

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

Insights Report



CULHAM ST GABRIEL'S

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

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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Community Interest Groups	9
The purpose of RE	10
The ‘current crisis’ of RE.....	11
Thoughts on RW	11
The Strengths of RW	12
Challenges with RW	12
Resources and Potential Ways Forward.....	13
SACRE Members.....	14
The purpose of RE	14
Parental perceptions of RE	15
Child withdrawal from RE	16
Challenges facing RE	16
Thoughts on RW	18
The Strengths of RW	19
Challenges with RW	19
Resources and Potential Ways Forward.....	20
Parents	22
The purpose of RE	22
Perceptions of child’s experience of RE and compared to own.....	23
Thoughts on RW	24
The Strengths of RW	25
Challenges with RW	25
Resources and Potential Ways Forward.....	25

MATs, Heads, SLTs	26
Challenges facing RE	26
The Strengths of RW	26
Challenges with RW	27
Resources and Potential Ways Forward.....	27
Academics and Policy Professionals	28
Challenges facing RE	28
Discussion of data from previous focus groups.....	28
Thoughts on RW	29
Resources and Potential Ways Forward.....	30
Conclusion	31

Executive Summary

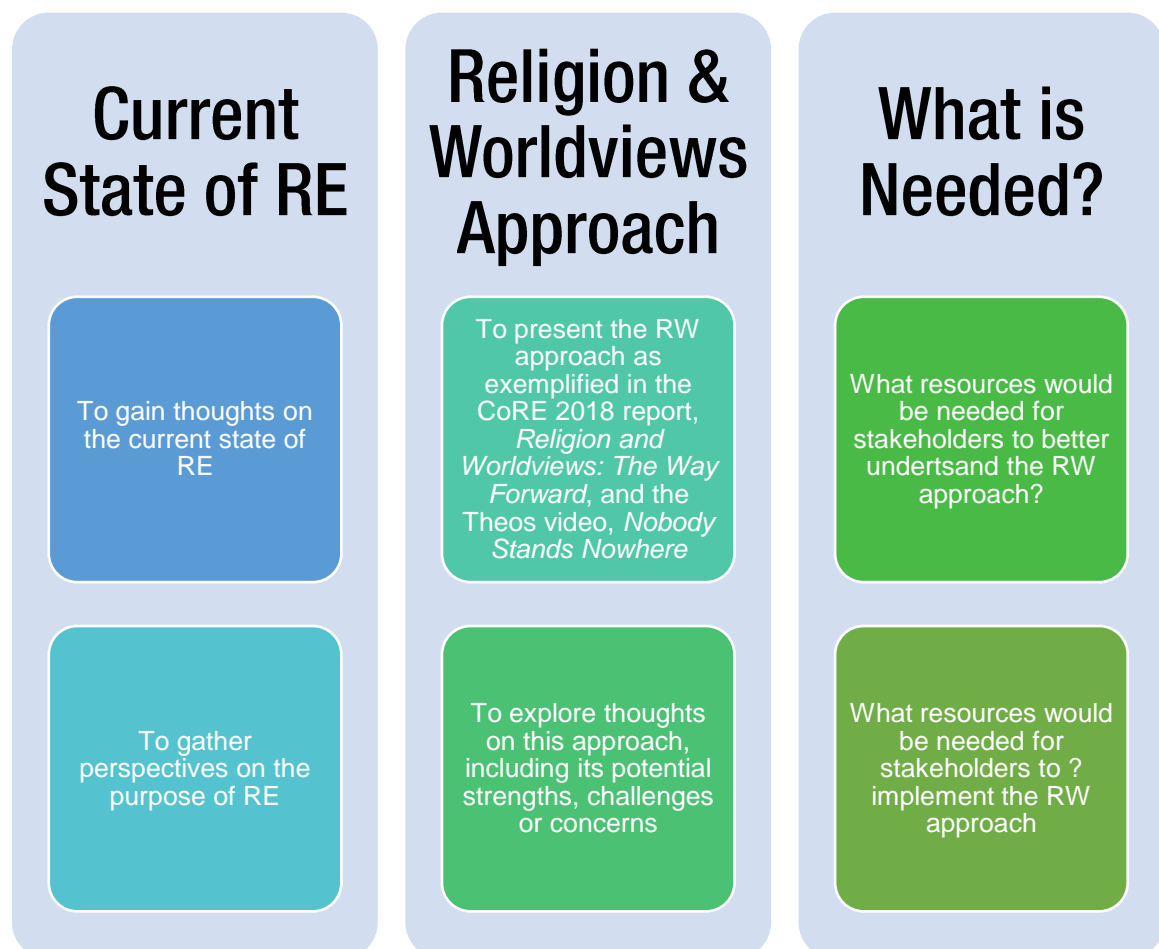
This Insights Report summarises and analyses the data from a series of focus groups held online between July and November 2021, as well as two surveys open in this same time period. This report summarises our participants views; terms in quotation marks are direct quotes from participants.

The data was collected as part of the project *Promoting the Exploration of Religion and Worldviews in Schools - Fostering Coherency and Diversity*. This is a project undertaken by **The Faith & 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.

Purpose of the research

The focus groups and surveys sought to reach a range of stakeholders with three key areas of exploration:



Stakeholder groups and key findings

The primary stakeholders of this project are those outside of the classroom. The series of focus groups and two surveys were therefore each centred around the following groups: 'community interest groups'; SACRE members; parents; MATs (Multi Academy Trusts), Heads and SLTs (Senior Leadership Teams); Academics and Policy Professionals.

Community Interest Groups

We use the term 'community interest groups' to refer to the religious and nonreligious organisations which have an interest in RE. We had 31 participants from these groups, across eight different focus groups, with participants drawn from the four geographical regions of Barking and Dagenham, Birmingham, Lincolnshire and Sunderland.

Views on the current state of RE: Key findings here include that the majority of participants saw a largely practical role for RE with social cohesion and religious literacy identified as the most important purposes. They saw the current challenges of RE as arising from a lack of specialist teachers as well as general negative public perceptions of the subject.

Views on RW as an approach: Participants had mixed reactions to the RW approach, especially when capturing their immediate thoughts. When the approach was explored in more detail, participants were generally positive.

POSITIVES: Strengths were seen as the focus on self-reflexivity and critical analysis, starting from the individual's viewpoint and a focus on lived experience. It was seen as a more inclusive approach with more recognition of diversity. It was seen as potentially contributing to better understandings of diversity, social context, and how to "bring up good people".

CONCERNS: Concerns raised to us included that it might be a dilution or "watering down" of the religion component of RE which could lead to less, rather than more, understanding. There were concerns that the shared values or 'big questions' of the major faiths would be neglected. There were also concerns about what a RW curriculum would look like in practice and whether 'worldviews' was clearly defined.

What is needed: Potential ways forward include greater engagement of community groups in supporting RE/RW teaching. In general, participants were keen for their own religious/non-religious groups to be involved in visiting schools as speakers, hosting school visits, contributing to resources and generally advising RE teachers as and when needed. Participants thought that an RW curriculum should represent the local community and be community-based. It should be focused on how people can "live well together" and it should have a moral/character-formation or pastoral aspect.

SACRE Members

We held one focus group with nine participants drawn from across England, and this data was supplemented with a survey which received 144 responses.

Views on the current state of RE: SACRE members, like community groups, see RE as fulfilling a social role with religious literacy and then social cohesion identified as the most important purposes.

SACRE members suggested that the current challenges to RE are largely structural issues including its lack of curriculum time, specialist teachers, resources and budget. However, many also noted the negative public perceptions of the subject, including amongst pupils themselves and their parents. The majority of SACRE members did not feel able to comment on parents' views of RE but of those who did answer, more thought parents had a negative perception than positive. Getting parents on board with a RW approach was seen by SACRE members as an important way forward. However, the parents who were part of this project, as well as those surveyed by Culham St Gabriel's (summer 2021), did not have a negative perception of RE.

Views on RW as an approach: The majority of participants (65%) had a generally positive view of the RW approach. Strengths were seen to be a more relevant and academic subject, in which pupils develop critical self-reflection and can confidently discuss controversial issues, as well as a "re-invigoration" of the subject allowing for greater connections with other curriculum subjects.

The primary challenges of an RW approach were seen to be three-fold:

1. the intellectual and conceptual challenges around understanding worldviews, especially the lack of clarity around the definition of worldview
2. the existing structural issues around lack of curriculum time, specialist teachers, budget and resources
3. how to get other stakeholders on board, including teachers, parents and government.

What is needed: One potential way forward was seen to be an increase in communication between schools, community groups and parents.

Parents

We held one focus group with three participants, and this was supplemented with a survey which received 45 responses.

Views on the current state of RE: In contrast to the community groups and SACRE members perceptions that parents have a generally negative view of RE, 50% of our parent participants thought their child had a positive RE experience and 60% thought their child's RE experience was better than their own. Parents valued a range of purposes for RE, with 28% selecting 'all purposes' as most important.

Views on RW as an approach

POSITIVES: 51% of the survey respondents had a positive view of the RW approach. Strengths were seen to be the child-centred approach, the encouraging of asking questions and developing critical thinking and reflexivity. This, combined with the valuing of 'all purposes' of RE suggests that parents think of RE as providing a 'holistic' or pastoral education rather than fulfilling a single purpose, and that a RW approach might be in line with that.

CONCERNS: Challenges identified largely focused on practical issues of implementation – how would the balance be struck between providing information about religious and non-religious worldviews and then discussion and self-reflection? What would be the opportunities for learning from others in a mono-cultural classroom? How would the teacher be trained to hold the 'safe-space'? Parents thought there might be "push-back" from religious community groups who might feel side-lined in the new curriculum, as well as from religious parents who might not want their children to critically analyse their own religious tradition.

What is needed: Suggestions for ways forward included greater engagement between schools, community groups and parents, such as including parents in RE lessons delivered in places of worship. This engagement would fulfil a number of functions including breaking down barriers and misunderstandings and increasing children's exposure to lived religion.

MATs, Heads, SLTs

We held one focus group with six participants who were employed in school settings or local authorities.

