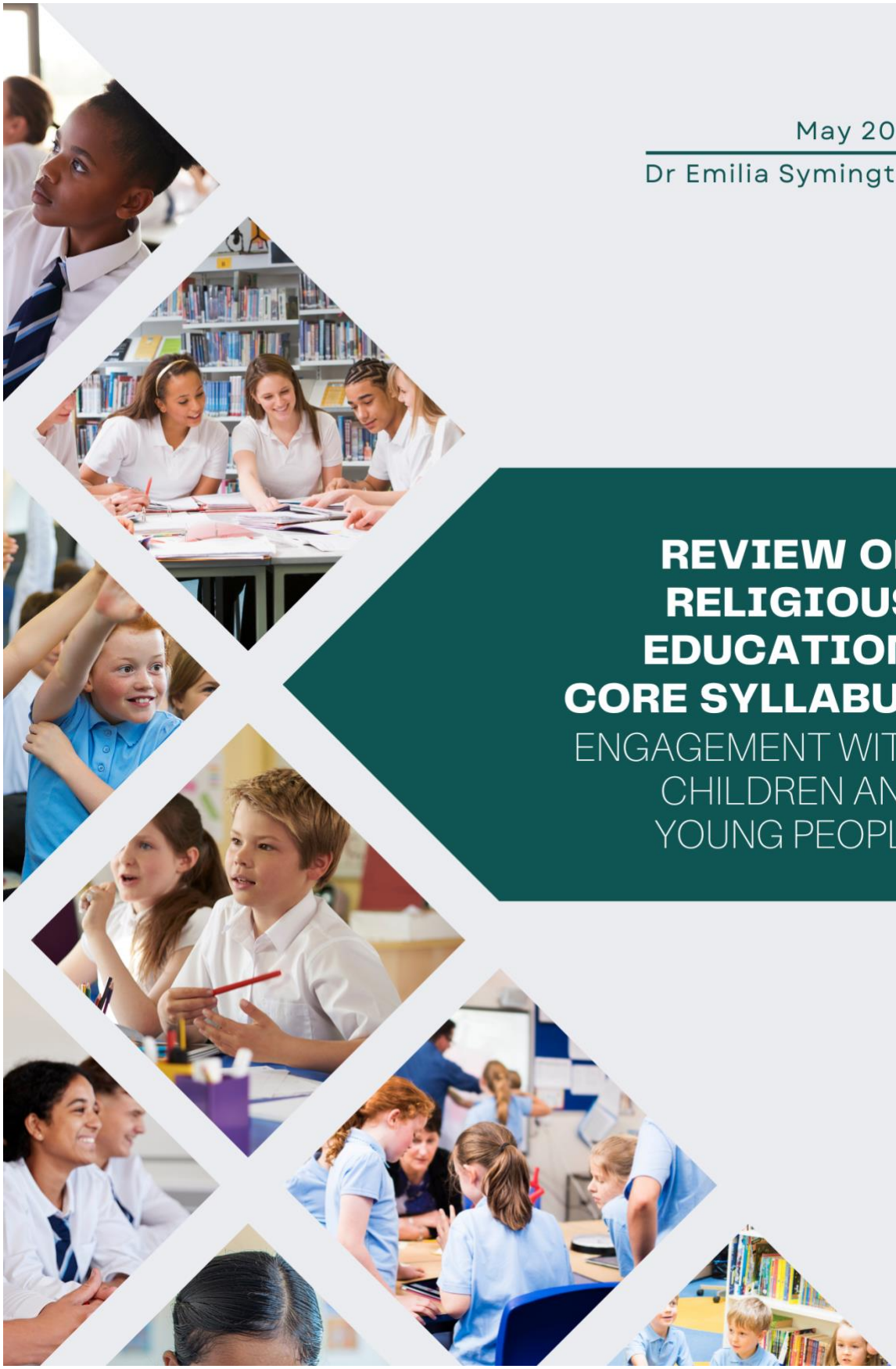

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Dr Emilia Symington

REVIEW OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CORE SYLLABUS

ENGAGEMENT WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from engagement with children and young people undertaken as part of the Review of the Religious Education (RE) Core Syllabus in Northern Ireland. The engagement was commissioned by the Department of Education to ensure that children and young people's views, experiences and priorities are reflected within the wider review process.

The engagement took place in the context of the Department of Education's response to the Supreme Court judgment on Religious Education and collective worship in Northern Ireland schools. The Department's specification for this work states that, in light of the Supreme Court ruling, the revised RE Core Syllabus should: treat RE as an academic discipline; develop critical and analytical skills; retain Christianity as the central focus; be pluralist and inclusive; and prepare children and young people for future learning and citizenship. This report uses those five areas as the organising framework for the findings.

The research involved focus groups and age-appropriate consultation activities with children and young people across a range of settings, including primary, post-primary, integrated, maintained, controlled, grammar, Irish-medium and special school contexts, as well as a youth group. In total, the engagement included 82 participants aged between 8 and 21.

Across the focus groups, participants generally spoke positively about RE. Many pupils described RE as enjoyable, interesting and meaningful, particularly when it involved discussion, debate, creative activities, visitors, visits, real-life topics and opportunities to explore different beliefs. Pupils valued RE when it was treated as a serious curriculum subject with substantive content, skilled teaching and clear relevance.

A key finding was that pupils understood RE as a subject capable of developing critical and analytical skills. Older pupils in particular described RE as a space for questioning, discussion, interpretation and independent judgement. They valued opportunities to examine different viewpoints, evaluate arguments, interpret religious texts and form their own views. Pupils also described RE as a safe space where young people could discuss difficult questions of belief, identity, morality and difference, provided discussion was respectful and well managed.

Participants recognised Christianity as a prominent and locally significant focus of RE, particularly in schools with a Christian ethos. Many pupils saw a rationale for retaining Christianity as a central focus because of its historical, cultural and community significance in Northern Ireland. However, support for Christianity did not usually mean support for an exclusively Christian curriculum. Pupils often distinguished between

learning about Christianity and being required to believe it, and many supported learning about Christianity alongside other religions and worldviews.

Participants generally supported RE being pluralist and inclusive. Across different sectors and age groups, pupils argued that RE should help them understand people who believe differently from themselves, engage with a range of religious and non-religious worldviews, and develop respect for others. Some felt that RE should respond to the beliefs represented in the classroom, while others recognised that complete coverage of all religions and worldviews would be impossible. Pupils differed on whether RE should be taught from within a school's particular ethos or from a more neutral standpoint, but there was broad support for RE as a shared curriculum space where difference could be discussed respectfully.

A recurring theme across the findings was that pupils did not generally see Christianity and pluralism as mutually exclusive. Many wanted RE to retain a strong focus on Christianity while also engaging meaningfully with other religions, non-religious worldviews, and contemporary ethical issues. In addition, the issue of 'opting out' revealed a related tension between respecting freedom of belief and ensuring access to shared curriculum learning. Many pupils felt that RE should be understood as part of the curriculum rather than as religious observance, and therefore argued that pupils should not be withdrawn simply because they do not personally share the beliefs being studied. However, the findings also highlighted the importance of ensuring that RE is genuinely inclusive, educational and non-coercive, so that pupils from different religious and non-religious backgrounds can participate meaningfully.

Finally, pupils frequently described RE as preparation for life beyond school. While some pupils identified specific future uses connected to family life, religious practice, or particular vocations, most described RE's value in broader civic terms. They saw RE as helping young people understand difference, interpret current affairs, engage with moral questions, develop their own beliefs, and participate more thoughtfully in society.

Overall, the findings suggest that children and young people want RE to be serious, inclusive, relevant, and intellectually meaningful. They value RE when it provides substantive knowledge, supports critical thinking, recognises the significance of Christianity, engages respectfully with religious and non-religious diversity, and helps pupils make sense of themselves, others, and the wider world.

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1 Introduction

On 3 February 2026, the Minister of Education announced a comprehensive response to the Supreme Court judgment on Religious Education and collective worship in Northern Ireland schools. As part of this response, a review was initiated to revise the RE Core Syllabus.

This report presents the findings from engagement with children and young people undertaken as part of that review. The engagement was commissioned by the Department of Education to ensure that the voices and experiences of children and young people are reflected within the wider review process. In recognition that children and young people require distinct, age-appropriate approaches to participation, this strand of work was designed specifically to capture their views in a child-friendly and accessible manner.

The Department's specification for this engagement identified five areas arising from the Supreme Court ruling. It stated that the revised RE Core Syllabus should:

- Treat RE as an academic discipline;
- Develop critical and analytical skills;
- Retain Christianity as the central focus;
- Be pluralist and inclusive;
- Prepare children and young people for future learning and citizenship.

