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Research and analysis

# Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report

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## Context

The scope of religious education (RE) is vast. Through RE, pupils encounter ancient and living traditions that have shaped the world. They explore foundational texts and the way that individuals and groups live in the world, as well as the values, beliefs and ideas that bind people together. Pupils consider deep questions that have inspired human thought throughout history, and that still challenge children and adults alike today. The knowledge that they gain stretches beyond oversimplifications: it enables pupils to derive meaning from complexity.

The RE sector generally agrees that RE contributes to pupils' personal development. However, the sector does not agree on – or discuss enough – the distinct body of knowledge that pupils learn in RE. This report explores the content and substance of what pupils learn in RE. Within the RE classroom, teachers and pupils work with claims about religious and non-religious traditions, as well as the reflections that they themselves bring to the table. At its best, RE can help pupils to make sense of a complex world where aspects of religion and non-religion hold different places in the lives of its citizens.

RE forms part of the basic curriculum for all state-funded primary and secondary schools up to the end of sixth form. Unlike the content of other subjects, the RE content is not nationally defined. Maintained schools and voluntary-controlled schools must teach the agreed syllabus that has been proposed by their local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education and approved by the local authority. Voluntary-aided schools must teach RE but do not have to follow this syllabus. They can determine their own curriculum, which should be in accordance with their trust deed. If they convert to academy status, this requirement remains in place.

What academies and free schools must teach in RE is outlined in their funding agreements. Many choose to follow the locally agreed syllabus. Sometimes, trusts develop their own curriculum. All schools, including independent schools, must promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. RE may be a significant part of the school's provision of this.

This report considers the evidence gathered through inspections and research visits. For our methodological note, [see Annex A: Methodological note](#). The report is split into findings in primary schools and those in secondary schools; it includes evidence from Reception Year to sixth form. It evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of RE, building on the work of our 2021 [research review into RE](#). It considers:

- curriculum: the content that pupils learn in RE lessons
- pedagogy: how schools teach and implement the curriculum
- assessment: how teachers check the extent to which pupils have learned the curriculum
- how RE is organised in schools
- teacher education and professional development

Strengths and weaknesses are exemplified through this report. The report aims to illuminate effective practice. It makes recommendations to help wider stakeholders, leaders and teachers understand how they can make sure that all pupils leave school with the depth of knowledge that they need about a range of religious and non-religious traditions. It explains what it means for pupils to have a meaningful understanding of the complex and diverse world that they live in.

The evidence gathered suggests that many of these RE curriculums are in the process of refinement. In some schools, an ambitious RE curriculum is clearly still a 'work in progress'. There is much to do to ensure that all pupils have access to a rigorous and challenging curriculum.

The quality of RE is not determined by the type of school or the source of its curriculum. We found better quality RE in a range of schools, from small primary schools to non-selective and selective secondary schools. Factors that contributed towards this included:

- strong teacher subject knowledge
- access to professional development
- regular time for RE lessons
- a well-organised curriculum containing knowledge chosen by leaders to enable pupils to deepen their understanding term by term

## Religion in schools

The place of religion in schools in England is complex, eliciting much debate. These debates fall beyond the scope of this report, which focuses on the curriculum subject of RE.

The focus of this report is on the content and teaching of RE in schools. Specifically, it looked at RE in schools where the subject falls within Ofsted's inspection purview. Our research focused on evidence about the quality of the curriculum, teaching and assessment in RE. Our research also looked at the impact of the curriculum on the knowledge and skills of pupils.

We did not gather evidence on the wider work of schools relating to social, moral, social and cultural education, or on other areas of school life which have religious dimensions. For instance, this report does not explore provision for collective worship in schools.

## RE and personal development

There are a range of different ways in which RE operates in schools. We are aware that the way that schools approach RE can be relevant to 2 different judgements within our education inspection framework (EIF): the quality of education and personal development. The quality of education is about the academic substance of what is taught. It looks at what pupils learn and know in each subject. The personal development judgement explores how the curriculum may extend beyond the academic, technical or vocational. This may include, for instance, the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils. This report outlines what we have found out about RE through our 'deep dive' methodology on inspections and our research visits. As such,

the report is primarily concerned with the school RE curriculum considered through the lens of the quality of education judgement.

## Main findings

The RE curriculum often lacked sufficient substance to prepare pupils to live in a complex world. The RE content selected rarely was collectively enough to ensure that pupils were well prepared to engage in a multi-religious and multi-secular society.

A superficially broad curriculum does not always provide pupils with the depth of knowledge they require for future study. In most cases, where the curriculum tried to cover many religions, like equal slices of a pie, pupils generally remembered very little. In cases where the curriculum prioritised depth of study, pupils learned much more.

The RE curriculum rarely enabled pupils to systematically build disciplinary knowledge or personal knowledge.

The content of some secondary curriculums was restricted by what teachers considered pupils needed to know for public examinations at the end of key stage 4. In a significant number of cases, teachers taught examination skills too prematurely. This significantly limited the range and types of RE content taught.

In the secondary phase, most statutory non-examined RE was limited and of a poor quality. A notable proportion of schools did not meet the statutory requirement to teach RE to pupils at all stages of their schooling.

Where RE was weaker, the knowledge of traditions specified for pupils to learn was overly and uncritically compartmentalised. Sometimes, pupils were presented with over-simplistic assertions about religious traditions, which were often based on visible entities, such as places of worship.

What schools taught was rarely enough for pupils to make sense of religious and non-religious traditions as they appear around the world. Curriculums did not identify clearly the suitable mix of content that would enable pupils to achieve this.

There was a profound misconception among some leaders and teachers that ‘teaching from a neutral stance’ equates to teaching a non-religious worldview. This is simply not the case.

In some schools, leaders were rightly focusing on developing the curriculum before considering assessment. However, even when leaders had systems of assessment in place, these rarely gave them the requisite assurance that pupils were learning and remembering more and increasingly complex content over time.

Long gaps between lessons hindered pupils’ recall. When the timetable was organised so that pupils had regular RE lessons, they remembered more.

Although a few teachers had received subject-based professional development in RE, the overwhelming majority had not. Given the complexity of the subject and the kind of misconceptions that pupils were left with, this is a significant concern.

## **10 years on – what has changed in RE since our last subject report?**

In 2013, our [subject report](#) stated that RE ‘should make a major contribution to the education of children and young people’. The unrealised potential of the subject remains now, as it was then. At the time, the report made several recommendations to improve the subject in schools. One recommendation was that the Department for Education (DfE) should review statutory arrangements that allow RE to be determined locally by agreed syllabus committees. Others related to responding to weaknesses found in RE by clarifying expectations, training staff, monitoring provision, having enough resources, and improving subject quality. All these factors could have significantly improved the quality of the RE curriculum that pupils learn, preparing them to be well informed and thoughtful about religious and non-religious traditions that shape the world. Ten years later, and although much of the educational landscape has changed, the problems and challenges facing RE persist.

The 2013 subject report suggested that the DfE worked with professional associations to clarify its

expectations about RE and consider what high-quality curriculum, pedagogy and assessment might look like in schools. A decade on, there has been no change to the legal position of RE. RE syllabuses are still locally determined. However, the system has become more complex and includes the growth of multi-academy trusts. As a result, 'where teachers go' to tell them what to include in their RE curriculums has become even more complicated: the locally agreed syllabus applies in some, but not all, maintained schools. Academies have freedoms to develop their own RE curriculums in accordance with their funding agreements; and some multi-academy trusts have established trust-wide curriculum expectations.

The 2013 report also called for improvements in training, both locally and nationally. Until recently, bursaries for trainee teachers were withdrawn, and recruitment has reached a new low. The capacity of local authorities to develop and support school RE has reduced. There are various subject associations, organisations and networks, some of which are linked to charities, which provide support for RE. However, the subject lacks the kind of coordinated support that is, for example, provided through subject hubs in English and mathematics.

These factors have combined to mean that leaders in schools have been poorly served. The lack of a coherent approach to the subject has negatively affected leaders and specialist and non-specialist teachers. The absence of an infrastructure to support schools has only served to compound problems that already existed. This has meant that, in many cases, teachers' subject knowledge has not improved. Despite the importance of RE in preparing pupils to engage in a multi-religious and multi-secular world, these issues have not been addressed through primary legislation or statutory guidance. In many ways, the subject continues to wilt.

Although various subject organisations and stakeholders share a common pursuit for excellence in RE, they do not always agree about the best way forward. A coordinated approach led by the RE Council of England and Wales has suggested that a focus on 'religion and worldviews' would be an improved way of framing curriculum content in RE. This approach has gathered much interest and support, but not all in the world of RE agree with this reframing. Many have also discussed the need for a national standard for the subject. While this debate continues, the status of RE as a mandatory subject, yet outside the national curriculum, remains unchanged. There are still no clear national expectations for RE. A system that is increasingly hyper-localised is confusing for leaders and teachers to navigate.

The challenge that this context presents to schools should not be underestimated. Even in schools where Ofsted inspects RE, leaders must balance competing views about what RE should cover and how this should be done. There is a significant duplication of time and energy in establishing the content of RE. This happens nationwide as local authorities, trusts and school leaders have to grapple with competing ideas. This adds undue complications for those who are involved in teacher development. It is hard to provide training and support for teachers when content is so varied across schools.

Statutory guidance has not kept pace with national changes, including the growth of multi-academy trusts. Leaders and teachers need up-to-date guidance in order to understand the implications of the complex legal foundation for teaching RE. Teachers moving from school to school may have to adapt to different models and expectations of RE each time. It can be tricky for parents to understand how RE in one school may differ from RE in another school down the road. It may be difficult for stakeholders to understand why Ofsted inspects RE in some schools and does not in others. These factors, and the failure to address them over the past 10 years, make the work of leaders and teachers harder.

Our research shows that, although some schools steer through these challenging waters well, most do not. The legacy of poor subject and pedagogical knowledge, scant training and a lack of clarity about RE content is that, in too many schools, the RE curriculum is poorly constructed, poorly implemented and poorly learned. What pupils know and remember about the subject is noticeably patchy. Misconceptions abound. A superficial and limited approach to RE sometimes ends up normalising caricatures or the most extreme or ‘unusual’ religious traditions. Leaders and teachers have not had the direction or support they need to inform their decisions about the structure and content of the subject. We called for this support in our 2013 report, and we call for this again now.

Despite all these challenges, this report demonstrates that it is possible to construct a curriculum that is ambitious and achievable. Some schools manage to select the knowledge they want pupils to gain so that it reflects the complex and diverse world that we live in today. They consider what might be collectively enough in the curriculum so that pupils can build an informed conception of the place of ‘religion’ and ‘non-religion’ in the world, (which includes making informed choices about what content, for practical reasons, has to be left out). They make thoughtful decisions about which narratives, texts, case studies and traditions pupils will explore in depth. They enable pupils to discern between different types of claims that different thinkers have about religion and non-religion. They plan carefully for how pupils can use the content of the RE curriculum to reflect on their own position, including their personal beliefs and attitudes.

We found examples of this ambition in both small and large schools, in both primary and secondary schools, and in both maintained schools and academies. This shows that it is possible, realistic and attainable to have an ambitious RE curriculum, taught capably, which has a positive impact on pupils’ lives in the long term. However, without serious attention and support, it is difficult to see how the fortunes of RE – a subject so essential to prepare pupils to make sense of the world deeply and meaningfully – will be reversed.