Views on the current state of RE: Discussion focused on the structural issues surrounding RE, including the limitations of teachers in terms of time, investment, resources, training and networking. The challenges of current RE were seen to be three-fold:

1. a lack of clarity around the aims and purpose of RE
2. the public perception of RE and parent's lack of support for the subject

3. the 'structural' issues of RE including the variance in quality due to a lack of specialist teachers and of investment, as well as its unique status and the lack of a national syllabus.

Views on RW as an approach: Discussion was not so much about the strengths and weaknesses of the RW approach but on how aspects of it could be implemented within the framework of existing time constraints. However, strengths were seen to be that it was more inclusive and "resonates better" with current pupils who tend to eschew boundaries and categorisation. One challenge identified was that it was still a cognitive approach which could neglect materiality and corporeality.

What is needed: Discussion around ways forward focused on two interlinked strands: how to improve the quality of RE as a subject and how to better communicate to parents and others what RE is about. Important ways forward were thinking further about how to network and share resources across boroughs. Participants discussed the need for easily understandable resources and for investment in knowledge hubs as exist for other subjects.

Academics and Policy Professionals

One focus group was held with 14 participants (nine academics and five policy professionals).

Views on the current state of RE: This group saw the challenges to current RE as predominantly structural including lack of curriculum time, teacher support and investment, and lack of a national curriculum creating great variance in teaching. Challenges with the content of RE identified include the need for RE to be more relevant for all pupils and to better reflect diversity and lived religion which is context specific.

Views on RW as an approach: There were a wide range of views on the RW proposal, from positive to negative. However, the discussion tended towards the challenges of the RW approach. Concerns included:

1. that religion will be diluted or disappear and/or that worldviews will simply be the additional content about non-religion
2. the lack of clarity around the question of 'what is a worldview' and the question of whether everyone has a worldview
3. the individualism implied in worldview to the exclusion of community and tradition
4. the general perception of RE
5. RE's relationship to other curriculum subjects

What is needed: Suggestions for ways forward focused on creating better connections between schools and academics, including that networks be established within local authorities connecting RE teachers and a university Religious Studies department. Participants felt that a rethink or reclarification of the purpose of RE was also needed.

Community Interest Groups

Eight focus groups were held with community interest groups – religious and nonreligious organisations which have an interest in RE. Two groups, with the same attendees, were held online with participants drawn from four different geographical areas: Barking and Dagenham; Birmingham; Lincolnshire and Sunderland. Whilst these areas do not necessarily comprise a representative sample, we aimed for a mix of urban and rural locations, coupled with areas of existing Faith & Belief Forum networks. The Covid pandemic meant that all focus groups had to be conducted online, which had not been the original plan for this project.

31 people took part in these eight focus groups as follows:

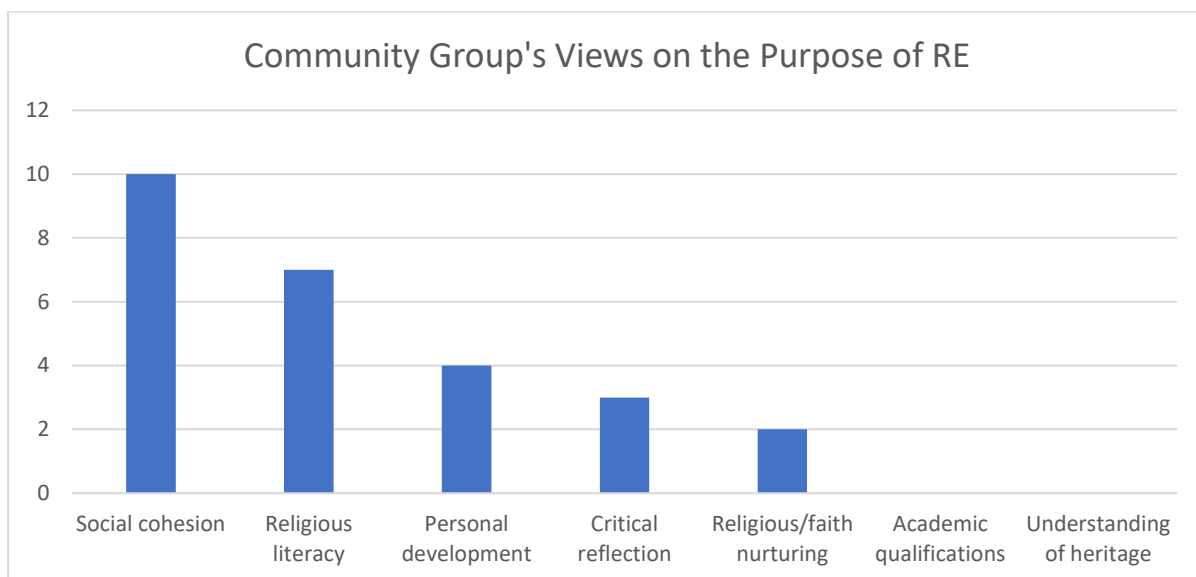
- Barking and Dagenham – 7 participants and then 3
- Birmingham – 13 participants, then 6
- Lincolnshire – 5 participants, then 2
- Sunderland – 6 participants, then 3

The drop in numbers for the second focus group was disappointing and indicative of the problems around how to sustain and engage the interest of those not already invested in the process of improving RE.

The first focus group focused on discussions around the purpose of RE and its current 'crisis' and then presented the RW approach (see the appendix for the slides used in the focus groups). The second focus group focused on gaining participants' views of the strengths and weaknesses of the RW approach and exploring possible resources and ways forward. Participants completed a pre attendance questionnaire (n = 16) and a post attendance questionnaire after the second focus group (n = 9). Of the nine participants who completed the post questionnaire, three stated that their views of RE had changed as a result of the focus group.

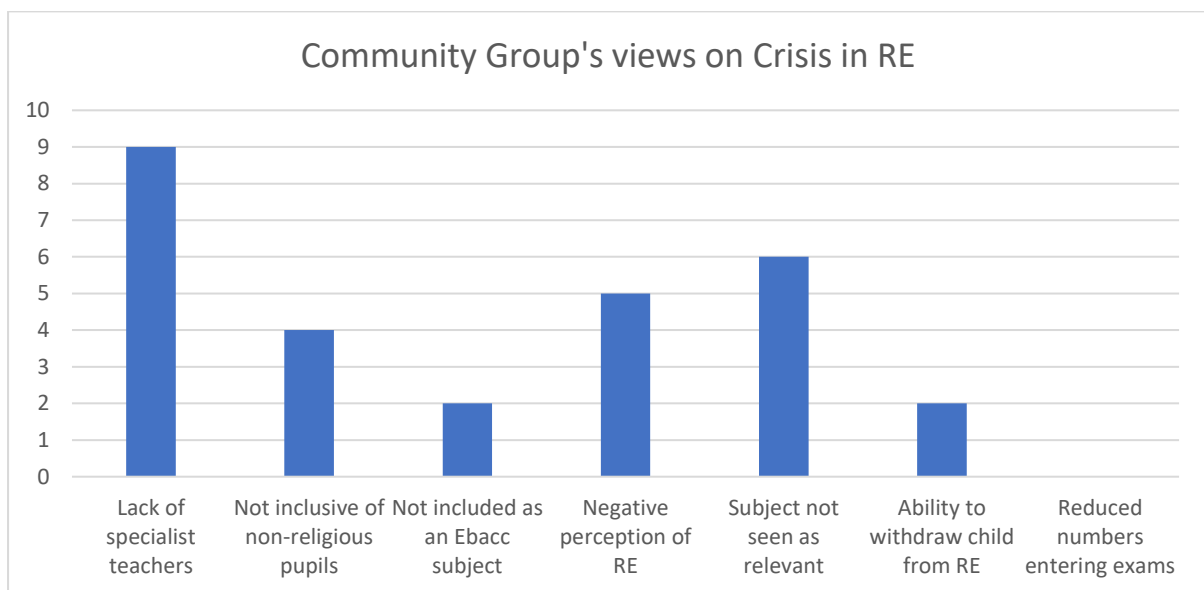
Across the focus groups there was generally enthusiasm and support for the RW proposal, although there were concerns raised. There were no significant disagreements between participants in the groups and most thought that RW could be a potential way forward to contributing to better understandings of diversity, social context, and how to "bring up good people", through teaching values of tolerance, understanding and empathy. There were differences between the geographical groups too: Birmingham had the greatest number of participants and hence of religious diversity, Lincolnshire was focused on the specifics of the geographical location and the problems and best practices in that area, Sunderland was the most philosophical group – participants seemed to largely agree that RE should be about teaching young people how to live well in the world.

The purpose of RE



During the focus group, participants completed an online poll in which they were asked to select one of seven options as the primary purpose of RE (these options were taken from Mark Plater 2019 'What is Religious Education For: Exploring SACRE Members Views', *Religion and Education* 47(1): 55-76). The majority (10) chose social cohesion followed by religious literacy (7), suggesting that these stakeholders see RE as fulfilling a practical social function. In further discussion of the purpose of RE, participants spoke about the need to include more non-religion and to move away from a Christian focus in order to better capture diversity between and within faiths and non-religions. They discussed the need for children's own faiths to be accurately represented and that RE could hinder social cohesion if not taught well. There was discussion of RE as a potential space to explore the meaning of life, big questions, and philosophical ideas, as well as a good space for building understanding of self, others and the world. In these discussions, the purpose of RE was suggested as being about developing a 'good person' and moral guidance. Although not explicitly discussed in the focus groups, these ideas suggest an overlap with PSHE/SMSC and Citizenship. This was addressed more in thinking about what RE should be called and what it should cover.

The 'current crisis' of RE



During the focus group, participants completed an online poll in which they were asked to select one of seven options as the primary cause of the 'current crisis' in RE. The majority (9) chose a lack of specialist teachers, but others chose the related reasons subject not seen as relevant (6) or a negative perception of RE (5). In discussion of the crisis, participants focused on the lack of specialist teachers and the need for teachers to be better supported and have more learning opportunities and better resources. There was discussion of members of religious and non-religious groups assisting teachers by creating resources or as guest speakers but with recognition that this raises questions of representation, authority and authenticity. It was recognised that whilst there is a crisis of lack of support and investment across Arts and Humanities more generally, RE is neglected in schools and the importance of understanding religion in society generally is underestimated. Finally, the absence of a national curriculum was noted with instead localised syllabuses with localised problems recognised.

