

Promoting the Exploration of Religion and Worldviews in Schools – Fostering Coherency and Diversity

Baseline Report 2

Public Perception: Student and Teacher Views



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Coherency and Diversity**

Baseline Report 2: Public Perception: Student and Teacher Views

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Inform

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Contents

Introduction 2
Baseline Report 2 3
Existing Surveys..... 5
Student Survey..... 8
Teacher Survey..... 12

Introduction

Promoting the Exploration of Religion and Worldviews in Schools - Fostering Coherency and Diversity is a project undertaken by The Faith and Belief Forum, The Open University and Inform, with funding from Culham St Gabriel's. The project aims to educate people outside the classroom about the importance of teaching Religion and Worldviews inside the classroom.

The project seeks to better align attitudes of key stakeholders within the education sector, but 'outside the classroom' to the critical importance of good teaching of Religion and Worldviews (RW) inside the classroom. The target groups include parents and local stakeholders, headteachers, school governors, CEOs of MATS as well as civil servants at both local and national levels who have roles in advising and implementing education policy. We will produce resources to help teachers and teacher educators advocate for the crucial importance of a Religion and Worldviews curriculum to school leadership and to parents.

The project will take place over 18 months from February 2021 to June 2022. It has three phases:

In phase 1, we will establish a steering group and conduct baseline research reporting on current opinions on Religion and Worldviews as a subject as well as exploring attitudes to religion in today's Britain that impact schools and government policy. *Baseline Report 1: Setting the Context* was published in May 2021 and is available on the project member's websites.

In phase 2, through a series of roundtable discussions, this project will identify key challenges and insights relevant to promoting a shared vision of Religion and Worldviews education, producing support material and networks required for responding to the challenges identified.

In phase 3, we will produce resources aimed at targeting the challenges identified through insight reports, online resources developed by The Open University, as well as cementing enduring networks.

Baseline Report 2

This second baseline report first summarises the few existing public opinion surveys available about opinions of RE, before providing primary data from surveys with students and teachers. It should be noted that this report was conceptualised and completed before Culham St Gabriel's Trust commissioned Savanta to conduct a public opinion survey in the summer of 2021.¹ The Culham survey asked specifically about public perception of an education in religion and worldviews, after providing a definition of religion and worldviews. Survey results were more positive than the earlier surveys referenced in this baseline report, with nearly two thirds (64%) of the respondents thinking that an education in religion and worldviews (or RE) is an important part of the school curriculum today.

As a survey of the general public about their opinions of RE/RW was beyond the scope of this project, we instead selected two target groups to elicit their opinions: current undergraduate students reflecting back on their experiences of RE at secondary school; and RE teachers, whom we asked for their thoughts on the Commission on RE final report, *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* (2018).

As background research for these surveys, we also conducted some secondary analysis of media and governmental materials. In terms of media analysis, we conducted a Lexis Nexis search using the key words 'Religious Education', 'Religion and Worldviews' and 'Religious Literacy'. We searched within the dates 1st January 2015 to 31st December 2020, searched for England only and removed duplicates. Results were as follows:

- Religious Education – 57 articles identified. The articles identified were overwhelmingly positive about the importance of RE (51 articles). The most commonly occurring themes were that RE promotes critical thinking, community cohesion and tolerance of others and, as a result, can help to combat extremism.
- Religion and Worldviews – 25 articles identified. The majority of these articles were from 2018 and were reporting on CoRE 2018's recommendations. As such they do not give many opinions or cover positive or negative themes. It is interesting to note that 'Religion and Worldviews' has not been in the media since 2018, suggesting a lack of media engagement with CoRE 2018 after its initial release.
- Religious Literacy – 24 articles identified. Arguments for the importance of religious literacy were, unsurprisingly, similar to those for the importance of RE. In the case of religious literacy, its role in promoting critical thinking and understanding diversity is emphasised (community cohesion less so than for RE), as is its role in helping to combat extremism. A commonly occurring theme was the need to raise religious literacy levels in the media. Three articles linked the importance of religious literacy to good RE teaching.