## Recommendations

### Curriculum

Schools should:

- ensure that there is a distinct curriculum in place for teaching RE at all key stages. They should make sure that this is rigorous and challenging and that it demonstrably builds on what pupils already know
- carefully select the knowledge they expect pupils to gain to make sense of a complex and diverse world. They should make sure that important content and concepts are clearly identified and sequenced. They should also make sure that curriculums do not contain oversimplifications of traditions, including, where appropriate, non-religious traditions
- balance the breadth and depth of study of religious and non-religious traditions to ensure that these are collectively enough for pupils to make sense of a complex world
- ensure that all pupils have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge in RE over time.

Leaders in secondary schools should make sure that the curriculum is designed to meet or exceed exam board specifications (rather than being driven by them)

- make sure that curriculums clearly identify how pupils will develop disciplinary and personal knowledge through the chosen substantive content

## Teaching and assessment

Schools should:

- be ambitious for pupils to develop all aspects of knowledge: substantive, ways of knowing and personal knowledge. They should make sure that teachers have high expectations of what pupils will know and remember
- provide opportunities for pupils to review and build on important knowledge over time. They should make sure that pupils use the knowledge that they gained in previous years as the curriculum becomes increasingly more complex and demanding
- ensure that teaching specifically develops pupils' knowledge of the complexity of religious and non-religious traditions
- develop manageable assessment methods that move beyond the simple recall of factual information. They should check that pupils recall and understand the intended curriculum over time and that the domain of their knowledge is expanding

## Systems at subject and school level

Schools should:

- ensure that all teachers have the subject and pedagogical knowledge that they need to teach RE well
- check that the time allocated for teaching RE at all key stages is used effectively so that pupils learn a curriculum that is both broad and deep
- organise the timetable for RE so that gaps between teaching are minimised
- ensure that the curriculum for statutory non-examined RE at key stages 4 and 5 is ambitious and consistently implemented. They should make sure that the RE content is clearly identified and builds on what pupils have learned at key stage 3

## Recommendations for others

- The government should urgently update guidance for schools about its statutory expectations for RE. The government should also ensure that there is appropriate clarity about what is taught in RE, and when and where it is taught, for those schools where Ofsted inspects the subject. This would help schools and, particularly, leaders and



teachers of RE.

- Those involved in writing syllabuses and commercial curriculums should make sure that these enable pupils to build deep knowledge of the chosen religious and non-religious traditions. They should make sure that curriculums identify what pupils should learn and when. They should ensure that it is clear to teachers when pupils will revisit and review important content and concepts.
- Those involved in commissioning and organising professional development should increase access to, and the range of, training available to all leaders and teachers, to improve their subject knowledge.
- Those involved in training teachers and early career professional development should prioritise helping trainee teachers and those who are newer to the profession to gain the subject knowledge that they need.
- Exam boards should recognise that the way in which schools use exam-style questions is not always appropriate. They should make sure that their communication with schools reflects this.

## Primary

### Curriculum: what pupils need to know and do

#### Summary of the research review relevant to curriculum

Through the RE curriculum, pupils build knowledge of the religious and non-religious traditions that have shaped the world: substantive content and concepts. Pupils should increase their depth of knowledge about such traditions, which provides them with detail on which to build ideas and concepts about religion. At the same time, high-quality RE curriculums accurately portray some of the diversity and complexity found within and between different traditions.

In ways that are appropriate to the primary phase, pupils also need to learn ‘how to know’ in RE (how knowledge about religious and non-religious traditions came about). We call this ways of knowing.

In high-quality RE, substantive knowledge and ways of knowing are not separated. For example, leaders might plan for pupils to know how the meanings of a religious text might differ between followers in a particular tradition. Or they might plan for pupils to know different knowledge constructed in different ways, such as the results of national surveys and religious stories.

When pupils learn both substantive content and concepts and ways of knowing, they do so from a position that we define as their personal knowledge. Pupils come to see the relationship

between what they learn in the RE curriculum and their own lives as they build awareness of the assumptions that they bring to discussions concerning religious and non-religious traditions.

## Substantive knowledge – knowledge of religious and non-religious traditions

### Summary of the research review relevant to substantive knowledge

There are a variety of religious and non-religious traditions that leaders of RE could include within their curriculums. It would be impossible to cover every tradition that could be covered in RE. Leaders therefore have to choose to include some content and leave other content out. The RE curriculum can be considered to include collectively enough RE content when what is included enables pupils to have an accurate overall conception of religion and non-religion in the world. In high-quality RE, pupils reach these ambitious end goals over time. Accuracy should not be confused with making the curriculum unnecessarily complex: there may be times when generalisations are helpful to show those aspects of traditions that bind some communities together, such as creeds.

A high-quality curriculum may build towards greater nuance over time. It will also be coherently planned and well sequenced, considering what specific prior content is needed ahead of future learning. This is particularly the case when introducing sensitive issues in RE. At primary, pupils may need a range of, for example, emotional and knowledge components before teachers introduce social and religious concepts such as death or community. In these ways, the RE curriculum may build towards greater nuance over time. These all illustrate how the curriculum is the progression model.

1. Leaders in this sample of schools said that they recognised the importance of RE and wanted to improve the quality of their educational offer. Just under half of the schools visited as part of the sample had recently introduced new curriculums. Leaders of several other schools were refining existing curriculums.
2. In the schools that inspectors visited, we found that Christian traditions were the most frequently studied. This is in keeping with the legal expectation that curriculums should reflect that traditions in England are 'in the main Christian'. Jewish and Muslim traditions were the next most frequently studied religious traditions.
3. In schools where RE was strong, leaders had clearly identified what children in the early years needed to know to be ready for the RE curriculum in Year 1. In one school, for example, teachers read stories from religious traditions to children in the Reception Year. As pupils were familiar with these stories, in key stage 1 they were able to build on this knowledge and learn what they might mean to different people.
4. In schools that had Reception classes, inspectors found that children were taught about a range of faiths and cultures. This linked to children's developing knowledge of the world around them. However, some leaders did not have coherent reasons for what they had chosen to include as

part of the early years curriculum and why. Traditions selected in the early years did not always link well to the traditions that children would go on to study in key stage 1. In most cases, schools had little rationale for why content such as the Chinese New Year had been selected. The curriculum did not identify key concepts, such as 'festival' or 'new beginnings', that would help pupils at a later stage.

5. There were clear similarities in the ways in which the curriculum was organised across primary schools. For example, in most schools, pupils studied Jewish and Christian traditions at key stage 1. Inspectors found that few leaders could explain why they had organised the curriculum in this way. In roughly half of these schools, pupils did not study Jewish traditions again, and so they did not have the chance to build on this knowledge.

6. In almost all schools, pupils also learned about dharmic faiths. Few schools studied a dharmic faith at key stage 1. More curriculums included content on Hindu traditions than other dharmic traditions, such as Sikh and Buddhist traditions. However, less curriculum time was afforded to dharmic traditions than to Abrahamic traditions. Although this is not a problem in itself, it could become one if, over time, the curriculum did not reflect a range of religious traditions. This could lead to pupils having a skewed understanding of the historic and current religious landscape.

7. A minority of schools specifically allocated curriculum time to teaching about non-religious worldviews. In almost all these schools, this consisted of a unit of work in Year 6. It was rare that schools included systematic study of non-religious worldviews throughout the school curriculum. This could become a problem if pupils did not have sufficient opportunities to recognise and understand that there are religious and non-religious traditions and worldviews.

8. Inspectors found that there was a common misconception about teaching non-religious worldviews. Some teachers thought that explaining to pupils that RE was taught from a non-confessional standpoint equated to teaching about non-religious worldviews. Inspectors found that curriculums typically contained little about both defined non-religious traditions, such as Humanism, and the complexity of contemporary beliefs, such as those of people who might define themselves as 'spiritual' but not 'religious'.

9. Beyond the top-level headings (such as 'Judaism' or 'Christianity'), few schools had precisely identified the concepts and content they wanted pupils to learn. Many schools used either a locally agreed syllabus or a published scheme of work. These identified high-level outcomes of what pupils should know and be able to do. However, these were rarely adapted for individual schools. Schools had not identified, within these broad plans, precisely what pupils would know or decided how and when this would be taught and revisited. They had not been selective in thinking through the specific content they wanted pupils to understand deeply.

10. In a few schools that followed locally agreed syllabuses, the curriculum went beyond the number of religious traditions that were recommended in the syllabus. Inspectors found that this did not increase pupils' knowledge of each religious tradition. Rather, this spread curriculum time thinly. Pupils did not have the chance to consolidate and deepen their learning. Few pupils could remember what teachers had planned for them to recall. Pupils had misconceptions about what they were learning.

11. Pupils, in general, had a relatively unsophisticated view of religion and non-religion through their study of the RE curriculum. For example, when some Year 6 pupils were asked about what they recalled about Sikh traditions, their response was: 'Be honest, everyone should be treated equally, don't bully other people, listen to other people's ideas.' Teachers had planned an

incomplete version of the tenets of this tradition in the curriculum.

12. Few curriculums included planning that reflected the variety of beliefs within a tradition. Inspectors found that it was rarely the case that there was collectively enough content to lead pupils to an accurate understanding of the complexity and diversity of religious traditions. Pupils encountered an oversimplified representation of faiths and practice.

13. In a minority of schools, pupils recalled a great deal about what they had been taught. In one infant school, pupils had a deep understanding of Jewish and Christian traditions. In another school, pupils understood how religions change over time, and could explain different beliefs within Christianity about what happens after death. They could contrast this with knowledge of beliefs about moksha and reincarnation in Hindu traditions. However, in most schools, pupils remembered little of the taught curriculum.

### **How one school went about selecting collectively enough content to include in the RE curriculum**

One school planned its curriculum by adapting the locally agreed syllabus. It selected 2 dharmic traditions and 2 Abrahamic traditions, as well as non-religious worldviews. Staff identified concepts they thought were most important from each tradition. They also had a clear rationale for what they did not study and why.

Leaders constructed the curriculum to focus on the lives of people who follow these traditions. This meant that pupils revisited important content as well as learning that there may be differences within religious traditions. Teachers planned precisely when pupils would encounter new content and when pupils could revisit important concepts such as 'prayer'. This meant that they had the chance to recall this knowledge and meaningfully compare differences as well as similarities between traditions.

### **How one school went about sequencing content**

One school explained how the similarities between the traditions in Christianity and Judaism helped pupils to understand how there are some shared values. Staff chose stories from the Torah that explained how God forgave the people of Israel when they turned from him. They contrasted these with the stories that Jesus told, such as the story of the prodigal son.

They said that learning about some of the writings in Christian traditions helped pupils when they learned about some of the teaching from the Qur'an in key stage 2. In Year 1, pupils learned about the practice of baptism in the Christian traditions as turning from evil and being welcomed into the family of the Church and a loving relationship with God. In Year 6, pupils contrasted this with the text from the Qur'an: 'Whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy hand.'

14. Inspectors found very little evidence of how schools decided that curriculum content might

build up over time to help pupils to learn bigger ideas, such as ‘covenant’, ‘dharma’ or ‘prophethood’, that form part of different religious traditions. In some schools, inspectors found that the curriculum emphasised specific and important vocabulary. Inspectors found that some of these schools made sure that pupils became familiar with these words in context. In others, pupils did not have the chance to use this vocabulary again and forgot how to use these words accurately.

