determination of specific content to reflect local circumstances
 - the Framework could become the basis for the inclusion of RE within the National Curriculum
- consider ways in which SACREs might be enabled to play a stronger role in promoting the priorities of community cohesion and educating for diversity.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) should:

- develop further guidance to support the effective use of the Framework in constructing agreed syllabuses
- provide further opportunities for SACREs to share good practice
- extend the range of accredited courses for RE to ensure that the needs of all students are met
- secure greater continuity and progression in RE for the 11 to 19 years age group by aligning the assessment criteria for accredited courses with the attainment targets and levels in the Framework
- ensure that accredited courses place greater emphasis on enabling pupils to understand the changing social significance of religion in the modern world
- when reviewing the Framework, consider whether the two attainment targets for RE are an effective basis for planning and assessment.

Local authorities, in partnership with their SACREs, need to:

- consider ways in which SACREs can be better supported to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities effectively
- use the Framework rigorously in reviewing their agreed syllabus, and thoroughly assess the impact of their existing syllabus on standards and the quality of planning and assessment
- consider how the work of SACREs might support further the promotion of community cohesion and educating for diversity.

Secondary schools should:

- improve the quality of curriculum planning and assessment, particularly at Key Stage 3
- use their locally agreed syllabus more systematically and effectively to improve provision for RE.

Primary schools should:

- improve the quality of teachers' RE subject knowledge
- focus on RE in the course of whole-school development work, where appropriate.

All schools should:

- ensure that RE contributes strongly to pupils' understanding of the changing role of religion, diversity and community cohesion.

Providers of ITT should:

- strengthen the arrangements for selecting and training RE subject mentors to ensure that trainees receive high quality training.

Part A. Religious education in schools

Achievement and standards

Primary schools

1. Pupils' achievement in 2004/05 in RE was good or better in 46% of primary schools compared with 63% in all subjects. This is, nevertheless, an improvement from 2001/02 when the figure for RE was 32%. The most recent subject survey visits in 2006/07 confirmed that achievement was good in more than four out of 10 schools. Inadequate achievement was rare. The way in which teaching challenges and extends pupils' thinking about religion has improved significantly.
2. Where achievement is very good or outstanding, pupils are engaged with challenging tasks and demonstrate the capacity to explore the meaning and significance of religious belief and practice:

In a Year 2 class the children were investigating the story of how Ganesh got his elephant head. The teacher made the purpose of the lesson clear at the beginning; namely, to understand that some religious stories are puzzling and difficult to understand. By using artefacts, posters and active learning (inviting the children to 'breathe life' into Ganesh), the teacher encouraged the children to identify the tricky questions. Working in groups, they tried to work out how they might answer the questions and,

by the end of the lesson, they had understood that there are lots of puzzling questions which cannot be answered easily.

- Where provision for RE is effective throughout the whole school, pupils' standards in Years 5 and 6 are often higher than those in Years 7 or 8 in many secondary schools.

In an outstanding Year 6 lesson, pupils prepared questions to ask the local vicar about the impact of her faith on her life. They classified the questions according to whether they were about her beliefs or their impact on her way of life. In ability groups, they selected questions and answers to prepare for a final discussion. Lower attaining pupils worked with a teaching assistant and made very good progress in consolidating their understanding. Higher attainers had extension questions asking them to consider whether there were any surprises in the vicar's answers. A large proportion of the pupils reached level 5, demonstrating understanding at least as good as that seen in many Year 8 classes.

- Where achievement is not as good, it is often because pupils do not gain a secure conceptual framework within which to fit their learning; as a result, their understanding and progress are fragmented. The key factor inhibiting achievement is teachers' lack of understanding of the content and pedagogy of the subject and, specifically, their uncertainty about how pupils make progress in their learning in RE. The following example demonstrates good progression in learning:

Pupils understand what they are learning and how this fits into a broader theme. Older pupils can also explain how they learn best, recognising practical activities, such as visits, as helpful and memorable ways of learning. Year 5 pupils understand that presenting the story of Rama and Sita to Year 3 pupils was a very effective way of learning about it themselves.

- Unevenness in the progress that pupils make across the two attainment targets of 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion reflects the continuing emphasis that many schools place on 'learning about' religion. Where provision is particularly weak, pupils learn about only superficial features of the religion, rather than deepening their understanding through investigation. This tends to happen when teachers assume that more analytical and reflective tasks are linked predominantly to attainment target 2, 'learning from' religion; as a result, they do not include challenging tasks in work related to 'learning about' religion. The following example illustrates the problem:

Across the school a number of pupils are working at a good level on aspects of 'learning from religion'. Examples include Year 6 pupils' thoughtful reflections on the feelings of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and descriptions of peace by pupils in Year 3 who think it is

'as delicate as a pink rose' and 'as soft as a grey goose feather'. However, this level of understanding is not demonstrated consistently across all elements of the subject. More challenge would be beneficial in relation to 'learning about religion' so that pupils gain more secure knowledge and understanding on which to base more reflective work.

6. It is common to find pupils making very good progress in one or two year groups and then marking time in other years. One reason for this is that achievement depends heavily on the expertise and enthusiasm of individual teachers.
7. This inconsistency in experience continues where schools have not addressed transition and continuity between Key Stages 2 and 3.

Key Stage 3

8. The achievement of pupils at Key Stage 3 remains very uneven. In 2005, the last year for which national data is available, achievement was good or better in 57% of schools, well below the average of 67% for all subjects. In the last year, of the sample of schools inspected, achievement was good or better in only four out of 10 and very little was outstanding.
9. Pupils' achievement at Key Stage 3 is very closely related to the quality of the curriculum and assessment, and the planning of lessons. In most schools, data about Key Stage 3 standards and achievement in RE are unreliable or do not exist. Overall, however, achievement across Key Stage 3 is often very uneven because of poor continuity in the curriculum.
10. Pupils' achievement has improved where teaching incorporates a more issues-based approach to the subject. Pupils' critical thinking improves and they analyse issues more thoroughly and imaginatively. In particular, the achievements of higher attaining pupils improve.
11. As in primary schools, achievement across the two attainment targets is uneven, as illustrated by this example:

The pupils' skills in investigating and enquiring into the beliefs, teaching and practices of religion are limited and do not develop well enough across Key Stage 3. By contrast, their ability to reflect on and express their own ideas about human experience is stronger, reflecting the emphasis in the teaching. However, because this is not rooted in the effective study of religion, the pupils do not develop their skills of applying and evaluating what they have learnt about religion sufficiently. Good opportunities for personal reflection do not secure real 'learning from' religion because work in 'learning about' religion lacks depth.

12. Frequently, work that is related to 'learning about' religion is not challenging enough. There is a tendency to limit extended writing to open-ended personal

responses rather than high quality argument or analysis. A recent inspection illustrates this:

Achievement at Key Stage 3 is very uneven. In Year 8 work is rarely above level 3 to 4 because written tasks lack challenge. Some pupils make better progress orally but, because their responses are not translated effectively into more structured written work, their progress is not consolidated sufficiently. Progress is uneven because of problems with continuity and progression in the curriculum and weak assessment. Pupils do not synthesise the various strands of their work so that they make even progress across the key stage. Their grasp of the meaning and significance of religion and their ability to explain and interpret religion improves very slowly.

13. The recent *Diversity and citizenship curriculum review* highlighted this:

'RE teachers face this challenge constantly. It is often simpler for them to fall back on the mechanics of religion instead of tackling the reality of being religious. Textbooks tend to concentrate on ceremonies rather than what it is like to live as a Catholic, a Muslim or a Hindu in the community; and to discuss where values and codes for living come from for pupils who do not have religious belief. It is an area which needs considerable work if we are to meet our objectives of developing active, articulate, critical learners who understand the value of difference and unity and have the ability to participate and engage in current debates.'³

14. Other factors still have a negative impact on pupils' achievements, most notably: non-specialist teachers, particularly where they are not managed effectively; limited time for the subject, restricting the opportunities to extend pupils' learning; and, in many cases, pupils' weak literacy skills.
15. Good achievement is the result of skilful teaching. It ensures that the tasks associated with 'learning about' religion are challenging and require the use of higher order thinking skills, and that pupils understand clearly the links between individual lessons and different topics.

