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# Opportunity for RE? A possible vision of the future for Religious Education structures in England, drawing on the implications of Education for All, the UK Government's 2022 education White Paper

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## ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the White Paper, *Opportunity for all*, published by the UK Government's Department for Education (DfE) in March 2022. This has a number of recommendations for schools in an attempt to 'level up'. In particular, there is a promise to deliver 'a fully trust-led system with a single regulatory approach [and] a clear role for every part of the school system'. Such a system provides a serious challenge to the way that Religious Education (RE) structures in England are currently built: in short, when Local Authorities no longer have schools under their control – what is the point of a SACRE? Arguing that the 'local settlement' for RE serves two purposes – a curricular purpose and support and monitoring purpose – this paper will suggest that future RE curricula will be planned at the Trust level, with the monitoring and support functions being moved from the local to the regional.

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## Introduction

The school system in England is highly fragmented, dynamic and complicated (Simkins 2015). Since the 1944 Education Act there has been a dual system in England, of church and community schools, with schools with a religious character having different legal status and governance from those without. These include freedoms over RE and Collective Worship, but also admissions and employment. Until the end of the last century, state maintained schools without a religious character were controlled by Local Education Authorities. However, the introduction of Academy and Free schools (independent of the Local Authority, but state-funded) further confused the system (West and Wolfe 2019). Academy schools exist only in England, the other three nations of the UK (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) have held devolved power over education since 1999. The government is intending to simplify the system through its White Paper (DfE 2022) which aims to bring all schools into Multi-Academy Trusts, with no schools under the control of the Local Authority (LA) by 2030. However, there appears to have been little consideration of the 'special case' of RE in this new system.

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Schreiner (2013) has noted that there exist in Europe three distinct approaches to the structure of RE: RE is either organised by the state, by religious communities or as in England (and a number of other countries) by a collaboration between the two. The proposals in the White Paper largely remove both the state (at either local or national level) and religious communities from direct involvement in RE in schools which do not have a religious foundation.

Currently in England, all statutory subjects (other than RE) have a National Curriculum which must be taught in LA maintained schools. Academies and Free schools must teach a broad and balanced curriculum, which includes English, mathematics, sciences, and RE (Roberts and Danechi 2019) that Ofsted expect to be ‘at least as ambitious as the National Curriculum’ (Spielman 2018: np). Presently in England, each of the 151 Local Authorities must constitute a Standing Advisory Council on RE (SACRE), a body made up of representatives of the Church of England, other faiths and denominations, teachers and the authority. This body has a statutory responsibility to advise the authority about RE and Collective Worship. In practice, they are fundamentally the same as the quinquennial Agreed Syllabus Conference, who create the RE syllabus for authority-maintained schools in the area. Academies and Free Schools must teach RE but can create their own syllabus, and most schools with a religious character can teach RE according to their own aims and syllabi.

I have long been sceptical about the likelihood of statutory change in the legislation around RE (e.g. Smalley 2020b), but I think that such a change is now more likely than at any time in the last 30 years, due largely to the UK Government’s education White Paper and the priorities outlined in the 2022 Queen’s Speech. Legislative change has taken place in Wales, where the (Curriculum and Assessment Wales Act 2021) renamed the statutory subject as Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE) and placed it within the Humanities Area of Learning and Experience. All Welsh school curricula (including schools with a religious character or foundation) must include RVE that is objective, critical and pluralistic and has regard for the RVE provision within the Curriculum for Wales. Agreed Syllabuses still exist but they are expected to follow the national curriculum guidance (Sandberg 2022).

Cooling (2022) and Chater (2022a, 2022b) have both written recently urging reform of the RE system in England, but have no solutions to how RE’s support should be structured in their respective articles, with Chater (2022b, 2) suggesting that:

Perhaps in due course this journal could host articles positing a range of structural models?

Boldly, this paper does suggest a solution to RE’s structural problem but will first outline the position of some other recent advocates for change and analyse some relevant aspects of the *Opportunities for All* White Paper.

