

RE

2003

# A non-statutory framework for religious education

Report of a feasibility study

31 March 2002



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# Executive summary

## Introduction

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has conducted this feasibility study as part of its remit to keep the school curriculum under review. Although religious education (RE) is part of the statutory basic curriculum in all maintained schools, it is not a subject within the national curriculum. The RE curriculum in most schools is set by the relevant local education authority (LEA) through its Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) and subject to advice by its Standing Advisory Council for RE (SACRE). In aided and foundation schools of a religious character, the RE curriculum is set by the faith communities. No change in these arrangements is envisaged.

## Purpose of this study

This feasibility study was designed to find out whether existing work in RE can be brought together into a non-statutory national framework that will give RE a more secure basis for:

- future local improvement
- further national development without losing the advantages of local responsibility and ownership.

## Context

Since the introduction of the national curriculum in 1989, there has been continuing debate over the balance of national and local responsibility for RE. The effectiveness of local arrangements is very variable; RE thrives where they work well but they do not work well everywhere.

A recent series of national initiatives has resulted in significant improvements in the provision and quality of RE. Several aspects of national curriculum subject development were made available to RE through non-statutory guidance (eg the eight-level scale, schemes of work). However, evidence from the Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection reports suggests that these improvements are not consistent throughout the UK; although standards of achievement by some pupils have risen, they are not rising everywhere. There are also serious concerns about the continuity of the RE curriculum, about what should be expected of pupils and about the quality of teaching and learning. Further national curriculum developments are taking place (eg the key stage 3 strategy, inclusion, and citizenship and online curriculum developments). It will be hard for RE to contribute to, and benefit from, these without some form of national framework for RE.



## Types of framework

The precise nature of such a national framework is a key question. After considering various models, this feasibility study recommends that a national framework should follow the structure of a national curriculum subject booklet. Many of the components of such a framework already exist.

## Uses and users of a framework

Another key question is who would use a national framework and for what purposes. A prime user – the LEA – has been identified and considered. Other key users (teachers, religious and faith communities, central government and its agencies, Ofsted, teacher trainers, publishers and the media) have also been identified. Although pupils are not direct users, the impact on them of such a framework has also been considered. This study comments on the potential benefits and possible issues a national framework could have for each of these groups.

## Conclusion: the main findings

- A non-statutory national framework for RE is both feasible and desirable.
- A framework in the style of a national curriculum subject order is the most feasible and desirable approach.
- There is a clear consensus, and much enthusiasm, for the development of a non-statutory national framework as soon as possible. A framework produced by a suitable consultative process would command wide support.
- This consensus exists among teachers of RE and most representatives of RE advisers, SACREs, faith communities, teacher trainers and professional bodies consulted in the course of this study. There is a great willingness to give time and energy towards producing a framework.
- The consensus envisages a national framework that would:
  - reflect current best practice to enhance clarity, continuity and coherence in the RE curriculum
  - promote national understanding of RE.

Such a framework would:

- strengthen LEA syllabuses so that they met the needs of pupils
  - support SACREs in their statutory functions
  - provide further national support for RE
  - provide a public description of RE
  - promote high standards of teaching and learning in RE.
- The development of a national framework will need to:
  - respect current legal requirements
  - maintain the advantages of local ownership and enthusiasm



- reflect best practice in syllabus and curriculum development, both locally and nationally
  - address issues of training, pedagogy and resources
  - consider appropriate methods of dissemination.
- Failure to develop a national framework will allow the present unacceptably wide variations in the quality of RE to continue. Even if other initiatives were put into place, misunderstanding and misinformation about RE would be likely to continue. Opportunities for RE to contribute effectively to, and benefit from, national developments in the curriculum (eg citizenship and online curriculum developments), would be lost. The capacity of RE to meet the needs of pupils across the UK would be weakened, with a detrimental effect on standards.

### **Conclusion: overall finding**

A non-statutory national framework for RE is both feasible and desirable. The development of such a framework will both meet the needs of pupils and promote high standards. It will enable RE to take its place alongside other subjects in contributing to the aims of the curriculum. The advantages of developing and disseminating a framework significantly outweigh the disadvantages.

### **Recommendations**

The feasibility study recommends that:

- a non statutory national framework for RE should be developed as soon as possible
- the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) should commission QCA to undertake this development by the end of 2002
- the development of a framework should involve representatives of teachers of RE, pupils, faith communities and professional associations of RE, and be subject to consultation
- questions of dissemination, training and resources should be addressed as the framework is developed.



# Introduction

## Why has a feasibility study been conducted?

Under legislation<sup>1</sup>, religious education (RE) is part of the basic curriculum in maintained schools and must be taught to all registered pupils, except those withdrawn by their parents. The RE curriculum is determined locally. In community, voluntary controlled and foundation schools of a non-religious character, the RE curriculum is set by the local education authority (LEA) through its Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) and Standing Advisory Council for RE (SACRE). These agreed syllabuses are reviewed every five years. For voluntary aided and foundation schools of a religious character, the RE curriculum is set either by a diocesan board of education (or its equivalent in other faith communities) or by the school's governing body. Although the introduction of the national curriculum in 1989 brought national programmes of study for national curriculum subjects, there are no national programmes of study (or national curriculum orders) for RE. No change in this legislation is planned, and none is likely in the foreseeable future.

The statutory remit of the Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) includes keeping the school curriculum under review. Monitoring of RE by QCA, and inspection evidence from the Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted), confirms that there have been some clear improvements in RE in recent years. Compliance with legal requirements has increased and standards of achievement have risen in many schools, especially at key stage 4, where GCSE entries for RE and religious studies (RS) have rocketed. Pupils respond positively to RE when it is well taught. However, there is also clear evidence that these improvements are not found everywhere. Some schools are failing to comply fully with legal requirements, especially at key stage 4. There are serious issues concerning curriculum continuity in many primary and secondary schools<sup>2</sup> and expectations at key stage 3 are too low in some schools, with poor-quality planning, teaching, learning and assessment. With standards rising in other national curriculum subjects, improvements in RE are not happening quickly enough.