Examination courses

16. The number of students taking GCSE and A-level examination courses in RE has risen substantially in the past 10 years.⁴ The total number of GCSE examination entries rose from about 110,000 in 1995 to about 400,000 in 2006. Of these,

³ *Diversity and citizenship curriculum review* (DfES 00045), DfES, 2007.

⁴ The data about examination results at GCSE and A levels is drawn from all schools whether they have a religious character or not.

approximately 130,000 were for full course GCSE. More than half the Year 11 cohorts now gain a GCSE in religious studies, an unprecedented number and proportion. The number of pupils achieving an A-level qualification has more than doubled since 1996.

17. The results for the GCSE short course have been fairly modest and the increase in numbers is not matched by an improvement in standards. Since 2002, the percentage achieving A* to C grades has been around 50%, with about 16% achieving the highest A*/A grades. Results for the GCSE full course have improved steadily in recent years. In 2001, about 59% of pupils gained A* to C grades; this rose to more than 70% in 2006. The percentage of pupils who gained the highest A* to A grades rose from about 21% of pupils in 2001 to more than 30% in 2006.
18. Among the reasons for the successes in GCSE over the past 10 years has been the willingness of those responsible for agreed syllabuses to prescribe nationally accredited courses leading to public qualifications in RE as the programme of study for students at Key Stage 4. As a result, only about one in five schools failed to meet the statutory requirements for RE at Key Stage 4 compared with one in three schools in 2001/02.
19. Although this is encouraging, there is much room for improvement, particularly in getting pupils to think more deeply about RE. In too many cases, the quality of the provision has not ensured that pupils develop the knowledge, understanding and skills which match the aspirations expressed in the Framework:

‘Religious education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life... It develops pupils’ knowledge and understanding of Christianity, other principal religions, other religious traditions and other world views that offer answers to questions such as these... It offers opportunities for personal reflection and spiritual development...

Religious education encourages pupils to learn from different religions, beliefs, values and traditions while exploring their own beliefs and questions of meaning. It challenges pupils to reflect on, consider, analyse, interpret and evaluate issues of truth, belief, faith and ethics and to communicate their responses.⁵

20. In practice, there is often a mismatch between the aspirations of examination courses and the demands of assessment. On occasions, while pupils learn sufficient to pass the examination, their learning is in danger of trivialising

⁵ *Non-statutory national framework for religious education (QCA/04/1336)*, QCA, 2004.

issues of global human significance rather than developing a deeper understanding of religious perspectives on life.

21. As an example of this mismatch, religion and medical ethics is a typical short course GCSE topic which requires pupils to study attitudes towards abortion and fertility treatment, euthanasia and suicide, and the use of animals in medical research. Pupils are required to support their views by referring to the teachings and sacred texts of Christianity and/or one or two other principal religions. These requirements appear intellectually demanding. However, assessment tends to encourage standard, mechanistic responses rather than thoughtful engagement with the issues.
22. Standards and achievements in the GCSE short courses are lower than they should be because of discontinuity between Key Stages 3 and 4. To be able to move forward rapidly at GCSE level, pupils need to understand the diversity of beliefs and ethical perspectives within the religions they are studying and the way in which religious belief and ethical life interact, as well as being able to debate philosophical and ethical issues rationally and analytically. In practice, RE at Key Stage 3 rarely prepares pupils properly for these demands. This discontinuity is also reflected in the significant mismatch between the grading criteria used for GCSE short courses and Key Stage 3 assessment and levels in many agreed syllabuses.
23. Nevertheless, RE is popular with many Key Stage 4 pupils, which is reflected in their decision to continue their study post-16. For many pupils, this followed their successes in GCSE short or full courses. The total figure of about 9,500 A2-level entries for religious studies in 2001 rose to 18,000 in 2006.
24. Since 2001, the results for AS- and A2-level religious studies have improved steadily: over 81% of students entered for A2-level religious studies in 2006 achieved A–C grades compared with 66.7% in 2001.
25. The potential exists to improve accreditation for RE if the range of qualifications can be extended to meet the needs of all students aged between 14 and 19 years. Very few students in further education colleges take accredited courses in religious studies. It is important that RE, as a compulsory subject in schools, has a fuller range of qualifications available for students within this age group.

The persistent underachievement by boys

26. Underachievement by boys in RE is a major cause for concern. Although in short course GCSE, where schools generally enter the whole cohort, the numbers of boys and girls entered for the examination are comparable, many more girls than boys take the full course. In both the full and short courses, girls gain most of the A* to A grades while boys predominate in the lowest grades. The difference in attainment between boys and girls at the end of Key Stage 4 is far greater than that for all subjects overall. At post-16, the

difference is far less marked. However, the numbers choosing the subject remain heavily skewed towards girls.

27. In recent RE inspections, inspectors have focused on boys' achievements. Inspectors held discussions with boys and girls in primary and secondary schools about their views of RE. In primary schools, in most cases, the boys were positive about the subject and valued learning about religions, but they placed a greater emphasis on the way they were taught, such as being given opportunities to learn in creative ways through drama or art, and to express personal opinions, rather than the subject matter itself.
28. In secondary schools, one of the most important findings was that boys generally did not regard RE negatively. When asked to rate RE in terms of its interest level, the most common response was that it was of above average interest compared with other subjects. A particularly striking finding was that boys at Key Stage 4 were often more positive about the subject than girls.
29. Boys said they enjoyed RE when:
 - they could explore interesting topics which mattered to them
 - they were finding out what other pupils thought, particularly about social and moral issues
 - it provided what they saw as a rare opportunity – denied them in a heavily examination-orientated Key Stage 4 curriculum – for more extended discussion, expressing opinions and developing personal views in relation to controversial human issues
 - it involved learning about different beliefs and lifestyles and helped people to get along better with one another and to be more tolerant; RE was perceived to be a key subject in generating this kind of understanding.
30. Boys were generally less interested in RE at Key Stage 3 than at Key Stage 4, where they preferred the heavier weighting towards ethical and philosophical issues. All the boys interviewed preferred work which discussed issues rather than simply gathering information about religions; these included world issues such as war and peace, and philosophical or theological issues such as the existence of God. Girls, on the other hand, often preferred issues related to family and human relationships or matters of life and death such as abortion. Learning about religions tended to be more popular with boys when this was related to issues such as the problem of suffering or religion in the media.
31. Often, boys' reasons for liking or disliking RE related directly to the quality of teaching. Although some expressed the view that they did not like RE because 'I'm not religious', their dislike was also associated with a style of teaching that restricted openness or focused too narrowly on recording information. In some cases, even where teachers believed that their style encouraged discussion, boys noted teachers' reluctance to open up debate and promote questioning, often in case it led to poor behaviour.

32. Although boys' attitudes improve when they take examination courses at Key Stage 4, data show that they still underperform. Interviews about this were revealing. In many cases, boys argued that, although the subject was intrinsically interesting, it was not a qualification they particularly valued because they did not believe it would enhance their chances of employment. A number of them suggested that, while girls were keen to do well in all their subjects because 'girls don't want a poor result on their profile', boys were more selective about deciding which subjects to focus on in preparing for examinations. This reflects the evidence that where boys are more successful in their short course GCSE it is because teachers skilfully combine good quality discussion with regular opportunities for short-burst examination practice. They avoid too much recording of information and are realistic about some boys' resistance to undertaking independent revision work.
33. Pupils were also asked whether they thought RE was easy or difficult compared with other subjects. Most pupils judged RE to be one of the easiest subjects. Their reasons varied. In some cases, pupils thought it was easy because discussion involves giving their own ideas, with no right and wrong answers. However, in other cases, related to weaknesses in teaching, boys thought of RE as an easy subject because tasks lacked challenge, when what they valued were topics that made them think more.
34. Boys were also often critical of fragmented learning, jumping from one topic to another without understanding the broader purpose or how topics linked together. A related cause for complaint was the lack of feedback about their progress. They were often unaware that 'it was possible to get better' in work such as discussion. Many teachers have not thought carefully enough about how to use discussion to enhance learning rather than simply to make lessons enjoyable.
35. In most of the schools where these interviews took place, subject leaders acknowledged that they had done little themselves to investigate pupils' perceptions about the subject, especially in the context of self-evaluation. The recent emphasis on 'pupil voice' in the report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group reinforces the importance of listening to pupils.⁶ This is a weakness that Ofsted has commented on before:

'What can RE teachers learn from this? Apart from taking seriously these opinions, which represent the views of boys in nearly 20 schools across the country, teachers should recognise the need to take seriously their pupils' evaluations of lessons. This shows it is possible to uncover highly significant data by the relatively simple procedure of talking to pupils, a

⁶ *2020 Vision: Report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group* (DfES 04255), DfES, 2006.

task more easily accomplished by teachers. Only a minority of boys were opposed to RE in principle. Where they had a complaint it was about the quality of teaching.⁷

36. Recognising the problem is the first step but, at present, relatively few departments include raising boys' achievement as a target.