15. Inspectors found that the accuracy of the representation of traditions in the RE curriculum varied. In some schools, pupils became aware of complexities within religious traditions. For example, one pupil said: ‘I used to think that all Christians thought being gay was a sin, but now I realise that not every Christian thinks this.’ As another example, pupils recognised the idea that ‘all Muslim women wear a hijab’ is a misconception. In other schools, misconceptions remained because pupils had not retained important knowledge. This was evidenced through the kinds of claims and statements that pupils made. An example of these was when pupils explained that ‘some Humanists believe in God because it’s up to you’.

16. Curriculums typically focused on main beliefs, lifestyles and festivals. Some schools used these as topic titles for units of learning. There were few instances where curriculums included the challenging questions that religions seek to answer.

17. In a minority of schools, leaders had thought carefully about how RE can support pupils as they encounter sensitive content. They recognised, for example, that they needed to make sure that content about the Holocaust had appropriate contextualisation. In one school, leaders explained that they had chosen to continue to study Jewish traditions because they knew that pupils would be learning about the Holocaust as part of their history curriculum and would need sufficient background knowledge of the traditions to understand what was being referred to in history. In other schools, this focus was less explicit.

## **Ways of knowing – learning ‘how to know’ about religion and non-religion**

### **Summary of the research review relevant to ways of knowing**

Ways of knowing is about pupils learning and acquiring different ways that scholars can study religious and non-religious traditions. This kind of knowledge is reliable and prevents pupils from depending on views and opinions that are not justified by scholarship. The professional standards of teachers include promoting the value of scholarship. In ways that are appropriate to the primary phase, the RE curriculum can include knowledge that is suitably precise. For example, leaders might add simple detail to make the representations on the curriculum as precise as possible by using qualifying words such as ‘some’, ‘many’ or ‘European’ (instead of blanket phrases such as ‘all Christians’, ‘Sikhs believe’, ‘Muslims practise’) to add clarity. This can help avoid over-simplifying or stereotyping religion and prevent misconceptions about religion from developing. The RE curriculum can also introduce pupils to different types of questions that scholars ask about religion. For example, at primary, the symbol of light in Hindu traditions could be approached by 2 contrasting questions, such as ‘Why do different Hindu stories talk about light?’ and ‘How does a festival of light bring different Hindus together?’ When pupils learn ways of knowing, this can help prevent misconceptions from developing, such as ‘Science is about facts; religion is about opinions’.

Younger pupils will experience ways of knowing before they understand its distinction from substantive knowledge. For example, when they study a topic on ancient Egypt in history and then learn about Jewish stories set in that period, they may ask ‘Did these stories really happen?’ Pupils may gather information about the significance of dharma in Hindu traditions from stories as well as from speaking to people from those traditions. Pupils may be curious about the difference between their own view of the world and those of others. In all these instances, teachers need to know how to respond in suitable ways. For this reason, teachers’ disciplinary knowledge is perhaps even more important than pupils’ at this stage. Effective training to develop strong subject knowledge would help to avoid misconceptions and enable teachers to model ways of knowing well.

18. In most of the schools we visited as part of the sample, pupils were taught generalisations, for example that all followers of a particular religion might worship in the same way. Misconceptions communicated to pupils through the curriculum demonstrated a lack of subject knowledge. Pupils were taught ideas that did not reflect accurately the traditions that they were learning about, such as the idea of Christmas as ‘God’s birthday’. However, this was not always the case. In one school, teachers spoke about how they had changed the language that they used to avoid generalisations, for example talking about what ‘most Christians believe’. This stopped pupils developing the misconception that all Christians believe the same thing.

19. Some curriculums contained questions that developed pupils’ disciplinary knowledge through new substantive content. For example, as one Year 6 class worked over time to answer the question ‘How reliable are sources of authority for believers?’ the pupils studied the story of Siddhartha Gautama and the Four Sights to learn how followers of Buddhist traditions interpret such stories. Through their developing disciplinary knowledge, pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), began to understand how followers of traditions might interpret the same story in different ways.

20. Other questions gave pupils the opportunity to develop their personal knowledge once they had secured substantive knowledge. For example, when pupils had learned about the story of the Buddha’s enlightenment and understood concepts such as ‘attachment’, they answered the question ‘What do you do when you see suffering?’ Pupils successfully used the substantive knowledge that they had gained in what they wrote. For example, one pupil described enlightenment as more than having an idea: ‘It’s like turning on a light.’

21. However, in too many cases, the curriculum questions that were asked were disconnected from the substantive content that pupils were learning, such as ‘Does everyone need a fresh start?’ Some questions were not appropriate to answer within an RE context: for example, ‘How do you think Muhammad would have felt when he realised that he was a prophet?’

22. Many curriculum questions asked were poor because they elicited narrow yes/no answers. Questions such as ‘Do you think that water is precious in Christian baptism?’ and ‘Is water precious to you?’ did not require pupils to use the substantive knowledge that they might have gained. These were questions that simply required an opinion. As such, they were not fit for purpose.

23. Curriculum questions were not always anchored in disciplinary discussions. For example, sometimes pupils were asked to respond to the story of the Nativity as though they were one of the characters. This required pupils to guess or suggest responses, rather than use the texts in

the gospel narratives as evidence for their answers. Questions such as ‘How would you feel?’ were not approached in a way that built pupils’ grasp of different ways of knowing. Pupils did not have sufficient knowledge of the differences in the gospel narratives to be able to explain the significance of these in the accounts.

24. Most schools said that they had artefacts from different faiths. However, they were not always used in a way that developed pupils’ ways of knowing. Pupils in one school had been learning about Sikh traditions. They recalled some knowledge about who Guru Nanak was. Pupils enjoyed handling objects that represented the 5 Ks. They could suggest what they were when presented with them for the first time. However, they did not have enough knowledge of Sikh traditions to be able to develop this when they were asked to guess what the symbolic meaning of them was.

25. A few schools had identified important passages from religious texts that they thought would help pupils to know more about religious traditions. Some curriculums were written with the aim that pupils would know more about how some traditions were connected. For example, schools explained that they wanted pupils to understand that Christians would know stories that were also found in the Jewish Torah. In a few cases, teachers had higher expectations of how pupils would gain knowledge from and about these texts. They started to help pupils develop knowledge of how different people might interpret religious texts. For example, older pupils in one school considered the different messages of the 2 different narratives of the birth of Jesus in Christian traditions.

26. Although a few primary schools recognised the importance of laying foundations that would enable pupils to recognise different ways of knowing in RE, most did not. Most schools had not chosen to include this as part of their curriculums. Some did not see the relevance of this. Few schools considered different disciplinary aspects, such as discussing where, around the world, followers of different traditions lived in the past and live today.

27. In the few schools that did include ways of knowing content, curriculums were organised around different questions that groups of thinkers ask. For example, some content related to topics that might interest social scientists. In one school, the curriculum specifically identified opportunities for pupils to learn about Christian traditions around the world. Younger pupils learned about ‘my life as a Christian’ in contrasting locations, such as Liverpool and Israel. They learned about rites of passage in Britain and in other countries around the world, such as Australia. Older pupils looked at maps and statistics about religious demographics in countries around the world.

### **How one school went about developing ways of knowing in the RE curriculum**

One school wanted pupils to be able to understand, before they went to secondary school, the different kinds of questions that scholars might ask about sacred texts. The school wanted pupils to know that not all followers would necessarily gain the same meaning from texts.

The curriculum identified the stories that pupils would learn in key stage 1. For example, pupils listened to the story of the ‘Two gardens of Sheba’. They thought about how, to Muslims, faith in Allah was more important than material things. They considered how the story might be interpreted by different Muslims in different ways.

In lower key stage 2, pupils learned about how familiar stories fitted into a religious text as a whole. They learned about the beliefs and attitudes that prevailed when the texts were

written and thought about the impact that this had on the stories. So, for example, before they read the story of 'The good Samaritan', they learned about how Jewish people might have thought about Samaritans. They learned about the roles of the priest and Levites so that they could understand what the story might have meant to contemporary audiences as well as to Christians today.

Finally, in upper key stage 2, pupils looked at different translations of the story of creation in Genesis. They thought about how people from different Christian traditions understood and used these passages in the 21st century.

## **Personal knowledge – pupils' awareness of the presuppositions and values they bring to studying religious and non-religious traditions**

### **Summary of the research review relevant to personal knowledge**

Pupils bring to the RE classroom a 'position': their viewpoint or perspective on the world. This position has been described using a range of words such as 'personal worldview' or 'positionality'; we define it as personal knowledge.

In high-quality RE curriculums, leaders are precise in how they select content to develop pupils' personal knowledge. For example, leaders may identify a specific concept such as 'searching', 'salvation' or 'rejoicing' when exploring Christian readings of 'The parable of the lost sheep'. Pupils can reflect on these specific concepts and consider how they might value them in similar or different ways – or may not value them at all. This is particularly important because pupils may not see the immediate value of that content. The focus on both knowledge of religious traditions and on what that knowledge contributes to pupils' self-understanding is well established in RE. Pupils are free to express their own religious or non-religious identities, and these may or may not change because of their studying RE (and, indeed, there is no obligation for them to change).

28. Most schools visited claimed that their curriculums developed pupils' personal knowledge. Few had specifically planned how and when this would happen. Some believed that it was an inevitable by-product of teaching RE. As one leader stated, 'It just comes out.' Other leaders expected teachers to build in opportunities for reflection. However, these were rarely built into the curriculum systematically.

29. When teaching concepts within specific religious and non-religious traditions, some schools used appropriate stories to help pupils to understand significant concepts. For example, one school used the story of Siddhartha Gautama to help pupils reflect on how they reacted when they witnessed suffering. This helped them to answer the question, 'Where would you go to think about something important to you?' In the weakest cases, specific content was taught in ways that were too often artificially separated from their in-depth contexts.

30. In curriculums that did include opportunities for personal reflection, the point at which these



happened differed. Some units built towards questions that pupils would consider, so that they would draw on the substantive knowledge gained across the year to answer them. Pupils could develop their personal knowledge through being taught the substantive knowledge.

31. In other curriculums, pupils were asked to develop their personal knowledge first. This meant that they did not use the substantive knowledge that they gained throughout the course of the unit to deepen their thinking. Pupils did not always reflect on the RE content that leaders had identified. For example, pupils discussed their own ideas about what they would do if they were powerful, without relating this back to the views about power from within the Christian and Islamic traditions that they had been learning about.

32. Approaches to teaching personal knowledge without considered connections to substantive concepts and content were problematic. In one example, pupils were asked to reflect on the Christmas story before they understood what Christians believed about it. This led to unhelpful misconceptions developing, such as the belief that it is 'God's birthday'. Pupils did not always have the knowledge of the concepts related to the story of the Nativity that teachers thought that they had. So, for example, when asked to give 3 reasons why God sent Jesus into the world, one pupil wrote, 'To be king, be kind and pick up litter.'

33. Sometimes, aspects of the curriculum for personal, social and health education (PSHE) were conflated with RE. This meant that the kinds of personal knowledge that pupils were acquiring did not meaningfully draw on the religious traditions that they were studying. For example, in one school, pupils were asked to explain when they might be kind to others and how they might show love to the world, or to reflect on the life of significant individuals. Teachers did not expect them to use what they had learned to help them to explain what they felt. This meant that tasks were poorly linked to the curriculum, and expectations of what pupils would know and be able to do were low.