## Recent structural suggestions

There has been a ‘centralising tendency’ in the debate around RE since the 1970s with the curriculum working papers, suggesting a common approach to the local curricula (HMI 1977), followed by publications such as the *Local Curriculum Framework* (NCC 1991), *SCAA model syllabuses* (1994), the QCA (2004) framework and the REC (2013)

*Curriculum Framework*. However, these were all trying to wrestle simply with the *curriculum* issue.

In the last ten years, the *Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life* (CORAB 2015), and the *RE for REal* project (Dinham and Shaw 2015), also suggested centralisation of *curriculum*, but despite Dinham suggesting ‘clarity of purpose, content and structure is essential’ (Dinham 2021, 60, italics mine) firm structural proposals to support and monitor RE were not evident, merely an assertion that RE specialists should deliver a national *curriculum* (Dinham and Shaw 2020). Clarke and Woodhead’s *New Settlement(s)* (2015, 2018) suggested a sort of National Syllabus writing council and strengthened SACREs. More recently, the Commission on RE (2018) made its recommendations about Local Advisory Networks for Religion and Worldviews (LANRWs) replacing SACREs. Whilst Chater (2022a) does call for new structures, he makes one structural proposal of a single Religion and Worldviews Association, for which he gives no indication of purpose, and as Cooling (2022) points out, no indication of how it might be achieved. Clarke and Woodhead suggested:

a national ‘Advisory Council on Religion, Beliefs and Values’ (ACRBV), consisting of RE professionals appointed by the Secretary of State on the basis of their relevant expertise in the subject. The ACRBV would work in consultation with relevant professional bodies, representatives of religion or belief groups, and local groups like SACREs. The ACRBV would also produce guidance on delivering the subject, to be issued by the Secretary of State. (Theos 2018, 10)

However, they also recommended strengthening the local SACRE system, suggesting three main roles for SACREs:

a) to assist in the local delivery of the new RE (or RBV) curriculum, and to be consulted about the development of that curriculum b) to assist in strengthening links between RE (or RBV) and FE and HE institutions, and between RE (or RBV) local religion and belief c) to assist in developing, and then delivering, the faith aspects of the government’s approach to community integration and cohesion. (Clarke and Woodhead 2018, 29)

They would be reconstituted, properly resourced and support all schools in the local authority area. The Commission on Religious Education (2018) suggested that SACREs should be renamed ‘Local Advisory Networks for Religion and Worldviews’ (LANRW) and be reconstituted with a wider membership. LANRWs would help implement a national entitlement in all local schools. Their roles would be to providing information, support and resources, connect schools with local faith communities, provide CPD, potentially develop programmes of study and promote good community relations. Dave Francis (2021) has thought through some of the implications of these ideas and believes that a renewed LAN system has potential to be an effective support structure for local Religion and Worldviews education. Some of these ideas have been piloted in the recent ‘LAN Project’ (which Chater encouraged SACREs to join at the end of his essay) and discussed in the *Still Standing* report (Clinton 2021), which showed many of the internal changes to SACREs were possible without legislative change, that democratic involvement was important, and that funding and resourcing were key.

Of course, none have yet found a solution to the ‘dual system’ which sees some schools with a religious character offer a very different sort of RE from other maintained schools, or at least a solution which is acceptable to all involved in those systems.

## Opportunities for All

At the state opening of the UK Parliament in May 2022, the then Prince Charles (now King Charles III) stated that the government's reforms to education 'will help every child fulfil their potential wherever they live'. This follows the White Paper that was published at the end of March 2022 and presents education as part of the government's 'levelling up' agenda, casting education's aims as solely economic. Religious Education is certainly one area which does require 'levelling up': the recent report into SACRE funding showed the wide discrepancies in funding, with a few well-funded SACREs and many insufficiently funded to carry out their duties (Clinton, Smalley, and Weston 2021). It may be worth noting that the Minister in charge of 'levelling up' at the time was former Education Secretary Michael Gove MP, who apologised for the unintended consequences to RE of his English Baccalaureate (EBacc) reforms (REC, 2013, 8). These reforms provide a list of academic subjects which the government encourage all pupils to complete, in order to help pupils continue education post 16 and thereby achieve economic success, and which do not include RE. This economic aim of education should come as no surprise with one previous Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson MP stating in July 2020, 'The purpose of education is to give people the skills they need to get a good and meaningful job' (Weston, 2022). The next Secretary of State for Education and author of the White Paper, Nadhim Zahawi (2021), noted in his first speech in that role to the Conservative Party Conference in July 2021 that:

A one grade improvement in GCSE mathematics is associated with an estimated increase of £14,500 in additional lifetime earnings.<sup>1</sup>

It is therefore consistent that the focus of the White Paper is on reading and writing, in order for every child to fulfil their [economic] potential. This is to be achieved by ensuring, in the titles of the four chapters of the paper:

- an excellent teacher for every child
- high standards of curriculum, behaviour and attendance
- targeted support for every child who needs it
- a stronger and fairer school system (DfE 2022)

This paper will focus on the structural implications for RE of the fourth of these ambitions, but Deborah Weston (2022) has produced a very detailed SWOT Analysis of the paper through an RE lens, and due consideration should be given to some of her more salient points first.

The White Paper aims for highly skilled teachers: high-quality teaching is identified as the most important factor in education (DfE 2022, 15) and there are promises of investment in ongoing training. This kind of level of investment is needed in RE. According to the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE 2018), in 53% of primary schools had some RE delivered by a Higher Level Teaching Assistant – not a qualified teacher. There is evidence that recruitment of teachers of RE in secondary is almost always below the number required (NATRE 2019), that the number of hours allocated to train primary teachers to deliver RE averages out at three hours (Commission on Religious Education 2018), and that the hours of RE delivered in secondary schools by

those without a relevant post 18 qualification in the subject is the highest of all subjects. This is known because Luke Pollard MP asked a Parliamentary written question which elicited this response from Schools' Minister Robin Walker MP in April 2022:

25.2% of Religious Education (RE) hours taught were by a teacher with no relevant post-A level qualification in that subject in the 2019/20 academic year. This compares with 12.2% across English Baccalaureate subjects. Information on subjects taught and teacher post-A level qualifications is published in the annual 'school workforce in England' statistical publication. (UK Government, 2022a)

Within the White Paper there is mention of specialist National Professional Qualifications (NPQ) being available to encourage expertise within specialist areas of the curriculum. It could be that one way for the government to address some of the inherent weaknesses in the RE teacher supply could be through provision of an RE or religious literacy NPQ.

Chapter 2 of the White Paper states that these highly skilled teachers should be delivering 'a broad, academic, knowledge-rich curriculum' (DfE 2022, 25). It notes that there are concerns with curriculum design being left to schools (DfE 2022, 26). The proposed solution is an 'arm's length curriculum body building on the success of the Oak National Academy' (DfE 2022, 27), an organisation which initially provided resources for online teaching in all subjects during the coronavirus pandemic. There is a promise to provide for:

Each subject ... a choice of resources, providing variety for teachers. This sector-led approach will draw on expertise and inputs from across the country, involving teachers, schools, trusts, subject associations, national centres of excellence and educational publishers. (DfE 2022, 27).

The then Schools' Minister, Robin Walker MP, has confirmed this offer will include RE at Key stages 1 to 4 (UK Government 2022b). This will be difficult in respect of RE if there are so many curricula for the body to provide resources for, and there have been concerns about the 'sort' of RE provided by Oak so far (e.g. Brent 2021, 124). However, and I am straying into *curriculum* problems here, I have long suggested that the 'local' argument for Agreed Syllabuses no longer holds true (Smalley 2020b). There is work being done by the REC, producing frameworks and exemplars, building on the recently published draft of *Religion and Worldviews in the Classroom: Developing a Worldviews Approach* (Pett 2022) which includes a Revised National Statement of Entitlement, one of the purposes of which is to provide a 'standard' for RE.