Religious education and pupils' personal development

37. The positive contribution which RE frequently makes to pupils' broad personal development and well-being remains a strength. In the most recent survey inspections, pupils' personal development in RE was good in three quarters of primary schools and two thirds of secondary schools. This represents the most effective aspect of RE provision:

'Pupils enjoy and achieve when they can see the relevance of what they are learning to their own lives, and it is in these circumstances that subjects such as... religious education... are at their most compelling.'⁸

38. As noted above, boys in particular value RE as one of the few contexts in which they are able to debate issues related to their personal lives. The subject continues to provide opportunities to explore matters of spiritual, moral, social and cultural significance effectively:

Year 8 pupils were very appreciative of the chance provided by work on the theme of 'death and the afterlife' to discuss and bring into the open issues and ultimate questions. Their work demonstrated individual deep thinking, the confidence to express very personal views and beliefs and an ability to communicate and understand their own beliefs and those of others.

39. RE often provides a very positive opportunity to deal with other aspects of the Every Child Matters agenda. Ofsted's report *Race equality in education* noted in a case study how RE can help to tackle issues related to 'staying safe':

'Religious education lessons in [a] secondary school were used for discussion on perceptions of asylum seekers. The work demonstrated the determination of staff to tackle race equality and to bring to the surface what they perceived to be an 'undercurrent' of racism existing in a rural area. The debate in that lesson helped in developing the skill of

⁷ 'Religious education in secondary schools: school subject report' in *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2004/05* (HMI 2480), The Stationery Office, 2005.

⁸ *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2005/06* (HMI 2606), The Stationery Office, 2006.

marshalling arguments, through distinguishing between fact and myth and then articulating those differences.⁹

40. Similar, very good practice is evident in many primary schools where RE contributes distinctively and significantly to pupils' wider development:

The pupils' work in RE showed that there were many opportunities for them to respond personally to learning in a variety of ways. They were tackling important issues of justice through, for example, work on Martin Luther King and racism. The pupils had expressed their personal response to his 'dream', in some cases in a sophisticated way. Pupils' positive attitudes to the subject contributed strongly to their personal development by enabling them to consider issues such as racism, bullying and care for the environment. They enjoyed the good variety of opportunities for expressing their ideas through, for instance, music, drama, art and discussion.

41. Although the contribution of RE to pupils' personal development is often positive, more can be done. In too many secondary schools, their self-evaluation judged RE to be very good, based on assumptions about the subject's intrinsic value. However, in some cases, the subject leader failed to recognise that a lack of challenge in pupils' learning, or weaknesses in planning and managing discussion, severely limited the effectiveness of the contribution.
42. A particular issue emerges about schools' contribution to promoting community cohesion. A discussion paper arising from a recent report of the Inter Faith Network for the UK noted the need to:

'... create more resources, including web based resources, for teaching and learning about issues related to inter faith relations and also resources about different faiths' understandings of citizenship. There are many existing resources dealing with individual religious traditions but few examples of good resources which help in teaching about the faith and inter faith dimensions of citizenship or about issues of belonging, coping with difference and respecting other people's beliefs and values.'¹⁰

This is a key area for further development. Active consideration should be given to providing further opportunities, with citizenship, for pupils to explore issues of identity, diversity and community cohesion in RE.

⁹ Race equality in education (*HMI 589*), Ofsted, 2005.

¹⁰ *Faith, Identity and Belonging: Educating for Shared Citizenship* – from a seminar held on 7 February 2006 and organised by the Inter Faith Network for the UK.

The quality of teaching of religious education

Primary schools

43. Teaching in RE is good or better in approximately half of the primary schools visited and has improved slightly over the past five years. In 2001/02, the quality of teaching in the subject was good or better in 45% of schools. In 2004/05 this figure had risen to 53%. The figure for all subjects in 2004/05 was 70%. The recent subject survey inspections found that RE teaching was good and better in half of the primary schools visited and was outstanding in one in 10 schools.
44. RE teaching in primary schools has benefited from the Primary National Strategy: improved teaching, leadership and management have had a positive impact on RE, such as:
- effective use of literacy and listening skills, which promotes greater depth of expression and encourages pupils to give views and reasons fluently in well constructed sentences
 - good teaching which stimulates pupils' interest through, for example, imaginative story telling
 - well managed strategies to link pupils' learning about religion to their personal experiences and other subjects
 - writing tasks which are matched well to pupils' abilities.
45. However, primary school teachers' insufficient knowledge of RE remains a key issue:

... there were weaknesses in... some subjects arising from lack of initial and in-service training or subject development in schools. This resulted in unsatisfactory teaching, often undetected by school managers who lacked the subject expertise to deal with it. In schools in which this was the case there were weaknesses in subject knowledge across a range of foundation subjects and religious education.¹¹

46. Weaknesses result in a lack of clarity about the purpose of learning, unfocused questioning, slow pace or muddled sequences of activities. In these lessons, teachers do not provide pupils with enough time to make connections between religion and their own experiences, leading to low-level, formulaic responses.

¹¹ The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2005/06, (HMI 2606), The Stationery Office, 2006.

Secondary schools

47. Teaching in RE remains very uneven. In 2001/02, the quality of teaching in the subject was good or better in 60% of schools. In 2004/05 the figure had risen to 68% compared with 75% for all subjects. However, the recent subject survey inspections have found that teaching of RE was good and better in just under half of the secondary schools visited and was rarely outstanding.
48. At Key Stage 3, the National Strategy has had some impact on RE teaching. In many schools, it has shifted RE teaching from a predominantly didactic approach to focusing more on pupils' activity. At their best, lessons now have good introductions and conclusions which clarify, reinforce and consolidate learning effectively within lessons and across sequences of lessons. Appropriate tasks are set more often, enabling pupils to achieve their potential. Teachers also use information and communications technology (ICT) more effectively in teaching. At Key Stage 4, these strengths are supplemented, in the best cases, with teachers' very good understanding of examination requirements, integrated within lively and challenging teaching:

In one Year 7 class, the teacher decided to adopt a very active pupil-centred approach to the introduction of a new topic on Judaism. Pupils were offered an initial key question: 'What is it like to be Jewish?' They were asked to work in groups to think about the question and their previous work on other religions. They were asked to work out any questions or issues they thought they would need to investigate in order to answer the key question. Once these were shared they were then asked to think about the best ways the various questions might be investigated. Despite the fact that many pupils had little prior knowledge about Judaism, they were able to come up with a wide range of pertinent and challenging questions demonstrating a very good overall understanding of the nature of religion and the ways in which it can be investigated. They showed they could use the wide range of technical language needed to study religion – words like ritual, symbol, belief, etc. The series of pupil questions were then used to structure their subsequent work on Judaism.

49. A number of factors, however, have limited the impact of the Secondary National Strategy. Aspects of teaching, assessment, the curriculum, and leadership and management have a negative impact on standards and achievement. Weaknesses in planning and managing learning in RE have not been addressed effectively enough. Teachers often find it difficult to identify clear learning objectives and outcomes. The sequencing of activities to ensure that pupils make progress is often weak and transitions between the different sections of a lesson are not managed effectively.
50. In many cases, teachers have introduced features of the Strategy, such as tasks which engage pupils more actively, but have introduced these piecemeal rather than building them into the curriculum to maximise their value. Pupils

may find individual tasks engaging, but because continuity from lesson to lesson and topic to topic is inadequate, their progress in individual lessons is not translated into positive achievement over the longer term. Weak assessment often prevents teachers from recognising this problem.