34. Some schools wanted pupils to use their substantive knowledge to develop their personal knowledge. For example, in one school, pupils in key stage 2 used examples that they already knew about to explain the idea of different Christians trying to build God's kingdom on Earth. Pupils described how Elizabeth Fry 'did much to alleviate appalling prison conditions in the 18th and 19th centuries'. Pupils recalled the response of Christians in their local area, for example running a local foodbank and the work of the Salvation Army. This informed their own reflections: 'It is hard to believe that poverty and hunger really exist in the UK in this day and age. The truth is, it's a growing reality.'

35. However, pupils did not always have the substantive knowledge that they needed to be able to think and reflect more deeply. This was the case for pupils with SEND as well as their peers. For example, in one class, where pupils were learning about the events in Holy Week, they were asked how they would feel if they were Pontius Pilate, or Mary the mother of Jesus. However, they did not know enough to be able to answer this. Pupils were still learning the events of the story and were not able to give their personal ideas about the significance of these.

### **How one school went about developing pupils' personal knowledge**

One school made deliberate choices about when and how pupils would develop their personal knowledge. The curriculum included specific units that would elicit pupils' reflections at the end of the academic year, so that pupils had built up substantive knowledge of what Christians, Jews, agnostics and atheists might believe. They made sure

that pupils knew that there were complexity and variation in these religions and beliefs, as they had studied them the previous year.

The curriculum identified specific vocabulary and important concepts, such as creation and stewardship. Teachers checked that pupils remembered these. Pupils were familiar with texts, such as the accounts of the creation of the world in the book of Genesis. Pupils had learned about these stories earlier in their school career. Having secured this knowledge, pupils were able to use it to explain what they believed themselves. Teachers specifically planned questions so that pupils would come to evaluate an argument and learn to use the language that they needed to explain their own ideas.

## Teaching the curriculum

### Summary of the research review in relation to teaching the curriculum

High-quality teaching in RE enables pupils to remember the curriculum in the long term. Teachers adopt well-chosen approaches that recognise that different forms of knowledge might require different teaching activities. When teachers are choosing which methods and strategies to use, their decisions should depend on the specific type of content being taught. Importantly, methods and strategies are fit for purpose when they lead to pupils remembering the RE curriculum. Suitable methods are appropriate for what is to be learned (the curriculum object), are well matched to what pupils already know (because they will need certain knowledge to succeed at a task), and prompt pupils to remember previous content. There are a range of classroom activities that may well be enjoyable for pupils in RE; not all of these will lead to pupils remembering what they have been taught in the long term.

36. It was notable that, when inspectors visited lessons, over 50% were focused on developing pupils' knowledge of Christian traditions. However, scrutiny of pupils' work indicated that the curriculum covered a broader range of religious traditions over the year. That said, work about Abrahamic faiths was found far more frequently than work about dharmic faiths.

37. In some schools, the teaching activities chosen were appropriate because they were well suited to pupils' existing knowledge. However, in some cases, pupils did not expect to have to use what they had learned before. For example, pupils learning about Mother Theresa considered quotations that gave reasons why she chose to help those who were suffering. Few pupils were able to relate this to what they had learned about Jesus and understand that, as a follower of Jesus, she was copying what he did. Implicit links that were evident to teachers did not support pupils as well as teachers hoped they might.

38. Before covering sensitive content, schools used a range of examples to prepare pupils for this. They made sure that pupils had the background knowledge that they needed. For example, pupils in one school were learning about places of stillness and calm in Christianity and Islam. Teachers planned to visit a burial ground to enhance this teaching. However, they were also mindful of pupils' individual experiences and how they could prepare them for challenging topics. They

thought carefully about suitable activities to explore sensitive content about death and afterlife, particularly for pupils who had suffered bereavement.

39. Many pupils did not have enough substantive knowledge to do extended writing activities or topic tasks. In addition, some activities did not support pupils to develop their knowledge of the topic in authentic ways. For example, some activities were anachronistic or focused on developing writing in genres. For example, teachers asked pupils to write from the perspective of a religious and historical figure who would almost certainly have been illiterate. These tasks displayed a lack of teachers' subject knowledge and did not help pupils to build their knowledge of RE-specific content.

40. Pupils typically responded positively in RE lessons. They told inspectors that they recognised the importance of learning about faiths and different people's beliefs. However, pupils spoke less favourably about times when they had to do research to find out about faiths. Pupils found this difficult because they had insufficient prior knowledge to do this effectively.

### **How one school approached teaching the curriculum**

One school had recently developed a new curriculum. The subject leader had worked closely with staff to make sure that they had the right subject knowledge to teach the new units of work. The subject leader supported them as they were teaching the unit so that she could make changes in the curriculum in subsequent years. Teachers commented that they felt well supported and could develop their teaching.

When teaching about significant Christians, such as Martin Luther King, leaders included appropriate references to the Bible to explain what he believed and where this came from. This gave pupils the knowledge that they needed to respond to the question 'How often do you think you should forgive someone?' Pupils were in turn able to use passages from the Bible to explain their ideas.

## **Assessment**

### **Summary of the research review in relation to assessment**

In our [RE research review](#), we highlighted that there has been an overall lack of clarity about what exactly is being assessed in RE. For assessment to be fit for purpose, leaders and teachers need to be clear about what they are testing and why. We focus on the kind of assessment that checks whether pupils have learned the content of the RE curriculum. Approaches to assessment that do not check whether pupils have learned the curriculum are not very useful in determining pupils' progress in RE. In RE, assessment does not have to be used excessively.

## Types of assessment and assessing types of knowledge in RE

### Summary of the research review relevant to types of assessment and assessing types of knowledge

Assessment has different purposes in the RE curriculum. Formative assessment is granular. It can provide 'in the moment' feedback for pupils. Formative assessment can be used as part of adaptive teaching that, for example, responds to pupils' misconceptions. It can also give teachers very clear feedback on the next steps for teaching RE content. Problems can occur when schools use formative assessment for other purposes, such as accountability. Summative assessment checks whether pupils have learned portions of the curriculum. Those portions increase over time, as pupils are taught more. Schools can use more simple assessment tasks (such as multiple-choice questions) to isolate portions of knowledge, including vocabulary and basic concepts. However, they are a blunter tool for assessing ways of knowing or personal knowledge. Personal knowledge, due to its highly personal nature, might be an aspect of RE that should be unencumbered by assessment.

41. The primary schools sampled used whole-school assessment systems rather than assessment designed to specifically check pupils' substantive and disciplinary knowledge in RE. For example, teachers used some of the same techniques and practices that were used in other subjects, such as skilfully using questions to check what pupils could remember. Questions focused on checking what substantive knowledge the pupils had retained, or whether pupils could find that information quickly in their books. For example, pupils answered questions in simple sentences to explain why babies receive a candle when they are baptised.

42. Summative checks of what pupils have learned in RE did not feature as part of typical school practice. In schools that did use these, assessment seemed to be on a formative basis, lesson by lesson. For example, in one school, leaders explained that teaching began with 'recaps', such as 'We learned about Judaism last term. Can you tell your partner what you remember about Hannukah? Now can you tell me what your partner just told you?'

43. Where RE-specific assessment did take place, it focused on substantive knowledge, particularly vocabulary and definitions of concepts. Schools did not attempt to assess personal knowledge. A few schools anticipated that pupils might not recall some important vocabulary. During the lessons, pupils were reminded of words that might be new to them. Teachers then recapped this during the story they were telling. Pupils used the correct vocabulary to explain the meaning of the story, demonstrating how they were building their conceptual knowledge.

44. Very few schools could explain how they used assessment. In most of the sampled primary schools, the curriculum was not being used as the progression model. Few teachers were able to tell whether the curriculum was remembered over time.

45. Many schools recognised that they were not using assessment well enough in RE. Some had appropriately prioritised establishing a new curriculum first. They were mindful of the fact that they needed to adopt an approach that checked gains in substantive knowledge in a manageable way to avoid undue workload for teachers. Few schools had incorporated developing ways of knowing into their curriculum. Those that had included appropriate elements, such as representations of

where followers of different traditions were most populous, did not assess these. They were justifiably not planning assessment of personal knowledge.

## Relating assessment expectations to the RE curriculum

### Summary of the research review relevant to assessment approaches that use the curriculum as the progression model

The curriculum maps out the journey of what it means ‘to get better’ at RE. So, when teachers want to know whether pupils have made progress in RE, they are asking a summative question: Have pupils learned and remembered the RE curriculum? If pupils have learned this curriculum, then they have made progress. Assessment models in RE that use ‘scales’, ‘ladders’ or ‘levels’ of generic skills to determine progress are not valid assessment models to assess specific RE curriculums. Assessment practices that report to parents, which are based on something other than checking whether pupils have learned the curriculum, or tasks that do not enable pupils to demonstrate what they have learned from earlier in the curriculum, are not useful. Good-quality assessment in RE relates assessment expectations precisely to the RE curriculum.

46. In most schools that inspectors visited, there was no assessment in place. In some of these schools, the curriculum was new, but not in all. Schools said that introducing assessment was a priority.

47. Some said that they had identified that the ways in which they had used assessment in the past were ineffective. Schools had stopped using them because they did not tell teachers what pupils could or could not remember. They said that they had focused instead on getting the curriculum right. This shows their sensible prioritising of securing appropriate knowledge first.

48. Some schools said that their assessments were based on end-of-key-stage statements in locally agreed syllabuses. These were often organised as end-of-year statements. They described high-level outcomes such as: ‘Observe and consider different dimensions of religion so that they can explore and show understanding of similarities and differences between different religions and worldviews.’ Statements like this describe a high-level end goal, rather than an assessment outcome. However, leaders had not spent time breaking down these high-level objectives into smaller units of knowledge to cover in their school curriculums. They did not provide a framework for checking how pupils’ knowledge grew and deepened over time. As such, these assessments were of little use for making reliable and valid judgements about what pupils knew and could remember.

49. Because schools had not identified component elements in the curriculum, it was not clear what specific content needed to be learned and taught in lessons, units or year groups to meet these abstract or generalised statements. There was not an agreed expectation of what pupils should be able to remember for teachers to check. Assessment, where it took place, did not typically check whether pupils retained this knowledge to be ready for the learning that they would meet next.

50. In a small number of schools, leaders checked what pupils could remember. They did this through speaking to groups of pupils to check whether pupils had learned the intended curriculum. They also sampled pupils' work.

### **How one school used assessment effectively**

In one infant school, the RE curriculum was very clearly defined. Teachers knew precisely what knowledge they expected pupils to have before they left for the junior school. This included important words which pupils would need to know, the stories that they would recall and the conceptual knowledge that they would gain through listening to stories, thereby learning about the ways in which believers lived in a range of countries.

Teachers used assessment tasks that checked important vocabulary. They also used discussions to check what pupils could explain during lessons. Teachers made sure that they listened to what pupils with SEND and those who were disadvantaged could tell them. Swift verbal explanations from teaching assistants helped pupils who had not understood something, or who had missed a lesson, to catch up. Teachers also checked pupils' written work.

This gave teachers deep knowledge of what pupils had and had not remembered. For example, they identified that pupils were able to explain the importance of Shabbat to Jewish people. But they also knew that pupils found it difficult to recall a symbolic meaning of the Chanukiah.