The national curriculum was reviewed in 2000 and new programmes of study, followed by non-statutory guidance, were published. Although RE was not reviewed in the same way, QCA published non-statutory guidance on RE that reflected some elements of the national curriculum review, for example, the eight-level scale of attainment. This enabled RE to keep up with some of the more significant developments in the school curriculum. However, further national developments in the school curriculum are now taking place. The introduction of citizenship into the national curriculum for secondary schools, the increasing emphasis on inclusion, the development of other aspects of learning across the curriculum and the gathering momentum of curriculum online developments are examples. These pose new opportunities and challenges for RE, particularly as, unlike other subjects, there is no national curriculum framework for RE.

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1 Education Act 1944 (Butler Act), Education Reform Act 1988, Education Act 1993, Education Act 1996.

2 *Ofsted Subject Reports for RE*. Ofsted, February 2002.





In the light of the evidence from monitoring, and within its remit to keep the school curriculum under review, QCA decided to conduct a feasibility study for a non-statutory national framework for RE. This was essentially designed to find out whether such a framework could help to reinforce the current improvements in RE, as well as increasing their pace and consistency. Could a framework enable RE to contribute to, and benefit from, future curriculum development? Could it help RE to meet pupils' needs more effectively and would it result in higher standards of achievement?

The feasibility study therefore set out to identify:

- what a non-statutory national framework for RE might contain
- the purposes and uses of such a framework, should one be published
- the consequences of publishing a framework, including any advantages and disadvantages its introduction would have
- the manageability of such a framework, including how it might be introduced and disseminated, and when.

QCA carried out the feasibility study between November 2001 and March 2002 with the endorsement of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). It agreed to report its findings to the DfES and other interested parties by 31 March 2002. The way in which the feasibility study was conducted is described in Appendix 1.

This document is the report of the study.



## Context

# What is the background to this feasibility study?

A number of recent developments in RE are relevant – directly or indirectly – to this feasibility study. These developments have involved the DfES, national agencies, LEAs, subject associations, faith communities and other groups concerned with RE.

### Continuing debate on national and local responsibility

The principle of local determination of the RE curriculum was introduced in 1944 and has provided the substance for continued debate on the balance of national and local responsibility in RE. The requirements to teach RE in schools, and to do so in most of them according to the locally agreed syllabus, are themselves national requirements. So is the requirement that agreed syllabuses ‘reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the beliefs and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain’.<sup>3</sup> Qualifications in RE and RS are subject to national criteria. An advantage of local responsibility for RE syllabuses is that it allows the RE curriculum to reflect the religious diversity of the area in which pupils live. Another advantage is the sense of ownership and support for RE that comes from local involvement in SACREs. In the continuing debate, many argue that this local determination results in too much disparity in the provision of RE, in the standards achieved and in the quality of teaching and learning for pupils, and that national intervention is necessary. This is felt by others to weaken local autonomy. There has always been both national and local responsibility for RE and more discussion of the balance of these responsibilities has taken place since the introduction of the national curriculum in 1989. For example, in 1992 the Archbishop of York called for the incorporation of RE into the national curriculum.

### National support for RE

Following debate in 1992, the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) and later QCA, published several documents to support SACREs, ASCs and others in their local responsibilities. These included:

- Faith communities’ working group reports and *Model syllabuses 1 and 2* in 1994<sup>4</sup>
- *Exemplification of standards in RE* in 1998<sup>5</sup>
- *Non-statutory guidance for RE* in 2000<sup>6</sup>
- *Exemplar schemes of work for RE* in 2000<sup>7</sup>.

In addition, examination criteria for Entry level, GCSE and AS/A level qualifications in RE and RS have provided the basis for greater consistency and quality at key stage 4

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3 Education Act 1996 (S375(3)).

4 *Faith communities’ working group report and model syllabuses 1* (RE/94/062) and *2* (RE 94/0634).

5 *Exemplification of standards in RE*. QCA/98/235. QCA, 1998.

6 *Non-statutory guidance for RE*. QCA/00 576. QCA, 2002.

7 *Exemplar schemes of work for RE*. KS1 and 2: QCA/00/442; KS3: QCA/00/454. QCA, 2000.



and beyond. The national introduction of GCSE (short course) RE in 1996–7 provided for an unprecedented growth in the number of young people gaining public recognition for their achievements in RE<sup>8</sup>.

Although all these initiatives have provided support for RE nationally, there is still controversy about the appropriate recipients for QCA guidance. Some materials were sent only to LEAs and SACREs, and not to schools. As a result, the *Exemplification of standards in RE* and *Non-statutory guidance for RE*, which had the potential to help teachers raise standards in RE, did not reach most of them. *Exemplar schemes of work for RE* was sent to schools as part of a DfES and QCA initiative to support the review of the national curriculum. However, confusion arose when some teachers used the schemes directly, instead of modifying them (as indicated) to meet the requirements of their locally agreed syllabus.

## Improvements in RE and continuing concerns

The initiatives mentioned above, together with the results of Ofsted inspections of RE, have helped to bring about real and noticeable improvements in the provision, quality and experience of RE in many schools. RE has a clearer place in the planning of the curriculum, especially in primary schools, and standards have risen in all key stages, especially key stage 4. However, these improvements are not found everywhere, nor are they consistent. National support has failed to resolve many of the issues that have resulted from the differences between RE and the subjects of the national curriculum (eg there is no agreement on the standards to be expected of pupils in RE, continuity in the RE curriculum is variable, there are many different approaches to the assessment and reporting of RE, and the degree of support for and resourcing of RE varies).