51. Not enough is done to make RE either accessible to lower attaining pupils or sufficiently challenging for higher attainers. Although some schools are making more use of setting by ability, this is often not used effectively and the match of tasks to pupils' abilities is limited.
52. The recent report on personalising learning emphasises listening to pupils, helping them understand how they learn and tailoring the learning to suit them. All these factors are relevant to the current shortcomings in teaching RE.¹²

The effective use of levels in religious education: an intractable problem?

53. The use of levels of attainment in planning and assessment remains one of the weakest aspects of RE, although there has been a significant improvement in primary schools. In 2004/05, assessment was good or better in 22% of primary schools. In the most recent survey inspections in 2006/07, assessment was good or better in about three out of 10 primary schools visited and inadequate in a further one in 10 primary schools.
54. In secondary schools, assessment is weaker in RE than in all other subjects and there is little evidence to suggest that it is improving. Assessment was good or better in 45% of schools inspected in 2004/05. In the most recent survey inspections in 2006/07, assessment in RE was good or better in only one in four of schools and was inadequate in a further one in four.
55. HMCI's *Annual Report for 2004/05* noted that there were still persistent weaknesses in the assessment of RE.¹³ Evidence from the recent subject survey inspections indicates that many of the problems have not been resolved, although the surveys identified more good practice in primary schools than in secondary schools, partly because primary school teachers transfer to RE their practice in using levels in other subjects. They have responded robustly to the new agreed syllabuses, as the following example illustrates:

A rigorous system for assessing and monitoring pupils' progress is being introduced to meet the requirements of the new agreed syllabus. The school has recently introduced 'levelled' statements, matched to each unit of the scheme of work in order to provide a sharper focus for learning. There are sound plans to support the staff further in adopting these and

¹² *2020 Vision: Report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group* (DfES 04255), DfES, 2006.

¹³ *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2004/05* (HMI 2480), The Stationery Office, 2005.

to monitor their implementation and the impact of new assessment criteria each term. In addition, teachers are drawing together a portfolio of work illustrating each level. Helpfully, a baseline for attainment at each key stage is to be established, from which the school can measure progress. There are well considered plans to revise the current review sheets for each unit of work for pupils so that they include the new levelled targets. These can then be used more precisely to help pupils assess their own work.

56. Teachers in some of the primary schools in the survey had looked specifically at the implications for the level descriptions of the new agreed syllabus and how these needed to be accommodated in planning and assessment, as in the following example:

The coordinator judges that the levels in the agreed syllabus immediately make more demands, and specifically in the layout of the scheme of work. Each unit has levelled statements for both AT1 and AT2. The levels cover the range of likely attainment for that year group and are specifically tailored to match the unit of work.

57. In contrast, the new demands of revised locally agreed syllabuses have had less impact in secondary schools. In many cases the revised syllabus has not prompted schools to review their approach to using levels in planning and assessment. Insufficient analysis has been carried out of the level descriptions, particularly at the higher levels. Although levels are often used to assess work, not enough consideration has been given to how they can be incorporated into planning.
58. Although basic assessment arrangements are now common in secondary schools, teachers do little with the outcomes other than to record them in a mark book. Assessment therefore remains a key area for development, particularly given that RE is generally taught in mixed ability classes.
59. Teachers need a detailed understanding of the levels and how to integrate the two attainment targets in planning modules of work and individual lessons. Using the levels effectively includes:
- matching work and assessed tasks closely to the differing needs of pupils in the teaching groups so that pupils can achieve at a range of levels
 - using levels to plan the learning outcomes for each topic and lesson and matching these to the range of pupils' needs
 - linking the levels to the specific topic and translating them into 'pupil speak', but ensuring that the levels' full ranges of competencies are maintained
 - allowing attainment shown elsewhere in the topic/sequence of lessons (oral work/other written tasks) to provide further evidence to confirm a pupil's level of performance

- identifying major assessment tasks which draw together learning across a range of lessons
- ensuring that pupils understand, at the beginning of a topic or sequence of lessons, the way in which they will be assessed
- ensuring that marking shows pupils what they have achieved in relation to the levels and what they need to do to improve.

Recruiting specialist religious education teachers

60. A recurring theme in Ofsted's reports on RE has been the teaching of the subject by non-specialists and the difficulties for secondary schools of securing sufficient specialist RE teachers.
61. A positive development for 2006/07 has been the extension of training incentives, including increased bursaries and a new 'golden hello' for post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE) students in RE.¹⁴ The impact on applications for a place on PGCE courses in RE has been dramatic, with an increase of over 17% on the figures for 2005. In addition, for 2006/07, when overall places for secondary PGCE training were reduced, those for RE were increased slightly.
62. Ofsted's short inspections of PGCE courses for RE over the past three years judged the training in all of them to be at least good; in most cases, the training had improved since the previous inspection.¹⁵ Improvements included the quality of mentoring, trainees' use of research, and the quality of trainees' planning and assessment. The three new providers of RE inspected over the past two years were judged positively; two of them provided excellent training. Many providers have taken on additional specialist staff and this has contributed to improving the quality of the training.
63. This positive picture has been confirmed by the most recent survey of newly qualified teachers: RE training was judged more positively than training for any other secondary subject.
64. Providers of ITT for RE now recruit trainees with a wide range of subjects for their first degree, such as sociology, philosophy and psychology. This enriches the shared knowledge of trainees, but runs the risk of training teachers with insufficient knowledge of RE. Recent improvements in providers' auditing of trainees' subject knowledge and development have compensated for this, as has the improved provision of 'bridging' courses. The TeachRE initiative has

¹⁴ Previously RE trainees received a bursary of £6,000. From September 2006 this was extended to include a bursary of £9,000 and a 'golden hello' of £2,500.

¹⁵ In 'short' inspections, inspectors do not judge the standards achieved by the trainees but, rather, they look at evidence that the design, quality and delivery of the subject have remained at least good since the previous inspection.

promoted the subject effectively as a career for graduates in theology, religious studies and other relevant subjects.¹⁶

65. This is a broadly positive picture. However, the quality of planning and assessment in some schools in which trainees are placed for the practical element of their training is reflected in weaknesses in trainees' progress in those aspects.
66. The number of trainees being trained to teach RE in secondary schools through the graduate teacher programme has increased by about 20% since 2004. As with PGCE provision, not all the training places for RE in schools are of sufficiently high quality, which is of particular concern in an employment-based training route.

The religious education curriculum

Primary schools

67. The RE curriculum in primary schools has improved markedly in recent years. In 2001/02 the quality of the curriculum was good or better in 33% of schools. By 2004/05 this figure had risen to 44%. In the most recent survey visits in 2006/07 the RE curriculum was good or better in over half the schools visited.
68. More primary schools have established an overall scheme of work to try to ensure a coherent curriculum. Non-compliance is rare. However, in many primary schools, there is still little continuity in the topics that pupils study each year and, as a result, they often do not build up a coherent understanding, linking the different aspects of their learning. The following observations by inspectors are typical:

Whilst pupils' recall of particular pieces of work on other world faiths was satisfactory, their understanding was limited by the lack of a secure conceptual framework in which to place their learning.

Recall of significant experiences in RE throughout their school lives, such as a church visit and the role play of a Jewish wedding, is at least satisfactory and sometimes good. However, most pupils lack sufficient broader contextual knowledge of the faiths studied.

69. Innovative thinking about organising RE is relatively rare, particularly in taking up the opportunities which *Excellence and enjoyment* offered.¹⁷ Schools still tend to assume that RE should be taught once a week in isolation and too few

¹⁶ The TeachRE course is run by the Culham Institute, Oxford.

¹⁷ *Excellence and enjoyment: a strategy for primary schools* (DfES 0377/2003), DfES, 2003.

of them take advantage of the project approach used successfully in subjects such as history, with a sustained focus on one theme over a number of weeks.