## **Systems at subject and school level**

### **Summary of the research review in relation to systems, culture, policies and prioritisation**

All schools that are state funded, including free schools and academies, are legally required to provide RE as part of their curriculum. They are required to teach RE to all pupils (who are of statutory school age) at all key stages, except those who have been withdrawn. The way in which schools structure and organise this is one indication of the quality of education.

### **Summary of the research review in relation to prioritising school RE**

How the RE curriculum appears on the timetabled curriculum (how it is 'classified') may be an indication of the extent to which a school prioritises RE. Problems can emerge when the subject is too weakly classified (for example, a key stage 2 topic approach that provides pupils with historical and geographical knowledge, but relatively little RE content). What limits the quality of RE can be a lack of scope: there is not enough time to teach a high-quality subject curriculum. Subject organisations suggest that in about a quarter of primary schools, fewer than 45 minutes of teaching time a week were given to RE. Staffing decisions can also affect

the quality of RE: at primary, RE classes are often the ones deprived of a main or specialist teacher. A report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on RE found that less than half of primary schools allocated the main teacher to teaching RE.

51. Inspectors found that some RE was being taught in all the primary schools visited. However, the quality and quantity of this varied widely. In 3 schools, RE was not taught in every year group.

52. In a very small number of schools, there was not a distinct curriculum for RE. In these schools, it was incorporated with PSHE or with other humanities subjects. It is worth noting that the blurring of subject boundaries in these cases did not enhance the quality of RE for pupils.

53. In most schools, RE was taught by class teachers. Some had changed to this model recently. This generally applied to both key stage 1 and key stage 2.

54. In most schools visited, RE was taught for around 36 hours at key stage 1 and 45 hours at key stage 2 over the academic year. In schools where teaching time was less than this, the quality of RE was weaker. However, the quality of RE was not decided by time allocation alone. In some schools where the timetable did allow for this amount of time, the curriculum did not have the impact that leaders intended. However, in the schools where the quality of the planned and taught RE curriculum was stronger, RE featured on the timetable weekly for at least an hour at key stages 1 and 2.

55. RE is a statutory subject for all pupils of statutory school age. However, aspects of the early years foundation stage framework (which is also statutory) include content on religious and cultural communities. All schools that had Reception classes included some of this content. How it was planned and delivered was of variable quality.

56. Inspectors found that the way in which time allocations were organised differed. In schools where RE was solely taught through special RE days, the quality of RE was weaker. However, such days sometimes enhanced the quality of RE in schools where there were also timetabled weekly lessons.

57. In over 30% of schools, RE was taught fortnightly or in blocked half terms, alternating with PSHE. RE was weaker in these schools. Where RE was not taught weekly, pupils remembered less. Pupils did not have the opportunities that they needed to return to important content and recall it.

58. In nearly 70% of schools in the sample, RE had at least a weekly timetabled lesson. In almost all cases, these lessons were taught by the class teacher.

59. In almost a third of primary schools, RE was taught in other ways. These included fortnightly lessons, a half-termly rotation with PSHE or drop-down days. Where RE was not as strong, these ways of organising the timetable for RE were more prevalent.

## **Teacher education and professional development in RE**

### **Summary of the research review in relation to developing teachers' knowledge and**

## expertise

Although there are clearly strong practitioners within the RE subject community, it is likely that school leaders will have teachers who do not have qualifications in RE. About half of primary school teachers lack confidence in teaching RE. Many primary teachers' views about RE are significantly shaped by the variability of RE they observe in schools during their training. School leaders can mitigate some of these factors by carefully considering the professional development needed to improve teachers' subject knowledge. Areas of professional development for teachers include: RE policy knowledge, RE content knowledge, RE pedagogical content knowledge, and research in RE.

60. Some schools recognised the importance of professional development. In many cases, professional development took place when an agreed syllabus was launched or a new curriculum adopted. This training was often only for the subject leader. Some subject leaders used this knowledge to support staff when new curriculums were introduced. Some had time at the beginning of the year to give an overview of what teachers needed to cover. Teachers appreciated the support. However, this was usually in response to individual requests, rather than following a systematic plan.

61. Over 60% of teachers in the primary schools sampled had not received any professional development in RE about what they were supposed to teach or the way in which they should teach it. Teachers explained that this meant that they sometimes did not understand what they had to teach well enough. One said: 'It's a good framework, but we don't necessarily know which RE concepts we are trying to develop.'

62. It was rarely the case that teachers received any professional development that developed their knowledge of RE policy or research. In schools where RE was stronger, staff had benefited from some professional development. In most cases, this was focused on developing their knowledge of the content of the curriculum and pedagogies appropriate to RE.

63. A few subject leaders had visited classes as a way of supporting their colleagues. However, most did not receive any dedicated leadership time to improve the quality of RE in their school.

## Secondary

### Curriculum: what pupils need to know and do

#### Summary of the research review relevant to the curriculum

Through the RE curriculum, pupils should build knowledge of the religious and non-religious traditions that have shaped the world: substantive content and concepts. This knowledge



includes knowledge of artefacts, texts, concepts and the diverse lived experiences of individuals who are part of living traditions. Pupils increase their depth of knowledge about such traditions, which provides them with detail on which to build ideas, concepts and theories about religion. At the same time, high-quality RE curriculums should accurately portray the diversity and complexity of religion and non-religion, such as the fluid boundaries between different traditions.

Pupils also need to learn ways of knowing. In high-quality RE, substantive knowledge and disciplinary knowledge are not treated as separate. Leaders might ensure that pupils learn not only selected content, but also tools with which to explore that content. This may include knowledge of well-established methods, processes and tools of scholarship, and of different types of conversation that academic communities use to learn about religion and non-religion.

When pupils learn both substantive content and concepts and ways of knowing, they do so from a position: that of personal knowledge. Pupils come to see the relationship between what they learn on the RE curriculum and their own lives, as they build awareness of the assumptions that they bring to discussions about religious and non-religious traditions. This kind of knowledge also occurs through tensions between their own perspectives and the perspectives of others.

Our research review highlighted a range of factors that affect quality in RE, such as what is included in the RE curriculum, which we call 'curriculum intent', and how that curriculum is taught and assessed, which we call 'curriculum implementation'. When pupils have, in fact, learned and remembered what was planned and taught, we call this 'curriculum impact'. Weaker RE would leave pupils with scant subject knowledge, leaving them ill-prepared to engage with the kinds of diversity and complexity of lived traditions in the modern world and their histories.

## **Substantive knowledge – knowledge of religious and non-religious traditions**

### **Summary of the research review relevant to substantive knowledge**

There are many religious and non-religious traditions that leaders of RE could include within their curriculums. It would be impossible to cover them all. Leaders therefore have to choose to include some content and leave other content out. The RE curriculum can be considered to include collectively enough RE content when what is included enables pupils to be prepared to engage in a complex multi-religious and multi-secular world.

In high-quality RE, pupils work towards these ambitious end goals over time. For example, leaders might consider the mix of content that would be suitable to give pupils an accurate overall conception of religion and non-religion in the world by the end of the curriculum journey. A high-quality curriculum may build towards greater nuance in stages. For example, leaders may aim to develop pupils' knowledge over time towards theories about religion and non-religion developed by communities of experts. These examples illustrate how the curriculum is the progression model. By the end of the curriculum, pupils should possess accurate knowledge of the complexity and diversity of global religion and non-religion.

A high-quality RE curriculum will also be well sequenced, in such a way that it identifies the specific prior content that is needed for of future content. This is crucial when introducing particularly sensitive or controversial issues in RE, such as topics that relate to perceptions of religion and terror, or the way in which the Holocaust (or Shoah) has shaped Jewish traditions. Pupils will likely need many knowledge components – political, social, emotional, intellectual – in order to study topics such as these in a meaningful way.

64. Given the quality of curriculums found in the majority of schools sampled, it is unlikely that their pupils would build up an overall diverse and rich conception of religion and non-religion. This is because most curriculums lacked collectively enough content to achieve it. Most lacked depth of study in specific religious traditions, which meant that there was a weak conceptual basis for pupils to make links with other traditions.

65. With a handful of exceptions where RE was not taught at all, key stage 3 was the main or only place in the secondary school curriculum where all pupils studied RE content. Fewer than a fifth of schools visited included any discernible RE content at key stages 4 and in sixth form, for those pupils who had not chosen to study the subject at GCSE or A level. This is despite RE being a statutory subject for pupils throughout their schooling.

### **Key stage 3**

66. In this phase, the religious tradition most studied in depth was Christianity. This is not surprising, given that Christianity is the only religious tradition specifically named in law. The next most frequently studied tradition was Buddhism.

67. Most school curriculums in the secondary schools visited covered a range of Abrahamic and dharmic traditions at key stage 3. Dharmic traditions were taught as discrete units, mainly towards the start of the key stage. In most cases, these traditions were not then referenced again at a later stage in the curriculum, so pupils did not have the chance to deepen their knowledge. If the key stage 4 curriculum then concentrated only on the Abrahamic faiths, this would prevent it from giving a balanced view of the variety of world religions.

68. Beyond the top-level headings (such as 'Buddhist practices'), subject leaders in about half of schools had identified some important content that they wanted pupils to learn, such as existentialism or meditation in Buddhism. They specified central tenets of faith in Abrahamic traditions, such as the 10 commandments or the concept of the law and mitzvot. So, pupils might have met the ideas of morality and sin and the belief in the omniscient nature of God before they undertook work about the problem of evil. However, curriculums did not typically identify the important concepts that connected content. For example, pupils would benefit from knowing how the concept of ahimsa was understood by Gandhi in the context of the struggle for Indian independence or how it might influence what followers of Hindu traditions thought about how animals should be treated.

69. In schools where concepts were identified, pupils rarely had the opportunity to return to them to see how they connected with similar or contrasting concepts in other traditions. So, for example, pupils in one school learned about 'stewardship' when they studied Sikh traditions in Year 7. They learned about the concept of 'sewa' or selfless service. However, they did not then revisit any of this knowledge in the rest of key stages 3 or 4. Although there is no obligation for those traditions to be studied again, in this school there were plenty of other topics or opportunities within the RE

curriculum that would have allowed pupils to revisit this concept through contrasting it with comparable concepts from other traditions. Without this linking, pupils were unable to build up a connected conceptual framework about religion and non-religion.

70. In this phase in particular, if pupils studied a particular belief system during one year, they did not usually return to it in the next to deepen their understanding. In some schools, pupils studied dharmic faiths one year and the Abrahamic faiths the next. When links between traditions were emphasised, they were too superficial. Some schools had identified what they thought were 'comparable' elements, such as religions having festivals, holy books or founders. However, these elements do not actually apply to all religious traditions. Examples of those elements that could be compared between different traditions, such as ummah in Islam and the idea of the Khalsa in Sikhism were not always specified in curriculum plans.