Ofsted inspections since 1992 show that inspectors and schools experience difficulties when making judgements about standards in RE (other than at GCSE and A/AS level, where national criteria operate). Some local syllabuses, although by no means all, include statements about standards to be achieved. Some of these make use of the eight-level scale published in QCA's *Non-statutory guidance*; many do not. As a result, RE teachers and Ofsted inspectors of RE find themselves without easily accessible benchmarks to demonstrate pupil progress when compiling evidence of pupil performance. Evidence of this is revealed in Ofsted's report *Inspection of RE in four LEAs 1998*<sup>9</sup>.

Linked to the question of standards of achievement is the question of expectations of pupils. Ofsted has highlighted the inappropriateness of much task setting for pupils at key stage 3 in RE compared with English and history. This results in reduced opportunities for pupils to show what they can do, slower progress, lower expectations and lower standards in RE than in other comparable subjects. Assessment and reporting regimes are less rigorous and therefore not as useful in raising standards.

## Disparity among agreed syllabuses

Since the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the publication of the *Model syllabuses* in 1994 (the content of which was agreed by the main faith communities) there has been

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<sup>8</sup> The number of entries expected in 2002 is approximately 300,000.

<sup>9</sup> *Inspection of RE in four LEAs 1998*. Ofsted, 1998.



more commonality among agreed syllabuses. This includes which religions should be covered and much of the content of these, although differences remain over the number of religions to be taught and when. The use of the aims and attainment targets in the SCAA model syllabuses is also increasing, but it is not yet universal. Research evidence<sup>10</sup> on agreed syllabuses clearly indicates that there are still other major differences between agreed syllabuses. These include the educational philosophy on which they are based; standards (especially in relation to assessment); the structure, range, flexibility and amount of material to be taught in different key stages; pedagogical styles and user-friendliness. Under the present arrangements it will be a very long time before there is enough commonality to alleviate the increasing concerns – of Ofsted and others – over the lack of curriculum continuity, progression and appropriateness for pupils within and across key stages, especially key stage 3.

## **Widening disparity among SACREs**

Evidence from Ofsted inspections of LEAs and from the annual reports of SACREs themselves<sup>11</sup> indicate that LEAs provide very different levels of resource and support for ASCs, SACREs, advisory services and RE in schools. Some SACREs are clearly very effective; others are not. Since the reorganisation of local government in the late 1990s, many unitary and smaller authorities have found it increasingly difficult to sustain an effective SACRE. Devolved budgets and cabinet government have seen the influence of SACREs in some LEAs become less effective. The number of SACREs producing annual reports of their activity, as required by law, has dropped in the last two years.

## **Developments in teacher training**

The Teacher Training Agency (TTA) training standards for 1997, 1998 and 2002 also demonstrate the difficulty of applying locally agreed syllabuses to national requirements in initial teacher training (ITT). The standards published in 1998 required ITT providers to use the SCAA model syllabuses of 1994, as well as locally agreed syllabuses, in the absence of a national curriculum for RE. The new standards<sup>12</sup> fail to mention agreed syllabuses and the model syllabuses and have reverted to national curriculum programmes of study – of which there are none in RE! This has repercussions for all aspects of teacher training in RE, and for Ofsted inspection of ITT institutions, and has resulted in trainees working with a plethora of RE curricula, none of which might be the one they will have to teach when they take up their first teaching post.

## **Continuing curriculum development nationally**

The drive to maintain the rise in standards continues. New targets have been set for primary schools and a review of existing schemes of work is likely. A clear curriculum basis is needed for this in RE. The key stage 3 strategy is aimed at transforming secondary education. The Teaching and Learning in the Foundation Subjects (TLF) strand includes RE. Further work on developing thinking skills is important for RE,

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10 School of Education, University of East Anglia, and current research by Mary Hayward at QCA.

11 *RE and collective worship: an analysis of SACRE reports*. QCA, 2002.

12 *Qualifying to teach: professional requirements for QTS and requirements for initial teacher training*. TTA, 2002.



which already contributes to pupils' ability to reflect, synthesise, analyse and reason on fundamental questions. Assessment for learning is as important in RE as in other subjects. Changes in 14-19 education are also on the way and the place of RE in the key stage 4 curriculum, and its links with other components of personal development, need to be clear as these changes take place. In all these areas, RE needs a clear curriculum structure if it is to continue its improvement and drive up standards alongside other subjects.

The national curriculum review identified the contribution that national curriculum subjects can make to learning across the curriculum, including the key skills and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. RE also needs to be able to identify its contribution to these important aspects of learning and to make a positive contribution to school improvement and ethos. The impact of citizenship in schools generally, and its arrival in the national curriculum for key stages 3 and 4 in particular, poses questions about its links with RE (and the contribution of RE to citizenship). Both have distinctive but complementary roles in the school curriculum and there are ways in which they can mutually support each other. These roles and links need to be articulated and developed at both a national and local level. It is ironic that RE is the only subject unable to develop nationally applicable statements of its links with spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and citizenship. The National Curriculum in Action website and, more generally, online curriculum projects, are very important for the future of all subjects. At the moment, RE cannot benefit fully from these online developments because there is no national framework from which to develop the appropriate electronic vocabulary.

The general learning requirements of the national curriculum include an emphasis on inclusion. It is vital that RE not only demonstrates its current extensive and positive contribution to inclusion but that it is also involved in future work in this area. Given the enormous importance for society of dealing with issues raised by the Macpherson report (following the death of Stephen Lawrence) and the events of 11 September 2001, RE must be able to contribute positively to valuing diversity and challenging racism. RE must also contribute the citizenship role of national and local faith communities.

## The key issue

Given past developments in RE and continued work on the curriculum nationally, and given the primacy and disparity of local provision, this feasibility study is faced with addressing the following question:

Can existing work in RE be brought together into a non-statutory structure, parallel to national curriculum subjects, that gives RE a more secure basis for further improvement locally and for future development nationally without losing the advantages of local responsibility and ownership?

If it can, a national framework will be feasible and desirable. If it cannot, other ways will have to be found of dealing with the pressing issues that face RE. Staying as it is might not be a luxury that RE can afford!