Over the last 30 years, successive governments have each reformed education. The period from 1988, when the National Curriculum was introduced in England, was described as 'ten years of unrelenting educational reform' by one of the architects of that programme, Sir Michael Barber (in Whelan 2013, 34). The incoming 1997 Blair (New Labour) government put Education reforms as a priority. Initiatives such as the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies led to initial improvements in numeracy and literacy, but then plateaued after 2002 and have not seen significant real progress since (Fullan 2015; Whelan 2013). When the current government came to power in 2010 (initially as part of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats) the educational priority was to 'close the gap' of achievement between those pupils from 'privileged' and 'underprivileged' backgrounds (Laws, 2013). After 12 years in power, this gap appears to have

widened. But these advances are always measured solely in terms of literacy and numeracy; thus, the White Paper can rejoice in the success of the improvement of 7-year-olds performance in the Phonics Screening Check it introduced in 2012 (DfE 2021, 24). At first the government's desire to 'drive up standards', in Chapter 2 of the White Paper, seems to be a much broader offer, with mention of a 'broad, ambitious curriculum' (DfE 2022, 25) and 'sport, music and cultural opportunities' (29) but it is clear that schools' focus must be on 'raising standards of literacy and numeracy' (30). Therefore, there will be 'dedicated English and maths hubs [that] will support schools to drive up literacy and numeracy standards, continuing our emphasis on mastery and systematic synthetic phonics' (DfE 2022, 30). There is again encouragement of EBacc subjects with 'hubs' for modern foreign languages and no specific mention of RE. This clearly demonstrates the government's economic educational priorities, but it may be that these models of support could be part of the structural solution to the problem of how to support RE – through hubs.

### **A fully trust led system with a single regulatory approach**

The main structural change to the education system is outlined in Chapter 4 of the White Paper: a fully Trust led system, which the paper states will be 'stronger and fairer' (DfE 2022, 43), despite the fact that research shows that maintained schools outperform academies in Ofsted inspection terms, at least (Angel Solutions 2022). It aims that by 2030 all schools will be part of 'strong Multi-Academy Trusts'. Local Authorities will be able to form trusts, but will otherwise face the prospect of having no schools to run. LAs, it is claimed, will have a 'clear role' in championing the interests of children and helping collaboration between trusts. It is noteworthy that schools with a religious character, or 'Church and faith schools' as the White Paper somewhat unusually terms them, will also be expected to form or join Multi-Academy Trusts, albeit with the existing 'freedoms and protections' they currently have. This is the closest reference to RE in the paper, for the 'freedoms and protections' of schools with a religious character, whilst including admissions policies, also includes RE and Collective Worship 'freedoms'.

Whilst Trusts will be held to account for high standards, it is not Local Authorities which will do this. Local Authorities will have a 'strengthened role': 'SEND, Children's Social Care, attendance, admissions, place planning and other key areas' (DfE 2022, 53). The DfE will continue to 'steward the system', but through the Regions. The current Regional Schools' Commissioners are to become Regional Directors and will 'act as the single regulatory interface' (DfE 2022, 55), bringing together functions which are currently distributed across the DfE and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).

RE does not have the national benchmark of a National Curriculum, nor the political support of a 'privileged' subject such as English or MFL. Other 'non-core' subjects have experienced decline in recent years in England. It is somewhat insightful that Chater (2022a) compares RE to Design Technology. However, Design Technology has experienced problems such as a reduction in curriculum time, declining numbers of well-trained teachers and fewer pupils studying it, particularly in academies outside of LA control – despite it being a subject required by the National Curriculum in England (Tuckett 2022). RE's anomalous situation, of local syllabi and monitoring has, to an extent, protected it from some of these pressures: examination entries remain relatively



high and there are many local support groups for teachers of RE organised by SACREs (Smalley 2020a). It therefore seems an obvious danger that in a fully trust-led system, where LAs have no schools to run, RE may be treated like any other subject, and lose the 'special' nature that RE currently has, being overseen by SACREs.

It is the LA's duty to establish and support the work of SACREs – without them – with no LA maintained schools, there is likely to be a severe lack of local support activity. There is already precedent: The Isles of Scilly is the first LA in the country with all of its schools being part of a MAT. When the DfE was asked if they needed to have a SACRE, they were quietly given permission not to. If the primary function of a SACRE is to advise the Authority what to do in its schools, there does seem little point in having them in a fully trust led system.