71. In around half the secondary schools visited, RE curriculums did not include non-religious worldviews. Some schools commented that this was because of a lack of time. Others stated that they limited their curriculums to what they thought that pupils needed to know to be successful in public examinations at the end of key stage 4. For example, one comment included: 'The exam board doesn't call for it.' Some curriculums were specifically designed to focus on key stage 3 content that mirrors the specifications of the religious studies GCSE. This narrows the scope of the curriculum. Some exposure to curriculum content that is not set out in an exam specification can be helpful. This is true of both religious and non-religious traditions. For instance, learning content about non-religious worldviews at key stage 3 can help prepare pupils to learn how different groups approach social ideas about equality, marriage and the end of life, which they may study at key stage 4. Alternatively, learning about the significance of the characters of Isaac and Ishmael in Jewish traditions at key stage 3 can help with the study of Islam later, even if Judaism is not part of the key stage 4 course.

72. Most curriculums lacked end goals that captured the diversity, fluidity and complexity of global religion and non-religion. Some pupils said that the curriculum did not reflect the place that religious and non-religious experience and thinking actually holds in people's lives.

73. Notably, in 4 schools, pupils told inspectors that the curriculum did not reflect their experience of living in a complex world. Some pupils said that they recognised the importance of learning about a variety of religious traditions. However, they commented on the need to make sense of more complex, contemporary expressions of human experience, such as being spiritual but not religious. For example, one pupil said: 'We learn what the Pope thinks about something, and that's fine. But what about other thinkers, such as Humanists? Or other thinkers? It's not like I'm not interested in learning about Christianity. I am, and I understand why it's important. We're a majority Christian country. But it's not the only way that people think. We're all far more interested when we get to discuss what people are thinking now.'

74. In schools where RE was strongest, pupils recalled what they had been taught and made clear links between what they had learned before and what they were learning then. They could:

- explain the complexity within individual religious traditions as well as the diversity of religious and non-religious traditions
- use a range of sources, from interviews to textual analysis, to make sense of how different people see religion
- explain how they had spent time exploring significant concepts such as 'prophethood' or 'trinity'
- recall how what they had learned about philosophy developed from Year 7 and could explain

### particular philosophers' points of view

- give examples of how stereotypes have been challenged, such as the misconception that scientific professions are incompatible with belief in God

75. However, in approximately half the secondary schools in the sample, there were significant weaknesses in the curriculum. In these schools, pupils, including those with SEND, had limited recall of what they had been taught. They found it difficult to explain what they had learned about diverse expressions of religious traditions, such as Christian denominations. In these schools, where RE was taught in thematic units, pupils could not distinguish between followers of dharmic and Abrahamic faiths.

### **How one school went about selecting collectively enough content to include in the RE curriculum**

Leaders wanted pupils to understand that the breadth and diversity in religious experience. They made sure that pupils had a strong prior knowledge of monotheistic faiths and, in particular, Christian traditions.

On this basis, in Year 7, the curriculum included an introduction to the dimensions of religions. Leaders wove in further examples of traditions, such as Paganism and Zoroastrianism, to illustrate different aspects. Pupils had the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of how religion could be categorised by considering how well these applied to the variety of traditions examined. Pupils also revisited what they knew about Abrahamic faiths when they encountered Rastafarianism.

The curriculum also included non-religious worldviews. For example, pupils learned about a non-religious worldview systematically in Year 8. They learned how Humanists decide what to believe and their views on death, discrimination and God. They revisited some of this content in Year 9, when they learned about theories of the problem of evil.

Leaders had selected sufficient traditions to ensure that the curriculum amounted to a high-quality subject education, collectively enough. Leaders organised the curriculum so that pupils had the chance to deepen their knowledge year on year.

76. In around half the schools visited, the curriculum was organised so that pupils revisited component elements. All pupils, including those with SEND, accessed this curriculum. For example, in one school, the Year 7 curriculum included an introduction to philosophy framed around the question 'Does God exist?' It also contained a focused study of Christian and Buddhist traditions about life and death. The curriculum built on this in Year 8 through pupils exploring the problem of evil and religious responses to suffering. This gave pupils the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the events of Holy Week in Christian traditions and the concept of attachment in Buddhist traditions.

77. In some schools, the curriculum covered many Abrahamic and dharmic faiths in one year. In some cases, this meant that pupils gained a superficial understanding of the diversity and complexity within religious traditions. For example, in one school, pupils did not have secure and broad enough prior knowledge of Islamic traditions to be able to comment knowledgeably about issues relating to the participation of Muslim women in sport.

78. Only about a third of curriculums included content that addressed the complexity and variation in religious and non-religious traditions. This led to inaccurate representations of traditions.

79. Pupils were presented with stereotypes. This was evidenced through the kinds of claims and statements that pupils made, such as 'Jesus was like a saint'.

80. In many cases, pupils were taught generalisations about, for example, Christianity and Islam, rather than how different Christians and Muslims have constructed ideas about Christianity and Islam. This was revealed when dealing with moral issues about sexuality. Pupils in one school had developed misconceptions, such as 'Christians don't like gay things'.

81. The great majority of secondary RE curriculums did not equip pupils for controversial or sensitive content in RE through prior, well-sequenced preparatory content. In about 40% of the schools visited, the curriculum focused on developing pupils' knowledge of religious and non-religious perspectives on ethical issues. However, this did not guarantee that they had sufficient prior knowledge to handle controversial or sensitive content. In most of the schools, pupils lacked vital background knowledge about relevant aspects of different traditions. For example, in one school, pupils did not know enough about foundational beliefs within Christian traditions to be able to knowledgeably consider Christian perspectives on moral issues such as abortion. One notable exception was a school where leaders had ensured that pupils had completed an in-depth study of Jewish traditions before they welcomed a Holocaust survivor to speak to pupils. Leaders said that this meant that pupils had a more mature grasp of the subject and were able to ask questions that built on this knowledge.

### **How one school went about sequencing content to ensure that pupils were well prepared for controversial and sensitive content**

Subject leaders developed a sequence of learning that developed pupils' thinking over time.

In early key stage 3, the study of ethical questions was introduced alongside an introduction to arguments about the existence of God. The curriculum included clear content around the in-depth study of Judaeo-Christian traditions, including moral codes such as the 10 commandments. This was built on again at the end of key stage 3, as pupils revisited learning about philosophical and religious thinkers when considering the problem of evil. Pupils secured deep knowledge of both religious traditions and philosophical enquiry.

This was built on in key stages 4 and 5 with questions that required pupils to consider the possible tensions between the rights of an individual and particular religious perspectives. This knowledge became embedded, so that pupils in Year 13 understood the complexity of sensitive issues, such as euthanasia and – specifically – the rights of an individual in a persistent vegetative state.

### **Key stages 4 and 5**

82. In schools that offered a qualification in religious studies at key stage 4, the 2 most common traditions studied were Christianity and Islam.

83. In approximately one third of schools, all pupils followed either the short or full religious studies GCSE course.

84. Of the approximately two thirds of schools in which pupils did not take a qualification in religious studies, very few continued to give pupils specific RE lessons at key stage 4. Most of these curriculums were weak and did not typically build on the knowledge that pupils had gained in key stage 3.

85. Most of the above schools combined RE with PSHE on the timetable. When inspectors considered these curriculums, RE formed a very small proportion of the content. Schools had not clearly defined what pupils should be able to do and know in RE by the end of key stage 4. In some cases, it was indiscernible. These sessions were typically taught during tutor time. In a very few cases, it was part of a clearly planned curriculum. In most, it was not. It was not clear how pupils would get better at RE during these sessions.

86. In schools where there was no statutory RE timetabled at key stage 4, pupils retained little of what they had learned during key stage 3. This was particularly the case for content about dharmic traditions.

87. Sixty per cent of the secondary schools visited had a sixth form. Provision in these varied in quality. In one third of schools, there was no provision at all for the teaching of RE. In another third, leaders said that RE was considered to be in the same part of the curriculum as other subjects such as PSHE or careers education, information, advice and guidance. In some cases, these curriculums built on what pupils had learned before, for example through topics such as stereotypical representations of religions in the media, or Islamophobia. However, in other cases, there was little content that was identifiable as RE. Some schools said that RE was taught during tutor time. However, there was very little evidence that demonstrated how these sessions developed pupils' knowledge in RE.

88. Curriculums in examination classes were better planned, and those who taught RE in the sixth form demonstrated secure subject knowledge. Pupils who were studying for A levels in religious studies or philosophy made secure links with their prior learning. For example, pupils could recall what they had learned about the Eightfold Path (magga) to nibbana/nirvana and the 5 moral precepts (as part of Buddhist ethical teaching) when they considered the difference between the intentions of lay people and monks.

## **Ways of knowing – learning how to know about religion and non-religion**

### **Summary of the research review relevant to ways of knowing**

Ways of knowing is about being scholarly in RE. When pupils learn ways of knowing in RE, they can build knowledge of scholarly tools, methods and processes. They may also build knowledge of types of conversations that academics have about religious and non-religious traditions. They can then develop awareness of how these are connected: that conversations about religion and non-religion carry with them certain assumptions which link to methods and processes and contain certain criteria about what is considered valuable.

In high-quality RE, leaders are precise about what constitutes appropriate evidence or purpose for constructing different types of arguments. When leaders plan for pupils to learn ways of knowing in RE, this can help overcome misconceptions, such as: ‘Later ideas in some religious traditions are deviations from an original pure tradition’, ‘Science is about facts; religion is about opinions’ or ‘Only loving religion is true religion’.

89. About half the schools visited did not have curriculums that would enable pupils to make sense of the global diversity and complexity of religious and non-religious traditions.

90. Most schools had not identified even the simplest ways of knowing that could illustrate how different knowledge about religion and non-religion could be constructed. Most did not use sources of information, such as interviews with followers of different religious traditions, to show how different people express ideas about religion and non-religion.

91. Some schools’ expectations of what pupils would be able to do were low. For example, they did not expect pupils to be able to analyse and interpret texts, including longer portions of religious texts, beyond simple ‘proof texts’. In around a third of schools, pupils had limited opportunities to contextualise passages or understand the wider traditions in which they were based.

92. In schools where pupils’ disciplinary knowledge was well developed, teachers had taught pupils the different methods that scholars used from Year 7. Opportunities to gain different forms of knowledge were woven in alongside substantive content.

93. Occasionally, misconceptions were communicated to pupils through the curriculum. These tended to take the form of unsustainable generalisations or over-simplifications, for example: ‘Christians believe that people should be humble’, or ‘Religion is a belief in God’. Pupils then developed misconceptions, such as ‘Jews think that Jesus is the Messiah’ (when not referring to forms of messianic Judaism). Similarly, pupils were not always corrected when they used imprecise terminology.

94. Curriculums in around 40% of schools used enquiry questions. For example, a curriculum question that pupils in one school studied was ‘What is religion?’ The topic was constructed so that pupils could develop knowledge from a sociological perspective, with strong links to ethnographic sources. This informed pupils as they were taught about a range of religions over the key stage. In one school, pupils began to learn stories about different ancient Greek philosophers in order to answer the curriculum enquiry question ‘What does it mean to live a good life?’ Pupils then used this knowledge to begin to learn about epistemology through questions such as ‘What is real?’. This was developed further the following year when pupils explored non-religious worldviews through the question ‘How do Humanists decide what to believe?’

### **How one school went about developing ways of knowing in the RE curriculum**

Leaders had thought carefully about how to weave in disciplinary knowledge. Contextual knowledge that pupils gained in Year 7 framed the discourses that they had in Year 9 about the Genesis narrative. Pupils learned about doctrinal development within Christianity, which gave historical context to how textual interpretation developed over time. Pupils used the questions that scholars from different disciplines, such as philosophy or social science, ask. They also analysed the data relating to the distribution of different

religions as they began to consider global patterns of belief.