The report begins by outlining the methodology used for the engagement. The findings are then presented under the five areas identified in the review specification, which are outlined in the methodology chapter, before the report draws together the key conclusions for consideration in the wider RE Core Syllabus review process.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative research design was adopted, using focus group discussions and age-appropriate consultation activities. This approach was selected because it allowed children and young people to discuss their experiences in their own words, respond to the views of others, and explore complex issues in an accessible and participatory way. The research schedule used to guide the focus groups is provided in Appendix One.

The Department of Education's specification for this engagement identified five areas arising from the Supreme Court ruling. It stated that the revised RE Core Syllabus should:

- Treat RE as an academic discipline;
- Develop critical and analytical skills;
- Retain Christianity as the central focus;
- Be pluralist and inclusive;
- Prepare children and young people for future learning and citizenship.

While these areas provided the overall structure for the engagement, the sessions were designed to allow participants to raise issues that mattered to them. This meant that the analysis was both deductive and inductive: deductive in that it was shaped by the five areas identified in the specification, and inductive in that it remained open to themes emerging from children and young people's own accounts.

The engagement used a combination of structured discussion questions and participatory activities, with each session adapted to the age, stage and needs of the participants. Activities were designed to be accessible, varied and age-appropriate, enabling children and young people to contribute in different ways. These included open discussion questions, visual prompts, drawing activities, and traffic light or thumbs-based responses to key statements. The quick-response activities provided an accessible way for participants to indicate initial views, while the wider group discussions allowed them to explain their reasoning, qualify their answers, respond to others and develop their views in greater depth.

2.2 Participant Overview

The engagement sought to include a broad range of children and young people, reflecting the Department of Education's requirement to engage with a representative cross-section of participants. Participants were recruited through schools and youth settings. The final sample included children and young people from controlled,

maintained, integrated, grammar, Irish-medium and special school contexts, as well as a youth group of young adults with recent experience of RE in school.

A breakdown of the participant demographics is presented in Table 1.

Identifier	Number of Participants	Gender	Age (in years)
Youth Group	4	1 boy, 3 girls	17-21
Maintained Post-Primary School	10	3 boys, 7 girls	12-16
Controlled Post-Primary School	4	4 boys	12-16
Maintained Primary School	6	3 boys, 3 girls	9-11
Integrated Primary School	8	3 boys, 5 girls	10-11
Controlled Primary School	6	3 boys, 3 girls	8-11
Grammar School	8	2 boys, 6 girls	12-16
Irish-medium School	13	6 boys, 7 girls	9-11
Integrated Post-Primary School	8	2 boys, 6 girls	11-14
Special School	15	10 boys, 5 girls	12-16

Table 1: Participant Overview

Overall, 82 children and young people took part in the engagement. Participants ranged in age from 8 to 21. The groups included a mix of boys and girls and represented a range of educational settings and experiences. Participants were recruited from schools across Northern Ireland, representing a range of localities, including both urban and rural contexts. In the special school setting, a teacher remained in the room during the session to support pupils' participation. This was particularly important for pupils who were non-verbal or who required additional support to communicate their views and responses.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

All participants were fully informed of the purpose, scope, and nature of the research prior to taking part. They were provided with information sheets outlining the aims of the project, the voluntary nature of participation, and the intended use of the data collected. Consent was obtained from all participants, and both parental consent and child consent were required for pupils to participate in the project.

Focus group discussions were audio-recorded for analysis purposes, and participants and parents/carers were informed of this in advance. The information gathered was treated confidentially and anonymised. The sessions took place during the school day in familiar school environments and in line with school safeguarding procedures.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data from the focus group discussions were analysed thematically. This involved reviewing the discussion data to identify recurring patterns, key messages, areas of agreement and areas of divergence across participants and groups. The analysis was guided by the five areas identified in the review specification, paying attention to patterns across age groups and educational settings, while also preserving areas of difference and tension.

2.5 Limitations

The findings in this report provide insight into the experiences, views and priorities of the children and young people who participated. A purposive sampling approach was used to ensure that the engagement included pupils from a range of educational sectors and settings, alongside an appropriate geographical spread. This included attention to representation across primary, post-primary, integrated, controlled, maintained, Irish-medium, grammar and special school contexts. However, the sample was also shaped by the availability of schools and groups within a short engagement period. As a result, while the research captured a broad range of perspectives, it should not be read as statistically representative of all children and young people in Northern Ireland.

3 Findings

The findings are organised around the five areas identified in the Department of Education's specification for the engagement. These headings provide a deductive framework for the analysis, reflecting the five areas arising from the Supreme Court ruling. Within each area, the sub-themes reflect the issues that emerged from children and young people's own accounts of their experiences, views, and priorities.

3.1 Treat RE as an Academic Discipline

Across the focus groups, participants understood religious education (RE) as a subject with substantive content, specialist knowledge, and academic demands. They valued RE when it was taught as a serious curriculum area: one that involves knowledge of religious traditions, opportunities for ethical and personal reflection, and varied methods of learning. At the same time, pupils' comments indicate that the status of RE within schools is sometimes undermined by limited curriculum time, inconsistent provision, and assessment structures that do not always reflect the breadth of learning taking place.

3.1.1 Experiences and methods of learning

As part of the focus groups, pupils were asked to respond to a series of statements using a 'thumbs up,' 'thumbs down,' or 'uncertain' response. These activities provided a useful indication of the overall direction of pupils' views and helped to prompt further discussion. Across the groups, responses were generally positive; most pupils indicated that they liked RE, saw it as a proper school subject, and believed that pupils were generally treated with respect in RE lessons. This was reflected in the participants' wider qualitative comments, where many pupils described RE as enjoyable, interesting, and distinct from other areas of the curriculum.

> *"I do enjoy religion." (Maintained post-primary school)*
>
> *"I like RE, it's enjoyable. I think it's enjoyable to learn about things like that." (Controlled post-primary school)*
>
> *"RE is more fun than other subjects because you're learning about everyone who is different to you and it's nice to know how they live their life." (Integrated primary school)*
>
> *"It's good fun to learn about God." (Special school)*

Participants indicated that teaching methods had a significant impact on how they experienced and valued RE. Across the focus groups, pupils spoke positively about approaches that were interactive, creative and discussion-based. These methods appeared to make RE feel more engaging and memorable.

"In Junior school we did loads of creative stuff. We did a project on Corrie Ten Boom, and we had to research all about her and make a presentation and stuff. And that was a long time ago, but I remember it because it was creative and engaging." (Youth group)

"Our teacher always makes the class more interactive. Sometimes we do role plays of different Bible passages. This year, we've done loads of debates. It's a really interactive subject, and you're learning stuff when you don't actually think you're learning." (Controlled post-primary school)

"We always watch the [Friends and Heroes] movie, and then we would get our RE booklet. It's a wee bit hard for me, because the book is a bit complicated. But I like the video… It's really fun." (Controlled primary school)

"RE is a lot more relaxed than other subjects, so we look forward to coming to the classroom. It's not just sitting in dead silence and copying out of the book. You're talking and debating and you're actively learning." (Grammar school)

Young people also spoke positively about opportunities to learn beyond the normal classroom environment, particularly where RE involved trips or engagements with local faith leaders. Several pupils placed value on learning from those they perceived as having specialist knowledge or lived experience of faith.

"We've done a few trips in RE, like we went down the road to two of the local churches and we got to ask the Ministers questions, and that was fun." (Grammar school)

"I don't think we should do RE in the classroom. We should do it in the chapel. We should learn it from the experts, like the priest. They've studied it… It's always good when [priest] teaches us." (Irish-medium school)

"[Local church leader] comes into school and they teach us more about religion. I like him, I like it when he comes in." (Maintained primary school)

"I went to [Church of Ireland Maintained] primary school. I don't remember very much, but I do remember the minister of the connected church would come in to teach us sometimes… I thought it was great when he came in." (Youth group)

"In December, a Reverend from the local church came in and said Merry Christmas and he told us about the cross and the donkey… I like it when people come in. I think it should happen more." (Special school)

3.1.2 Curriculum content

Pupils were asked to detail the content of their RE lessons. In most primary settings and in the special school, RE was closely associated with Christianity, God, and the Bible.

"I like the story in the Bible where Mary had the baby, and the story with the tomb. I enjoyed the way the stone moved, and the angel was there. I enjoyed that story." (Maintained primary school)

"We learn about miracles in RE. Like we learnt about David, when he got dropped into a pit of lions. Or actually that was Daniel. But yeah, what happened was he got put in a lion's pit, and he didn't get eaten because he was on God's side." (Controlled primary school)

"We learn about Catholicism and Christianity in this school. And like, God and the Bible and Jesus. Oh, and Adam and Eve." (Irish-medium school)

"We learn about Christmas and Easter… Someone from the church comes in and reads the Bible… [And] we learn about the life of Jesus." (Special school)

Pupils also referred to the specific resources and programmes used in RE during primary school. Pupils in the maintained primary school described using *Grow in Love*[1], while pupils in the controlled primary school referred to *Friends and Heroes*[2].