Secondary schools

70. The RE curriculum has also improved in secondary schools: in 2001/02 the quality of the RE curriculum was good or better in 36% of schools; by 2004/05 this figure had risen to 45%. In recent survey visits, the RE curriculum was judged good or better in half the schools visited. The most substantial improvement has been the quality of provision at Key Stage 4. All the schools visited met the legal requirements for RE at Key Stages 3 and 4, but none of those with a sixth form met the full statutory requirements for this age group (please see 'Religious education and the law' on page 4).
71. The Key Stage 3 curriculum has begun to move away from the study of the outward phenomena of religion towards a broader understanding of religion's meaning and significance and a study of issues such as the problem of suffering or the existence of God. This has been supported by a new emphasis on broadening pupils' skills and developing more challenging teaching. It is now more common to see RE planned to support literacy and contribute to teaching citizenship.
72. Schools with the most effective provision have made the relevance and interest of the RE curriculum a priority by combining the investigation of religion with opportunities for pupils to discuss ideas and reflect on profound aspects of human experience. At its best, the RE curriculum contributes powerfully to pupils' personal development, their intellectual progress and their understanding of important aspects of community cohesion.
73. Some imaginative work has been done to improve pupils' progression in RE. For example, one school introduced the GCSE short course at the start of Year 9, entering pupils for the examination at the end of Year 10; a complementary short course was introduced in Year 11, enabling most pupils to achieve a full-course qualification by the end of Key Stage 4. This maintained a high level of challenge and continuity through both key stages.
74. To ensure the subject's relevance and contribution to pupils' personal development, many schools include enrichment activities related to RE which also contribute strongly to provision for citizenship. For example, in one school, RE contributed to promoting race equality and celebrating cultural diversity through international language days.
75. Improvements in the Key Stage 3 curriculum, however, have not been consistent: in many schools, progression and continuity are not effective. It is not uncommon to find schemes of work beginning with a challenging unit about, for example, the existence of God, but then reverting to less demanding work, such as examining the features of religious practice or the life of a religious figure. The following is typical:

While the Key Stage 3 curriculum as a whole covers a range of aspects of RE, more work is needed to secure curriculum continuity and progression in learning. Provision in Year 7 is very muddled with a series of brief topics, not logically connected and with elements which are not integrated to secure effective learning and progress. Provision in Year 8 is better, with a more systematic study of religions, but the learning is not extended sufficiently and the demand of most work is far too low. The Year 9 curriculum is based on ethical issues with a higher level of challenge but this is not linked effectively to prior learning. Christianity provides the basis for examining religious perspectives on the ethical issues but pupils have not considered Christianity since Year 7. The RE department is aware of some of the problems but has not grasped their impact on pupils' learning and progress.

76. The issue of progression in the Key Stage 3 RE curriculum was highlighted in the *Diversity and citizenship curriculum review*.

'... pupils we interviewed discussed 'doing world religions in Year 8 and Year 9' but were unclear about how (or whether) the content had developed, or how their conceptual thinking was developing across the key stage. This clearly raises issues about teachers considering prior learning, clear learning objectives and progression. Schools need support in developing a curriculum that allows for clear mapping of concepts...'¹⁸

77. In approximately one in 10 schools visited in 2006/07 the quality of the Key Stage 3 curriculum was simply inadequate. Some of these schools do not use the agreed syllabus effectively to plan the curriculum; in other cases, weaknesses reflect the failure of the agreed syllabus itself to provide an appropriate basis for planning. Typical weaknesses include:

- levels not used properly to plan for progression
- units jumping from topic to topic with no obvious progression or continuity
- text books used to structure the curriculum with little attention given to developing skills and understanding systematically; the topics are not matched to the requirements of the agreed syllabus
- poor quality medium-term planning
- insufficient detail about and planning for assessment, with progression from previous units of work not made clear.

78. The improved quality of the curriculum at Key Stage 4 reflects the success of examination provision. The GCSE short course syllabuses have moved the subject on to the potentially more challenging and engaging investigation of

¹⁸ *Diversity and citizenship curriculum review* (DfES 00045), DfES, 2007.

key religious, philosophical, moral, cultural and social issues. There is greater emphasis on investigating the personal and social significance of religion and on evaluating the impact of religion on the way people make decisions about their lives. Pupils study ethical, philosophical and, sometimes, cultural and social topics from the perspective of different religions and are required to give their own views. However, as noted elsewhere in this report, the potential of the GCSE short course to improve RE provision is often inhibited by mechanistic teaching.

79. GCSE syllabuses pay little attention to issues related to religion's role and significance in contemporary Britain. The emphasis on philosophical and ethical topics is not balanced sufficiently with themes related to understanding the role of religion in society and in constructing personal and cultural identity. The *Diversity and citizenship curriculum review* noted: 'There is a widespread perception that issues of ethnicity and 'race', whilst often controversial, are more often addressed than issues relating to religion.' The changing and controversial role of religion in contemporary society is not given sufficient attention in most agreed syllabuses and examination courses.
80. A number of key elements of the Key Stage 3 section of the Framework are not given sufficient emphasis, notably those related to:
 - investigating and explaining the differing impact of religious beliefs and teaching on communities and societies
 - evaluating the challenges and tensions of belonging to a religion and the impact of religion in the contemporary world
 - a study of relationships, conflicts and collaboration within and between religions and beliefs.
81. A challenge for all schools is maintaining curricular continuity so that pupils make progress in their understanding as they move through and between the key stages. For example, because Christianity is usually revisited regularly in the curriculum, the sequencing of work is important as pupils study different aspects of the religion. Although schools organise carefully sequenced units of work on other faiths, their approach to Christianity is often much less rigorous and more fragmented; work on specific aspects of Christianity, such as the life of Jesus or the Bible, is isolated from an investigation of the religion itself.

Implementing the agreed syllabus

82. A major challenge for schools has been to implement recently revised agreed syllabuses, many of which are based on the Framework. In most cases, support and guidance accompany the revised syllabus. However, their quality and effectiveness vary significantly. In the best cases, coherent, sharply focused guidance gives schools a clear understanding of the principles and ways in which the syllabus could be translated into schemes of work. In other cases, the guidance is too general, too focused on assessment rather than planning,

and does not encourage teachers to work from the syllabus's underlying principles, so that the impact of using the Framework to support the development of the new syllabus is often lost.

83. In all the primary schools visited in 2006/07, arrangements for implementing the agreed syllabus were at least satisfactory; in approximately half the schools they were at least good and in approximately one in seven schools they were outstanding. In many schools, the subject leaders for RE had a good grasp of the distinctively new features of the revised syllabus and were aware that it made much greater demands on pupils' learning and teachers' planning. They had thought carefully about the way the syllabus could address weaknesses in schools' provision for RE.

The school is using the publication of the revised syllabus very effectively to tackle weaknesses in assessment and curriculum identified in its self-evaluation. The coordinator is considering carefully how to plan for and teach about world faiths to ensure that learning about these is more secure. The staff have identified carefully the main differences between the old and new syllabus. In their new schemes of work they have:

- reduced the number of teaching objectives to provide greater clarity about what pupils should learn
- improved the mapping of objectives to meet attainment targets
- consolidated the links between objectives and recommended teaching and learning activities.

84. Primary school subject leaders were open to change but often found it difficult to work directly from a new agreed syllabus; they tended to wait for the publication of more specific guidance such as schemes of work before revising their provision.
85. In secondary schools, implementation of the revised agreed syllabus was much less effective than in primary schools, even within the same local authority. The process was good in less than a third of schools and was inadequate in nearly half of schools. It was outstanding in none of them. Subject leaders were more resistant to change. A common view was that the revised syllabus involved no significant change. In many cases, subject leaders were not sufficiently aware of the relationship between the revised agreed syllabus and the Framework (please see 'Religious education and the law' on page 4). They had not understood the more challenging expectations which underpinned the Framework's principles and approach, the increased demands made in terms of planning and assessment, or the distinctive features of the revisions. They assumed that the main changes related only to assessment, the most significant major one being the introduction of nationally agreed levels of attainment. Some schools simply cherry-picked features from the new syllabus which matched current work because they had not understood the underlying principles.

86. Many secondary schools had not included implementing the syllabus in the improvement plan for RE and had not considered the resources, time or professional development which might be required. In most cases, departments had not made links between their self-evaluation and the revisions. As a result, the new syllabus did not prompt a thorough review of the curriculum and assessment, and not enough opportunities were taken to improve weak provision.