Thoughts on RW

After a brief presentation about the RW approach as outlined in the Commission on RE 2018 report, *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward*, and the Theos video, *Nobody Stands Nowhere*, we asked participants for their immediate thoughts on the approach. Reactions were mixed. In Birmingham, there was quite a consensus that the approach could be a "watering down" of religion and would lead to less understanding, rather than more. Participants in Lincolnshire wondered whether if RE was opened up "too much", and was not focused solely on religion, what would be the primary purpose of RE? Others questioned what the approach would look like in practice. There was discussion of the need for critical reflection on worldviews, that not all are equal. There was also some anxiety that special interest groups could attempt to "hijack" the approach for their own ends – although which groups might do this, and to what ends, was not discussed.

Other participants did respond favourably to the approach. Participants in Barking and Dagenham were generally supportive, agreeing with one another that the approach was more inclusive and that it had a greater focus on diversity than existing RE. They thought it would

allow children to gain the tools to critically evaluate their own and others' worldviews. Participants in Lincolnshire also discussed the importance of self-reflexivity and critical analysis as key skills covered in RE. Other participants appreciated the focus on the insider perspective, starting from the individual's viewpoint, and the exposure of children to diverse lived experiences. Some participants noted that this approach was already happening in some schools, even before CoRE 2018.

These immediate thoughts on the RW approach were captured in focus group one. In the second focus group, we explored the RW approach in much more depth and views were generally more positive. There were also geographical differences in that Birmingham and Sunderland were particularly concerned with the issues of social cohesion and wider societal issues of building understanding and tolerance. Lincolnshire was concerned with children developing critical reflection.

The Strengths of RW

The strengths of the RW approach were seen to be its potential to increase understanding of diversity, acknowledging both religious and non-religious worldviews, and for reducing stereotyping. This was seen to be important for increasing understanding of others, developing compassion and empathy, and for good community relations. RW was seen to be a more inclusive approach, especially including non-religious children to a greater extent. It was seen to provide a better vocabulary for exploring these issues.

Other strengths were its recognition of social context and its potential for increasing self-awareness. Participants supported the idea of critical reflection, including of one's own worldview. It was thought that this would help children to understand that no decision is "neutral". The approach was seen to be more discussion focused than existing RE and this was thought to be beneficial.

Participants supported the focus on lived experience and community engagement through visits to places of worship, speakers to schools and communities advising teachers and inputting into resources. It was thought that learning could be facilitated through "shared experiences" between children and community groups, such as sharing food or working in community gardens. Learning around "lived experience" would be more "memorable", it was suggested.

There was also support for teacher investment and recognition that inadequate teaching and resources can reinforce stereotypes.

Challenges with RW

Some of the participants' concerns focused on whether the RW approach includes enough religion, whether religion will be "watered down" and whether the RW approach would cover the "big questions" enough. This was particularly true of participants who thought that RE should focus on the "common ground" or shared values of religions and should be about how to "live a good life". A few participants, on the other hand, did not think that the term 'religion' should be included in the subject title. Some thought the subject should focus on ethics and that including the term 'religion' would detract from this.

Some participants were concerned about the lack of a clear definition of worldview. One participant questioned whether everyone does have a worldview and thought it might be a hard concept to teach to children.

There were concerns about the approach simply adding more content in to an already stretched existing RE curriculum, in which 'worldviews' would represent the non-religious content. Some participants thought that the majority of people will assume RW is just a 'minor tweak' to the existing RE curriculum rather than understanding it as a new paradigm as it is intended.

Some of the challenges identified were applicable to both existing RE and the RW approach. Participants discussed the challenge of the public's generally negative views of and fears around religion and their assumption that RE remains confessional or instructional. Related fears specific to the RW approach include the potential misunderstanding that the ultimate aim is for children to 'pick' a worldview. There were concerns raised about how to discuss worldviews which are potentially harmful – a need for critical reflection to avoid moral relativism was emphasised by participants.

There were concerns that vested community interest groups would have less voice in the RW approach and that this would need to be managed carefully. Some participants thought that previously "powerful" groups might find themselves disenfranchised. They also thought it could be the case that some religious parents might withdraw their children from lessons. Participants suggested there could be challenges around children being encouraged to critically reflect on any religious tradition in which they are raised.

There were also concerns around teachers needing additional support in order to teach RW well, as it requires greater reflexivity and critical analysis than existing RE, as well as the issue of who gets to select what is included in the curriculum.

Resources and Potential Ways Forward

In general, the participants did not make suggestions for resources. One suggested that useful comparisons could be made with the new RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) curriculum.

The Sunderland focus group had a useful discussion in which they attempted to reach a consensus on what a RW curriculum should include. They suggested that a RW curriculum should not be a tick-box exercise of covering lists of different faiths' beliefs, festivals and practices. Rather it should explore shared values and critically evaluate the social and historical contexts where values might differ. It should represent the local community and be community-based. It should be discussion focused and encourage critical thinking. It should also promote empathy, compassion and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion principles.

Two of the focus groups, Barking and Dagenham and Sunderland, explicitly called for greater interaction between SACREs, community groups and parents. Community groups could feed into SACREs to a greater extent, they suggested, as well as interacting directly with schools, as external speakers for instance. It was suggested that there was great "goodwill" amongst community groups to engage in this way. Parents need to be kept abreast of the developments in RE, it was suggested, and be presented with the benefits of the RW approach.

SACRE Members

One focus group was held with SACRE members from across England. Nine participants took part. The focus group explored the current challenges to RE, the strengths and weaknesses/barriers to the RW approach, and potential solutions and resources needed.

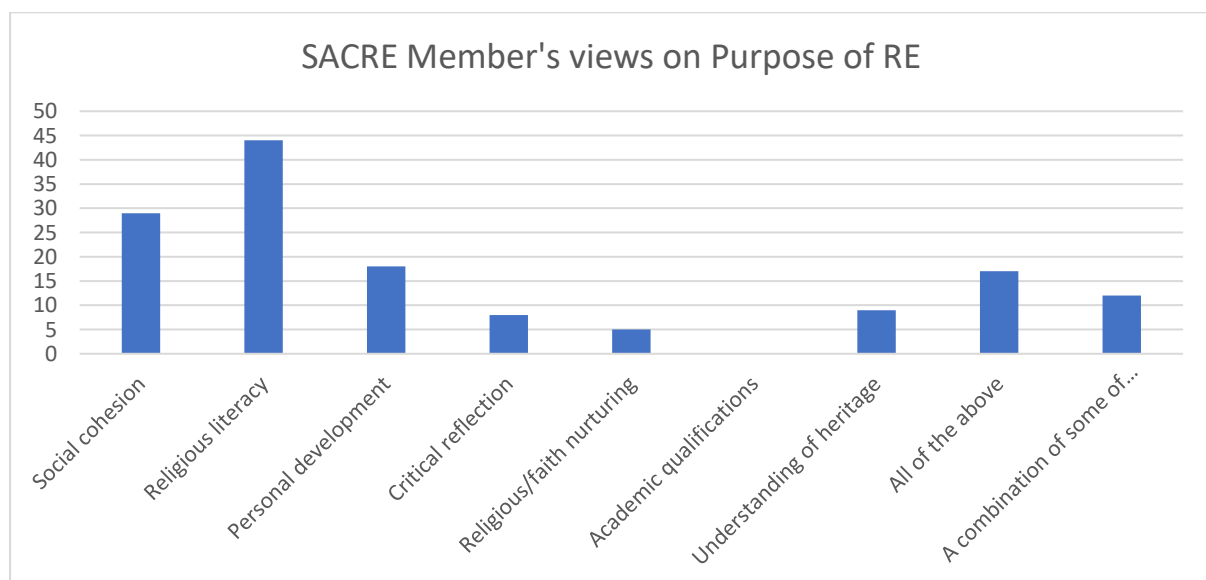
Because of the low number of participants, we also created a survey for SACRE members. We had 144 responses (as well as two emails from members explaining why they felt they could not complete the survey, namely because they felt the survey suggested an agreed upon RW approach which does not exist in reality). In addition to questions around the strengths and challenges to the RW approach, SACRE members were also asked their opinion as to the purpose of RE, their thoughts on parental perceptions of RE and cases of child withdrawal from RE in their area, as well as pressures facing RE teaching in their area.

Amongst the nine participants of the focus group there was general enthusiasm and support for the RW approach although concerns were raised about the clarity and definition of the term 'worldview' and the lack of agreement on this. Participants were also concerned about how to get teachers, and more especially parents, on board with the approach – many reported parental assumptions of RE as still being instructional. The primary concerns of SACRE members were two-fold:

1. Lack of clarity around worldview
2. How to get parents on board with the approach.

Representatives from Birmingham and Nottingham shared how the approach was being implemented through their locally agreed syllabuses and others reported that the RW approach, albeit perhaps not with that name, was already taught in some schools.