"We do Friends and Heroes. Another teacher comes in and teaches it, usually like a substitute. It's like a cartoon about different Bible stories." (Controlled primary school)

"We do the Grow in Love books in religion" (Maintained primary school)

"I went to [Controlled primary school], and we would have done a programme called Friends and Heroes, and it was like these little characters, and they took you through the Bible. You watched a movie and then we had these little activity books, where we would have followed along. It was really good." (Youth group)

While participants generally referred positively to the primary school resources and programmes, some pupils suggested that they would value the opportunity to move beyond activity-book or programme-based learning towards more substantive engagement with religious content.

"We do the Grow in Love books, but in chapel they read out the Gospel. I like that better, because you learn more about it." (Maintained primary school)

"I think you should be allowed to bring in your Bible when you're doing RE. I read my Bible in the house, and I just think it would be nice if you could bring it to school too." (Irish-medium school)

[1] Grow in Love is a religious education series produced by Veritas.
[2] Friends and Heroes is an animated Bible adventure series for children.

In contrast to the more explicitly Christian content described by pupils in most primary school settings, pupils in the integrated primary school setting described a broader RE curriculum that included multiple religions, festivals and worldviews. Their accounts suggested that RE was often linked to calendar events, cultural celebrations and wider historical learning. This meant that pupils encountered Christianity alongside other religious and non-religious traditions, often through festivals or topics connected to other areas of the curriculum.

> *"We learn about different festivals, kind of like Eid, and we would look at Chinese New Year and Easter as well. And like Hindus, we look at them too." (Integrated primary school)*

> *"In this school we study Chinese New Year, Muslim, humanism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism. If there's a holiday coming up, then you study that religion, like every year at Easter and Christmas we look at Christianity. Sometimes if we're doing history then we learn about that religion too, like we learned about the Germans trying to kill the Jews in RE." (Integrated primary school)*

> *"We're studying the Easter story at the moment, because it was just Easter, but we did Eid before that. We do all the big festivals." (Integrated post-primary school)*

Alongside these differences between school settings, several young people reflected on a perceived shift in content between primary and post-primary education. For many, particularly those who attended primary schools with a Christian ethos, primary RE was often remembered as more explicitly Christian in focus, while post-primary RE was described as incorporating other religions, ethical issues, and social themes.

> *"I went to Christian school, and we only learned about Christianity, but now it's different because we're doing a lot more different religions." (Integrated post-primary school)*

> *"I don't remember in primary school learning about other religions. It definitely was more Christianity focused. But then in high school, I remember we did Christianity too, but we also did Judaism and other religions." (Youth group)*

Participants suggest a broadening of RE beyond explicitly religious content towards social, relational and ethical questions. Pupils in post-primary school described RE as a subject that could address practical issues in young people's lives, such as relationships, discrimination, and respect for others.

> *"We're learning about relationships in RE. We do a lot about feeling comfortable and what does a good relationship look like... So, they give us a scenario, and*

then we kind of just say, is it a healthy or unhealthy kind of relationship." (Maintained post-primary school)

"We're learning about different types of discrimination in school, like racism and sexism." (Grammar school)

This broader pattern was particularly evident in the Integrated Post-Primary school setting, where pupils described a curriculum that moved from Christianity in their first year, towards other religious and ethical topics as pupils progressed through the school.

"In first year, it was mainly Christianity and the peace walls. And then in second year there was a lot more focused on Hinduism, and then we did veganism." (Integrated post-primary school)

"This year we're looking at Islam and the use of hijabs and the ethics around that." (Integrated post-primary school)

"You do Christianity mainly in First Year, like the fables and parables and stuff. You learn all the content, and then you look at other religions as you get higher in the school." (Integrated post-primary school)

Alongside this more expected progression from Christianity to other religions and ethical issues, some participants also recalled more specific or unusual areas of curriculum content that had made a lasting impression.

"I do remember doing one topic that was just what I'm interested in. It was about the layout of churches and church architecture… I feel like there's probably an argument that it's totally unnecessary and not very useful for most people, but I thought it was interesting and I gained a lot from it." (Youth group)

However, pupils also identified gaps in the content covered in RE, and some pupils communicated that they wanted deeper or more specific religious knowledge in particular areas. For example, several pupils mentioned wanting to learn more about differences between Protestants and Catholics.

"In RE, they don't really teach you the difference between Protestants and Catholics. I mean, we did the Spanish Armada, but that wasn't really the same thing. I'd like to learn more about that." (Integrated primary school)

"I was talking to a Catholic friend recently, and some of the things he was saying about what he thought the Protestant Church believed literally shocked me… That's what he should be learning about in RE. RE should look at what other Christians believe. That's important to know." (Youth group)

“In this country, there’s quite a lot of problems between Protestant and Catholics. We should probably learn more about that, I think.” (Integrated post-primary school)

“It's important to learn about the main beliefs that are in our country, which is Protestants and Catholics, and all children in this country should learn the differences and, more importantly, the similarities… I think in this country, it would be much more important to get a really good understanding of the differences between Catholic and Protestant faith. To me, that’s way more important than learning about other religions.” (Youth group)

“There isn't enough of looking at other types of Christianity. We only really look at the Catholic Church.” (Maintained post-primary school)

Pupils also made suggestions for other areas of religious content they would like to explore. These suggestions varied across settings, but they shared a common desire for RE to move beyond the topics pupils already knew well and create space for more specific, less familiar or pupil-led areas of study. In some cases, pupils wanted deeper knowledge within Christian tradition, while others were curious about alternative religions and worldviews.

“Do you know the way there are thousands of saints in the world? Maybe we could find out more about them and find out like what they actually do? We don’t do them in religion.” (Maintained primary school)

“Can we learn more about religions we don't mention much? Like, Shinto or something.” (Special school)

“I’d like to learn Paganism. Maybe we could have a suggestions box where we could say what religions we wanted to know more about, and then the teacher could do a lesson on it?” (Irish-medium school)

When asked about the most important thing they should study in RE, pupils gave varied responses, reflecting the different ways they understood the purpose of the subject. Pupils from a Maintained school background tended to identify core Christian beliefs as most important, while participants from an Integrated or Controlled school emphasised respect and understanding of people from different faith backgrounds.

“The most important thing you can learn in religion is that Jesus died on the cross for us.” (Maintained primary school)

“If you don't learn religion, you might know how Jesus was born, but you wouldn’t know God, and you wouldn’t know about Mary. You’d never know that Jesus died for us, you'd be like, I think he just died because someone didn’t like him. You’d never know he died for you.” (Maintained primary school)

"The most important thing that RE should do for young people is to give them an awareness of the world around them and how they respect others." (Youth group)

"The most important thing you can learn is RE is to not be rude to other people. You can't say, Christianity is the best faith, because that's rude to Muslims, for example. You need to be respectful and normal to everyone around you." (Integrated primary school)

3.1.3 GCSE RE and assessment

In relation to GCSE RE, pupils described the course as structured around specific units. Mark's Gospel and ethics were the most frequently mentioned modules.

"At GCSE, we do Mark's gospel and ethics, and it's all under the like umbrella of religion." (Maintained post-primary school)

"At the end of fourth year, you do your exam for Mark's gospel, which is 50%. And then at the end of fifth year, you do your exam for ethics, and then they go together to make the one GCSE." (Maintained post-primary school)

"In my secondary school I remember doing things like ethics and stuff like that." (Youth group)

Ethics was often described as particularly engaging because it connected religious teaching with real-life moral questions.

"I like ethics. It's very different from what we did in RE in other years... You go more in depth, and the life and death issues are always very interesting to me. I love learning about euthanasia and abortion and personhood and everything. Those topics are really interesting, because you're not just learning about like one point of view. You're learning about multiple views, so you have secular views and all the church teachings. It allows you to develop your own opinion throughout the year. My views have definitely changed over the years after learning RE." (Maintained post-primary school)

"I have enjoyed looking at euthanasia and abortion, how they apply to the Bible, and how that's changed over time, and how the world sees it as well." (Controlled post-primary school)

Participants had mixed reactions to the more text-based content of studying Mark's Gospel. Some pupils found that ethics had more real-life applicability, while others expressed a preference for the Gospel unit or saw value in studying religious texts as part of the GCSE course.

“Studying ethics is more beneficial for life than the Gospel of Mark. I'm not saying Gospel of Mark isn't useful. I'm just saying ethics is more realistic. Mark’s Gospel is whether you choose to believe or not. Ethics is right or wrong. Like, abortion happens, so it’s good we learn about it.” (Controlled post-primary school)

“I think I preferred last year's bit, which was we did Mark's gospel, but this year's ethics is still quite interesting.” (Controlled post-primary school)

A recurring concern was that GCSE RE relies heavily on long written responses, with limited opportunity for shorter questions that might help pupils build confidence as they move through the paper. Some pupils in the controlled post-primary school questioned whether a traditional written examination was the most appropriate way to assess learning in RE.