For analysis of government statements, we conducted a search of the two websites, 'They Work for You' and 'Hansard', using the key words 'Religious Education' and 'Religion and Worldviews' and refined by dates, January 2015 - March 2021. Just over 80 entries were recorded (81 on They Work For You, 83 on Hansard – they are the same entries). The majority are questions to the Department for Education, and they are categorised into different topics including: RE; Teacher Training; Ofsted; SACREs; Free Schools; Faith Schools; Maintained Schools; Academies - Curriculum; Schools -

¹ <https://www.cstg.org.uk/activities/campaigns/public-perception/>

Antisemitism; Schools - Collective Worship; Schools – Discrimination; Schools – Registration; Creationism; Sikhs – Curriculum; Race Relations – Curriculum; Secondary Education – Curriculum; RE and RSE Primary Education.

RE did not only come up in questions to the DfE, however. It was mentioned around 30 times in questions about the Middle East, Hate Crimes, Far-Right Violence and more. In these cases, it was most often mentioned in the context of religious literacy (e.g., RE is a good place for improving religious literacy). Within the 80+ entries, there were only seven entries where ‘Religion and Worldviews’ was specifically mentioned.

The data from our surveys will be complemented by that gathered in Phase 2 of the project, the roundtable discussions and further surveys with target groups. Target groups will include community groups, SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on RE) members, parents, heads of MATs (Multi Academy Trusts), head teachers and school senior leaders, local authorities, academics, policy professionals and more. This phase of the project will take place between July and December 2021, with insight reports published in early 2022.

Existing Surveys

Whilst a number of the reports from 2018 onwards note a mismatch between RE professionals' views of RE and those of the general public, there have been few surveys which gauge public opinion on RE. YouGov has a number of relevant polls and 'opinion trackers' which paint a rather negative picture - both that adults and students do not think RE is particularly important or enjoyable and that the general public do not have a positive view of the role of religion in public life more generally. However, despite a generally negative perception of the role of religion in the world, some surveys do show agreement with the importance of children learning about the diversity of religions to reduce prejudice.

Key surveys on perceptions of RE:

Organisation	Date	Target Group	Survey Question	Key Findings
YouGov	February 2018	General public	How important is it for secondary schools to teach each of 18 different subjects?	RS ranked 4 th from bottom. 41% think RS is very or quite important. Gender difference: 48% of women consider it important compared to 34% of men. Political difference: 47% of Labour voters consider it important compared to 40% of Conservative voters.
YouGov	September 2018	4,000 plus children aged 6 to 15	Which school subjects do girls and boys enjoy more?	RE second from bottom in subjects ranked by liking. Small gender difference. 23% said they do not enjoy it all. 12% said they enjoy it a lot.
Savanta ComRes for Theos	October 2018	2,031 British adults	RE in schools research	66% agree it is important that children learn about the different religions and beliefs in Britain. 62% agree RE is not as important as English, Maths and Science. 54% agree that better RE would help avoid prejudices towards religious people.
Survation for L&Q, a construction company	February 2019	1,095 people aged 16-18	Attitudes to construction and STEM subjects (although includes other school subjects, including RE)	1.89% said that RE was their favourite subject – the favourite was science at 14.97%. 10.38% said that RE was their least favourite subject – the least favourite was maths at 16.93%.
YouGov Biannual Tracker	23 rd November 2020 (last data)	1,645-1,692 British adults	How important is it to teach Religious Studies at secondary school?	31% - not very important 24% - not at all important 27% - quite important 12% - very important 6% - don't know

Key surveys on the role of religion in public life:

Organisation	Date	Target Group	Survey Question	Key Findings
Ipsos MORI	2017	Online international survey	Religion's impact on the world	60% of Britons believe religion does more harm than good.
British Social Attitudes Survey no. 36	2019 (data from 2018)	Over 3,000 British adults	General attitudes to religion, amongst other things	52% have no religion. 38% identify as Christian. 63% agree with the statement "looking around the world, religions bring more conflict than peace" / 13% disagree with that statement.
YouGov Biannual Tracker	21 st January 2021 (last data)	1,963-2,033 British adults	The influence of religion on the world	52% agreed with the statement "Religion on the whole has a negative influence on the world". 23% agreed with the statement that religion has a positive impact.

Key Themes from existing surveys:

- RE is not generally considered an important subject by:
 - The general public – although women consider it more important than men.
 - Students – here there is little gender difference.
 - Although Savanta ComRes data shows that over 60% think that it is important for students to learn about different religions.
- In general, the British public do not have a positive view of religion:
 - Ipsos Mori and BSA data agree that around 60% have a negative view of the role of religion in the world.