Within the DfE, there does appear to be a willingness, or at least an acknowledgement, that there will need to be a change to the law around RE and SACREs. Thanks to Janet Daby MP for asking this written question

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to the Schools White Paper published on 28 March 2022, what assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the proposals in that White Paper on Standard Advisory Councils on Religious Education and Agreed Syllabus Conferences as the existing bodies used to determine the locally agreed syllabus for Religious Education. (UK Government 2022b)

Which elicited this response from Robin Walker MP in April 2022

The Schools White Paper sets out the department's long-term vision for a school system that helps every child to fulfil their potential. However, there is still more technical work to be done along the way to realise this vision. The department recognises the important role that Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACRE) play in supporting the provision of RE in maintained schools. The department is aware that the ambition for a fully trust-led system will have an impact on SACREs. This is something that will be considered as we move towards greater academisation. (UK Government 2022b)

No one has asked about or mentioned Collective Worship and I suspect that there are many in government who would like to avoid contentious debate about the matter, but importantly, one of the other functions of a SACRE is:

to consider 'determination' applications from schools who wish to take advantage of the provisions of the 1988 Act and opt for Collective Worship other than that which is 'mainly or wholly of a broadly Christian character'. (1996 Education Act)

However, this system of applying to a SACRE for a determination only applies to a Local Authority maintained school. An Academy which wishes to seek such a determination must apply to the DfE through the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). Yes, it is a seeming bizarre situation that the funding agency considers Collective Worship! Now with such a function sitting so uneasily with their remit, I would envisage that this is one function that might be brought into the remit of the Regional Director. Perhaps, they might need a body to advise them in such matters, because RE and Collective Worship are not like any other subject, as exemplified by the Batley Grammar School incident cited by Cooling (2022). Whilst the government recognises the support function of SACREs and values them (UK Government 2022b), adequately funding SACREs to carry out this necessary support and monitoring role runs counter to everything else in



the White Paper, which sees schools and trusts regulated by the Regional Director and supported by regional hubs

## Regional Advisory Councils on RE

I therefore boldly suggest that there is a case to be made to the DfE that the solution to the curriculum problem is with the MATs and the schools, remembering that all schools (including those with a religious character) will be part of a MAT and noting that there needs to be regulation and support, because schools cannot be ‘trusted’ to do curriculum design well – especially in such a politically sensitive subject. The structure of that support, I would argue needs to be regional: a regional advisory body, constituted by the Regional Director.

Let us gaze into the government’s crystal ball and wonder what might the legislation look like:

RACREs are regional advisory councils, made mandatory in the 2023 Education Act and established by each Regional Director, who meet once each term.

In each region, the Regional Director must appoint representatives to each of three groups, representing respectively:

**group A:** Christian denominations and other such organisations as, in the Regional Director’s opinion, will appropriately reflect the principal faith and belief communities in the region and nation

**group B:** teachers of Religion and Worldviews in the schools and Trusts in the Region.

**group C:** school leaders in the region; including representatives of any MAT with over 9 schools, each local authority in the region and the Regional Teaching School Hub; representatives of accredited providers of ITE and CPD in the region.

These three groups are clearly influenced by the SACRE model. The Church of England’s response to the Commission on RE’s recommended reforms suggests that they are not precious about their own group (Genders 2018), but it seems wise to me to include the politically strong faiths and other belief communities. No doubt Chater (2022a) would still see this as producer capture. But importantly, this body would not be creating a syllabus, only advising and monitoring. This purposeful separation of curriculum and support functions hopefully insulates this body against accusations of the unfair influence of faith and belief communities on the curriculum. It seems apposite that those involved in teaching about an institutional worldview might seek advice about that view from those (noting the plural) who inhabit that worldview. Some may question as to whether, if the Trusts are represented as school leaders, teachers need their own group. However, both Cooling and Chater agree that teachers should be the final decision makers about curriculum and Christopher (2022) stresses the importance of the teacher voice. I am sure that no-one would want teachers to be the forgotten voice of RE. The inclusion of LAs in the council enables some democratic input into the body – one of the criticisms of the RE Commission recommendations. In this imagined legislation I am using the name Religions and Worldviews for the subject. Personally, I am not precious about the name of the subject, RE or Religion and Worldviews, but if we are dreaming of the future, let us imagine it is one consistent with the drive of the RE Council.