Leadership and management

87. The leadership and management of RE have improved, although weaknesses remain in key areas such as the provision of specialist teachers and the quality of some aspects of self-evaluation and monitoring.
88. In 2004/05, leadership of RE was good or better in 46% of primary schools, and the corresponding figure for management of RE was 43%. This was an improvement on the combined figure for 2001/02 when leadership and management were good or better in 40% of schools. The subject survey inspections in 2006/07 found that leadership and management were good in over half of the schools visited. Ofsted reported in 2005:

‘Leadership and management of RE are insufficiently focused on raising standards. Few schools see RE as a priority and too often leadership of the subject is given to inexperienced staff. When this happens, subject leaders are likely to lack the necessary confidence to tackle issues such as assessment and the monitoring of teaching, so that teachers are left to their own devices to plan and teach as they see fit. Where no one can be found to take on the role, headteachers assume responsibility for RE and few of them are in a position to devote much time to the subject.’¹⁹

89. More recent inspections show how effective management has a positive impact on the quality of RE, as in this example:

The school has introduced a self-evaluation process for RE which involves close scrutiny of standards across school. As a result the RE subject leader has correctly identified that attainment is above average in Key Stage 1, below average in Years 3 and 4 and average in Years 5 and 6. This shows a subtle level of analysis. During implementation of the new agreed syllabus, the coordinator will carry out half-termly scrutinies of pupils’ work and lesson observations to see through the two year cycle of the new scheme of work. The governor linked to RE is well informed about

¹⁹ ‘Religious education in primary schools: school subject report’ in *The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools 2004/05* (HMI 2480), The Stationery Office, 2005.

developments in the subject and reports back to the full governing body as required.

90. In 2004/05, leadership of RE was good or better in 68% of secondary schools; the corresponding figure for management of RE was 59%. This represents an overall improvement on the combined figure in 2001/02 when they were good or better in 59% of schools. The more recent survey inspections in 2006/07 confirmed that leadership and management were good or better in around two thirds of the schools visited.

91. Many secondary subject leaders manage their departments effectively:

The head of department provides strong leadership for the department and gives robust support for less experienced staff. She manages the evaluation of their teaching and their training needs well. The department has a strong commitment both to raising standards and promoting the personal development of pupils, although it needs to develop sharper practice in analysing data. The inclusion of all pupils is a particular strength. Pupils with learning difficulties are given good support and the department has produced innovative strategies for developing the potential of gifted pupils. The department has forged good reciprocal links with outside agencies. Speakers are brought in to give pupils first-hand information, and pupils contribute to the work of local charities.

92. Weaknesses in key aspects of leadership and management are often associated with a lack of support and commitment by the school's senior leadership, rather than the quality of the subject leadership. Recent developments, notably GCSE short courses, have led some senior leaders to value the subject more highly but in too many schools the subject is still inadequately staffed and resourced.

93. Small departments, especially those with just one person, face particular difficulties. These can be offset where senior managers link the subject leader with other departments and provide opportunities for relevant professional development. Senior staff can also support RE by managing non-specialist staff carefully when using them is unavoidable. Schools doing this successfully ensure that the number of non-specialists is small and that continuity of experience is provided from year to year. Giving non-specialists a specific year group or module to teach, allowing them to become familiar with a limited section of the curriculum, is particularly effective.

94. A growing number of schools with a single, specialist RE teacher have trained a permanent group of non-specialists who have extended their own knowledge

and understanding to become very effective teachers of RE. They are vital recruits to a subject which suffers serious teacher shortages.

95. Since 2005, school inspections have increased the emphasis on self-evaluation.²⁰ Many schools, especially secondary schools, require departments to conduct annual, written self-evaluations to inform whole-school self-evaluation. This is a new challenge for most RE departments and subject leaders in primary schools. Many base their self-evaluation on Ofsted's school self-evaluation form.
96. The quality of self-evaluation has improved significantly. In 2001/02 the processes of monitoring and evaluating RE were good or better in 25% of primary schools and 46% of secondary schools. The most recent subject survey inspections in 2006/07 found self-evaluation in RE to be good in six out of 10 primary schools and seven out of 10 secondary schools. Where this was the case it frequently meant that subject leaders set themselves challenging targets for improvement. As a result, teaching often improved and standards were raised.
97. The processes in primary schools, while usually informal, often provide accurate and evaluative judgements. Because RE coordinators usually teach across the whole primary curriculum, they tend to have a clearer set of benchmarks against which to evaluate the subject and are more likely than their secondary school colleagues to be open about the need for improvement. Good practice in monitoring and self-review is related closely to implementing the agreed syllabus.
98. In secondary schools, recent national guidance about self-evaluation in RE has had a positive impact.²¹ Many departments are now producing robust reviews of their provision and, in some cases, provide a model for other departments in their schools.
99. Securing accurate evidence is often the priority for improving RE. In many secondary schools, the failure to undertake reliable assessment means that weaknesses in the curriculum are not being identified. Many heads of RE departments have not been trained to use data and only a minority of them analyse pupil achievement in terms of gender or ability, or take account of the teaching group. Although self-evaluation should help those responsible for RE

²⁰ Changes to school inspections were implemented in September 2005 and the new inspections do not report on subjects in the curriculum. To ensure that information is gathered about RE, HMIs inspect the subject in 30 primary and 30 secondary schools each year. Schools receive a letter summarising the inspection findings for RE. Each letter is also copied to the local authority, with a request that it should be forwarded to the SACRE. The letters are available on Ofsted's website.

²¹ *Self-evaluation in religious education: a toolkit for subject leaders*, Association of Religious Education Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC), 2005.

to scrutinise and improve provision and outcomes, many subject leaders need support. The most recent *HMCI Annual Report* noted that:

Subject departments were increasingly involved in self-evaluation... In some cases, however, departmental self-evaluation was not rigorous enough, nor sufficiently sharply focused on standards and the quality of teaching. In these instances, departments judged their performance to be good when the evidence, including data on pupils' progress, made it clear that this was not the case.²²

Part B. Religious education in context: its future in the 21st century

Are the current statutory arrangements constraining development in religious education?

100. Despite the positive features noted earlier, lack of clarity about continuity and progression in the curriculum, and weaknesses in the way pupils' progress is defined and assessed, contribute significantly to the slow pace of improvement in RE. These raise questions about the quality and effectiveness of agreed syllabuses.
- Do the agreed syllabuses provide an effective basis for planning and assessing RE?
 - Does the national Framework help to resolve some of these problems?
 - Do the current statutory arrangements serve RE well?
 - Are the current arrangements for producing agreed syllabuses effective in driving improvement and responding to wider educational changes?
101. Current statutory arrangements derive from legislation in 1944 and 1988, but there have been many changes since, the most recent being the publication of the Framework and the emerging proposals for a national strategy for RE. At the same time, there have been changes in the relationship between local authorities and schools, an increasing emphasis on school self-determination and school self-evaluation, and lighter-touch inspections. Other changes are also having an impact on the religious education of children and young people in England, including more diverse faith schools and the introduction of faith-based academies and trust schools.
102. The proposals of the recently published report of the teaching and learning in 2020 review group have significant implications for personalising learning and

²² The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2005/06 (HMI 2606), The Stationery Office, 2006.

curriculum flexibility. Those with responsibility for RE need to be in a position to respond quickly to these developments.²³

103. Ofsted's evaluation of the work of SACREs in 2004 questioned the capacity of many local authorities to undertake their responsibilities for developing and reviewing their locally agreed syllabus. The report noted:

'All agreed syllabuses seen meet statutory requirements, but their quality varied considerably. Very few syllabuses seen were of high enough quality throughout to make a consistently sound basis for good planning, teaching, learning and assessment.'²⁴

104. The Framework and the plans to introduce a national strategy for RE are significant moves towards providing a national basis for planning and assessing RE.²⁵ Developing and publishing the non-statutory Framework in 2004 involved high levels of cooperation between the QCA and the DfES, and also with the major faith communities and professional associations for RE in England; all were part of the development work and endorsed the Framework. In February 2006 the leaders of the major faith communities signed a joint statement committing their schools to use the Framework, leading to the possibility that, before long, all maintained schools in England, whether faith-based or not, will link their RE to nationally agreed standards.
105. The Framework provides a coherent basis for planning and assessment. Each element contributes to continuity and progression within and between the key stages and the elements are integrated with each other. For example, the 'knowledge, skills and understanding' and the general descriptions for Key Stage 3 are designed to enable most pupils to achieve level 5 and above. Similarly, the 'breadth of study' prescribes the themes to be taught, the experiences and opportunities for learning, and the Christian and other religions and world views that form the context for pupils' learning at Key Stage 3. Even so, the Framework's effectiveness in improving the quality of agreed syllabuses and of RE in schools depends to a large extent on the action taken by local authorities, agreed syllabus conferences and SACREs.
106. During 2006, HMIs evaluated how the Framework was used in constructing syllabuses and its impact on provision in schools. Although the evaluation

²³ *2020 Vision: Report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group* (DfES 04255), DfES, 2006.