## Types of framework

### What might a framework for RE look like?

To assess the feasibility of a non-statutory national framework for RE it was necessary to conceptualise a framework. The feasibility study group considered several different types or models for a framework in RE. These were:

- a* The statutory orders for the foundation subjects of the national curriculum such as history, geography and music. These contain two sets of requirements for each key stage – ‘knowledge, skills and understanding’ and ‘breadth of study’ – as well as general material about the subject.
- b* The national curriculum order for citizenship, which is written in the same format as *a* (above) but contains no ‘breadth of study’ requirements.
- c* The non-statutory framework for personal, social and health education, which is a guidance document only. It contains ‘breadth of opportunity’ statements (rather than a ‘breadth of study’ section) and does not have the other material that subject orders have.
- d* One particular local agreed syllabus, which could be put forward as a model for adoption by LEAs as allowed by legislation.
- e* A unique type of non-statutory framework that could include features of all of the above.

The study focused on a framework based on *a* (above) for the following reasons:

- The structures of many newer agreed syllabuses follow the revised national curriculum subjects and are written in the style of the foundation subjects such as history or geography. This has proved to be popular with teachers and others who use such syllabuses.
- A framework based on the national curriculum subject booklets would be familiar to teachers and others who use the framework and would allow for easier transfer of skills such as planning and assessment.
- The capacity of an ASC to fulfil its syllabus responsibilities in ways that set high standards can be reinforced by the comparison between RE and the national curriculum. In this way, a framework based on national curriculum subject booklets could strengthen the work of an ASC.
- It is important that any non-statutory framework for RE includes learning objectives and a range of content through which these can be achieved for each key stage. This could not be done so easily using *b* or *c* (above), as neither includes a ‘breadth of study’ section. The inclusion of a ‘breadth of study’ section is potentially very important if a framework is to enable ASCs to decide on content locally through which common learning objectives for knowledge, understanding and skills in RE could be promoted.
- Many of the components of a framework for RE based on a national curriculum subject booklet already exist. For example, QCA has already published non-statutory material on the importance of RE, RE and learning across the curriculum, attainment targets and levels of attainment. Essentially, what these lack are the key



stage curriculum components (guidelines), which would complete the structure. It is interesting to note that Awdurdod Cymwysterau Cwricwlwm ac Asesu Cymru (Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales; ACCAC) has already published national guidance on agreed syllabuses that includes a framework for key stage programmes of study across Wales.

- Although using one particular agreed syllabus as a model is theoretically possible, it could be very divisive and would be unlikely to secure national acceptance on raising standards.
- A new kind of curriculum framework specifically for RE would have all of the disadvantages of more change for teachers and others, and none of the advantages of familiarity.

For these reasons, the study concludes that if a non-statutory framework for RE is developed it should be based on the model of a national curriculum subject booklet. An example of the contents of such a framework is in Appendix 2. Consultation with teachers and with representatives of faith communities and RE professional associations has confirmed that this is by far the most favoured model for a framework. This is the basis on which the feasibility of a non-statutory national framework for RE is assessed.





## Uses and users of a framework

### Who might use a framework for RE and for what purposes?

#### Central role of a framework

A central outcome of the development of a non-statutory national framework for RE could be to place RE within the ‘common structure and design for all subjects’ of the national curriculum. In this way it could improve the clarity and coherence of the ways in which RE contributes to the values, aims and purposes of the school curriculum. These are set out at the beginning of the *National curriculum handbooks for primary and secondary teachers* and provide a rationale for the school curriculum. The values include a belief in education as a route to spiritual, moral, cultural, physical and mental development, and thus to the well being of an individual, and reaffirm the commitment to the virtues of truth, justice, honesty, trust and a sense of duty<sup>13</sup>. The two aims for the school curriculum are to:

- provide opportunities for all pupils to learn and to achieve
- promote pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and prepare all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life<sup>14</sup>.

The purpose of the national curriculum is to establish entitlement and standards, and to promote continuity, coherence and public understanding<sup>15</sup>. These purposes are equally valuable for RE. A national framework, even of a non-statutory kind, would clearly help to fulfil these purposes for RE.

The *National curriculum handbooks for primary and secondary teachers* already contain this statement (page 20):

RE makes a distinctive contribution to the school curriculum by developing pupils’ knowledge and understanding of religion, religious beliefs, practices, language and traditions and their influence on individuals, communities, societies and cultures. It enables pupils to consider and respond to a range of important questions related to their own spiritual development, the development of values and attitudes and fundamental questions concerning the meaning and purpose of life.

A non-statutory national framework for RE could be used to articulate this contribution and set out the teaching and learning that will make this a reality.

The subjects of the national curriculum must meet some general learning requirements, notably inclusion, the use of language and the use of information and communication technology (ICT). Whereas a non-statutory framework for RE could not make these requirements apply statutorily to RE, it would provide an opportunity for them to be considered more fully in the teaching of RE and allow RE to play a greater part in contributing to their implementation across the curriculum. It is especially important that RE is seen to be promoting inclusivity and community cohesion.

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<sup>13</sup> *National curriculum handbooks for primary and secondary teachers*, page 10.

<sup>14</sup> *National curriculum handbooks for primary and secondary teachers*, page 11.

<sup>15</sup> *National curriculum handbooks for primary and secondary teachers*, pages 12–13.





To fulfil such a role, any framework would have to be developed carefully and with full consultation. It would need to be presented sensitively and include a clear statement of its rationale and its intended audiences. A framework would be most likely to raise standards in RE if it were (and were perceived as) helpful to ASCs and SACREs, and if it strengthened their statutory role.

A framework would also need to clarify any confusion that might exist about the RE curriculum to be taught in schools using an agreed syllabus. Continuity and coherence across key stages would need attention. Links with Entry level, GCSE and AS/A level RS criteria at key stage 4 and beyond would need to be considered and clarified. Continuity would need to be maintained with previous guidance and current best practice.