The purposes of RACREs set out by the legislation are:

- to advise the Regional Director on teaching about Religion and Worldviews in schools, which is legally required in all state-maintained schools, and about the numbers of pupils withdrawn from that provision.
- to advise the Regional Director on the conduct of daily Collective Worship, which is legally required in all maintained schools, and about the numbers of pupils withdrawn from that provision.
- to consider ‘determination’ applications from schools who wish to take advantage of the provisions of the 1988 Act and opt for Collective Worship other than that which is ‘mainly or wholly of a broadly Christian character’.
- to publish, for the Regional Director and the Secretary of State, an annual report with respect to the exercise of their functions

I think these statutory duties successfully combine all that SACREs and the ESFA do, with a little ‘beefing up’. They advise the Regional Director on such matters, whom as the ‘single regulatory approach’ may take action.

The RACRE should also:

- monitor the provision and quality of teaching about Religion and Worldviews according to national standards\*, including the recruitment and deployment of highly skilled teachers.
- provide advice and support on the effective teaching of Religion and Worldviews; provide advice to MATs and schools on methods of teaching, the choice of teaching materials and the provision of teacher training, informed by the best research and evidence.
- offer advice to schools and Trusts, concerning how national standards\* can be interpreted so as to fit in with a broad, balanced and ambitious curriculum.
- ensure the prudent use of funds that are made available to enable tailored support to schools and colleges, including networking of teachers, to take place, to improve the teaching of Religion and Worldviews.
- monitor and assure that representatives of faith and belief groups who speak to pupils in schools or welcome pupils to their places of worship, are able to do so in a way that encourages pupils to develop religious literacy in an objective, critical and pluralistic way.

\* Including, but not limited to the REC National Statement of Entitlement, the C of E Statement of Entitlement and the CES Curriculum Handbook

These other, support and advice functions include a network of RE Hubs, an element of supervision of faith leaders who interact with schools which I think is a measure that some within government would see as either combatting extremism, or encouraging pluralism. Since many Trusts may include schools with (and without) a religious character, I think that there is a neatness to using REC and Church documents to establish a standard. I hope that this usage would be agreeable for all concerned.

The White Paper proposes no change to the work of the inspectorate, Ofsted, who would still inspect schools to judge the quality of the overall quality of the education provided (and not the particular quality or suitability of the RE curriculum). Schools with a religious character would still, I anticipate, want to inspect the religious ethos of the school and quality of the denominational RE and Collective Worship they provide. Perhaps, these reports might inform the work of the RACRE.

This is just my personal daydreaming. It is not meant to reflect the ideas of any group that I am associated with or represent. It is very much a draft. But I think, and I hope, that it may be the foundation of a National Plan for RE that the RE community has been calling for over recent years.

## Conclusion

This paper began by noting the particular way that RE has been structured in England, as a collaboration between religious communities and the state. It reviewed some of the proposed changes to the situation of RE proposed by wise thinkers over the recent past. It has analysed the White Paper published by the UK government in March 2022 and considered what implications for RE might flow from an educative situation in England where all schools are detached from Local Authority control, and part of Multi-Academy Trusts. Responding to Mark Chater's call for radical solutions, it has finished by suggesting that a renewed structure for the monitoring and support of RE might be on a regional basis, with curricula written by Trusts, monitored against National Standards and supported by funded local RE hubs.

## Note

1. Zahawi was quoting from a government report Hodge, L. Little, A, Weldon, M *GCSE attainment and lifetime earnings Research report* available from [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/993202/GCSE\\_Attainment\\_and\\_Lifetime\\_Earnings\\_PDF3A.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/993202/GCSE_Attainment_and_Lifetime_Earnings_PDF3A.pdf)

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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