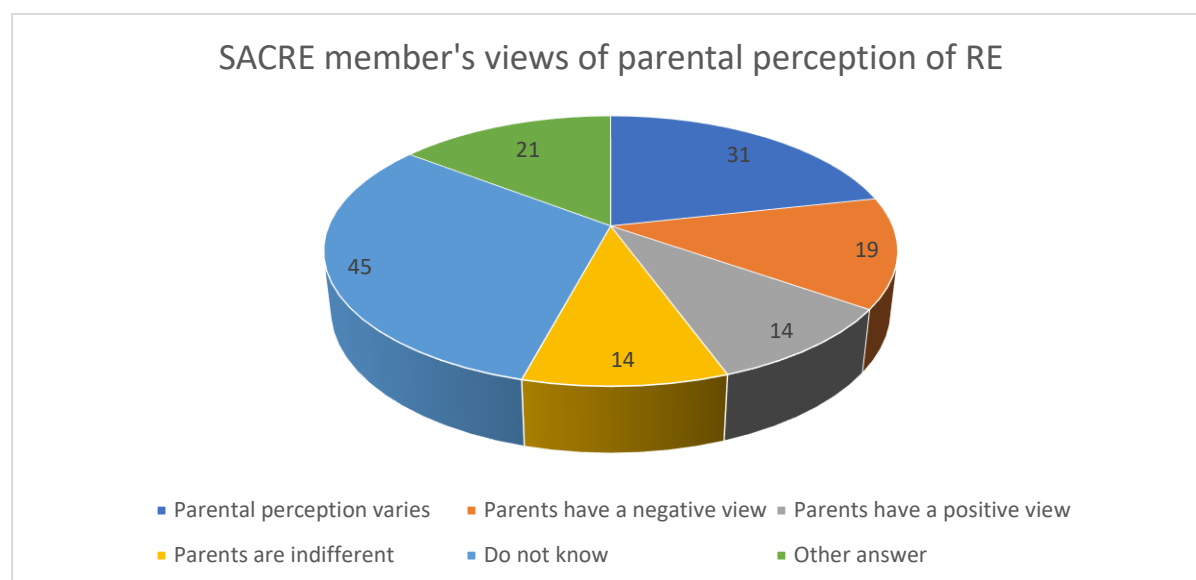
The purpose of RE



In the survey, we asked SACRE members for their thoughts as to the purpose of RE, listing the same seven options as used in the community groups focus group, but adding the possibility for respondents to select all or a combination of the options. Most respondents (44 or 30%) thought that religious literacy was the most important purpose of RE, followed by

social cohesion (29 or 20%). Many respondents stated that all of the purposes listed were equally important (17 or 11%) and some selected a combination (12 or 8%). Three of the respondents stated that all of the purposes, aside from faith nurturing, were equally important. As with the community groups, no respondents selected 'academic qualifications' as the most important purpose, suggesting that RE is seen as fulfilling a social role.

Parental perceptions of RE

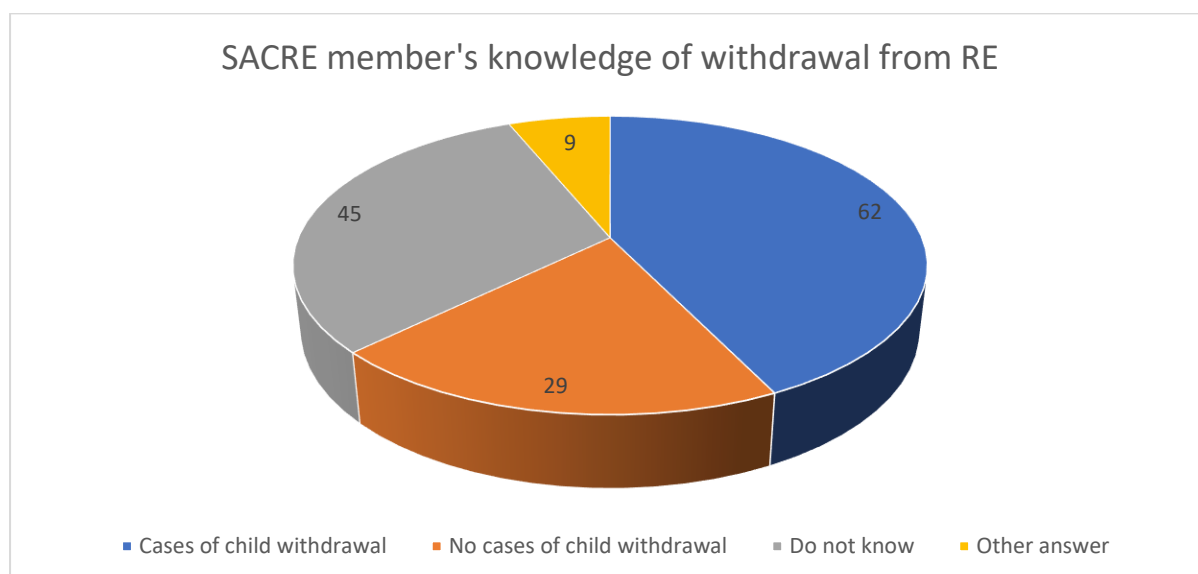


This question was asked in the survey, not the focus group: 'What do you know about current parental perceptions around RE in your geographical area?' The majority, 45 respondents (31%), stated that they did not know enough to answer the question. The next largest group, 31 respondents (21%), recognised that parents' perceptions varied according to a number of factors including whether they are religious, geographical area and type of school. 19 respondents (13%) thought that parents had a generally negative view of RE, including five who thought this was because parents thought RE was instructional or confessional or had an aim of conversion. 14 respondents (9.7%) thought that parents had a generally positive view. 14 (9.7%) also thought that parents were mostly indifferent or confused about RE or just accepted it as part of the curriculum with little interest or engagement.

The quote below highlights well the complexities of parental perceptions:

I would say most parents are disinterested or anti RE. Most have no idea what it entails, perceive it as largely about Christianity (particularly parents of church school pupils) and don't see it as a priority. Occasional parents recognise the importance of the subject but when so, this is due to thoughts on social cohesion and issues such as race and gender. Many parents don't feel RE is relevant to their child if they are a non-religious family. A minority of parents have issues with their children learning about other religions, particularly Islam, due to their ill perceived perception of religion as responsible for extremism.

Child withdrawal from RE



The survey also asked, 'What do you know of cases of pupil withdrawal from RE in your area?' The majority of respondents (62 or 43%) knew that there were at least a few cases of child withdrawal in their area. Twenty of these respondents explained that it was due to either the parent's own religious worldview (Jehovah's Witnesses were mentioned 13 times, Seventh-day Adventists, 'Mormons' and Muslims were all mentioned once) or not wanting their child to learn about a particular religious worldview (Islam was mentioned twice in this context). Five of the respondents said that after the teacher had explained the RE curriculum, the withdrawal request was withdrawn by the parents. One respondent mentioned pupil withdrawal because of low grades and two mentioned withdrawal from collective worship rather than RE.

29 respondents (20%) said that there were no cases of withdrawal in their area and 45 (31%) said they did not know enough to answer the question.

Challenges facing RE

The focus group participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of the current challenges facing RE. Challenges identified included the need to recognise the diversity of local areas and different relationships between schools and SACREs, as well as differences in the composition of SACREs and possible tensions between representatives and who gets to join. Some community groups might have specific agendas for joining a SACRE of which schools might not be aware, it was suggested.

Other challenges identified were variance in the quality of RE teaching, partly linked to time and financial limitations when many RE leads are part-time and overburdened, as well as challenges around what resources to use, which are 'authentic'?

Participants also discussed the challenges of public perceptions of RE, especially parents' assumptions that RE is still instructional/confessional rather than focused on academic inquiry, perhaps particularly with regard to faith schools. This might be based on parents' own experiences of RE, it was thought. Some parents think RE is indoctrination and withdraw their children from RE lessons, sometimes influenced by negative media stories, participants reported.

These ideas were also replicated in the survey data. The majority of respondents listed some form of structural pressures surrounding RE, including its lack of time on the curriculum (34 respondents), lack of trained teachers, resources and budget (30 respondents), potential lack of confidence and subject knowledge of teachers (17 respondents), lack of support from senior leadership (9 respondents) and schools having too many competing priorities in general (9 respondents).

Other respondents focused on the negative perceptions of RE, either a lack of interest from pupils (8 respondents), a lack of interest and support from parents (5 respondents), or the general low status of the subject (5 respondents). A minority of respondents noted that the multifaith, multicultural pupil population of their school made RE a challenge (7 respondents). Respondents did not, in general, mention the content of the curriculum – one noted confusion over the purpose of RE, one noted confusion with RSE, one noted a lack of national guidance, and another a lack of adherence to the locally agreed syllabus.

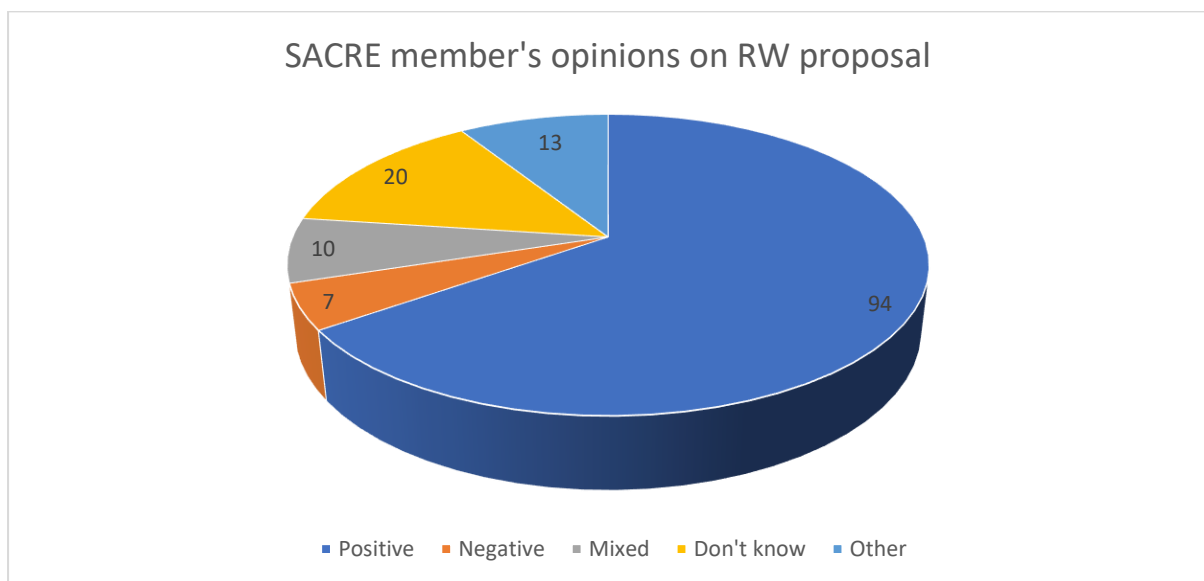
Whilst 11 respondents did not feel that they knew enough to answer the question, four stated that there were no pressures around the teaching of RE in their area.