Key Questions from existing surveys:

- Why does the public generally have a negative perception of RE? Is it because they do not know its purpose?
 - Can RW communicate a clearer purpose?
- Why do students not enjoy RE?
 - Lack of coherent purpose?
 - No dedicated RE teacher?
 - Teacher is not enthusiastic/engaging?
 - Not enough curriculum time to cover in depth?
 - Not valued by the school? GCSE not encouraged?
 - Can RW remedy some/all of these points?
- Why is there a gender divide in enjoyment and recognition of importance (however small)?
 - Can a new curriculum better articulate the importance of RE to all?
- Can better RE (ie RW) change public perception of role of religion in England more generally?

Student Survey

We created a survey for current undergraduates, on any degree programme, which asked about their perception and experience of RE at secondary school. We advertised this through Inform's social media accounts and networks. The survey was open from 11th February 2021 to 19th March 2021. We received 67 responses (note: no question was compulsory so totals do not always add up to 67).

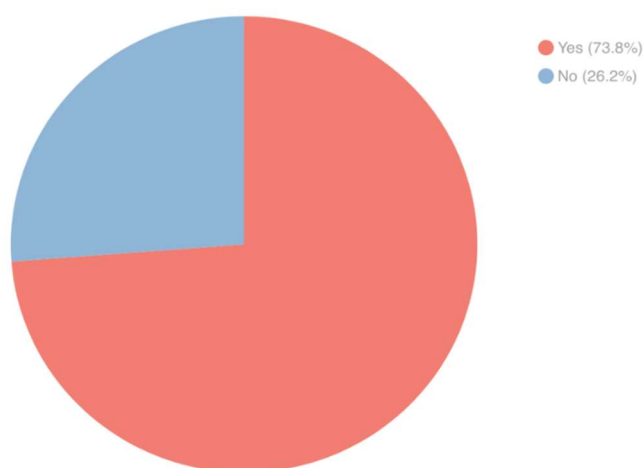
Despite not targeting TRS students (respondents studied a broad range of degree programmes; including 11 who were studying RS/Theology/TRS), responses were overwhelmingly positive. However, the comments in the free text question show a more varied response, ranging from positive views about learning about different religions, to more negative concerns around not enough religions being taught in not enough depth, to more generally negative views about RE as a subject or the way it was taught or treated in their particular school.

It should be noted that the questions were about the student's past experiences. We did not ask directly about 'Religion and Worldviews', as this might not have been their experience of RE teaching. They did not mention the study of conceptual categories or of non-religious worldviews in the free text responses – either as something important to them or not.

In general, the survey shows that students had a positive view of the importance of RE and of learning about different religions, highlighting themes of understanding others, respect and reducing discrimination. They enjoyed studying 'real-life', ethical issues. They did not want to learn 'trivia' about different religions, but neither did they want to study too few religions, or for Christianities to dominate.

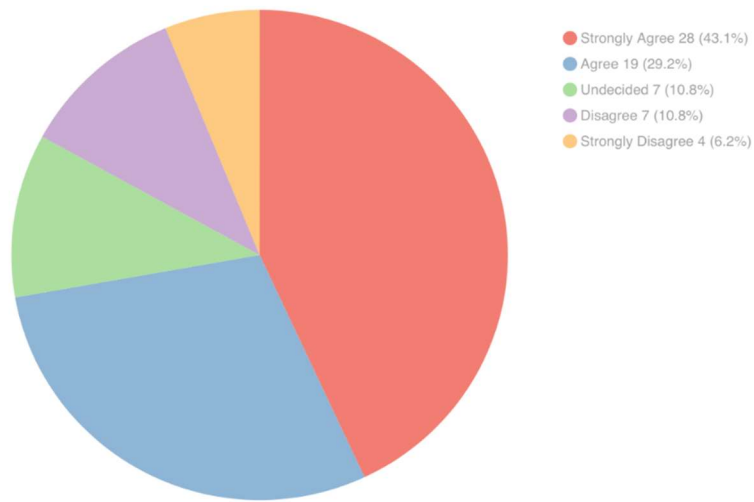
Selected questions and responses include:

Did you take Religious Studies as a GCSE? (including if it had a different name such as Religious Education or Philosophy and Ethics)?