## **Personal knowledge – pupils’ awareness of the presuppositions and values they bring to studying religious and non-religious traditions**

### **Summary of the research review relevant to personal knowledge**

Pupils bring to the RE classroom a ‘position’, which is their viewpoint or perspective on the world: personal knowledge. Pupils develop their personal knowledge when their assumptions about religious or non-religious traditions are drawn out through the content they study. Content relating to meaning and purpose, human nature, justice in society, values, community and self-fulfilment can all illuminate pupils’ own self-knowledge.

In high-quality RE curriculums, leaders are precise in how they select content to develop pupils’ personal knowledge. For example, leaders may identify a specific concept such as *sewa* (selfless service) in Sikh traditions, together with rich detail about how this may form part of Sikh ways of life. Pupils can reflect on these specific concepts and consider how they might value them in similar or different ways – or may not value them at all. This is particularly important because pupils may not see the immediate significance of that content. In RE, pupils are free to express their own religious or non-religious identities. These may or may not change because of their studying RE – although of course there is no obligation for them to change.

95. Schools stated that they valued the role that RE plays in developing personal knowledge. They considered that it was part of the broader school curriculum. However, not all could explain how they had planned this in the curriculum or what content they used to develop pupils’ personal knowledge.

96. Some schools explained that they thought that personal knowledge formed a part of the curriculum because pupils were asked to give their own views at the end of the unit of teaching. There was a disparity between what leaders thought was in the curriculum to develop personal knowledge and what was evident through speaking to pupils or scrutinising their work.

97. Inspectors found that some schools gave pupils the opportunity to reflect on the content of the RE curriculum. However, in some cases, pupils did not use the knowledge that they had previously gained in RE to help them do this. For example, some pupils knew that many Christians might believe that God had given them dominion over animals. They knew about factory farming and free-range farming. However, they did not use this knowledge when trying to explain the ethical issues of the treatment of animals and how they felt about these. They had not connected the prior learning with the reflection task that they were asked to complete.

### **How one school went about developing pupils’ personal knowledge**



Leaders carefully planned the substantive knowledge that pupils would gain. Pupils learned about Jewish messianic expectations and revisited this concept when they learned about different Christian beliefs. Teachers skilfully wove in the opportunity for pupils to develop their personal knowledge once they had secured this component knowledge.

Pupils said that they use this knowledge to reflect. One said: 'We explored the idea of what a messiah is and also our own viewpoint about what we might think that this would mean.' Another pupil added: 'I don't think my views have changed, but it's given me the opportunity to see the world from a Christian perspective, and I can see the possibility for how there could be a God. So, I think it's brilliant to be able to see another point of view.'

Pupils were able to understand the significance of messianic expectations being fulfilled for Christians. However, they did not need to believe this themselves to have deepened their personal knowledge of ideas of hope, expectation and redemption, which have different connotations for many in a diverse and pluralistic world.

## Teaching the curriculum

### Summary of the research review in relation to teaching the curriculum

High-quality teaching in RE enables pupils to remember the curriculum in the long term. Well-chosen approaches to classroom teaching enable pupils to build the forms of knowledge that are distinctive to RE. A 'fit-for-purpose' teaching approach (including teachers' selections of procedures, methods and strategies in RE) depends on the subject matter being taught and whether it supports pupils to remember the RE curriculum. Suitable methods are appropriate for the RE curriculum object, are well matched to pupils' prior knowledge (whether pupils have the requisite knowledge to be able to succeed at a task) and support pupils' recall of the curriculum. Without such well-judged teaching approaches, classroom activities may well be enjoyable for pupils but may not lead to curriculum impact.

98. In approximately half the schools visited, the teaching activities chosen were appropriate because they were well suited to pupils' existing knowledge bases. For example, in one lesson, pupils had appropriate knowledge before they answered the question: 'If God was omniscient, what would be the purpose of a test?' Pupils had learned about the Job narrative when they had studied Jewish traditions as well as teachings from Buddhist traditions about suffering and attachment. Skilful teaching built on this through developing pupils' knowledge of the terminology of 'moral evil' and 'natural evil'. Teachers had made sure that pupils' knowledge was broad enough and deep enough to be able to tackle the question.

99. These schools also developed activities to enable pupils to use concepts well. Teachers encouraged pupils to see the connections between concepts, such as 'atonement' and 'forgiveness'. This meant that pupils were able to refine their thinking through using increasingly precise terms. For example, one pupil wrote about beliefs held within the Christian tradition with increasing precision. Following discussion with the teacher, they corrected their work, so that

'Jesus was killed by crucifixion and he came back to life, which was a miracle' was changed to 'Jesus was killed by crucifixion and ascended to heaven after being resurrected'.

100. Sometimes, pedagogical choices were inappropriate. For example, pupils were asked to make posters about ethical issues. However, they did not know enough about the topics, nor about religious perspectives, to make this a meaningful activity. Pupils did not find this engaging or interesting.

101. In one school, lessons were skilfully adapted for pupils with SEND. Teachers had identified precisely which specialist vocabulary they needed to understand. The pupils studied content that was similar to the expectations of the GCSE course, but in a simpler way. This helped pupils to concentrate on the principles of the design argument more closely. The pupils who needed extra practice in using these words precisely, got it.

102. In the majority of schools, pupils lacked background knowledge to engage with sensitive or controversial content in an informed way. Pupils did not have the knowledge needed to answer questions or debate issues competently. For example, in one school, pupils were asked to summarise how followers of specific religious traditions might view contraception. Pupils did not know enough about methods of contraception or how they worked; nor did they know enough about religious beliefs about the sanctity of life. This prevented them from answering well. There were notable exceptions, however. In one school, pupils were taught about moral codes and ethical issues in Years 7 and 8 before they discussed whether the death penalty should be used. This prepared pupils well for wider discussions about war and conflict at key stage 4.

### **How one school approached teaching controversial and sensitive issues**

This example shows why teaching activities need to be appropriate for the curriculum goal.

A single lesson in the Year 8 curriculum was given to the topic of religion and abortion. In the lesson visited, the curriculum goal was for pupils to learn different religious attitudes to abortion. The teacher chose an activity that explored how the legal status of abortion in England applies at different stages of pregnancy. As much of this was new information for pupils, most of the lesson was taken up by the teacher responding to pupils' questions on the scientific details about what abortion is and what happens. Very little time was given to exploring religious attitudes.

In this instance, the curriculum goal was not to develop pupils' scientific or legal knowledge, but to learn how values and ideas (such as the sanctity of life) shape the attitudes that different religious people hold. The teacher did not take into account the natural curiosity and predictable interest of pupils when planning this activity. This should have been a particularly important consideration for them, especially as this was the only lesson on the topic. Although it was stimulating, the teaching activity was not appropriate because it did not help pupils to reach the curriculum goal.

This example also shows how the RE curriculum should supply pupils with sufficient prior knowledge to learn new content in a meaningful and nuanced way. In this example, the curriculum was implemented as leaders had intended. Earlier in the curriculum, pupils had studied a topic on inspirational religious figures (such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King), and had one lesson on the Holocaust, one lesson on religion and human life, and one lesson on euthanasia. However, this sequence did not prepare pupils well for

each lesson. Their knowledge of specific religious traditions was scant, and so what they knew about different religious attitudes towards all stages of human life was very limited.

103. When teaching concepts within specific religious and non-religious traditions, not all teachers made sure that pupils had the core knowledge that they needed. In the weakest cases, teachers taught specific content in a way that was artificially separated from its in-depth context. For example, in one lesson, pupils were asked to create their own 10 commandments when they did not know anything about the Torah, or where it came from.

104. In a significant minority of RE lessons that inspectors visited, there was little discernible RE content being taught. In some schools, this was because RE curriculum time was used to teach non-RE content, such as relationships, sex and health education (RHSE), study skills or other aspects of personal development.

105. In around a third of the schools visited, teaching focused on developing exam technique prematurely. In the majority of these schools, this practice began in key stage 3. Pupils did not always have the substantive knowledge that they would need to answer a question well. This approach limited the scope of the curriculum and the opportunities to deepen pupils' knowledge. One pupil commented: 'We have to write what we have been taught – [there's] less time for thinking. We are writing to a mark scheme. We have to write "In conclusion I think this" to get the marks, when actually we don't [think this].'

## Assessment

### Summary of the research review in relation to types of assessment and assessing types of knowledge

There has been an overall lack of clarity about what exactly is being assessed in RE. This confusion has led to, among many things, unreliable assessment practices. For assessment to be fit for purpose, leaders and teachers need to be clear about what they are testing and why. Literature categorises RE assessment into 2 kinds: the 'knowing kind' and the 'personal qualities, beliefs and values kind'. We focus on the first kind of assessment, because this is appropriate for checking the forms of knowledge pupils build through the RE curriculum. High-quality RE uses assessment sufficiently, but not excessively.

Assessment has different purposes in the RE curriculum, as outlined in the primary school section on [types of assessment and assessing types of knowledge in RE](#).

106. The great majority of schools visited had some form of summative assessment in place at key stage 3. Yet a handful had no meaningful assessment system at all. This was problematic as it meant that leaders and teachers had no way of checking whether the curriculum was being learned.

107. Summative assessments in key stage 3 were typically written by teachers to assess the

knowledge that pupils had secured. They checked pupils' use of specialist vocabulary and knowledge of important concepts. These assessments usually took place at the end of the unit. However, they rarely included prior knowledge from previous units. In this way, few schools revisited this in subsequent assessments to see what pupils had remembered over a longer period. This meant that assessments did not actually check how much of the curriculum pupils had learned over time. Therefore, in most cases, assessments were unlikely to provide valid information about pupils' progress through the curriculum.

108. Many schools used 'low stakes' quizzes. Teachers stated that they used them to check what pupils had recalled. However, in about a third of schools, many pupils' knowledge was insecure, and they were not always able to use this information well. This indicates that low stakes quizzes are not a guarantee of pupils remembering the curriculum.

109. Some pupils had a shallow recollection of specific terminology because they lacked in-depth knowledge of the place of that terminology within religious and non-religious traditions. This led to pupils remembering some information but only being able to construct superficial answers to questions. For example, pupils struggled to explain why followers of Hindu traditions might avoid meat, simply saying 'religious reasons'.

## Relating assessment expectations to the RE curriculum

### Summary of the research review relevant to assessment approaches that use the curriculum as the progression model

The curriculum maps out the journey of what it means 'to get better' at RE. So, teachers want to know whether pupils have made progress in RE and need to ask as a summative question: Have pupils learned and remembered the RE curriculum? If pupils have learned this curriculum, then they have made progress.

This can be achieved by sampling from the knowledge that teachers expect pupils to retain from earlier parts of the curriculum, as well as checking what has most recently been taught. Assessment models in RE that use 'scales', 'ladders' or 'levels' of generic skills to determine progress are not valid assessment models to assess specific RE curriculums. Assessment practices that report to parents, which are based on something other than checking whether pupils have learned the curriculum, or tasks that do not enable pupils to demonstrate what they have learned from earlier in the curriculum, are not useful. Good-quality assessment in RE relates assessment expectations precisely to the RE curriculum.