Most answers were brief but some, such as the quote below, gave very complete answers:

There are enormous pressures on RE in schools. In Primary, the curriculum is overloaded, many teachers have little subject knowledge, enthusiasm or confidence for the subject and it is the first subject to drop off the timetable when there is not enough room for everything to be done. Teachers are confused about what they should and have to teach and what the purpose of the subject entails. Lots of staff in schools confuse work around ethos, values and collective worship with their RE curriculum. Many teachers feel uncomfortable teaching about religions out of concern about 'getting it wrong' and don't know how to tackle controversial issues.

In secondary, the specialist RE teachers that we have are knowledgeable and amazing. They are too few and far between and are having to plan for too many classes and often support non-specialist teachers in delivering the RE curriculum. They often struggle to get commitment from SLT for the subject and in particular struggle with support for core non-exam KS4 RE... Removal of RE from the baccalaureate leaves teachers in a few schools struggling to argue the case for RE. Excellent graduates of RE leave the area due to lack of jobs in RE in local secondary schools. When RE is taught well, particularly at KS3 pupils really rate and enjoy the subjects. The limiting and uninspiring nature of the KS4 exam specs though make this very difficult to achieve further up the school.

Thoughts on RW



The survey asked respondents, 'What are your views towards the Religion and Worldviews proposal?' 94 respondents (65%) expressed a broadly positive opinion, albeit sometimes with a list of caveats, mostly around the definitions of worldviews and what it would include, such as in the two quotes below:

It could restore a sense of purpose to RE for teachers and a sense of the relevance of RE for students. It could ground RE as an academic subject rather than a confessional one. It would be important for the curriculum to not get overly bogged down in the pursuit of what exactly 'world views' means however.

Better and more relevant than the current state affairs. There is, though, too much emphasis on the beliefs and learning of the individual student and not enough sympathetic study of the historical and religious background of the community(-ies) in which they have been nurtured, with more emphasis on communitarian understanding.

Only seven respondents (4.8%) had a negative opinion, such as the individual below:

Mostly unnecessary. If the subject was just treated like any other and taught in broad terms like History or Geography then the problems disappear. This is more special treatment and attention-seeking from religious groups. Having special arrangements for this subject inevitably leads to over-representation of religious groups in the panels making the decisions because they have organisations able to supply members....

Ten respondents suggested either an ambivalent, neutral or mixed view, such as the statement below:

Mixed - there is no one proposal - or rather there are many interpretations of the proposal. Most of it makes sense, but I think that local determination is a strength if funded and resourced adequately. Having a National framework will not fix the issues without funding, training, priority etc. If you have these, local determination will work! The idea of ensuring a rigorous curriculum can be supported and monitored by eg NASACRE with the DfE.

Twenty respondents said they did not know about the proposal, or know enough about it to comment. Thirteen gave an answer which was not easily categorised, as they gave their thoughts on RE rather than RW specifically. This could be indicative of them also not knowing about the proposal.

The Strengths of RW

The focus group participants were generally positive about the RW proposal. The approach was seen as an opportunity for introducing in-depth, critical discussions about religion and worldviews. Participants thought the RW approach could be broad enough to encourage more connections with other curriculum areas and to reinvigorate the subject again, allowing pupils to have greater critical self-reflection and more confidence in discussing controversial issues. The survey did not ask for views on the strengths of RW.

Challenges with RW

Focus group participants agreed on a primary clear challenge to the approach – the intellectual and conceptual challenges around understanding worldviews. There were suggestions that SACREs understood the RW proposal but teachers and, more so, parents might not – how can it be taught if teachers are not clear in their understandings and on board? There were suggestions that the limited time and finances given to RE would hinder teaching the RW approach. Participants wondered whether there was opportunity for RE to be reframed as having the specific purpose of reducing prejudice and/or for the RW proposal to be included across the school curriculum and not confined to the RE lesson.

When this question was asked in the survey, answers, as with the challenges to existing RE, focused on structural issues around teaching training and support, and financial and time limitations. Confusions and complications around what is a worldview and what should be included were also raised, as were more general concerns about the term ‘religion’ as causing “division” (as one respondent wrote). Negative public perception and lack of interest from parents and from government were mentioned, as were the “vested interest” or “power” of certain religious movements. Two respondents questioned the continued existence of SACREs.

Many of the answers combined all of these points, as in the quotes below:

Resistance to change from some teachers of RE. A lack of time, leading to fear of a lot of extra work re-writing a school syllabus. Academic arguments over the exact definition of world views, which may confuse teachers trying to understand the new curriculum. Overcomplication of the syllabus - in a well-meaning attempt to portray a more realistic overview of faith and worldviews, but which may end up being confusing and lacking direction or a framework of knowledge for students to build on. Lack of training for teachers of RE (other subjects often having priority in a stretched school budget.)

The idea that some worldviews are not 'religious' and should therefore be studied in politics or economics or sociology lessons. The multi-discipline approach is open to over complication. Lack of 'off the shelf' resources which are not used by 'lazy teachers' but desperately needed by an overstretched profession....

Two main barriers. I think some areas within various religious communities are concerned about diluting 'religion' in favour of 'worldviews' and that somehow this proposal is a backdoor move to secularism. I think this view is in the minority but extremely vocal. The other barrier comes from those working in education who think it's a meaningless name change for something that has long existed in the classroom anyway and that the proposal is more about putting a sticking plaster on a gaping wound....I think most parents are completely oblivious to the discussion taking place and would likely be apathetic if they did know.

Resources and Potential Ways Forward

At the end of the focus groups, participants were able to share ideas and best practices about their own locally agreed syllabuses and their engagement with RW. For example, a participant from Birmingham spoke about the videos the SACRE has produced for parents and for faith leaders explaining their syllabus, whilst another participant reported that the Nottingham SACRE had written to school governors to remind them of the statutory duty around teaching RE. Other suggestions included webinars, resources for headteachers to provide to parents, schools to have a governor who acts as RE lead and liaison with parents, greater discussion of what is covered in RE at curriculum evenings/parents evenings/open evenings for Year 6 parents viewing secondary schools. Some of these are of course already being practised.

Some of these suggestions for resources were repeated in answers to the survey question, 'What resources do you feel would be useful to create a better understanding of the nature of the Religion and Worldviews proposal?' Additional things noted here include: meetings between parents and local community groups; workshops for parents led by schools; resources for the whole teaching community, including primary; short animations dispelling common misconceptions around RE; more video resources, like the Theos video; more on social media; more resources designed in consultation with young people; resources in different languages; more resources clarifying the RW approach.

Quite a few responses focused on resources for increasing parents' understanding. Some also called for more input from local community groups. A three-way communication between schools, faith and community groups and parents was emphasised by some. This is exemplified in this response:

Parents - clear, concise information outlining this new development in the teaching of Religion via an understanding of worldviews

Community - information together with an invitation to be involved - thinking in terms of institutions (churches / mosques etc - faith groups / secular organisations), local experts able to deliver 'living' information i.e. this is how my religious belief shapes my worldview and how my worldview shapes my behaviour...

This response too is useful food for thought:

... short and snappy resources are needed to help all of us (regardless of religion/worldview or whether we are parents/community members/LAs or schools) answer this question: Why should we teach RE/R&WV at all? What's the point of the subject? Why does it matter? What would happen if we didn't? My own SACRE can't answer those questions and we all believe it does matter! So if those advocating for the subject can't clearly articulate its importance, why should anyone else care? Resources to help with this are what is needed. When you can establish 'why' a subject is important and needs to be taught, the 'how' becomes much clearer.

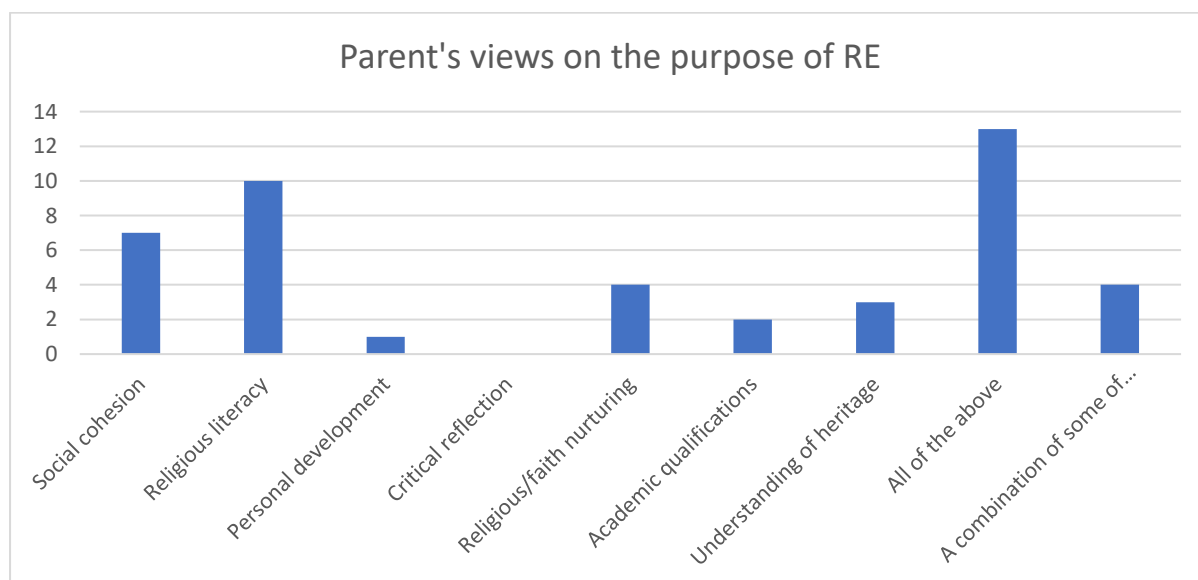
Parents

One focus group was held with parents. We had three participants, all of whom identified as religious themselves and had connections to church schools (CofE or Catholic), either in that their children attended or they worked at a church school. The low number of participants was disappointing and was possibly a result of our lack of access to parents due to the Covid pandemic. We had intended to work with particular schools to engage parents and as the locations of the focus groups, but schools were still not open to outside visitors at the time of our research.