## **Prime users of a national framework for RE**

The 1996 Education Act requires that the curriculum for every maintained school includes RE for all registered pupils, except those withdrawn by their parents. RE in community schools, and foundation and voluntary schools of a non-religious character should be taught in accordance with the locally agreed syllabus. It is the responsibility of every LEA to set up an ASC to produce the syllabus and a SACRE to advise the LEA on matters connected with the RE that is to be given in accordance with an agreed syllabus. Therefore, within current legislation, any national framework for RE can only be non-statutory and its prime users would be ASCs and SACREs, who will continue to hold their current statutory responsibilities for RE.

### ***Local education authorities***

ASCs, SACREs and LEA advisers could use a national framework as a resource for reviewing agreed syllabuses, enhancing the role of SACREs to advise on RE, and providing effective support for schools, according to their statutory functions under the Education Act 1996.

### ***Likely benefits. A national framework for RE could:***

- provide a common starting point for greater consistency among agreed syllabuses
- raise the level of awareness of ASCs of national developments in RE
- support ASCs in drawing up the local RE curriculum
- improve the quality of many agreed syllabuses
- avoid the duplication of resources across the 150 LEAs
- provide a more secure foundation on which SACREs could offer advice on curriculum, resources, training and pedagogy in RE
- encourage a greater number of SACREs and LEAs to consider RE in their support for school improvement
- allow more targeted support for RE in schools
- provide an opportunity for smaller authorities to work together more coherently

### ***Possible issues. A national framework for RE might:***

- diminish distinctiveness in agreed syllabuses
- lessen the sense of local responsibility for RE among ASCs
- undermine the distinctive work of SACREs, which currently reflects the religious and cultural diversity of their areas



- detract from the good work of effective SACREs, which might feel that responsibility was being taken away from them because others were not so successful
- be perceived as a threat to LEA autonomy

### *Commentary*

There is currently great diversity in the ways in which LEAs, SACREs and ASCs approach RE. This stems from factors such as the local history and tradition of a SACRE, the varying sizes and budgets of LEAs, and the availability of and access to specialist support and advice. Evidence from SACRE annual reports and other research suggests that there is too much disparity in the effectiveness of local arrangements for SACREs and ASCs.

Some of the SACRE members and LEA advisers who were consulted favour the development of a national framework, provided this reflects best practice and allows the effective exercise of local responsibility for RE. They saw the potential of a framework to enhance national support for RE while retaining local ownership. However, other LEA advisers and SACRE members were concerned that a framework might have an adverse effect on the work of ASCs and SACREs, and diminish their role.

Greater consistency in the quality of syllabuses, advice offered to LEAs and support for RE in schools would be achieved if the national framework was such that it allowed effective SACREs and ASCs to flourish, by reflecting current good practice, while encouraging less effective ones to improve. Such a framework would need to contain key stage guidelines comprising 'knowledge, understanding and skills' and a 'breadth of study' section that allowed for the teaching of these in a local context.

**On balance, a national framework would be an advantage for LEAs because the likely benefits outweigh the possible problems.**

## **Other key users**

The feasibility study identified a number of other important potential users with a direct or indirect role in the provision and support of RE in schools in addition to ASCs and SACREs.

These users are described below in terms of the potential beneficial outcomes and any issues or problems arising from a national framework, together with a commentary and a conclusion.

### **Teachers**

Teachers could use a national framework to deepen their understanding of RE, share good practice, reduce needless differences between RE curricula in different schools, and help them plan teaching, learning and assessment in RE more consistently, as required by the local agreed syllabus.

***Likely benefits. A national framework for RE could:***

- facilitate the raising of standards in teaching and learning by providing all teachers with a clear vision for RE from the best agreed syllabuses



- strengthen the links between RE and national curriculum subjects in the way subjects are taught, learned and assessed
- provide the basis for more commonality within the RE curriculum in different schools
- allow greater sharing of resources through a common subject structure and vocabulary
- ease the transferability of teachers' expertise between one LEA and another
- enhance the status of RE

***Possible issues. A national framework for RE might:***

- be perceived as yet another round of change to add to the existing workload of teachers for meeting the requirements of agreed syllabuses
- be *insufficiently prescriptive* because RE would still be subject to local variation
- be *too prescriptive* if it limited the choices about approaches to, or content of, RE currently available to teachers
- cause confusion if the relation between 'national' and 'local' is not understood
- result in some teachers using the framework instead of the agreed syllabus

***Commentary***

Except in aided and foundation schools with a religious character, teachers are required to teach RE according to their locally agreed syllabus. A non-statutory framework would not change this requirement. A national framework would impact on teachers mainly through its potential effect on the agreed syllabus. Teachers were concerned that any framework should clarify potential confusion about the RE curriculum arising from the presence of local syllabuses (and sometimes schemes of work) and national guidance. Whereas some teachers have access to national guidance material directly through the internet, and some LEAs and SACREs give national guidance to RE teachers, many do not.

The views of the teachers consulted were almost unanimous: they were strongly and enthusiastically in favour of the development of a non-statutory national framework for RE. They cautioned against a framework that might result in assessment processes that were too bureaucratic, and wanted a framework that would ensure greater clarity and less confusion in drawing up the RE curriculum.

Teachers were also clear that they would want to be sent a copy of a national framework in addition to it being made available to LEAs. They said that this would enable them to:

- understand better any agreed syllabus that used the framework
- appreciate the national context in which RE is taught
- conceptualise RE using the same structure as the national curriculum subjects
- feel a sense of worth because they were part of the national framework loop
- use it when discussing RE with head teachers and colleagues in school, parents and others.

To be most effective, it is important that a framework offers these advantages to teachers without creating an extra layer of confusion. A framework would therefore need to allow for use by teachers in a way that linked them with the agreed syllabus and brought together current developments in RE, which some teachers are now using.