²⁴ *An evaluation of the work of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education* (HMI 2269), Ofsted, 2004.

²⁵ Following a feasibility study carried out by the QCA in 2002 into the prospect of a national framework for RE, the DfES commissioned the QCA to prepare a non-statutory framework, along the lines of a National Curriculum subject booklet, for RE. This was to be used primarily to guide the development of agreed syllabuses in England, to improve their quality, and to bring more commonality to them.

focused on agreed syllabuses which were produced soon after the Framework was published, the initial findings raise some concerns.²⁶ Overwhelmingly, agreed syllabuses were being designed to take some account of the Framework. In some cases, almost all the main elements of the Framework were incorporated into the agreed syllabus and this ensured overall coherence. These examples, however, were the exception.

107. Agreed syllabus conferences did not use the Framework in a consistent way. Many used it as a resource: some elements were selected, others ignored and some merged with other material. Most syllabuses incorporated the eight-level scale from the Framework, but not always in ways which supported effective planning and assessment.
108. A small number of local authorities adopted an agreed syllabus which did not follow the Framework's structure. In some local authorities, often those with a high level of support from RE advisory staff, this led to innovative thinking about the subject. In others, selected features were carefully integrated with elements from the previous syllabus. Schools which had a high level of professional support to implement the new syllabus were able to use it effectively to improve their planning and assessment. Overall, the picture was one of considerable inconsistency.
109. For most local authorities, adopting the entire Framework would require a major revision of the existing agreed syllabus. Early indications are that some conferences are not willing to do this. This reflects resistance by some teachers on agreed syllabus conferences who wish to keep the existing content as far as possible. Reluctance to write new schemes of work or buy new resources may be understandable, but it prevents much needed review.
110. Partial adoption of the Framework often leads to confusion. One local authority used the text of the Framework at each stage, followed by the units of work from the previous syllabus with minor changes, in an attempt to bring them into line. On the whole, these units were unrelated to the Framework sections, so teachers were either continuing to teach the old units, unaware of the significance of the insertions from the Framework, or confused at the juxtaposition of what they saw as two quite different syllabuses and unsure of which to focus on in their planning.
111. In some syllabuses the match of content to assessment requirements was confused. In one case, an agreed syllabus included the key stage sections of the Framework and stated that the units of study matched the requirements of the eight-level scale. But the content and activities in the syllabus did not

²⁶ At the time of the survey, eight agreed syllabuses written to the new Framework had been inspected.

reflect the breadth and depth of study implied in the Framework because the units were narrowly focused.

112. In another case, the syllabus provided programmes of study that were virtually independent of the Framework; teachers found it difficult to relate the main syllabus strands to the levels derived from the Framework. One agreed syllabus had produced a 'pupil-speak' version of the levels, but this did not provide comprehensive coverage of the level descriptions. The result was that the definition of standards did not match that which was recommended nationally.
113. Early findings suggest that pupils will find it difficult to reach the standards in the Framework because they are not being taught precisely enough the 'knowledge, skills and understanding' and/or encountering the 'breadth of study' which is designed to match these standards.
114. Given the strong consensus about the Framework, the question is raised about whether it should be statutory, in its present or any revised form. Currently, local authorities must review their agreed syllabus for RE once every five years. The response to national developments is therefore often slow. Possible ways forward include the following:
- further guidance could be developed to help agreed syllabus conferences to use the Framework more effectively and coherently
 - the Framework could become the statutory basis for locally agreed syllabuses, leaving space for some local determination of specific content to reflect local circumstances, such as religious diversity
 - the Framework could become the basis for the inclusion of RE within the National Curriculum.
115. Although controversial in some respects, the last suggestion would have the support of many SACRE members, teachers and other professionals in RE. Many teachers, often supported by senior managers, argue that local determination weakens RE and contributes significantly to its low status in the curriculum.
116. In the absence of a statutory national syllabus, publishers find it difficult to decide how to focus their publications and other resources, so much of the published material is too general. If the Framework were to become a nationally agreed syllabus, it would provide a secure basis from which publishers could develop materials. The publication of the Framework has helped, but it has not given them the confidence to produce innovative new materials.
117. In schools with sixth forms, post-16 core RE remains a problem. Some sixth forms provide good opportunities for students to extend their study of religion through, for example, general studies sessions or day conferences. Many schools, however, do not meet the statutory requirements. The current anomaly that statutory requirements apply to RE in sixth forms but not in

further education colleges is difficult to justify. With the increasing number of students in sixth forms taking accredited courses in religious studies, the major priority for RE at post-16 level would seem to be developing examination provision in further education colleges, rather than enforcing the statutory requirement in sixth forms.

Is there a future for SACREs?

118. SACREs watch the current debate about the statutory basis of the RE curriculum carefully. Many SACRE members fear that increased centralisation of the curriculum may threaten their future. Many local authorities claim to find it very difficult to provide their SACRE with the necessary level of professional support to function effectively and respond to change. Furthermore, the increased emphasis on school self-determination and self-evaluation raises questions about the role of SACREs in monitoring provision. The current arrangement in which each local authority and SACRE tries to develop and implement its own syllabus is inefficient and may not serve the subject well. Garnering limited resources and focusing them on developing national guidance might prove more effective.
119. There are, however, powerful arguments for retaining SACREs. They reflect the continuing importance of religious and non-religious beliefs in the lives of individuals and communities. It is essential that local faith communities are confident that what is taught is accurate and balanced. Parents, whether involved in faith communities or not, need to be assured that their child's school respects diversity, understands the importance which belief and commitment play in developing personal identity, and supports the growth of community cohesion. Enabling the representatives of this diversity to meet is important. Only a very small proportion of parents exercise their legal right to withdraw their children from RE so, in part, this may reflect the confidence of those of faith or no faith in a curriculum that has been 'agreed' by their representatives.
120. With agreed syllabus conferences, SACREs provide diverse religious and non-religious communities with a unique opportunity to contribute to the curriculum and gain insights into issues in English education.

'All members of SACREs... acknowledged that their membership had significantly increased their understanding and appreciation of other faiths. They also recognised the unique role of religious education in promoting mutual understanding in a multi-faith community, and this recognition had been written into most agreed syllabuses. Individual SACREs had produced outcomes of work in this area, such as a calendar

of festivals in the local community or a poster of children's drawings reflecting on the destruction of the World Trade Centre.²⁷

121. In a climate where dialogue between religious communities, community cohesion and respect for diversity are important, the opportunities provided by SACREs should not be underestimated. Involving teachers at a local level can be particularly advantageous: their representatives bring professional expertise to SACREs and agreed syllabus conferences and give teachers a say in what they teach. Although the number of teachers involved in developing agreed syllabuses is often small, those involved benefit from close contact with members of faith communities, bringing fresh ideas for joint work.
122. The present arrangements benefit RE by stimulating creative thinking and innovative ideas locally. The opportunity for teachers and faith communities to work together can have a very positive impact. Recently, a number of innovative agreed syllabuses have helped to advance thinking about the subject. Greater centralisation might endanger this creativity.
123. The range and effectiveness of the work of SACREs have increased in recent years. Many have been innovative in providing opportunities to support, celebrate and encourage good RE through lively initiatives. SACREs have supported the development of resources on local faith communities, enabled visitors from faith groups to work in schools, organised arts competitions focused on RE, run local student parliaments of religions, and sponsored exhibitions and lecture programmes linked to RE.
124. Regardless of whether the RE curriculum is locally or nationally devised, SACREs are necessary to give faith communities and other local interests confidence that schools provide a broad and balanced RE curriculum that meets legal requirements.
125. Many SACREs are not focused sufficiently on raising achievements in RE and improving the quality of teaching and learning. They are not integrated sufficiently into the professional structure and priorities of their local authority, and do not receive sufficient support.
126. In a context of increasing school self-determination, SACREs are in a good position to advise on self-evaluation; they are also well placed to draw from schools' self-evaluations in RE and, in that role, well placed to gather intelligence about RE in their local area. It is a matter for individual SACREs, in partnership with their local authority, to decide whether and how to link their monitoring process to school self-evaluation. Monitoring by the SACRE should

²⁷ An evaluation of the work of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (HMI 2269), Ofsted, 2004.

evaluate the agreed syllabus and identify trends in standards, pupil achievement and provision.