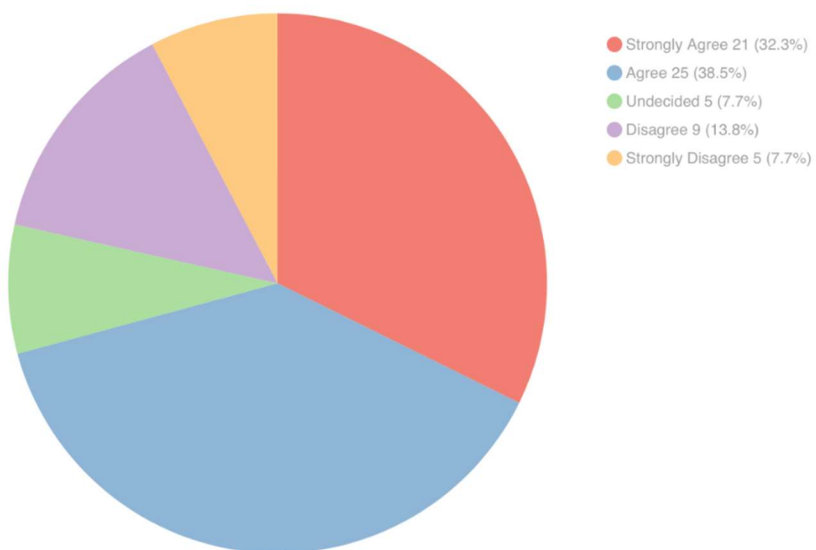


34 respondents (52.3%) said that GCSE RS was compulsory in their school; 31 respondents (47.7%) that it was not.

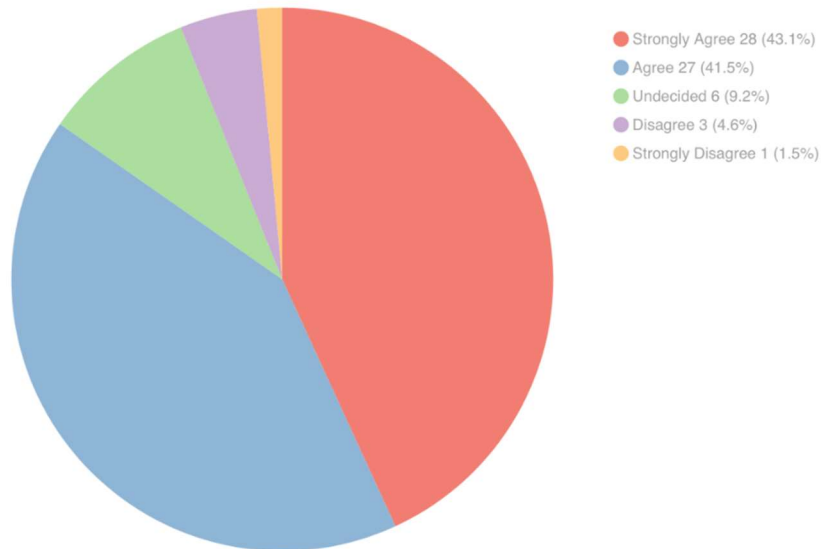
To what extent do you agree with the statement: "I enjoyed Religious Education /Religious Studies at secondary school?"



To what extent do you agree with the statement: "I personally learnt a lot from studying Religious Education /Religious Studies at secondary school?"



To what extent do you agree with the statement: "Religious Education /Religious Studies is a useful subject to study at secondary school?"



We also included a question with a free text-box for response: *Is there anything more you could tell us about your experience of Religious Education /Religious Studies at school or your thoughts on the subject more generally?* It is interesting to note that whilst most mentioned an appreciation of studying 'real-life' or ethical issues, none mentioned non-religious worldviews.

Responses here include positive views of the importance of studying different religions:

1. I think it is really important to learn more about something that effects the way you view people so you can understand different view points.
2. It's very important- I think more religions should be taught in more detail to help reduce discrimination and negative image on certain religions.
3. Found it highly interesting and made me more "woke" in terms of other cultures.
4. I loved learning about different religions, cultures, theories of being/ means of existing.... It was the only subject where you learnt about actually living and its teachings were so useful.... I think these school lessons are so crucial to teaching morals and values, respect for all people and communities, and it provides us with the foundation frameworks to make life decisions.
5. I went to a very diverse school (as a white student I was a minority) so any discussions we had in RE always had lots of different perspectives and we probably learnt as much from each other as we did from the teacher which made it more interesting.