“The problem with RE is the way the exam is the huge paragraphs you have to write, and there's not really any short questions to build your confidence... There’s also just not enough time to write everything you’ve learnt. It's not that there's too much to learn. It's that you don't have enough time to show what you’ve learnt.” (Controlled post-primary school)

“I don’t like the exam. It would be good if there was another way to assess what we know, rather than just the exam.” (Controlled post-primary school)

“I think it should be more shorter answer questions. I love the way geography exams are laid out, because at the start of the paper, you always have a couple of one markers, and then you'll go into your four markers, and then at the end you might have one big paragraph... It means you’re prepared by the time you get to the big writing bit.” (Controlled post-primary school)

Pupils in the Grammar school raised a further concern related to the pressure of memorisation and the impact this had on deeper thinking. While these pupils valued the subject as a space for discussion, interpretation and reflection, the exam experience may feel more focused on recall, coverage and speed. This appeared to reduce the opportunity to think carefully about their own views or engage with religious and ethical questions in depth.

“For our GCSE RE exam we need to learn like 30 or more Bible stories off by heart, and I feel like, with big markers like that, you're more focusing on getting it finished rather than actually thinking about your actual opinion. You don’t have time really to think about things deeply. You’re under so much pressure just to show you learnt all the content.” (Grammar school)

"I think we need a bit more time in the RE exams. There's so much to do and you just don't have the time to show how much you actually know." (Grammar school)

Young people in the Youth Group and Maintained Post-Primary school similarly described GCSE RE as highly academic, content-heavy and strongly essay-based.

"You write essays upon essays… It's very academic." (Youth group)

"It's a really heavy essay-based subject, and it's difficult as well. It's really heavy content." (Maintained post-primary school)

3.1.4 Consistency of Provision

Pupils reflected on consistency in RE provision. Some pupils were aware that their experience of RE was shaped by the specific context of their school, such as having access to a chapel, using particular video resources, or learning through Irish.

"I don't think all schools go to chapel in RE. We have a chapel on our grounds, so it's easier for us to go." (Maintained primary school)

"I think other schools probably show different TV shows than the ones we do. Or maybe they don't even do videos at all. But that would be sad, I like the videos." (Controlled primary school)

"I bet most schools don't teach RE in Irish. That's probably the biggest difference." (Irish-medium school)

Another participant suggested that consistency could also vary within schools, particularly where pupils experienced staffing changes or were taught by teachers without a specialist RE background. In this account, staffing instability affected continuity because each teacher brought a different approach to the subject.

"We've had a different teacher every year… We've had three very different teachers, and because they're quite short staffed for religion, our religions teacher last year was actually a music teacher. So, the way they all teach is totally different." (Integrated post-primary school)

Another post-primary pupil questioned whether it made sense for different schools to study different topics for GCSE RE, suggesting that standardisation might make the subject feel more comparable across settings.

"I think it should be that there aren't multiple units, so every school has to do the same topics in religion at GCSE, rather than people being able to maybe choose. Obviously, there would need to be restructuring, but I just don't think it makes

sense that every school could be learning a different thing." (Maintained post-primary school)

Some participants recognised that complete consistency across all schools may be difficult, and perhaps not always desirable. These pupils suggested that RE provision should reflect the character and ethos of different schools, as well as the communities they serve. From this perspective, variation reflects different school identities and pupil populations.

> *"I think it would be nice if all schools taught the same thing in RE, but at the same time, I don't think that would be possible. Some schools need to be more Christian and just focus on Christianity, and other schools maybe have people from other religions, and they need to do all religions." (Irish-medium school)*

> *"I think if you're a Christian and you don't want your kid to learn about different religions in RE, then you should have the choice to send them to a Christian school where they teach it from a Christian perspective." (Integrated post-primary school)*

One pupil in the Irish-medium school imagined a more differentiated model, where different schools could focus on different religious or worldview traditions. While this was not a common view across the data, it illustrates how some pupils connected curriculum consistency with parental choice, school ethos and the right to learn from within one's own belief tradition.

> *"It would be good if you could have different schools for different religions. You could have like Christian schools and Humanist schools and Pagan schools, and that way people could learn about their own religion as the main one." (Irish-medium school)*

3.1.5 The status of RE within schools

Alongside discussion of curriculum content, participants also reflected on the nature of RE as a subject. Across the focus groups, RE was frequently described as distinctive because it does not fit neatly into one curriculum category. Several pupils compared RE with History, noting that it involves factual knowledge, textual study, comparison of sources and attention to historical and cultural contexts. At the same time, pupils recognised that RE is not only about learning historical information, but also about understanding how religion has shaped societies, beliefs and events over time.

> *"In my experience, RE is very historical. I remember studying church history. I mean it literally has history in the title." (Youth group)*

> *"RE is kind of is like history, because you've got these facts and things to learn." (Controlled post-primary school)*

"You don't have to be religious to study religion. You learn it as if it's history. I study the Synoptic Gospels, and you have to compare them. And you can see how all the accounts aren't the same, so you can compare them. You don't have to be religious to do that." (Maintained post-primary school)

"It's kind of like history, because religion has affected a lot of things in history. But we also learn the history of religion, so like how it started and what it used to be like. So, you learn about religion in history, and you learn about the history of religion." (Integrated post-primary school)

However, participants also distinguished RE from subjects in which answers were perceived to be fixed. They described RE as involving facts and knowledge, but also interpretation, personal opinion, and engagement with the beliefs of others.

"In History, an artefact is an artefact, whereas in RE, you've also got your own opinion. There's not a set in stone answer." (Controlled post-primary school)

"RE is definitely a more opinion-based subject. In some areas of it, obviously, you have the church history, and you have to learn facts and stuff. But then there's the other side of it, where you have to think about your own belief." (Youth group)

"It's not like other subjects, where it's all facts. I mean, the formation of a waterfall is the formation of a waterfall. You can't argue that any other way. In RE, you've got the facts, you've got your own opinion, and then there's also what other people think as well." (Maintained post-primary school)

Participants' views on the status of RE were nuanced. Although some participants were clear that RE did not hold the same practical status as Maths or English, RE was generally understood as a valuable subject because of its contribution to personal development, identity, and understanding others.

"RE isn't as important as Maths or English, because you need them to do anything. But it's still an important subject." (Grammar school)

"I feel like English and math are very, very important, because you have to learn how to read and write and stuff. But I feel like RE is important too." (Maintained post-primary school)

This distinction between practical necessity and personal value was particularly evident in the youth group discussion, where one participant understood RE not simply as a curriculum subject, but as a space for self-understanding and identity formation.

"I think it's probably one of the most important subjects, because at the age where you're learning about RE, you're going through such a hard time. Being a

teenager is hard, and RE gives you a chance to discover what you believe, even if the answer is that you don't believe in anything. RE gives you the opportunity to discover that, and figure out who you are." (Youth group)

At the same time, pupils recognised that the status of RE is communicated through how it is positioned within the school day. One pupil suggested that, although RE may be described as important, its perceived value can be undermined when it is the first subject to lose curriculum time. In this account, timetable decisions were understood as sending a message to pupils about how seriously the school values RE.

"I think RE is important, but in school it's always the subject that gets cut first, especially in primary school. If the school is ever going to cut a subject, they always drop RE first. So, that tells you how important the school thinks RE is." (Grammar school)

This perception was also reflected in the accounts of younger pupils, who described RE as an occasional rather than regular part of the curriculum.

"We usually do RE like once a month or just a few times a month." (Integrated primary school)

3.2 Develop Critical and Analytical Skills

Building on participants' understanding of RE as a substantive academic subject, many pupils also emphasised the particular kinds of thinking that RE develops. Participants' accounts suggested that RE is valued not only because it introduces pupils to religious beliefs and ethical issues, but because it can help young people develop critical and analytical skills. Across the focus groups, pupils and young people described RE as a subject in which they were encouraged to ask questions, compare perspectives, interpret texts, and form their own views. In this respect, RE was understood as a distinctive curriculum space, where pupils were expected to think carefully about belief, morality, and identity.

3.2.1 RE as a space for questions

A recurring theme across the post-primary schools was the importance of RE as a space for curiosity, questioning and personal exploration. Participants described RE as a subject where young people could begin to consider what they believe, without necessarily being expected to arrive at simple or fixed answers.

"RE is a good place for people to discover what they believe. Sometimes there is no right or wrong answer, and young people need a space where they can be curious. RE was that space for me." (Youth group)

"Everyone's always open to asking questions. You're not forced to say, well, I believe in this or I believe in that." (Grammar school)

“You don’t learn like, this is the right way of doing things. It's more like, these are what different people think. And then it's about developing your own beliefs.” (Maintained post-primary school)

“I like whenever our religion teacher opens it up to the class, and we get to hear what everybody thinks, because she does ask a lot of big questions so we can think about our own personal beliefs.” (Integrated post-primary school)

This emphasis on questioning was closely connected to the idea of RE as a safe space. Participants suggested that RE may be one of the few places in school where young people can ask difficult questions, express what they believe, and explore issues of identity.