127. Some SACREs already intend to ask for information from a sample of schools' self-evaluation processes. Where capacity allows, SACREs supplement such information with monitoring visits to schools and feedback from teachers' meetings and support groups.
128. The strength of SACREs lies in their multi-faith, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural composition. Some have responded very effectively to the current priorities of community cohesion and diversity, for example by developing links with local inter-faith networks or introducing youth faith forums. These achievements suggest a widening of the defined role for SACREs to reflect these priorities.

Are two attainments targets serving religious education well?

129. A reasonable consensus has been reached about the structure of the RE curriculum, which is clearly and coherently expressed in the Framework. It includes two attainment targets: an agreed structure of knowledge, skills and understanding which pupils should acquire, and progression defined through the eight-level scale. These structures are broadly in line with those in National Curriculum subjects.
130. Schools, however, find it difficult to provide a coherent RE curriculum which enables pupils to make progress and achieve their potential. The two attainment targets give rise to particular difficulties. They have helped teachers to remember the importance of balancing an academic approach to studying religion with one that fosters pupils' wider personal development. The model has commanded considerable, but not universal, support for some years. However, it has proved problematic as a basis for planning and assessment. Teachers in primary and secondary schools find it difficult to apply levels appropriately. The following are typical:

The teacher has given the pupils tasks defined as 'learning from religion' (AT2). Pupils have to decide what questions they would ask Muslims about their faith and then consider how they might answer them. The problem is that many pupils ask questions which are quite unrelated to AT2; the teacher has difficulty in applying AT2 levels when marking their work.

In many cases, teachers perceive that AT1 work is essentially descriptive and a lower order of challenge. They assume that short answers are all that is required to check basic knowledge and understanding. More extended answers are always linked to AT2 alone. As a result, AT1 tasks too often demand that pupils 'report on' or 'write about' rather than asking them to analyse and process the material. This is a particular issue for the most able pupils. Given descriptive work, they write at length and in detail. But their understanding that 'similarities and differences illustrate

distinctive beliefs within and between religions... and reasons for this' (L5) is weak, and teachers have not thought how to assess this reliably. Teachers recognise repeated achievement of the most basic aspects of the AT1 L5 description as attainment at that level.

A problem is the over-emphasis on open-ended written tasks, inviting pupils to express personal thoughts or opinions with no clear sense of what constitutes quality in AT1. As a result pupils believe that they cannot improve in RE because it is 'all a matter of opinion'.

131. Teachers often indicate that they plan to assess either AT1 or AT2. Separating assessment often leads to tasks which invite pupils to offer personal responses which cannot be judged in terms of any real achievement or which tests them to recall or recount information about religion. A lesson might be learned from assessment in history and geography, where teachers assess pupils' progress across a series of skills which underpin all aspects of the subject.

Educating for diversity: is religious education responding effectively to the changing social reality of religion post-9/11?

132. Current developments in RE are taking place within the context of the extraordinary increase in the political, social and cultural importance of religion in Britain in this century. Recent world events, the rise of more fundamentalist forms of religion, the growth of faith schools and the debates about the relationship between religion and British identity have given a new impetus and urgency to the subject.
133. References to religion in the media have increased substantially over the past few years. The imagery associated with religion in the public mind has also changed. A recent report on religion in the contemporary world noted:

'The sociologist, Peter Berger, who wrote in *The New York Times* in 1968 "by the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist world-wide secular culture", wrote in his book *The Desecularisation of the World* in 1999: "The assumption that we live in a secularised world is false. The world today, with some exceptions... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever".²⁸

134. The notions, common until recently, that religion was quietly declining and RE had little relevance to modern life now look naïve. It is widely recognised that children and young people need to develop a more profound understanding of the significance of religious commitment and diversity. They need the opportunity to reflect on issues about personal identity, meaning and truth.

²⁸ N Spencer, 'Doing God': A future for faith in the public square, Theos, 2006.

135. This report has referred on a number of occasions to the *Diversity and citizenship curriculum review*. Its foreword says:

'... we passionately believe that it is the duty of all schools to address issues of 'how we live together' and 'dealing with difference', however controversial and difficult they might sometimes seem.²⁹

136. The review recognises the importance of religion in defining identity and also the importance of RE in promoting education for diversity. Religious education has the potential to contribute to the implementation of a fourth strand of citizenship related to the review's Identity and Diversity: Living Together in the UK.

137. The social changes reflected in the *Diversity and citizenship curriculum Review* provide challenges and opportunities for RE. Ten years ago, a series of lessons on Islam with Year 8 pupils might have started with an assumption that pupils would know little. Now the issue is not pupils' lack of knowledge but the complex images they bring to the subject from a range of sources. Many pupils have a new view of RE's importance in helping them to understand religious diversity and develop respect and tolerance. On occasion, however, some parents have made requests to withdraw their child from visits to particular places of worship or from learning about specific religions.

138. The implications for RE focus on four key points.

- RE cannot ignore diversity within each religion, teaching about a religion as though it were a monolithic set of beliefs and practices. Each religious tradition encompasses variety, and individuals and groups within it will interpret their faith in very different ways.
- RE cannot ignore controversy. We should dispense with the notion that we should encourage pupils to think uncritically of religion as a 'good thing'. Religion is complex and its impact is ambiguous. Pupils are aware of this ambiguity and must be given the opportunity to explore the issues openly.
- RE cannot ignore the social reality of religion. Most of the issues in the RE curriculum for secondary pupils have been about ethical or philosophical matters, such as arguments about the existence of God, or debates, from a religious perspective, about medical ethics or the environment. It has been unusual to find questions about religion's role in society, changing patterns of religion in the local community, or the rise and decline of religious practice. It now needs to embrace the study of religion and society.

²⁹ *Diversity and citizenship curriculum review* (DfES 00045), DfES, 2007.

- RE cannot ignore its role in fostering community cohesion and in educating for diversity. This goal has never been far from good RE teaching but the current changes in society give this renewed urgency. Pupils have opinions, attitudes, feelings, prejudices and stereotypes. Developing respect for the commitments of others while retaining the right to question, criticise and evaluate different viewpoints is not just an academic exercise: it involves creating opportunities for children and young people to meet those with different viewpoints. They need to grasp how powerful religion is in people's lives. RE should engage pupils' feelings and emotions, as well as their intellect.

Notes

This report draws on evidence from section 10 and section 5 school inspections over the period 2001 to 2006. It also draws on the programme of subject visits by HMIs over the period 2003–2006. This comprised RE inspections in 30 secondary and 30 primary schools each year by HMIs and Additional Inspectors. In 2006, these were focused specifically in eight local authorities that had recently adopted a revised agreed syllabus.

Further information

Ofsted publications

An evaluation of the work of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (HMI 2269), Ofsted, 2004.

'Religious education in primary schools: school subject report' in *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2004/05*, (HMI 2480), The Stationery Office, 2004/05.

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The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2005/06 (HMI 2606), The Stationery Office, 2006.

Publications by other organisations

The non-statutory national framework for religious education (QCA/04/1336), QCA, 2004.

N Spencer, *'Doing God': A future for faith in the public square*, Theos, 2006.

Faith, identity and belonging: educating for shared citizenship (ISBN 1 902906 25 X), Inter Faith Network for the UK, 2006.

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Excellence and enjoyment: a strategy for primary schools (DfES 0377/2003), DfES, 2003.

Self-evaluation in religious education: a toolkit for subject leaders, Association of Religious Education Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC), 2005.

2020 Vision: Report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group (DfES 04255), DfES, 2006