Responses also include recognition that not enough religions are covered in not enough depth, particularly, it seems, for students in Christian schools:

1. I went to a catholic secondary school so this was the main religion that we were taught about and encouraged to participate in. I did not particularly enjoy this as it did not allow me to learn more broadly about religious studies and other faiths.
2. I think the most important thing is to teach diversity of beliefs eg. going to a CofE, culturally Christian secondary school, learning about religions like Islam was so important. I think more could be done to expand this further to include religions like Judaism and Buddhism.
3. I went to a Catholic School so my experience of RE was very Christian/Catholic biased. We did study other religions but not nearly as much. I would've liked to learn more about Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism etc
4. I feel it is necessary to have comprehensive religious education- that is not centred solely around Christianity to create tolerant atmospheres of inclusivity in schools. I felt GCSE RS was the most provocative lesson we had which encouraged the most wide-ranging discussions. However the Christian centred nature of our education meant our understanding of other cultures and perspectives was really lacking.
5. For the GCSE syllabus we studied two religions in a fair bit of depth. I think it would have been more useful if the syllabus covered a greater number of religions in less depth, with an approach that focused more on teaching awareness, acceptance and appreciation for all religions rather than going into lots of detail of the theology of only two beliefs.

Other responses recognise the neglected state of RE in their schools or as a subject more generally:

1. At school, the religious studies department was severely neglected. There was no teacher assigned to the subject. Just supplies teachers teaching it. They also assigned one hour per fortnight to teach it..... Most of the students failed due to no teachers in the department and lack of funding.
2. I had to take gcse classes after school as there was such little interest in it.
3. Religious studies was not taught as a subject at my secondary school, was included in subjects such as citizenship.
4. Very unfocussed - not really exploring the roots of faith or the philosophy of major religions - instead just learning some trivia about a few religions.
5. It was never compulsory. I think we had two or three lessons a year on RE and that was it. The lessons were not useful and at the time I did not see the benefit of them.

Teacher Survey

We created a survey for RE teachers which asked about their views on the purpose of RE and the proposed RW vision, amongst other things. We posted this on the REspect Facebook page and advertised through Inform's social media. It was also advertised on NATRE and REC and other organisations were emailed to ask for their support in sharing (Association of Catholic Teachers of RE, Chartered College of Teaching, Jewish Teachers Association, Muslim Teachers Association). The survey was open from 15th March 2021 to 22nd August 2021. We received 25 responses. Note: no question was compulsory, so totals do not always add up to 25.

22 of the respondents were current RE teachers; 3 were previously RE teachers. They all worked in different local authorities (24 listed; one did not answer). 7 (30.4%) worked in a school with a religious character; 16 (69.9%) worked in a school without a religious character. The majority (9 or 37.5%) worked in an academy without a religious character, but others worked in community (4), independent (4), academy with a religious character (2), grammar (2), voluntary aided (2), and other (1) schools.

8 teachers (33.3%) had experience of a child being withdrawn from RE in their school.

70.8% (17) had post A-Level qualifications in RE. The majority (13) spent 100% of their weekly timetable teaching RE but for others it was as low as 5 or 6% of their time.