The focus group explored the parents' understanding and experiences of current RE, further information required by parents, capturing thoughts on the RW proposal, potential barriers and challenges to implementing it, and possible solutions and resources needed.

The focus group was supplemented with a parent survey which received 45 responses. After collecting demographic data (local authority, religious affiliation, their child's level of schooling, whether they had ever withdrawn their child from RE – and only 3 had), we asked for their thoughts on the purpose of RE. We then asked for their perceptions of their child's experience of RE and whether this was better or worse than their own. We then asked them to watch the Theos video, *Nobody Stands Nowhere*, and asked for their immediate thoughts. Finally, we asked 'How could we help parents have a better understanding of the subject of Religion and Worldviews or RE in general?'

The purpose of RE

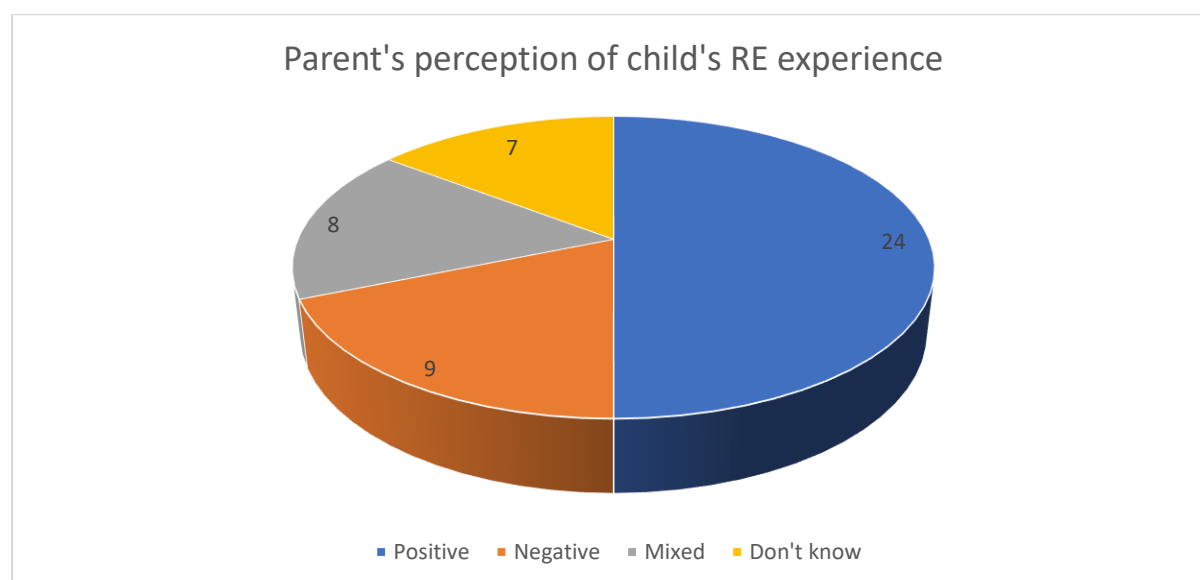


In the survey we asked parents for their thoughts as to the purpose of RE, listing the seven options as previously, as well as 'all of the above' or a combination of the options. In this survey, the majority of respondents (13 or 28.8%) thought that all of the purposes were equally important. This was followed by religious literacy (10 or 22%) and social cohesion (7 or 15%).

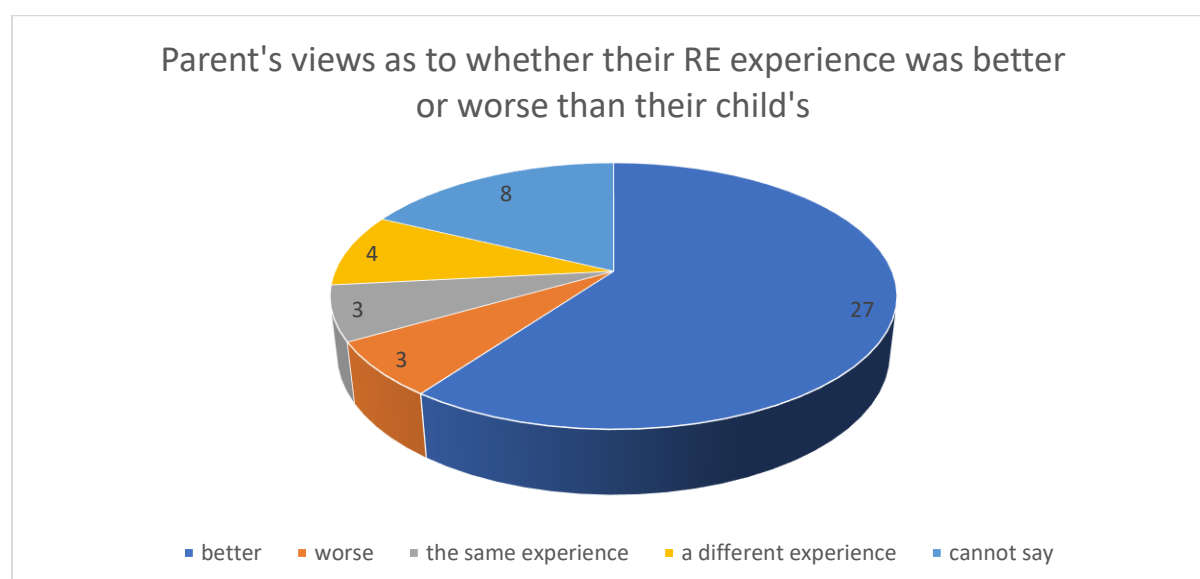
We asked a slightly different question in the focus group where we asked participants to reflect on what they saw as the value of RE. The participants spoke about the need for children to develop a "multicultural competence" - understanding difference and making connections to the communities around them – as well as about making sense of their own stories – "the

stories to understand ourselves”. The participants stressed the importance of children learning in a safe space and gaining the confidence to ask difficult questions. They thought that RE should not be a simple learning of facts but should rather be a “stepping back” to look at the “big picture”. It should be a space for developing the whole child, a recognition that RE cuts across the curriculum as it relates to social issues including gender, ethnicity and mental health. RE should be a space for teaching tolerance and acceptance.

Perceptions of child's experience of RE and compared to own



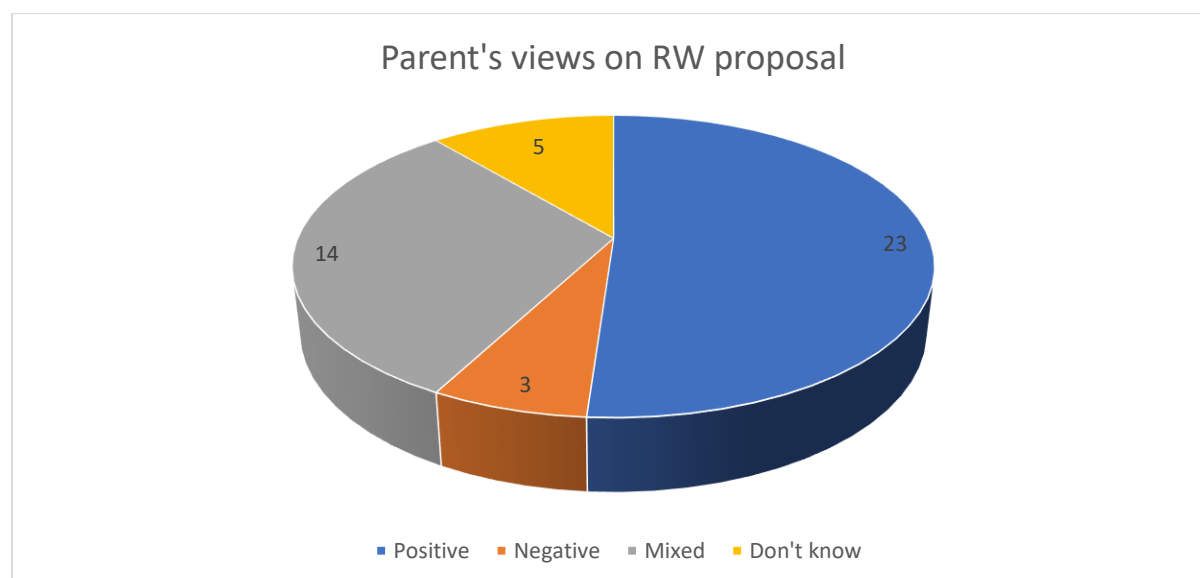
In both the focus group and the survey (n = 48) we asked parents for their perceptions of their child's experience of RE. Half of the respondents thought it was generally positive; nine thought it was generally negative; eight had a mixed opinion (such as if they had a primary age child with a positive experience and a secondary age child with a negative experience); and seven said they did not know enough to comment.



In the survey (n = 45) we asked parents whether they thought their child's experience of RE was better or worse than their own. Over half (27) thought it was better and only three thought it was worse. Three respondents thought the experience was essentially the same whilst four

explained that it was a different experience which could not be quantified as better or worse. Eight respondents could not answer the question either because they could not remember their own RE experience or they did not study RE as a child.

Thoughts on RW



The survey asked the question, 'What is your response to the proposed Religion and Worldviews approach in the video?' (and provided a link to *Nobody Stands Nowhere*). 23 respondents (51%) expressed a broadly positive opinion, 14 respondents (31%) had a mixed opinion, five (11%) said they did not know or did not have an opinion, and only three (6.6%) expressed a negative opinion of the video. Some of the mixed responses raised issues which were repeated in other focus groups, including whether the approach focused too much on the individual and on belief over practice and the practical implications for the RE classroom:

I am not sure what I think about this, I do think that there is a place for critical reflection, but equally, I do think that it is legitimate to say that dogma is important too. I worry that Religion and Worldviews puts too much emphasis on the individual at the expense of community.

I think it mistakes 'religion' with 'belief and perspective' and therefore misses the centrality of action.

It sounds good but putting it into practice is another matter... Also, it is all about accepting that your world view may be different from others which is fine, but why is there no focus on questioning your world view?

Interesting and modern perspective. However it feels like it would merge better with a social/cultural class rather than come under the umbrella of religion.