“RE might be the only place in school that is a safe space… RE creates a safe environment for young people to explore their identity, other people's identity, and how we all can work together respect each other.” (Youth group)

“I think RE is the only space available to a lot of young people, where they can ask those questions. I mean, if you’ve been taught your whole life that this is wrong or this is evil, you need space to learn how to be respectful.” (Integrated post-primary school)

“I think it can get heated in the moment when you’re debating, but as soon as we go out of the classroom, it's not really talked about again. RE is the space when you can talk about those things, and it’s one of the only spaces where people can express what they believe.” (Controlled post-primary school)

The understanding of RE as a safe space was closely connected to participants’ wider view that RE allows pupils to explore their own identity, rather than pressuring them towards a particular belief. Participants distinguished between being taught about beliefs and being pressured to adopt them. In their view, teachers should provide knowledge, perspectives and support, while allowing pupils to interpret that learning for themselves.

“At the end of the day, teachers aren’t there to indoctrinate kids. They’re there to teach them. They’re saying, this is what this group of people believe, and now you're educated on it. Now it's up to you, and what you want to do with this knowledge.” (Youth group)

“RE is a space for questions to be asked, but they might not necessarily get them answered there. And I remember that being frustrating because you want a yes or a no, but RE teaches you how to make up your own mind, and you use those different viewpoints you’ve learnt. You get given all this different information, but what you do with that information is up to you.” (Youth group)

> *"Integrated Religion is a conversation more than a subject. It's structured, it's not a free for all, but it's a conversation. And you find that as you go higher in the school, it gets more conversational… Your voice is as important as anyone else's." (Integrated post-primary school)*

Pupils also recognised that a safe space for discussion does not mean that every view can be expressed in any way or at any moment. One Grammar school pupil explained that disagreement was acceptable in RE, but that pupils needed to communicate their views respectfully and at an appropriate time. This suggests that pupils understood RE as a space where different opinions could be heard, but within agreed norms of respect and relevance.

> *"I think it would be okay to have a different opinion to everyone else in RE, but it would depend how you communicate it. If you said it in a rude way, that wouldn't be okay, but actually having a different view wouldn't be problem. And you'd have to say it at an appropriate time. If you interrupted someone to say, no I think this, then I do think that would get shut down. But if you have a relevant point to make at a point where we're having a discussion, then your opinion would be treated the same as any other opinion in the class, even if it's totally different to what everyone else is saying." (Grammar school)*

Young people also described RE as a subject that exposes pupils to multiple perspectives. This was particularly important in relation to ethical issues, where pupils valued opportunities to hear religious, secular and alternative viewpoints before deciding what they thought. Across different settings, pupils described RE as helping them understand disagreement, consider both sides of an argument, and develop their own position.

> *"You have to think about the benefits and the disadvantages of everything, and decide which argument you think is better… I quite like getting to see how different religions see things, because you get to see things from other people's point of view." (Integrated post-primary school)*

> *"We learned the arguments for both sides of all the ethical debates, and that was helpful to me, because my family wouldn't really debate each other or have conversations about any of these big things. So, a lot of the things I was learning, I was learning for the first time, and I was getting the Christian viewpoint as well as the other viewpoints, and then within that, you're able to form your own opinion." (Youth group)*

> *"We always learn what the Bible says, compared to what other people say, which is the counter argument. I quite enjoy that. It is quite interesting to hear the different views." (Controlled post-primary school)*

> *"We're always asked what we think of things, but you have to know how to argue for both points of view, even the side you don't agree with." (Maintained post-primary school)*

Participants suggested that RE supported them to distinguish between personal belief and reasoned evaluation. Several pupils described being able to express their own views, while also being able to understand and explain perspectives they did not necessarily share. This was particularly evident in relation to ethical questions, where pupils understood that strong personal opinions needed to be explained, supported and placed in conversation with other viewpoints.

> *"Say you're answering a question about abortion; you can talk about your own beliefs and put your own thoughts in there. But you have to show you know the arguments for the other side too, even if you don't agree with it. That's your evaluation. So, you can talk about your beliefs, but you talk about it in the context of other beliefs." (Maintained post-primary school)*

> *"It's all about learning other people's point of view, which you can include your answer. Sometimes you'll be reading a question, and somebody brings up their point of view, and you're like, oh, it's good point. And maybe you didn't think of it before... There's not really a right or wrong answer, because it's things that you can debate over. So, it's more down to your own personal opinion and how good you are at explaining why you believe something." (Controlled post-primary school)*

3.2.2 Textual Analysis and Interpretation

Participants recognised that studying RE can develop analytical skills through interpretation and comparison of texts. This was particularly evident in relation to Gospel study, where pupils from the maintained post-primary school described analysing different accounts, noticing variations in wording and structure, and considering historical and interpretive questions.

> *"You get different skills from RE that you wouldn't get from other subjects. You learn how to take things out of a big text and compare them. We do it with the Gospels. You literally read the same story from different accounts, and you have to notice the slight differences in them. So, it could be slight differences in the wording, or the way it's laid out, and then you have to take that back into part to like, well, was that written earlier? Was that written later? So, it is interesting, and it gives you the skills to analyse something." (Maintained post-primary school)*

For some participants, the value of RE lay in its capacity to broaden pupils' perspectives beyond the views they may have encountered at home or within their wider community. This was not presented as a rejection of pupils' backgrounds, but as

part of the educational purpose of RE: enabling young people to understand alternative viewpoints, reflect more critically on inherited assumptions, and develop more informed views of their own.

> *"If someone who grew up in a home where they there was a certain sort of ideology pushed on them from a young age, I think it's really even more important for them to be in an environment where they learn the other side, because if you don't understand the other side, then that's a real big problem." (Youth group)*

> *"Religion is quite important, because you need to understand people and why they believe what they believe… You need to know why you believe what you believe." (Integrated post-primary school)*

This was closely connected to pupils' descriptions of RE as a subject that develops independent judgement. Across different settings, pupils described being invited to consider moral and ethical questions, listen to a range of viewpoints, and decide what they thought for themselves. Importantly, pupils did not describe this as unsupported personal opinion. Rather, they understood RE as requiring them to give reasons, use evidence, and engage with perspectives they may not personally hold.

> *"You're always asked in exams, what is your view on euthanasia or whatever, and then you have to give points to back your view up. But they give you complete freedom to develop your own opinion. It's pretty cool to learn like that." (Maintained post-primary school)*

> *"I like religion. It's very open and subjective. You don't have to have a certain belief. You can be secular as well an atheist, and still, you can have an opinion on topics. Questions will be open… It could be, what's your opinion on IVF, and you have to back it up with information, but you don't have to have a certain opinion." (Controlled post-primary school)*

> *"We talk about right and wrong in RE a lot. We learn lots of different points of views about different topics, and then we get to decide for ourselves what we think." (Grammar school)*

For one participant in the Youth Group, this reflective dimension of RE also made the subject accessible in a way that other academic subjects had not been. They described struggling with writing because of dyslexia, but explained that RE was the only GCSE they passed in their first year. For this participant, RE was valuable because it combined factual learning with interpretation, reflection and personal meaning.

> *"I would be dyslexic, so I struggled a lot with writing. In first year of doing my GCSEs, the only GCSE I passed was religion. I wasn't even a Christian, but I really enjoyed the subject. It's good for people who think a wee bit differently because*

there are facts and things to learn but it's also about knowing what you think. And in many ways, what you learn in RE could be the time when something sparks in your head and you're like, actually, I understand it now, I know what I believe." (Youth group)

The emphasis on RE as a space for questioning, interpretation and independent judgement was most clearly articulated by post-primary pupils and Youth Group participants. These older participants described RE in terms of critical thinking, ethical reflection, textual analysis, and the development of personal viewpoints. By contrast, primary pupils were less likely to describe RE in this way. This was evident in one Integrated Primary pupil's description of RE as a subject focused more on factual knowledge and correct answers than on "big questions." For this pupil, RE appeared to involve learning identifiable features of different religions, such as places of worship, where answers could be marked as right or wrong.

"We don't really do big questions in RE. We're more focused on learning the questions that have answers. It's more like, one religion goes to a church, one goes to a mosque. And if you get that confused and you say the first person goes to a mosque, that would technically be wrong." (Integrated primary school)

The contrast between primary and post-primary accounts suggests that opportunities for critical and analytical thinking may become more explicit as pupils move through the school system. Younger pupils were less likely to describe RE in terms of open-ended questioning, interpretation or independent judgement, and their accounts more often emphasised knowledge of religious facts, practices and correct answers.