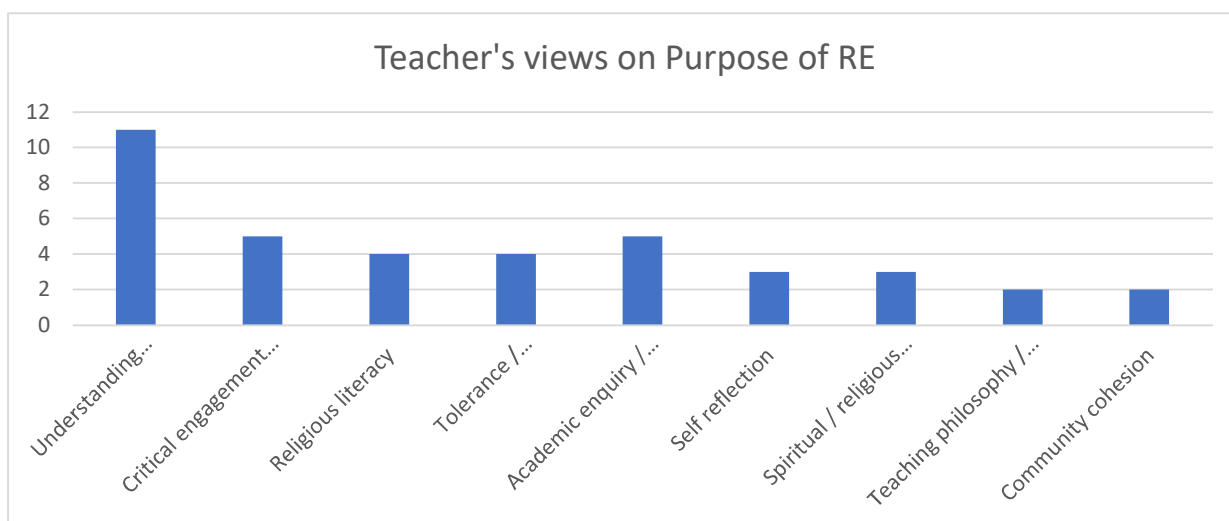
22 of the respondents were familiar with CoRE, 2 were not, one did not answer.

24 respondents answered the question: *What do you think is the purpose of RE in the curriculum of schools in England?*

Whilst a couple of respondents gave the answer for academic enquiry / intellectual autonomy, the majority gave longer answers which combined ideas around religious literacy, building tolerance of others, and understanding religious and non-religious worldviews.

Selected answers:

1. To facilitate understanding of people's Worldviews amongst children and adults. To give pupils the tools they need to have religiously literate conversations.
2. To provide young people with the religious literacy they need to live in modern Britain. To allow students to ask and answer challenging questions about their own faith and beliefs and those of others.
3. Lots of things, religious literacy, understanding others, knowledge you don't get in other subjects, community cohesion to an extent, opportunities for self reflection. Could go on!
4. To enable students to spiritually develop whilst being exposed to a wide range of beliefs and to help them to grapple with ethical and philosophical issues so they can be empowered members of society.
5. To increase tolerance and awareness of diversity, to develop students own sense of spirituality, morals, culture & social skills.



It is clear that the teachers were engaged with RW as most answers mentioned understanding worldviews and/or critically engaging with worldviews. This could be a sample bias as those interested in RW more likely to complete the survey. The teachers identified a range of purposes for RE which is consistent with the Commission's approach.

23 respondents answered the question: *How do you feel about the CoRE 2018 recommendations?*

The answers were generally positive - 11 respondents simply said that they agreed with all of it. One respondent disagreed with all of it saying it was "weak and based on a personal whim". But the majority of respondents were positive whilst having specific concerns on one or more of the three elements of New Vision, National Entitlement and Investment.

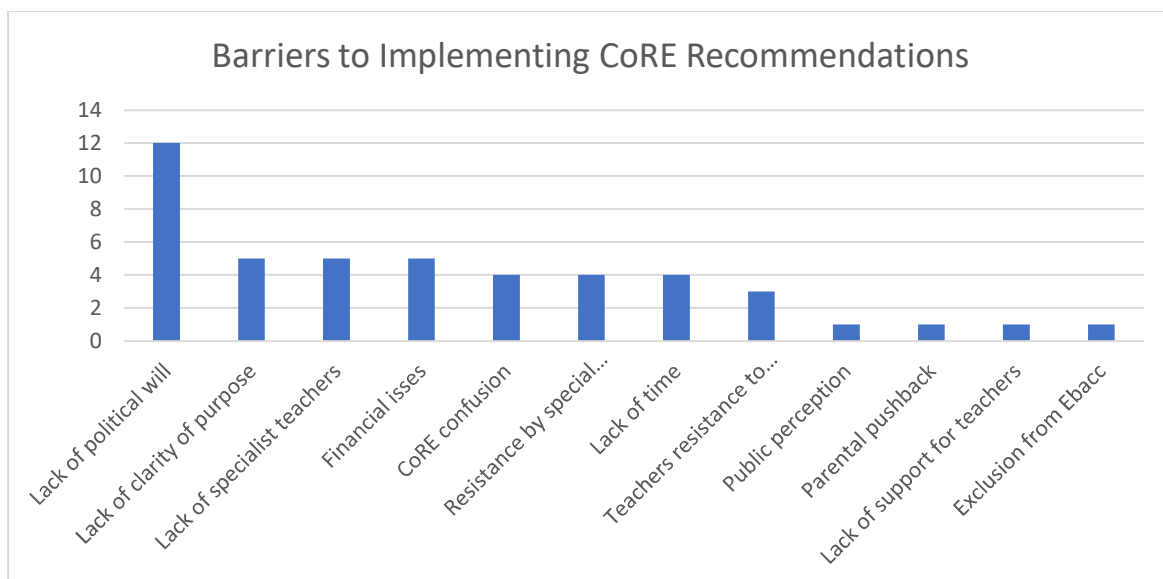
For example, one respondent thought the proposed name change "distracts" from the other proposed changes; others were concerned that the National Entitlement is not "snappy" enough, is too subject to interpretation and is unlikely to be implemented by the government; whilst one respondent said they disagreed with National Entitlement completely as they were unsure of the role of SACREs in it, and that local involvement through SACREs is of great benefit.