**On balance, a national framework that did this is clearly advantageous to teachers.**



### ***Religious and faith communities***

Religious and faith communities (and those employed by them, such as diocesan advisers) could use a framework to help identify and support their contribution to RE and to inform their work in planning appropriate guidelines.

#### ***Likely benefits. A national framework for RE could:***

- take forward the agreement of the faith communities on RE, reached in 1994 when the SCAA model syllabuses were published, into the post-national curriculum review era
- ensure greater clarity about the nature of RE and its distinction from religious nurture
- clarify further the basis on which religious communities can be involved in the work of RE in a school
- promote understanding among governors and parents about the nature of RE, including those from different religious communities
- encourage more sharing of good practice between schools with and without a religious character
- enhance syllabus development in aided and foundation schools with a religious character by providing a clear structure
- strengthen continuity from such schools in the primary phase to community secondary schools.

#### ***Possible issues. A national framework for RE might:***

- reduce the influence and role of the local representatives of religious communities on SACREs or ASCs
- cause confusion because the title 'national' would not reflect the distinctive position of RE in aided and foundation schools with a religious character.

### ***Commentary***

A national framework would not affect the legal status of RE in aided schools or foundation schools with a religious character. The development of any national framework would make available an opportunity for faith communities and their schools to review their provision of RE and the way in which it was set out if they wished.

It is important that any framework in RE is seen to build on the SCAA model syllabuses, on which there was a large measure of agreement by the main faith communities in 1994. A framework could provide a structure for RE (reflecting the national curriculum subjects) that enabled the 1994 developments to be implemented more effectively. Such a framework would therefore need to be developed in association with representatives of faith communities, but would not require a review of the faith community material set out in 1994.

**On balance, a national framework would be advantageous to faith communities and those who work for them in the field of RE because it would provide a clearer picture of RE nationally to inform their work.**

### ***Central government and its agencies***

The DfES, QCA, British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) and TTA could use a framework as a national description for RE alongside the subjects of the national curriculum to:



- enhance public understanding of RE
- clarify the contribution of RE to the aims of curriculum and other aspects of school life
- promote links between RE and learning across the curriculum
- support the development of RE in the National Grid for Learning (NGfL).

***Likely benefits. A national framework for RE could:***

- produce a clear understanding within government of the nature of RE; this could lead to effective communication nationally of what RE is about
- provide a source for the input of material about RE into curriculum development nationally, for example on inclusion, citizenship and ICT
- provide more opportunities for national support for a locally determined subject of the curriculum, especially in the light of the fact that many LEAs do not currently employ a specialist advisor
- clarify links with national initiatives, such as the National Curriculum Online
- provide continuity with the criteria for examinations and qualifications
- facilitate the meta-tagging project as an important resource for teachers
- be beneficial for ITT and in-service training (INSET) and for the recruitment of new teachers of RE because the framework would provide an easily accessible source of information about the nature of the subject

***Possible issues. A national framework for RE might:***

- fail to take full account of what happens locally
- fail to reflect the distinctive features of individual agreed syllabuses
- undermine an appropriate focus on agreed syllabuses
- be introduced without appropriate levels of resources and training
- encourage a trend towards a national curriculum for RE, with loss of local responsibility and control

***Commentary***

Government agencies are working on a wide range of initiatives to help the curriculum prepare pupils and young people more fully for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life. It is vital that RE contributes to, and benefits from, these national developments, so that when they are disseminated to teachers and pupils in schools the important contribution RE can make is clear. Although a national framework could not reflect all local diversity of RE, it would be able to reflect enough commonality for its distinctive and important contribution to national curriculum developments to be clear.

**On balance, a national framework is regarded as essential for safeguarding the future position of RE within the statutory curriculum nationally.**

***Office for Standards in Education***

Ofsted could use a national framework to inform the arrangements for inspecting standards and quality in RE and in the training of inspectors.

***Likely benefits. A national framework for RE could:***

- provide a common benchmark for determining standards in RE

***Possible issues. A national framework for RE might:***

- result in an Ofsted inspection being based on the national framework for RE instead of local agreed syllabuses



### *Commentary*

Ofsted is required to inspect RE taught according to the locally agreed syllabus in community, controlled and foundation schools with a non-religious character. This is not always easy for inspectors because syllabuses vary in their requirements, including the standards expected of pupils. Expectations are not always clear in local syllabuses and inspectors are thrown back on their own professional judgements, which can occasionally result in misunderstanding and confusion for SACREs and schools alike. If a national framework helped to produce more commonality across syllabuses through a clearer structure and standards for RE, Ofsted inspectors would be able to be more consistent in their approach, and schools clearer about what Ofsted inspectors expect of them. Although there is a danger, especially in the short term, that some inspections might use inappropriate criteria, the increasing use of any national framework in the longer term should reduce this risk.

**On balance, a national framework would help improve the quality of the inspection of RE and would help schools be better prepared for such inspection.**

### ***Teacher trainers***

Teachers and mentors in ITT and INSET, and in departments of theology and religious studies in higher education, could use a national framework as an agreed description for the subject when training teachers to teach RE.

#### ***Likely benefits. A national framework for RE could:***

- provide a common standard, structure and vocabulary for use by teacher trainers in ITT institutions and schools
- encourage ITT providers to improve the time provided for RE in some of their courses

#### ***Possible issues. A national framework for RE might:***

- undermine an appropriate focus on agreed syllabuses

### *Commentary*

The standards that newly qualified teachers (NQTs) of RE are expected to meet are published by the TTA. These standards do not describe the knowledge and understanding that trainees in RE are expected to attain because the references to the national curriculum do not apply to RE. In practice, trainers of RE teachers rely on the different agreed syllabuses used in the schools where trainees do their teaching practice, and on the SCAA model syllabuses of 1994 (which, until 2002, were referred to in the standards).

A non-statutory national framework would enable teachers to be trained to deliver local syllabuses by applying their knowledge and understanding of a commonly accepted national description of RE. It would also result in more consistency in agreed syllabuses, so trainees would be better prepared for syllabuses in LEAs where they did not do their training.

