

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: rationale, vision and intent for RE in Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, Haringey and North Somerset

A rationale for Religious Education in Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol, Haringey and North Somerset

The first aspect of our rationale underpinning this agreed syllabus concerns the areas of life, particularly modern life, where an *understanding of religious and non-religious worldviews* is vital if children and young people are to gain the insights they need to make the most of their opportunities in life and to cope with the difficulties they will inevitably face.

A second aspect of our rationale reflects the *history and location of the areas in which the syllabus is taught*. Within this syllabus, agreed in very diverse urban and rural local authorities, teachers are encouraged to draw pupils' attention to the local personalities, places, achievements, issues and changes that have contributed to the richness of religion and belief in the area.

1. Understanding religions and beliefs

Religious education is important because it helps children and young people gain *wisdom* in the following areas of life:

- **artistic, musical and literary:** many great artists, composers, musicians and writers had deep religious and/or philosophical motivation and inspiration for their work. Many use religious themes and employ references to religious literature and thought in their work. How can we understand the insights they are communicating without a knowledge of some key religious ideas and stories?
- **cultural, historical and philosophical:** what is the meaning of life? Where are we going? What is 'true'? What is 'best'? Where do we come from? Why are people different and why do they have different tastes and preferences? What is to be gained from a diverse society? How can we understand the history and traditional cultures of Britain and other countries without a knowledge and understanding of the religious and philosophical traditions which helped to form them?
- **moral and ethical:** in the light of the many moral and ethical dilemmas we meet in life, ranging from the personal to the global, what is it to lead a good life? How do we know? Whom should we trust? How can we decide? Religious and philosophical principles and insights can help guide us when faced with moral dilemmas.
- **personal:** How can I be happy? How can I best manage my relationships? What skills do I need to succeed in life? What emotional resources do I need to maintain a healthy lifestyle? We can get insights from religions and philosophies studied in RE and get practice in 'skills for life', such as

empathy, sensitivity, humility, and in thinking and communicating well.

- **political, social and psychological:** How can we best understand the relationships between people? Why do religion and belief feature in the news so much? What do religious and belief groups say about various contemporary issues? How can we best understand the religious practices and festivals celebrated by our neighbours? What motivates people? Why are our public institutions set up in the way they are? How do/should people behave when in positions of power? How do/should people react when others have power over them? Without a knowledge of religions and beliefs our understanding of these big questions will be incomplete.

2. The history and location of AMV area

In exploring these areas of life, this syllabus prompts teachers, *where appropriate to their school community*, to introduce local features as well as those with national or global significance.

Amongst the topics for study in RE lessons could be religious and social reformers, past and present. These could be pioneers of the Sunday School movement, Christian Saints and founders of non-Christian religious groups and centres, Church of England and Roman Catholic bishops, writers of prose, poetry and song, anti-slave-trade and anti-racism campaigners and founders of new religious and cultural traditions.

It is worth exploring the diversity of religion and belief in the area and within traditions too. Recent surveys have revealed organised groups of Bahá'ís, Tibetan and other Buddhists, Sai Baba followers, Pagans, Druids, Rastafarians and independent and black-led Christian churches in our areas. Many new religious movements are represented and Humanists also have a presence throughout the AMV area.

As well as individuals and local communities, schools may choose to illustrate broader investigations with a study of places of significance for religions and beliefs. There are many buildings worthy of study: monasteries, abbeys, churches, cathedrals, synagogues, mosques, gurdwaras, temples and other 'sacred spaces'. Often there are exhibitions of art and artefacts in museums and galleries that will yield good learning in an RE context. Such visits have marvellous cross-curricular learning opportunities particularly where pupils can explore the links between RE, history and art.

Not all of these can be studied within the RE curriculum, of course, so this syllabus will indicate where opportunities exist to choose specific examples for local study where the school feels it is appropriate to do so.

A vision and statement of intent for Religious Education in Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol, Haringey and North Somerset

Here, a vision is a statement of how we would like things to be. The purpose of the vision is to motivate and inspire teachers and learners to reach towards the goals within that vision.

Our vision:

RE in our area is about Awareness, Mystery and Value.

Pupils who follow this syllabus gain a deep awareness of their own and others' identities; they wrestle with the mysteries of life and the answers given by a wide variety of religions and beliefs; they develop a clear sense of what is of real value in world today.