3.3 Retain Christianity as the Central Focus

Across the focus groups, many participants recognised Christianity as a prominent and significant focus of RE, particularly in schools with a Christian ethos. When participants were asked to vote in response to the statement that RE should mostly be about Christianity, answers were mixed and appeared to vary by school context. Participants in the Youth Group, Controlled Post-Primary School and Controlled Primary School tended to agree with the statement, while pupils in the Grammar School, Irish-medium School, and Integrated Post-Primary School were more likely to be uncertain or disagree. This reflected the wider qualitative pattern: while most participants provided a clear rationale for retaining Christianity as the central focus within RE, many also supported learning about other religions and worldviews.

3.3.1 Ethos and culture

Several participants described primary RE as largely or exclusively focused on Christianity. This was particularly evident in reflections from participants who had

attended primary schools with a Christian ethos, where RE was remembered in terms of Bible stories, parables, and Christian beliefs.

> *"I went to primary school in the south, and when I went there, it would have been all different religions. I think it was called Educate Together... Then when I moved up North, I noticed that the RE lessons in primary school were mainly focused on the parables and different stories the Bible and stuff. It was more focused on Christianity, for sure." (Youth group)*

> *"I think most people who went to our primary school were Christians, so that's what they taught us." (Integrated post-primary school)*

For many participants, the Christian emphasis in RE was understood as a reflection of the wider cultural and religious context. Pupils across different settings repeatedly described Northern Ireland as a "Christian country," and used this to explain why Christianity should be taught in schools. This reveals how young people made sense of the place of Christianity in RE: not only as a matter of personal belief, but as part of the cultural and historical environment in which they were growing up.

> *"I think it's good that we focused on Christianity for a big amount of time, because where we live, that is the main religion. Like this is primarily a Christian country, so it's important that kids growing up in this society have an awareness of why things are the way they are. It's not about forcing a particular religion on a child, it's educating them about their own country as well as letting them discover what they believe and why." (Youth group)*

> *"This has always been a Christian country, so it's good to know what's the country's history. It's good to know why they think that, and why they think this is the truth." (Controlled post-primary school)*

> *"This is a Christian country, so it's good we do Christianity as the main focus of RE." (Grammar school)*

> *"I would say, because we're a Christian country, we should do Christianity the most in school." (Controlled primary school)*

> *"I think schools should mainly teach Christianity... because that's the religion that most people believe in Ireland." (Irish-medium school)*

> *"If one day there was a, you know, 5% Christian population in Northern Ireland, which would be sad, but if there was, then there would be definitely an argument to not ditch Christianity in schools. But that's just not the society that we're in." (Youth group)*

A related theme was the idea that pupils should learn about Christianity because it helps them understand the culture and communities around them. For these pupils, Christianity was not only a personal faith commitment, but a form of cultural knowledge that helped explain the world around them.

> *"You see the way we are a Christian country, why would the government be trying to bring any other belief on top of that? This is a Christian country, so the teaching should focus mainly on Christianity. I mean, isn't our justice system based on the Bible? I actually don't know about that, but I do know that this is a Christian country, so it doesn't matter what you yourself personally believe, you need to learn about the religion of your country. It's our culture." (Youth group)*

> *"This is a Christian country, so if we're focusing on any religion in school, I think it should be Christianity. And that's not to say everyone has to believe it, but I do think it's okay that our school focuses on it. I bet if you go to Saudi, they won't be letting me learn Christianity in school. I'd be learning Islam, because that's what most people in that country are." (Controlled post-primary school)*

Some participants' support for a strong Christian focus was also shaped by school ethos and parental choice. In these accounts, a Christian emphasis was viewed as consistent with the nature of the school, the local community, and the expectations of families who had chosen that setting. Participants recognised that this might be experienced differently by pupils from other religious backgrounds, but nevertheless felt that a Christian ethos provided a reasonable basis for Christianity remaining prominent within RE.

> *"I wouldn't have wanted to go to school where I didn't learn about Christianity. I guess that's partly due to my Christian background. If I was a Muslim... I probably wouldn't have gone to a Church of Ireland school." (Youth group)*

> *"Some parts of RE are quite Christian heavy, but I don't mind that. I think it's okay. I suppose it also depends on what school you're in. For us, we're a Protestant school, so we're probably going to be more Christian orientated." (Controlled post-primary school)*

> *"I feel like, since it's a Christian school, the majority of people and it would have that belief. So, it makes sense for us to study that most." (Grammar school)*

> *"In primary school, I learned about Christianity, and it was certainly Christianity based. I don't remember ever learning about anything else. But I mean, that makes sense. It wasn't a particularly diverse school, and the church was literally next door. Most people who attended were either Christian or atheist, so I don't think we needed to learn any other religions." (Youth group)*

Within maintained school contexts, pupils linked the focus on Christianity to the local community, school ethos and pupils' own religious background. RE was valued because it helped them understand the religion they had been raised around or might return to later in life.

> *"I think we learn about Christianity because that's what we've been raised around. I mean not even just the area we live in, but even the street we're on. We're obviously going to focus on Christianity and the Catholic Church, because that's what most people believe on this street and in this community and in this school." (Maintained post-primary school)*

> *"If you don't learn religion, you wouldn't really know about your own religion yourself. And say, if you went to Mass, you could be sitting there and be like, what's this priest on about? I don't really know anything." (Maintained primary school)*

> *"I think it's good we learn about our own religion. You should want to know what you actually believe in, and even if you don't believe it now, you might in the future decide you do believe it. Or maybe you even just need to understand it because you might have kids and want to get them baptized or whatever. Even if you don't have a religion, you should still learn about religion." (Maintained post-primary school)*

3.3.2 Faith formation and the requirement to believe

Some participants framed the importance of Christianity more explicitly in terms of faith formation. These comments were particularly evident among some primary pupils and Youth Group participants. While this was not the only rationale given for retaining Christianity as the central focus, it demonstrates that for some pupils, RE was understood as a context in which children might encounter Christian teaching and belief.

> *"I think it's good to have a focus on Christianity, because it is a core belief of the country, and it's like obviously I'm biased because I'm a Christian, but still, it is an important religion to learn about, and it's the truth. So, it's important that there's a focus on that." (Youth group)*

> *"Everyone should have to learn about Christianity. Because how are you going to believe in the Word of God if you don't ever hear about it?" (Controlled primary school)*

> *"I think it's important you know about God, even if you don't believe in Him." (Irish-medium school)*

However, participants also repeatedly distinguished between learning about Christianity and being required to believe it. This distinction was important for pupils who supported a strong Christian focus in RE but did not want this to become coercive or exclusionary. Christianity was often defended as central curriculum content, while pupils simultaneously emphasised the importance of personal freedom, interpretation and respect for pupils from other religious or non-religious backgrounds.

> *"I know there are certain people that are from a different religion, and you want them to feel included, and you don't want them to feel like that they can't take part in the lessons. But they're not learning to be Christians, they're learning about Christianity." (Youth group)*

> *"You can study RE and not be a Christian. You can study it and bring your own thing, your own beliefs, your own opinion. You can say whatever you want in RE, you can put your own point of view into it, as long as you get facts that are valid." (Controlled post-primary school)*

> *"Although it's Christian based, and it's obviously following Christianity, there's so many other people who've came to our school who have different religions and different beliefs... They still have their freedom of religion." (Maintained post-primary school)*

> *"You can definitely study RE as a non-Christian, because RE isn't the subject of Christianity, it's just the subject of what you believe. You can learn about Christianity and then think, yes, I do believe it or not I don't." (Grammar school)*

Beyond questions of ethos, culture and inclusion, some participants also suggested that Christianity should remain central because it provides substantive academic content in its own right. In these accounts, Christianity was not treated simply as familiar background knowledge, but as something that could be studied in greater depth and used as a framework for understanding ethical debate.

> *"You can't teach ethics without Christianity, so you need to have that basis knowledge of Christianity and knowing the Christian values before you can learn about ethics in secondary school. There's a lot of good teaching coming from the Bible, even for a non-Christian person to learn about just to understand where most people are coming from in this country." (Youth group)*

> *"Whenever we started looking at Christianity, I think a lot of it seemed like it was going to be obvious, like most people would already know it. But they taught it in much more depth, there's maybe some misconceptions and stuff but if you're studying it properly as a subject, it helps tackle that." (Integrated post-primary school)*

For many pupils, Christianity mattered because it was connected to local culture, school ethos, family background and community identity. For others, it also provided a foundation for ethical reflection and a body of knowledge that could be studied critically and in depth. At the same time, pupils' comments indicate that retaining Christianity as central does not necessarily require excluding other religions and worldviews. Rather, the data suggests support for an approach in which Christianity remains prominent, but is taught as substantive curriculum content, alongside opportunities to understand religious diversity and engage respectfully with difference.

3.4 Be Pluralist and Inclusive

Across the focus groups, participants generally supported RE being pluralist and inclusive. While most pupils saw Christianity as an important or central focus, they did not usually understand this as excluding other religions and worldviews. Rather, pupils frequently argued that RE should help them understand people who believe differently from themselves, encounter a range of religious and non-religious perspectives, and develop the knowledge needed to live respectfully in a diverse society.