The Strengths of RW

The three participants in the focus group were positive about the RW approach as presented through CoRE 2018 and the video, *Nobody Stands Nowhere*. They liked the child-centred approach, the encouraging of asking questions and developing critical thinking and reflexivity, which were seen as important life skills. The approach was described as “dynamic” and as “holistic” and as providing a “safe space” for exploring one’s own experiences. The survey did not ask about the potential strengths of the approach.

Challenges with RW

Despite the positive views of RW, numerous challenges were discussed by the three participants. They noted that whilst the critical questioning approach was one of the strengths of RW, information would also have to be provided in an age-appropriate way, the RE space cannot just be reflexive discussion. One participant wondered whether RW might be easier to teach in a multi-cultural classroom where the children could learn from one another, and it might be harder in a mono-cultural classroom where more external input might be necessary. The level of discussions would be dependent on the skills of the teacher to hold the safe space, it was suggested, as personal and sensitive issues could be raised. Respect would be a central issue.

One participant wondered how some people might react to a decentring of Christianity that the RW approach implies and wondered how it would then fit communal worship. Another noted that there is often a discrepancy between what children learn about some religions at home and in school and this could be rectified in the RW approach through its focus on lived reality and materiality. The participants also discussed the fact that some religious parents might not approve of this questioning and critical approach to their own worldviews. There could be “pushback” from parents, community groups and government it was thought. The survey did not ask about the potential challenges of the approach.

Resources and Potential Ways Forward

Practical suggestions and best practices discussed in the focus group included engaging with community groups running after school activities, providing parents with sample RE lessons in order to break down barriers and misunderstandings, especially when their own religion is being taught, and including parents in RE lessons delivered in places of worship. These could be seen as suggestions for improving the perception of RE in general rather than specific to the RW proposal.

These ideas were repeated in the survey where we asked the question, ‘How could we help parents have a better understanding of the subject of Religion and Worldviews or RE in general?’ Many answers here commented on the need for good communication between schools and parents so that parents are aware of “what is being taught and why”. Other answers commented on the need for greater engagement with faith groups, such as this answer: “*by being able to meet with people of faith, sharing artefacts, having school spotlights on different faiths*”. One respondent recognised that this would need to be extended to non-religious people too: “*Maybe put more people front and centre who aren't religious and have them show that the subject teaches about critically engaging with the good and bad of religions (and no religious positions)?*” The responses show an appetite for greater engagement with RE.

MATs, Heads, SLTs

One focus group was held with head teachers, senior leader teams, and others employed in school settings. Six people participated in this group. The group explored current challenges to RE, thoughts on the RW proposal, suggestions as to how we could help people better understand the approach, and thoughts on resources needed.

Discussion in this focus group, perhaps unsurprisingly given the participants, focused on the structural issues surrounding RE, not least the limitations of teachers in terms of time, investment, resources, training, networking and more. Discussion was not so much about the strengths and weaknesses of the RW approach but on how aspects of it could be implemented within the framework of existing time constraints. There was some discussion of RW as a new approach or paradigm for RE, but mostly the discussions were implicitly about how to add in more content rather than shake-up the pedagogical approach. Options discussed in this focus group were just adding in a bit on RW to an existing syllabus, buying or developing a RW syllabus from an external organisation, and thinking further about how to network and share resources across boroughs. This raises concerns that RW will be approached by school leaders as a means to add some new content to existing syllabuses.

Challenges facing RE

The focus group began with a discussion of the challenges facing current RE. Numerous challenges were identified which can be grouped around three central issues:

1. a lack of clarity around the aims and purpose of RE, combined with the need for RE to be “threaded through” the curriculum to a greater extent.
2. the public perception of RE and parent’s lack of support for the subject, exacerbated by the lack of clear purpose. How best to communicate all the good teaching that already goes on, and how to further present it as a rigorous academic subject, was noted, as was the challenge of how to make the subject more relevant to young people. It was noted that religious parents have greater support for the subject and that religious children are more engaged in it – the increasing numbers of non-religious young people does not bode well for RE, it was suggested.
3. a lot of the discussion however focused on “structural” issues – the variance in quality of RE teaching across the country, partly caused by a lack of experienced teachers and of central government investment. The unique status of RE and its difference from cores subjects was also noted. The lack of an agreed national syllabus and instead the plethora of locally agreed syllabuses, as well as faith schools and academies own syllabuses, participants identified as a particular challenge. Some actors in this field might pursue their own agenda it was suggested. There was recognition that those stakeholders involved in networking and sharing resources were not necessarily those who need the most help and support, raising the question of how best to reach the teachers who need more support.

The Strengths of RW

Not all of the participants were familiar with the RW proposal before attending the focus group. One of the participants who was not familiar with the proposal thought it looked like a more inclusive approach than existing RE. Other participants were very familiar with it and they

stressed the importance of the concept of the critical reflections of worldviews, both the pupils own and others', over and above any additional content. One participant noted that they were already encouraging pupils' greater critical reflection of their own worldviews, noting that it is harder than it sounds. Another suggested that the approach "resonates better with pupils", especially teenagers who are exploring questions of identity and more likely to take a "fluid" approach and not appreciate strict categorisations of themselves and others.

Challenges with RW

Problems identified by participants with the RW approach, as it is presented in CoRE 2018 and *Nobody Stands Nowhere*, is that it emphasises a cognitive approach, of "seeing" the world, rather than materiality and corporeality. A focus on belief remains, which is not in congruence with university-level teaching about religion. There was also discussion around the appropriateness of language used and the extent to which worldviews could include both personal and institutional.

Resources and Potential Ways Forward

Discussion here focused on two interlinked strands: how to improve the quality of RE as a subject and how to better communicate to parents and others what RE is about. One participant felt that the "innate dignity" of RE as a subject needs to be improved and that this could be done through more reflection on the purpose of RE and the forms of knowledge in RE. He suggested that knowledge needs to be imparted first before critical discussions can take place. A similar point was made in the parents focus group – that there needs to be a balance between knowledge and reflection and how is this best implemented?

Participants discussed the need for easily understandable resources and for investment in knowledge/resource hubs as exist for other subjects. Again, time was recognised as the biggest hurdle, with RE taught either by specialists pushed for time or by non-specialists. Resources are needed to "make it easy for them to be passionate about the subject", we were told.

Academics and Policy Professionals

One focus group was held with academics and policy professionals and 14 people participated. There was a wide range of views on the RW proposal, from positive to negative, and different levels of engagement/working with the approach. This focus group took a slightly different format from the others as, after discussion of the current challenges to RE, we discussed the data from the other focus groups. We then explored thoughts on the RW proposal and on resources needed.

Challenges facing RE

The discussion here focused, as in previous focus groups, on the structural challenges surrounding RE, such as the lack of specialist teachers and the lack of support for all teachers of RE. Specific challenges mentioned include the lack of initial training or ongoing CPD and time constraints of teachers. The lack of a national curriculum was also seen as a challenge to RE creating large variance in what is taught and to what quality across the country. There is then a lack of standards and of expectations, one participant suggested. The fact that schools opt out of their statutory duties and that academies do not have to teach RE was noted. A further structural constraint noted was the disinclination of exam boards to change GCSE and A Level exams away from the 'World Religions Paradigm', which would mean that if RW was implemented there would be a potential discrepancy between key stages three and four.

There was much less discussion about the content of RE but challenges mentioned include the need for RE to be more relevant for all pupils, to better reflect the nature of lived religion which is context specific, to have better discussions "across difference" (including religious/non-religious and within worldviews) and, for one participant, the "need to celebrate difference whilst exploring the commonalities in religion". This last point bears more similarities to the discussions in the community group focus groups.

Discussion of data from previous focus groups

During this part of the focus group, participants were split into four breakout rooms. In each room, a facilitator presented the main themes arising from one of the previous focus groups. The purpose of this was two-fold – both to present our findings to academics for their own interests and to gain their thoughts on the data, including whether it fits with their expectations and anything surprising in it.

1. Discussion of data from community groups. Participants agreed that there were two main themes from this data: the challenge of teacher training and resources; and discussion of whether RE should be focused on teaching the "big questions"/ethics/morals and hence be about developing the character of pupils into "good" people. The participants thought these themes were not surprising but that the second was more interesting. It suggests that RE is not (only) an intellectual pursuit but is about learning how people can "live well together". This is what matters at the community level and suggests that RE is tied in with other areas of the curriculum, such as Citizenship. It is also a reminder that school RE should not be presented as a "mini university course" as it has a "holistic", character-forming aspect. One participant

was surprised that community group's agendas or self-interests had not arisen as a major theme.

2. Discussion of data from SACRE members. Participants here focused on discussion of the challenges of worldviews, after noting that the worldviews proposal has been around, albeit not so clearly delineated, since the 1970s. They discussed the lack of clarity as to what RE is to different schools/teachers/pupils/parents and the resultant differing expectations across schools. There are also varied meanings of the term 'worldviews' and therefore varied interpretations of this in teaching across the UK. Participants wondered whether if the subject was renamed as something like 'worldviews education', removing the term 'religion', there would be an increase in interest in the subject. They felt that RE's exclusion from the EBacc had damaged the subject.
3. Discussion of data from parent group. Participants here agreed that it was difficult to discuss themes taken from just three participants, but they noted some interesting questions and themes such as the responsibility of teachers and their need for confidence in their teaching; questions around how children come to identify as religious or non-religious; and questions around whether religious and non-religious speakers should teach their own worldview with the teacher then acting as a facilitator for discussion.
4. Discussion of data from MATs, heads and SLTs focus group. As with the community group data, participants here recognised two central themes, one around the structural issues of teacher training, time and resources, and the other around the content of the subject. Participants discussed how teacher confidence needs to be built, especially for newly qualified teachers, and there needs to be discussion of how to reach those teachers who need the most support. In terms of content, participants discussed the need to move beyond presenting religion/non-religion as binaries, which is especially relevant for "Gen Z".