Selected answers:

1. I like the idea of the new vision but it is the suggestion of a national curriculum that I think is powerful in driving the subject forward. Investment is a top priority - there are too few teachers of RE who have relevant degrees - this weakens the subject and its reputation.
2. I think the entitlement is good, but it's not very snappy: it's quite hard to unpack and could do with being clearer. The trouble is, each person who tries to explain it seems to give their own spin and change its meaning, so I'm sceptical about that too.
3. New Vision- I agree with this, especially as summarised by NATRE, however there are such broad opinions on what worldviews are that any consensus is impossible and can cause confusion. I do not agree with a National Entitlement, there is too much that has/to be gained from local involvement particularly when SACREs are well funded and the committees appropriately represent the faith/non faith make up of the area. I do not think the proposed restructuring of this involvement is enough. I completely agree with Investment. I am the only specialist who teaches RE in my school, this causes a huge issues in the quality of RE offered despite my best efforts.
4. The new vision is good, although not that new. Many RE teachers have always worked like that. National entitlement is great idea in principle but in practice, beyond KS3, becomes counter productive with classes of GCSE and 6th form students who are not invested in the subject, especially if non examined. Investment, great, but where are my qualified RE specialists? I am currently planning and managing 7 non-specialists with extra time on their timetables!
5. Very much in agreement with all recommendations, we are changing to religion and worldviews in September after some significant changes to our ks3 in line with recommendations.

23 respondents answered the question: *What do you think are the barriers to implementing the recommendations?*

The most common theme here was lack of political will to change RE (mentioned by 12 respondents), followed by a lack of clarity and purpose in RE (5), a lack of specialist teachers (5), financial issues (5), CoRE itself having "muddied the waters" (5), resistance by special interest groups (4), lack of time for RE on the timetable (4), and an unwillingness of some teachers to change (3). Other barriers mentioned once each were: public perception of the subject, lack of support for teachers, parental pushback to the subject, and RE's exclusion from the EBacc. Note that these answers are higher than 23 as each respondent gave more than one answer.



Selected answers:

1. Political will - politicians are too frightened to be seen to impose RE because they don't understand the subject. If people keep insisting that RE is smsc or pshe rather than an academic subject we will not be able to avoid the decline. Plus we don't have enough properly qualified teachers of RE.
2. Lack of specialist knowledge and special interest groups wanting to preserve the relative freedom they have to influence RE in its localised format. RE has a special status and this needs to be sensitively removed. It is too important to be left to waste away.
3. The religious groups running faith schools trying to block the recommendations. RE teachers who are happy teaching sanitised and textbook versions of religions that don't reflect the reality of religion for most people (but does reflect the version of religion that some of those teachers would like there to be).
4. The 'noise' around the aims and purposes of RE - there is very little listening going on amongst teachers of RE in this area.
5. Introducing Worldviews has muddied the water, led to lots of introspection and confusion and little material change.

Finally, we included a free text box for teachers to add in any further comments they had on the Commission on RE report and its recommendations. Ten teachers added in comments. The majority of these recognised that there was still work to be done - that the Report should be updated in light of criticisms and that there remained "a lack of consensus about the role and function of RE". But, in general, teachers were broadly supportive of CoRE and its proposals and were enthusiastic about their subject. One respondent wrote: "RE is the most important subject on the curriculum for creating well-informed citizens capable of nuanced thinking and wider social integration".