3.4.1 Current provision

When pupils were asked to describe what they had studied in RE, all post-primary reflections referred to learning about a range of religions, beliefs, practices and festivals. While Christianity remained a recurring and often central feature of RE provision, pupils' accounts suggested that current practice in many settings already includes some engagement with wider religious diversity.

> *"We've looked at Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism, Islam, Buddhism." (Integrated post-primary school)*

> *"In year eight we learned Christianity. Year nine, we learned Islam, and year 10, we did Judaism. And I think that's a really, really good way to do it is breaking up into each year group, yeah, because then it means that there is some sort of balance there. It's so funny people who say you only do Christianity in RE because definitely in secondary school you do other religions. It was definitely covered in our school." (Youth group)*

> *"In Year 10, you learn about different religions. But we don't do like the whole story of how they originated or whatever. I mean when we learnt about people who are Islamic, we learnt about what's halal, and about celebrations and stuff." (Maintained post-primary school)*

> *"We do learn about different religions. We've learnt about Judaism and other religions in Junior School." (Controlled post-primary school)*

“Every year there is some element of Christianity in what we’re learning, but it’s always balanced with another religion. So, in year nine, it was Christianity and Judaism. In year ten it was Christianity and Islam. So, you do majority Christianity, but there are other beliefs too." (Grammar school)

“We did Chinese New Year. We watched videos of that.” (Special school)

Participants also indicated that pluralist RE included some engagement with non-religious worldviews, although these comments were largely descriptive. Pupils referred to atheism, secular perspectives and, to a lesser extent, Humanism as part of what they had encountered in RE.

“We learn about atheists and people who are secular all the time. It’s like part of the spec, I think.” (Maintained post-primary school)

“We learnt about secular views and atheism.” (Youth group)

“We talked a bit about Humanism, but we didn’t really do it fully.” (Integrated post-primary school)

Participants were generally open to a pluralist RE curriculum and often saw value in learning beyond their own religious or cultural background. Across different school sectors and age groups, pupils suggested that learning about a range of religions and worldviews could help them become more informed, open-minded, and better equipped to understand the wider world.

“I think you should know about other religions, instead of just knowing about one. It's like a whole spectrum of religions, not just the one you believe in.” (Irish-medium school)

“It's very important that you hear different viewpoints in RE. We need to know more about the world we live in.” (Grammar school)

“Every religion is different and I do want to learn about different religions too.” (Maintained primary school)

“If you only learn about Christianity in RE, you won’t know how to react with people from different religions or backgrounds. It’s important to mix with people who believe different things to you.” (Integrated primary school)

“I think you can have a religion but also learn about all the other ones as well, because then you're just more open minded.” (Integrated post-primary school)

“I wouldn't mind learning other ones. I'm actually quite curious.” (Controlled primary school)

> *"It's good having the time to form our own opinions, but we need to have the inside information from other religions as well… If you get more of other people's ideas, the more you know, the more you can form an idea for yourself." (Integrated post-primary school)*

However, some participants recognised the practical difficulty of designing a fully pluralist RE curriculum. While pupils often wanted to learn about a wider range of religions and worldviews, they acknowledged that the breadth of religious diversity makes complete coverage impossible.

> *"There's like 4000 religions… You can't look at them all." (Integrated primary school)*

> *"What do you even mean when you say, 'other religions?' Like where would you even start with that?" (Youth group)*

Participants suggested that inclusive RE should be responsive to the pupils and beliefs represented in the classroom. Rather than treating religious diversity as abstract, pupils often felt that RE would be more meaningful if it reflected the real people in front of them. In this view, the presence of pupils from different religious or cultural backgrounds created an opportunity for mutual learning, where pupils could learn not only about religions in general, but about the beliefs and traditions of their classmates.

> *"If there's a few people in your class with a different religion, maybe they could go to a different class, and they could talk about their religion. Or maybe if they come to our religion class and we can learn about each other." (Maintained primary school)*

> *"I think if there's someone in your class who believes something, that's what you should learn about." (Integrated primary school)*

> *"If I was in charge of RE, I'd make it so we studied more religions. I think if most people in the class are Christian, it makes sense to learn about that. But there are other religions, so I would focus on them too." (Irish-medium school)*

> *"We probably try to largely do religion based on the people in the room. If there was someone who brought a new culture in, that's what we'd probably look at. It's relevant here and now, otherwise it can be quite abstract." (Teacher, Special school)*

A recurring theme across the data was that pupils need to learn about religious diversity because they will encounter people with different beliefs throughout their lives. Participants across primary, post-primary, integrated, controlled, maintained and youth group contexts linked pluralist RE to respect, social understanding, and the ability to interact sensitively with others.

“We need to have an awareness of the other religions and be able to respect other religions, including people with no belief.” (Youth group)

“I think you should have an element of other religions in RE, because this isn't a completely Christian world. You're going to meet other people who are from other religions. It's important to understand that a bit more about them.” (Grammar school)

“If you say you don’t believe in another person’s religion, it can come out in a rude way and be offensive to people who do believe that. I think everyone should be eager to learn about people who are different to you.” (Integrated primary school)

“It’s good to learn other religions too, so you don’t accidentally hurt someone’s feelings.” (Controlled primary school)

“[Teacher] used to live in Dubai, and because he did RE, he knew not to eat in front of people when Ramadan was happening… Doing RE means you understand other people better.” (Integrated primary school)

However, one participant recognised the limitations of classroom-based learning about other religions. Although they agreed that pupils should have some knowledge of other beliefs because they are likely to meet people from different religious backgrounds in everyday life, they suggested that learning about religion in school may not be as meaningful as learning through real relationships and conversations.

“It's important to learn about other religions to a certain degree, because you will most likely run into people who have those beliefs, and it's good to know about them. But at the same time, in my experience, there's been people that I've met now that I'm at [university], I've met people from different backgrounds and had conversations and learned more from them than I would have learned in school, because it's a more interesting way to learn if you actually know someone who actually believes it.” (Youth group)

This emphasis on mutual understanding was particularly clear where pupils described religious diversity in terms of their own friendships and relationships. One Integrated Post-Primary pupil explained that, as a Catholic with Protestant friends, they valued RE because it allowed their peers to learn about their religion, while also giving them the opportunity to learn about theirs.

“I’m Catholic, but all my friends are Protestants. So, I think it’s really nice that everyone has to learn about my religion too, because it teaches them more about who I am. And then I get to learn about their beliefs too. People can be

more respectful if they've got better background knowledge." (Integrated post-primary school)

In some primary school settings, participants described limitations where provision was almost entirely Christian in focus. In these accounts, pupils felt that reduced exposure to other religions could leave them with gaps in their understanding or restrict opportunities to explore traditions they were interested in. This was particularly evident where pupils contrasted Christian-focused provision with later or desired opportunities to learn about a wider range of beliefs.

> *"I went to a Christian primary school, and we would have never learned about anything else. I didn't even really know about other religions until I came here." (Integrated post-primary school)*

> *"Most of the things we do in RE is Jesus, Christianity, and stuff about God and Easter, Christmas and stuff. It's never anything about any other religions. It's just Catholicism and Christianity. But I think if I said I didn't want to learn about that, my teacher would make me read a book instead. I wouldn't get to learn about paganism or anything of the religions I want to learn about." (Irish-medium school)*

However, this concern was not shared by all participants. One Youth Group participant suggested that an exclusively Christian focus in primary school was not necessarily problematic, particularly given pupils' age and stage of development. While they acknowledged that pupils should learn about other religions eventually, they felt that primary school may not be the point at which children are best able to engage with multiple religious traditions in depth.

> *"My primary school only taught us about Christianity, and let's be honest, it didn't affect me too horribly. I feel like you're quite young at that age. I don't think there's an issue with not learning about it in primary school. I think it's important to learn about them at some point, but in primary school you haven't fully matured enough to really be able to balance learning more than one. I only learnt about Christianity, and I think that's fine." (Youth group)*

3.4.2 Ethos-based and neutral approaches to pluralism

Some participants suggested that pluralist and inclusive RE does not necessarily require schools to teach from a position of complete neutrality. Instead, they recognised that schools with a particular religious ethos may approach other religions and worldviews from within that tradition. For these participants, the inclusion of other religions was important, but it also needed to make sense within the wider identity and values of the school.

"I don't think schools should be unbiased when they're teaching RE to be fair. I mean yes, we should learn about other religions, but not too much that it makes you go, well, what am I? What am I believing? Why am I in this school to begin with? Like if it was a Catholic school, it wouldn't be appropriate for the teacher to say like oh well no one knows the truth, Islam could be the right way. Like how does that fit with what the rest of the school is saying? It wouldn't make sense." (Youth group)

This was reflected in accounts from participants who had experienced learning about other religions from within a Christian perspective. One participant described their integrated primary school as inclusive because it allowed pupils to learn about a range of religions while also giving them space to engage with their own Catholic tradition. Another participant described a more explicitly Catholic school environment, but still noted that Islam and Judaism were included in RE, albeit from a Catholic perspective.