**On balance, a national framework would make the training of RE teachers more effective and efficient.**

### ***Publishers***

Publishers, including web publishers and broadcasters, could use a national framework to help further provision of teaching and learning resources for RE.



***Likely benefits. A national framework for RE could:***

- encourage publishers to invest more in the development of high quality teaching and learning resources because the market would – potentially – be greater
- provide a clearer structure for RE to help publishers plan new materials that relate more precisely to what teachers are required to teach
- aid the further development of useful information and discussion about RE on the internet and elsewhere

***Possible issues. A national framework for RE might:***

- discourage authors from reflecting agreed syllabuses in their publishing
- encourage publishers to treat the framework as a national curriculum for RE

***Commentary***

RE resources vary in their quality and usefulness. Part of the reason for this is that, for commercial reasons, they need to be marketed as being appropriate for as wide a group of users and uses as possible. This means that they do not always suit some agreed syllabuses or meet teachers' needs when teaching one particular aspect of RE. A more widely used subject structure in RE would increase the market for publishers and encourage them to prepare materials that meet teachers' needs more precisely. The degree of diversity necessary in RE is in danger of being overlooked by publishers if a framework is not written to prevent this.

**On balance, a national framework is likely to increase the number and usefulness of RE resources both in hard copy and in electronic form.**

***The media***

The media could use a national framework as a point of reference for reporting news and featuring articles about RE.

***Likely benefits. A national framework for RE could:***

- help improve the quality and consistency of reporting in RE
- help enhance national and international understanding about the nature and content of RE in England.

***Possible issues. A national framework for RE might:***

- be treated as a national curriculum for RE

***Commentary***

When the media refer to the RE curriculum they tend to use three sources for their information: national bodies (statutory, eg QCA, or voluntary, eg faith communities and subject associations), local RE syllabuses and stereotypes. Too much credence is often given to the last of these, but stereotypes continue to be used because:

- the national bodies do not have a curriculum framework to which they can refer
- there are too many local syllabuses, and they are not readily accessible to the media
- stereotypes are often felt to make good copy.

Although the media will continue to stereotype RE, serious journalism on RE would be enhanced by a national framework, particularly if this had been agreed by faith communities and professional associations.





This is likely to become increasingly important as the issues dealt with by RE gain greater prominence in debate. These include discussion of issues of religious diversity in communities and society, tolerance of and respect for religions and their practice here and abroad, and community cohesion. It is important that such discussion is informed and that reference to what is taught in RE is accurate.

**On balance, a national framework would be very advantageous to the presentation of RE in the media.**

### ***Pupils***

Pupils would be the ultimate end users of a national framework because it would have a direct effect on the teaching and learning of RE in the classroom, on the standards they were expected to attain and on the assessment of their progress in RE. Thus, although pupils are not direct users of a framework, the impact on them of such a framework has also been assessed.

#### ***Likely benefits. A national framework for RE could:***

- help provide a common source of understanding of the role and expectations of RE for pupils and their parents
- improve pupils' continuity and progression from the early learning goals to the agreed syllabus
- improve pupils' continuity and progression through an agreed syllabus
- improve pupils' continuity and progression from an agreed syllabus to nationally accredited qualifications in RS
- provide greater continuity in RE for pupils who move from one school or LEA to another

#### ***Possible issues. A national framework for RE might:***

- be regarded as a national curriculum for RE by pupils and their parents

### ***Commentary***

The curriculum and the teaching and learning of RE must be aimed at meeting the needs of pupils; promoting their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; preparing them for life; meeting their entitlement to learn and achieve. Pupils (and their parents) therefore need to know what RE is about and for, and be able to contribute to their own progress by taking responsibility for their learning and bringing their own experiences and understanding to bear.

Of itself, a curriculum framework cannot raise pupils' standards of achievement; only high-quality teaching and learning can do that. However, a national framework that commanded a large measure of agreement on RE and was reflected in local syllabuses for RE could confirm and encourage good practice in the classroom for the benefit of all pupils. A national framework would help to create better understanding of RE and promote more commonality between syllabuses through a clearer structure and standards for RE.

To do this, it would necessary for any framework to reflect pupils' needs and enable them to see the relevance of what they learn in RE not just to their personal and social development but to their contribution to their communities and to society as a whole.

**On balance, a national framework would help improve the quality of pupils' experience of RE and help raise their standards of achievement.**





# Conclusion

## What findings has the study reached?

### Alternatives to the development of a framework

This study addressed the question of what might happen if a non-statutory national framework was not developed. Although the real improvements in RE are very encouraging, current concerns about RE will not disappear if things remain as they are. If a framework is not developed, RE will continue to lack a significant component in its structure as a subject compared with other subjects. This will prevent its full participation in future developments to raise standards and will weaken the coherence of those developments that have already taken place.

If a framework is not developed, other means of addressing the concerns in RE will be needed. For example, ways of trying to spread best practice among 150 LEAs, ASCs and SACREs would need to be devised, such as an extensive programme of conferences, training events and dissemination of materials. The curriculum basis on which to articulate such practice nationally does not currently exist. Experience shows that the very diversity of LEAs, ASCs and SACREs – let alone schools – means that such initiatives might not reach those who most needed them, unless there was ear-marked funding. Resources for such initiatives would need to be found, as with the development of a framework, but they are likely to be much less effective than a national framework.

### The main findings

- A non-statutory national framework for RE is both feasible and desirable.
- A framework in the style of a national curriculum subject order is the most feasible and desirable approach.
- There is a clear consensus, and much enthusiasm, for the development of a non-statutory national framework as soon as possible. A framework produced by a suitable consultative process would command wide support.
- This consensus exists among teachers of RE and most representatives of RE advisers, SACREs, faith communities, teacher trainers and professional bodies consulted in the course of this study. There is a great willingness to give time and energy towards producing a framework.
- The consensus envisages a national framework that would:
  - reflect current best practice to enhance clarity, continuity and coherence in the RE curriculum
  - promote national understanding of RE.