Thoughts on RW

Participants were asked for their thoughts on RW, assuming a pre-existing degree of knowledge about the proposal, rather than being asked specifically to discuss strengths and then challenges as in previous focus groups. Interestingly, there was more resistance to the proposal than in previous groups. Concerns raised included the following points:

1. Concerns that religion will be diluted or disappear and/or that worldviews will simply be the additional content about non-religion. This latter point is exacerbated, one participant felt, by the 'and' linking religion and worldviews.
2. Linked to this is the lack of clarity around the question of 'what is a worldview' and the lack of agreed definitions amongst the RE community. Participants noted that the term worldview is not a neutral one but is rather a particular theological construction. Further, worldviews, especially personal, suggest a form of "hyper-individualism", when religion is about tradition and community. There is a lot to the study of religion which is not about "worldview" it was suggested, not least materiality. Finally, it is not self-evident that everyone has a worldview.
3. Other concerns related to the perception of RE and to the relationship of RE to other subjects, especially citizenship. Participants wondered whether the RW proposal could be seen as a "power grab" by RE teachers to extend their reach and influence. More thought needs to go into the purpose of RE, it was suggested.

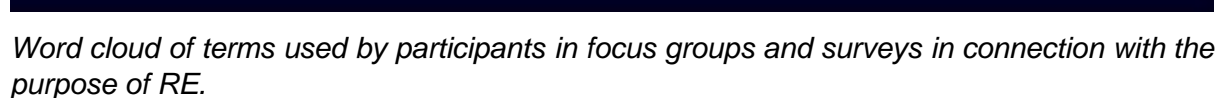
Resources and Potential Ways Forward

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the preponderance of academics (9) over policy professionals (5) present, most of the suggestions for ways forward focused on establishing better connections between universities and schools. Participants thought that because of the diversity of local syllabuses, networks could be established within local authorities of RE teachers and a university department – an idea not dissimilar to the MATs, heads and SLTs calls for resource hubs. The universities of Winchester and Chester were held up as examples of good practice. Participants also thought that time and resources should be invested in explaining to teachers and other stakeholders why the existing world religions paradigm is problematic, otherwise the RW proposal could end up as additional content in existing syllabuses. Again, there were calls for a rethink or reclarification of the purpose of RE.

Conclusion

Purpose of RE

Parents were most likely to see all purposes as important suggesting that RE should be “character-forming” and “holistic”, whilst community interest groups and SACRE members took a more functional approach suggesting that RE should fulfil a social role of teaching religious literacy which will lead to social cohesion. Whether religious literacy will necessarily lead to social cohesion has been questioned and discussed by academics (Hannam et al 2020 ‘Religious literacy: a way forward for religious education?’, *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 41(2): 214-226). Community groups also thought that RE should have a moral or pastoral function, teaching pupils how to “live well together”. Academics and policy professionals were more likely to see the lack of clarity of purpose as problematic and called for a rethink or reclarification as one of the contemporary challenges.



Challenges to Current RE

The challenges to current RE teaching were seen as a number of interlinked factors including structural issues, public perception, and the curriculum content, although in the majority of groups structural issues were seen as predominant. These include the challenges of a lack of curriculum time, a lack of specialist teachers and support for teachers, a lack of investment, and a lack of good-quality (and preferably free) resources.

The unique status of RE and the lack of a nationally agreed syllabus was seen as a challenge by many. The content of current RE was recognised as not being relevant for all pupils, leading to a lack of interest by some pupils. However, the negative perception of the general public, and parents in particular, was noted as a particular challenge by some stakeholders.

Whilst existing public surveys do suggest a negative public perception of RE (see Baseline Report 1), this is refuted by the findings of Culham St Gabriel's 'Public Perception Survey' (summer 2021) and the data collected from parents for this project. The parents who engaged in this research project mostly had a positive perception of RE but this is likely to be participant bias – it was mostly parents with an interest in RE who were prepared to attend a focus group or complete a survey. Further work is needed to reach parents who have no interest in RE. Further work is also needed to explore the potential discrepancies between stakeholder's perceptions of parents' views and parents' actual views.

Strengths of RW Approach

Our participants were generally in favour of the RW approach as presented through an overview of the Commission on RE 2018 report, *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward*, and the Theos video, *Nobody Stands Nowhere*. Strengths of the approach were seen to be:

- It is more inclusive of all pupils, particularly those who are non-religious
- It recognises diversity
- It recognises historical and social context
- It encourages critical analysis of worldviews
- It encourages self-reflexivity
- It has greater potential for cross-over with over curriculum subjects.

Concerns with RW Approach

However, the approach was not seen to be without its problems. Challenges and concerns raised were manifold focusing not least on the lack of agreement in the RE and academic communities around what is a 'worldview'? Concerns include:

- The RW approach might be a dilution or ‘watering down’ of the ‘religion’ component of RE
- Or it could just become a means of adding in extra content about ‘non-religious’ with the term ‘worldviews’ reserved only for this content
- Worldviews is not clearly defined and is not a neutral term
- Is it correct to assume that everyone has a worldview?
- Do worldviews prioritise individualism at the expense of community and tradition?
- Does the approach overemphasise cognition, belief and ways of ‘seeing’ the world, rather than materiality, corporeality, and social networks?
- Could RW’s critical approach lead to greater child withdrawal from religious parents?
- Could there be defensiveness around worldviews, whether this is from pupils/parents or at a higher level from SACRE members/ community interest groups/ established religious organisations with a stake in schooling?
- How relativistic will RW education be? Will all worldviews be considered equal? How will issues of, for example, extremism and minority religions be engaged with?

Ways Forward

Our data suggests that there is a need and appetite for greater engagement between the different stakeholders we have reached. Schools, SACREs, community groups and parents all expressed enthusiasm for working together and suggested that support and best practice guidance on this would be appreciated. Academics were keen to host and/or facilitate networking meetings.

We suggest that greater community engagement could also contribute to greater positive perceptions of RE/RW education and hence to greater critical religious literacy in the long term. Greater interaction with academics could ensure that school and university-level teaching on religion can be more in-line, whilst recognising the differences between the two.

Our data suggests that there are three predominant strands which need to be addressed in order to improve RE and implement the RW approach:

1. Structural Issues

The Problem: The current structural issues surrounding RE are seen to be part of its current crisis and an inhibitor to implementing the RW approach. Structural issues include:

- A lack of specialist teachers and a lack of support and funding for initial training and ongoing CPD

- A lack of free or low-cost resources for teaching RE (not a lack of resources altogether)
- The time allocated to RE in the curriculum and, often, its conflation into other subjects such as PSHE, as well as some schools not teaching it at all
- The unique status of RE as a non-national curriculum subject, instead determined by Locally Agreed Syllabuses
- The exclusion of RE from the EBacc
- The constraints of exam syllabuses for GCSE and A Level RE.

Suggested Solutions: Head teachers, SLTs and local authority employees called for greater opportunities for networking, support and resource sharing, perhaps in the model of 'knowledge hubs', which do exist but without government funding. Academics suggested that schools could network with their local university Religious Studies department for advice and support. SACRE members suggested reminding school governors about the statutory duty to teach RE.

However, these can be seen as suggestions for managing rather than eradicating the structural issues which need to be addressed at a governmental level.

2. Public Engagement

The Problem: Our participants suggested that there is a negative public perception of RE which is detrimental to the subject. Community groups and SACRE members thought the problem especially lay with parents, that they have a misunderstanding of RE as being instructional/confessional/seeking to convert their children or as being a non-academic and unimportant subject, exacerbated by RE's exclusion from the EBacc and the National Curriculum. Disinterest and lack of engagement was seen as equally problematic as negative perceptions. This was seen as a challenge to current RE but also to RW going forward. However, our parent data and Culham St Gabriel's 'Public Perception' survey (summer 2021) refute the idea of a general negative perception or disinterest.

Whilst RW might have a broader appeal, especially amongst the increasing numbers of non-religious people, other problems might be brought to the fore such as religious parents withdrawing their children from RE.

Suggested Solutions: There was general support, across our stakeholder groups, that greater engagement in RE/RW could only be of benefit, leading to an increase in positive public perceptions in the long term. Community groups and parents in particular suggested that they wanted to have more involvement in RE, both in terms of better understanding its purpose and in terms of assisting teachers and schools moving forward. Information about RW for parents is necessary.

Practical suggestions included involving community groups in resource creation, as speakers in schools, and hosting lessons in places of worship. Parents could be provided with sample RE lessons in order to break down barriers and

misunderstandings, especially when their own religion is being taught, and they could be included in RE lessons delivered in places of worship.

Community group members were keen to be more involved in the work of SACREs.

3. Conceptual Issues

The Problem: The stakeholders tended to agree that there was a lack of clarity around the purpose of RE as it currently stands (see above) but also that there was still lack of clarity around the RW approach, not least in the definition of 'worldviews' and what could be included in the syllabus under this title. There is also the issue of the potential disparity between academic and RE teachers' understandings of 'worldviews' on the one hand, and the general public's, including parents, on the other. Is this significant when seeking to improve public perception of the RW approach?

Suggested Solutions: Solutions for conceptual issues were only really discussed by the academics and policy professionals. They suggested that further work is needed to explore the definition and potential of worldviews, but with a reminder that there is also no agreed-upon definition of religion and that 'elastic' definitions can be useful tools for approaching and thinking about a subject. However, these ideas need to be conveyed to parents and other stakeholders.

We will explore these ideas further in the major output of this project, an Open University Open Learn Course.

Appendix

Problems Faced by RE – The ‘Crisis’

- ❖ Lack of specialist teachers
- ❖ Reduced numbers entering exam
- ❖ Not included as core subject
- ❖ Negative perception of RE and religion
- ❖ Ability to withdraw child from RE
- ❖ Subject not seen as relevant
- ❖ Not inclusive of the majority of pupils who identify as 'non-religious'



Slide presenting the ‘Crisis in RE’ used in focus groups with community interest groups.

Importance of Religion and Worldviews

- Its inclusive of all pupils, not just the religious pupil or those interested in religion
- Opens up – what do we mean by worldview? Not fixed definition, its each person's lens
- Raises questions about perceived divide between religious and nonreligious – all are worldviews
- Emphasises diversity within religions – there is not just one Christian worldview- each believer has a worldview
- Enables pupils to think about their own worldview and explore it.



Slide presenting the ‘Importance of Religion and Worldviews’ used in the focus groups with community interest groups.