Pupils who follow this syllabus gain a deep knowledge and understanding of the teachings, practices and life stories expressed in a variety of ways within Christianity and other principal religions and world views. Through reflection on their own beliefs and values in the light of their learning, they grow in respect for themselves and others.

Pupils who follow this syllabus encounter the transformative power of religions and beliefs in people's lives – in our area, in the UK and in the wider world. They demonstrate curiosity about people of faith and commitment who have changed individual lives, society and culture. Through RE, they feel compelled to imagine and contribute to the creation of a better world for all.

How is this vision for RE to be put into practice? The following notes in relation to two questions may help:

1. What constitutes successful RE in our context?
2. What constitutes a religiously educated person in our context?

1. Successful RE

It is important for teachers to know whether what they are doing in RE is successful or not. Success, in this sense, might be measured in a variety of ways, though there may be 'successes' that are not so easily measured.

- First, there is the success of the pupils, not just in terms of levels of attainment, but also their enjoyment of and engagement with the subject; there is no reason why RE should not be amongst the most popular subjects in school – it relates to pupils' own interests and concerns, is challenging, powerful and meaningful, offers opportunities for pupils to make their own reflective contributions and is open to the whole range of active learning strategies, both in and outside of the classroom.

Ask: are the pupils enjoying RE and achieving as well as they can? How

do I know? How could I improve pupils' application to and enjoyment of RE?

- Next, there is the success of teaching a broad, balanced and compelling RE curriculum. The programme of study in this syllabus is designed to provide a balanced coverage of religions and beliefs and to focus on learning about and from key areas of the subject. These 'areas of enquiry' are revisited several times at increasingly challenging levels, so should ensure deepening learning over a broader range of religions and beliefs over time.

By 'balanced RE', we mean:

- balancing 'learning ABOUT religions and beliefs' and 'learning FROM religions and beliefs';
- balancing study of Christianity and the other principal faith and belief traditions;
- balancing knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes;
- balancing the use of core and supplementary questions in partnership with the study of individual religions and beliefs.

Ask: is this programme being followed in sufficient depth through our schemes of learning? Is our scheme of learning well balanced? How do I know? How could I improve the programme?

- Also, there is the idea that success is sometimes hidden from view. Inevitably, one might never know how 'successful' the RE programme has been, especially if pupils cannot or choose not to communicate their reflections within their time in school.

Ask: is the programme providing the sorts of stimulating and thought-provoking learning activities that are likely to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development? How do I know? How could I improve such opportunities?

A statement from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), provides some further markers of 'successful RE':

'There is a growing consensus among educators that knowledge of religions and beliefs is an important part of a quality education and that it can foster democratic citizenship, mutual respect, enhance support for religious freedom, and promote an understanding of societal diversity.'¹

In terms of the impact on individuals, therefore, we might hope to see pupils taking an interest in how they can make a helpful difference in their communities, responding thoughtfully and respectfully to those with different cultural or religious backgrounds or with different beliefs from their own, and enjoying the diversity within the class, school or community.

¹ The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) advisory council of experts on freedom of religion or belief, 2007. *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR, p.18.

2. A Religiously Educated Person

For those following AMV 2016, being 'religiously educated' is about pupils' achievement in the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes contained within and promoted through this agreed syllabus. It is not about 'being more religious' or 'becoming religious' or even 'more moral and spiritual'; these are not deliberately planned outcomes of the programme of study, though of course it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that a pupil might change their life in some radical way because of something they have learnt through RE. That is at the heart of the power of the subject and the responsibility teachers have.

In the context of religious education, the [Learning Outcomes](#) in the assessment scheme, provide some indicators of what a religiously educated person might look like. However, not all pupils will develop great depth of knowledge and understanding of religions and beliefs, or the ability to think and communicate clearly and critically about the issues raised in the programme of study.

In another, more inclusive sense, a religiously educated person might simply be one who has undertaken a religious education programme of learning and has responded positively and with interest to it. There will be those who attain well in RE, and gain national qualifications, but there will be other individuals who, for whatever reason, do not reach such heights, yet will have gained personal insights and experiences from the RE programme that will stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives.

A religiously educated person will have experienced a deepening understanding of their own religious perspective and the place of religious faith in society today. This will be coupled with empathy and understanding of others arising from a positive encounter with other faiths and beliefs.

A 'religiously educated' person, therefore may be one who has attained good grades in tests and examinations, but equally there will be those whose achievements are less easily measured or described. Such gains may be personal, even 'spiritual' but no less worthwhile or important.