Such a framework would:

- strengthen LEA syllabuses so that they met the needs of pupils
  - support SACREs in their statutory functions
  - provide further national support for RE
  - provide a public description of RE
  - promote high standards of teaching and learning in RE.
- The development of a national framework will need to:
- respect current legal requirements
  - maintain the advantages of local ownership and enthusiasm
  - reflect best practice in syllabus and curriculum development, both locally and nationally
  - address issues of training, pedagogy and resources
  - consider appropriate methods of dissemination.
- Failure to develop a national framework will allow the present unacceptably wide variations in the quality of RE to continue. Even if other initiatives were put into place, misunderstanding and misinformation about RE would be likely to continue. Opportunities for RE to contribute effectively to, and benefit from, national developments in the curriculum (eg citizenship and curriculum online), would be lost. The capacity of RE to meet the needs of pupils across the UK would be weakened, with a detrimental effect on standards.

## Conclusion

Some of those consulted believe that RE is at a crossroads: it can either continue on its current path, with improvements to mirror some of the developments in the national curriculum subjects but risking ever-increasing disparity, or it can seize the opportunity to complement its local arrangements with a clearer nationally understood structure, of a non-statutory kind, that will enable it to maintain and enhance its improvements locally and contribute to and benefit from further development nationally. The feasibility study agrees with this assessment and finds that the opportunity of developing a national framework should be taken and implemented.

The judgement of the feasibility study, therefore, is that the needs of pupils and the required improvement in standards in RE will be better met by the development of a national framework. A national framework will enable RE to take its place alongside other subjects in contributing to the aims of the curriculum. The advantages of developing and disseminating a national framework significantly outweigh the disadvantages. A non-statutory national framework for RE is both feasible and desirable.



## Recommendations

### What recommendations for action does the study make?

The feasibility study recommends that:

- a non-statutory national framework for RE should be developed as soon as possible
- the DfES should commission QCA to undertake this development by the end of 2002
- the development of a framework should involve representatives of teachers of RE, pupils, faith communities and professional associations of RE, and be subject to consultation
- questions of dissemination, training and resources should be addressed as the framework is developed.



# Appendix 1

## The methodology of the feasibility study

The feasibility study was part of the 2001–2 QCA business plan, approved by the DfES early in 2001. At the request of the DfES the study was not started until after the general election in May 2001. Ministers gave the go-ahead in October 2001.

QCA then established:

- a feasibility study group (FSG), whose members were:
  - Dave Francis, Chair, Association of RE Inspectors, Advisors and Consultants
  - Geoff Teece, Secretary of the National Association of SACREs
  - Lat Blaylock, Executive Officer of the Professional Council for RE
  - Gillian Wood, member of executive of the RE Council of England and Wales
  - Linda Rudge, executive member, Conference of University Lecturers in RE
  - David Lankshear, from the Church of England's Board of Education
  - Barbara Wintersgill, Her Majesty's Inspector for RE, Ofsted
  - John Keast, QCA (convenor)
  - Deborah Weston, teacher of RE (consultant/rapporteur for the study).
- a consultative group (CG), whose members were 40-plus representatives of the bodies that make up the Religious Education Council of England and Wales.

The FSG met on five occasions to prepare initial ideas and proposals. These were written up by the consultant, who also helped to prepare papers for the CG.

The CG met for two one-day conferences in January and March 2002. At the first conference the group's views were sought on the:

- structure of the feasibility study report
- types and styles of framework to consider as part of the feasibility study
- uses and users of a framework
- conclusions and recommendations that the study should consider.

At the second conference, the emerging findings of the FSG were put to the CG and discussed thoroughly. A clear endorsement was given to the nature of the findings. There was much unanimity of opinion on the views expressed by the CG on both occasions.

A wider consultative process was held. This included:

- a one-day conference with approximately 25 LEA advisers and independent consultants and others who support RE
- two one-day conferences with approximately 45 teachers
- other discussions with teachers and SACRE members in various LEAs on four other occasions. The numbers involved were approximately 180 teachers and 40 SACRE members.

The views expressed on all these occasions were fed back to the FSG via consultation sheets completed by the conference members. The sheets were also used by the consultant for the feasibility study in preparing the text of this report.



## Appendix 2

# Contents of a possible non-statutory framework for RE using a national curriculum subject model

### Foreword

### About this booklet

### About RE in the curriculum

### Non-statutory guidelines for RE

### A common structure and design for all subjects

### Attainment targets and level descriptions

### Learning across the curriculum

Promoting pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Promoting pupils' personal, social and health education and citizenship

Promoting key skills

Promoting other aspects of the curriculum

### The importance of RE

#### Foundation stage

Knowledge, skills and understanding

Breadth of study

#### Key stage 1

Knowledge, skills and understanding

Breadth of study

#### Key stage 2

Knowledge, skills and understanding

Breadth of study

#### Key stage 3

Knowledge, skills and understanding

Breadth of study

#### Key Stage 4

Knowledge Skills Understanding

Breadth of study

#### Post-16

Knowledge, skills and understanding

Breadth of study

### General teaching requirements of the national curriculum

Inclusion: providing effective learning opportunities for all pupils

Use of language across the curriculum

Use of ICT across the curriculum

### Attainment targets for RE







## Curriculum and Standards

<b>Audience</b>	SACRE members, CEOs of LEAs, religious education (RE) advisers and inspectors, RE subject associations and organisations, representatives of faith groups, others interested in the RE curriculum
<b>Circulation list</b>	SACRE members, LEAs, RE associations and organisations, representatives of faith groups
<b>Description</b>	The feasibility of a non-statutory national framework for RE
<b>Contact</b>	The RE team at QCA: <a href="mailto:religiouseducation@qca.org.uk">religiouseducation@qca.org.uk</a>

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