110. Positively, most schools sampled no longer used a skills-based ladder as a framework for assessment at key stage 3. A minority of them assessed 'skills'. Some used an assessment framework that was totally disconnected from the curriculum journey, for example an assessment scale of generic skills, such as recounting, explaining, evaluating or analysing.

111. In most of the schools, assessment was related to the intended curriculum. In schools where RE was stronger, leaders had thought carefully about how they would check whether pupils had learned the curriculum, including ways of knowing. In one school, leaders spoke about changing

assessment questions from questions like 'What are the 5 Ks?' to questions like 'Why might the life of Guru Nanak impact the lives of Sikhs today?' The former question is more limited in its scope and is far less orientated toward the kind of meaningful questions that scholars might ask about religion and non-religion than the latter. The latter question enables pupils to apply a range of substantive knowledge and to consider the kind of knowledge that would be needed to be able to answer the question appropriately.

## Assessment tasks in RE

### Summary of the research review relevant to assessment tasks

Summative assessment often includes composite tasks (such as extended writing) to assess learning. These tasks do not separate types of RE knowledge. For example, RE teachers can assess ways of knowing through the ways that pupils use substantive content and concepts to respond to a subject question. These sorts of composite assessment tasks are fit for purpose when they are based on RE curriculum content. In this way, teachers' use of assessment is based on curriculum-related expectations.

At key stages 3, 4 and 5, a common assessment task is for pupils to construct an argument. When teachers are unclear about what is appropriate evidence, purpose and backing for that specific argument, this assessment practice is not as effective as it could be.

Further, there are significant limitations and problems with applying exam-style questions (such as GCSE religious studies exam questions) in non-qualification contexts, including key stage 3. First, pupils will not have had the opportunity to learn the domain of the programme of study. Second, the specific RE curriculum cannot be assessed effectively by generic exam skills. Finally, these types of questions too often promote a narrow 'oppositional' approach to thinking about religious and non-religious traditions.

112. The majority of schools visited used composite tasks as a form of assessment. Typically, this took place at the end of a term or a unit of work. In schools where strong RE was evident, this was closely linked to the ways of knowing that were woven into the curriculum. For example, pupils knowledgeably used textual sources, understanding the context from which they came, or referenced the philosophical thinkers whose arguments they were using.

113. Positively, many schools had moved away from using GCSE assessment criteria in key stage 3. However, approximately one fifth of schools visited applied these assessment approaches prematurely to key stage 3. This approach skewed the curriculum. Some assessment practices led to pupils developing stereotypical ideas based on oversimplifications of what followers of different traditions might think. One school, for example, used excessive and imprecise 'proof texts'. Pupils learning to use a particular quote did not encounter the wider text from which it was derived. As a result, they did not understand that followers of the same faith might interpret texts in different ways.

114. In these schools, not all pupils had developed a detailed knowledge base to draw on before

being asked GCSE-style questions. Yet leaders did not identify this as an issue. For example, one leader commented: 'We've tried to provide the skills for GCSE as early as possible. Then it's about developing the knowledge.' This approach is problematic. It does not consider the rich body of knowledge that pupils need to draw on in order to answer complex questions meaningfully. Exam-style questions are designed for pupils who have had the opportunity to learn the domain of the GCSE programme of study.

115. In about one fifth of the schools visited, leaders thought carefully about how to build towards more complex assessments within units of learning. Teachers used a variety of formative tasks to check pupils' security with content. Once pupils had acquired sufficient depth of knowledge, teachers introduced more complex assessment tasks, allowing them to use this knowledge. In one school, an assessment question such as 'What is it like to be a Muslim in the UK today?' was not asked until pupils had gained secure knowledge of the concept of ummah, as well as a range of accounts written by young Muslims.

## **Systems, culture and policies at subject and school level**

### **Summary of the research review in relation to systems, culture and policies**

All schools that are state-funded, including free schools and academies, are legally required to provide RE as part of their curriculum. They are required to teach RE to all pupils at all key stages (including sixth form), except those who have been withdrawn. The way in which school leaders organise this is one indication of the quality of education.

## **Prioritising RE in the school curriculum**

### **Summary of the research review in relation to prioritising school RE**

How the RE curriculum appears on the timetabled curriculum (how it is 'classified') may be an indication of the extent to which a school prioritises RE. Problems can emerge when the subject is too weakly classified (for example, teaching RE through tutor times or assemblies, or in conjunction with PSHE education where the format limits the curriculum that pupils can learn).

What limits the quality of RE can be a lack of scope: there is not enough time to teach a high-quality subject curriculum. Research by subject organisations suggests that about a quarter of secondary schools gave no dedicated curriculum time to RE. About a third of academies reported no timetabled RE at all. This increases to just under a half of all academies at key stage 4. Staffing decisions can also affect the quality of RE. This may depend on the type of state-funded school. For example, a much greater percentage of RE lessons are taught by a qualified subject specialist in schools of a religious character than in academies.

### **At key stage 3:**

116. In about four fifths of the secondary schools visited, RE occupied, on average, at least a weekly timetabled lesson.

117. In about one fifth of the schools, RE was not strongly 'classified'. It was timetabled in a range of ways, including half-yearly blocks. In 2 schools, what leaders asserted to be the 'RE curriculum' contained, in the main, PSHE content.

118. In just under a third of the schools, leaders had shortened the length of key stage 3 RE. Often, this was the only subject that was timetabled in this way

### **At key stage 4**

119. About four fifths of the schools visited offered a religious studies qualification. In approximately half these schools, all pupils at key stage 4 were required to take either a short or long GCSE in religious studies. In the other half, pupils were given the option to take a GCSE in religious studies.

120. In almost a third of schools with a shortened key stage 3, pupils took their GCSE qualification at the end of Year 10. In most cases, these schools did not provide RE in Year 11.

121. Two thirds of the schools taught statutory RE through a timetabled lesson for all pupils. However, one third of schools offered no timetabled statutory RE lessons at key stage 4. In those schools, leaders said that they taught RE content through other means. Examples of these included assemblies, tutor time and drop-down days. In these schools, the RE curriculum was rarely ambitious enough.

### **At key stage 5**

122. Fifteen of the 25 secondary schools visited had a sixth form. In these schools, just under two thirds offered a qualification in religious studies or a related subject such as philosophy. Most taught statutory RE content through tutor time or PSHE. The RE content was rarely defined clearly or suitably rigorous.

## **Teacher education and professional development in RE**

### **Summary of the research review in relation to developing teachers' knowledge and expertise**

Although there are clearly strong practitioners within the RE subject community, it is likely that school leaders will have teachers who do not have qualifications in RE. More than half of secondary school RE teachers do not have a qualification or appropriate expertise in the subject. This is a higher proportion than in other subjects. School and subject leaders can mitigate some of these factors by carefully considering the professional development needed to improve teachers' subject knowledge. Areas of professional development for RE teachers

include: RE policy knowledge, RE content knowledge, RE pedagogical content knowledge, and research in RE.

123. Over half the schools visited used non-specialist teachers to teach RE. In the majority of these schools, teachers had not had any subject-specific professional development. These teachers did not have the training that they needed to be able to develop their subject knowledge (content knowledge) or to teach subject content (pedagogical content knowledge).

124. In about 90% of the schools, teachers did not have regular access to research in RE. In these cases, specialist RE teachers were unable to keep up to date with developments in their subject.

125. In schools where the quality of RE was stronger, teachers had access to regular professional development. They used research to help them evaluate the strengths and areas for development in the curriculum. They used subject expertise, both in-house and externally sourced, to make sure that the curriculum was suitably ambitious and taught well. These schools said that they valued their links with other schools and with national associations.

### **How one school developed teachers' subject knowledge**

Leaders developed a subject network with other schools in their trust. They used this to exchange knowledge about recent research and to share their different specialist knowledge.

Leaders identified that teachers had less subject knowledge about defined non-religious worldviews and how to teach these systematically. They organised a day when they could work with experts to increase their knowledge and incorporate new professional knowledge into their curriculums. Staff from all the schools were able to work together and deepen collaboration across the RE departments.

Teachers used the knowledge that they had gained when they revised the curriculum. They included a new scheme of work at Year 7. They adapted existing planning in Year 8.

## **Annex A: Methodological note**

This report draws on findings from 50 visits to schools in England. We carried out the visits between September 2021 and April 2023. They took place as part of scheduled school inspections under the education inspection framework and also as specific research visits.

The inspectors who made the visits had relevant expertise in RE and were trained for this work. They carried out a deep dive as part of our methodology for evaluating the quality of education. Inspectors gathered a rich range of data by speaking to senior leaders, subject leaders, teachers and pupils, and visiting RE lessons. They also reviewed pupils' work in RE.



Schools were not compelled to take part in the research visits or additional deep dives. It is possible, therefore, that this had an impact on the findings. Schools that thought that RE was weaker may have chosen not to take part.

We identified some criteria for the sample that risked being under-represented. These criteria were: region, inspection outcome, disadvantage quintile, size of school, and rural or urban location. We made sure that the sample was broadly representative of the national picture and that there was some representation from schools with different characteristics. The visits were split evenly between primary and secondary schools. The sample only included schools in which the inspection of RE falls within Ofsted's legal purview.

Inspectors gathered qualitative evidence about RE in the schools they visited. The evidence gathered across these visits enabled us to identify common themes in RE that are likely to be relevant in a wide range of schools.

Inspectors focused on gathering evidence that related to the following areas:

- curriculum
- pedagogy
- assessment
- school-level systems and their impact on RE

When analysing this evidence, we drew on the conception of quality in RE that we outlined in our [RE research review](#). This enabled us to consider how RE in English schools relates to our best evidence-based understanding of how schools can ensure high-quality RE for all pupils.

## Annex B: Key terms used in this report

Throughout this report, we use the same terminology to describe the forms of knowledge that pupils learn in RE as we did in our [RE research review](#). These are not day-to-day terms that we would expect pupils or teachers to necessarily use. Rather, we use them here to recognise at least 3 important types of knowledge that pupils build in RE throughout their time at school.

- **Substantive knowledge** refers to knowledge of the religious and non-religious traditions that have shaped the world: the substantive content and concepts. It includes knowledge of different ways that people express religion and non-religion, as well as artefacts, texts, concepts and narratives found within traditions. Some of these are connected by geographical location and conceptual knowledge. For example, the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam share the figure of Abraham and all regard him as a prophet. Some other faiths, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, originated in the Indian subcontinent and share some similarities in core beliefs. These are referred to in this report as dharmic faiths. There are, of course, other religious and non-religious traditions, such as e, that may be part of the RE curriculum.
- **Ways of knowing** refers to pupils gaining disciplinary knowledge in RE. This is when pupils learn how knowledge about religious and non-religious traditions is constructed. This is part of 'being scholarly' in RE. It includes both the knowledge of what scholars use to make sense of religion and non-religion and how debates and discussions add to this. So, pupils might learn

about what ethnographic information tells them about the Jewish diaspora. They might consider how debates within different orthodox and reformed traditions have an impact on how Jewish people keep the Shabbat.

- **Personal knowledge** refers to pupils' awareness of their own assumptions, presuppositions and reflections that they bring to studying religious and non-religious traditions. This sort of knowledge is similar to academic reflections in higher education.
- **Collectively enough** refers to a curriculum that covers substantive content and concepts collectively, rather than covering excessive amounts of content superficially. Content is sufficient for pupils to grasp a bigger picture about the place of religion and non-religion in the world.

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