"I went to an integrated primary school. I'm personally a Christian, and they were really inclusive. We learned about Christianity and Hinduism and other religions, and because I'm Catholic, I was able to do my communion and my confessions. You were able to choose what religion you wanted to study in RE. So I went in the group that taught RE from a Catholic perspective, and it was really nice to be able to choose what we wanted to do. We did learn about other religions, but we looked at it from a Catholic point of view." (Integrated post-primary school)

"In my school… they just wanted you to be a Catholic at the end of the day. But it's interesting, because they did talk a lot about other religions. We did learn about Islam and Judaism and stuff. We learnt it from a Catholic perspective, but we still learnt it." (Youth group)

By contrast, other participants described a more neutral or even-handed approach to pluralist RE, where no religion was presented as more normal, familiar or authoritative than another. This perspective was particularly evident in the Integrated Post-Primary School, where neutrality was not simply about giving each religion equal time, but about the tone and framing of teaching.

"Our RE teacher doesn't ostracise it, she doesn't make it seem like other religions are so different from us. And she never starts with, oh my god, Ramadan. Ramadan is so crazy. They fast for a whole month. It's insane. She'd say, what would you fast for? What would you what would make you do something like this to make us all relate to different types of religions? She makes it really relatable for us." (Integrated post-primary school)

"I don't think any religion in this school is seen as more normal than any others. All the religions are taught in the same way. Christianity would be taught the

same way as like, Hinduism… The religions in this school are done for the same kind of amount of time, and none of them are seen as right or wrong." (Integrated post-primary school)

3.4.3 Opting out

Finally, almost every focus group reflected on the issue of opting out of RE. These comments revealed a tension between respecting freedom of belief and ensuring that all pupils have access to shared curriculum learning. Many participants felt that RE should be understood as part of the curriculum rather than as an act of religious observance. On this basis, they argued that pupils should not be withdrawn simply because they do not personally share the beliefs being studied.

> *"I do think everyone should do RE. I don't think it's okay for some people to sit out and read a book in the corridor. Even if you don't believe it, you should learn it." (Grammar school)*

> *"I don't think you should force people to believe your religion, because it should be a choice. But it's important you learn RE because otherwise you won't know enough to be able to make a choice." (Irish-medium school)*

> *"Fine if you want to withdraw them from Assembly but you shouldn't be able to withdraw from RE, that's part of the curriculum." (Youth group)*

> *"We have two people in our class, and they're from Sudan, and they get iPads they can go on when we do RE. They don't join in with us… I think they shouldn't be allowed to sit out. If they stay in, they might find out that they like RE, even if they don't believe in Christianity." (Controlled primary school)*

> *"I think it's disrespectful to not stay in class, even if you don't believe in God. It's just disrespectful. I think it's great if you have a different opinion, you go ahead in that religion, but that doesn't mean you can't learn about other religions… If you don't stay in RE, you won't learn anything, and you don't know if you're going to need to know about those other religions in the future." (Irish-medium school)*

> *"RE is compulsory, but if you don't believe in it, then you don't have to go… I don't think that's right." (Maintained post-primary school)*

> *"Even if you don't agree with what you're being taught, it's good that you stay in the class. That's polite. That's the polite thing to do." (Integrated primary school)*

For these participants, the distinction between learning and believing was important. They agreed that no one should be forced to adopt a religion, but they saw value in all pupils learning about religion so that they could understand different beliefs and make informed choices. This was also linked to reciprocity: pupils felt that learning about

religion should involve mutual understanding, where pupils from different backgrounds learn about each other's beliefs rather than only one group being expected to understand another.

> *"We need to learn about other religions, and we need to take what they believe in and understand their beliefs. But then they also need to take in what we believe in and then understand our beliefs." (Maintained post-primary school)*

> *"If the person's Muslim, they shouldn't be forced to learn Christianity. But in the same way, I don't want to be forced to learn Islam… Either we all stay in or we're all allowed to [sit out] of the bits we don't believe in." (Controlled post-primary school)*

The potential consequences of withdrawal were particularly evident in one participant's account of being withdrawn from RE in primary school. In this case, withdrawal was framed as a parental response to an RE environment that was experienced as divisive and inconsistent with the school's integrated ethos. However, the participant also reflected that being removed from RE had longer-term consequences, leaving them with gaps in their religious knowledge and making later RE more difficult to access.

> *"When I was younger, I got taken out of religion because I went to an integrated religion school, but they discriminated everyone. They called themselves an integrated religion school, but they didn't show it at all… It was the opposite of integrated, actually. And my mum didn't like that, so I got removed from every RE class. But that means I now don't have a good background in religion, so I find that now learning about RE in this school is like being thrown in at the deep end. It's harder for me to understand because I didn't learn about it when I was in primary school. I think it's set me back." (Integrated post-primary school)*

A contrasting view was offered by an Integrated Post-Primary pupil, who supported the idea of opting out where pupils did not see a subject as relevant to their future. This participant recognised that RE could help pupils understand what other people believe but questioned whether this would have practical value beyond school or within particular career pathways. Their argument was not directed only at RE, but reflected a broader view that pupils should have more choice over subjects they do not expect to need in later life.

> *"I do think RE will give you a better understanding about what other people believe, but I don't see how that will help you outside of your education. I mean, say you want to be a scientist; are you really going to need to know about different religions for that job?… I feel like I've already made my mind up about what I want to do when I'm older, so I feel like, if there's a class that you don't think is going to benefit you in any way, you should be allowed to opt out of it. Not*

just RE, but any subject that you aren't going to need when you're older." (Integrated post-primary school)

While many participants emphasised the social and civic value of learning about religion, this pupil evaluated RE more in terms of perceived career relevance and personal utility. This highlights a wider tension in pupils' accounts between understanding RE as preparation for life in a diverse society and understanding school subjects primarily in relation to future employment or individual choice.

3.5 Prepare Children and Young People for Future Learning and Citizenship

Across the focus groups, participants frequently described RE as a subject that prepares children and young people for life beyond school. While pupils did not always frame this in terms of employment or direct career relevance, many understood RE as useful because it helps young people develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to live in a diverse society. Participants linked RE to future learning, citizenship, moral reasoning, awareness of current affairs, and the ability to interpret the social and ethical questions they are likely to encounter beyond school.

3.5.1 Diversity, Identity, and Values

A recurring theme was that RE helps pupils prepare for life in a society where they will encounter people with different beliefs, cultures and worldviews. One Integrated Post-Primary pupil acknowledged that pupils may not use specific factual content in obvious everyday ways but argued that learning about difference from a young age helps make later encounters with diversity more familiar.

> *"Whenever I'm out of school, I am never going to go up to someone say, oh, I know about the four pillars of Islam. That would be weird. But I think that, because we live in a predominantly white Christian area, the fact we've learnt about different beliefs from a young age will make it easy for the transition into the real world, where there are people who believe different things to you. It won't be a shock, because we're learning about it now." (Integrated post-primary school)*

This suggests that the value of RE may lie not only in the retention of specific facts, but in the formation of broader dispositions: openness, confidence, respect and the ability to engage with people whose lives and beliefs differ from one's own. This was echoed by participants in the Youth Group, who described RE as helping young people understand the world, respect others and locate themselves within a wider social context.

> *"It's also not just about your own identity or your own beliefs, but it also helps you to have respect for the people you're growing up around... RE helps you to*

understand how the world is and why the world is the way it is, and how you can understand others, where they come from, even how to respect yourself." (Youth group)

"I think one of the biggest things I took out of religion is just that we should love each other and not to judge people. Everyone's doing the best they can. That's what I learnt in religion." (Youth group)

Several participants also connected RE with the development of personal identity and moral perspective. For these pupils, RE was useful because it gave young people space to consider who they are, what they believe and how they want to live. This included developing their own beliefs, becoming more open-minded, and engaging with moral values beyond their own immediate context.

"Religion gives you a developed sense of who you are as a person, and what your beliefs are… Studying RE has definitely made me more open minded. It helps you to develop your own beliefs and helps you to be the person you want to be." (Maintained post-primary school)

"Even if they don't believe anything at that point, they could end up coming to some kind of faith when they're older. And more than that, what they've learned just in terms of skills and stuff is valuable. There isn't a pressure that they have to believe in something." (Youth group)

3.5.2 Connecting RE to the Wider World

Participants also described RE as a subject that equips young people to engage with real-life ethical and social issues. This was particularly evident in relation to topics such as abortion, euthanasia, equality, racism, hate crime and conflict. Pupils suggested that RE can help young people understand current debates, form their own views, and contribute meaningfully to public conversations.

"Religion helps you to become a participating member society, because it means that you can go and with real life issues, like on the news you would say about euthanasia or abortion or whatever. And it really helps you to develop your own like thought towards it, and you can contribute to the conversation." (Maintained post-primary school)

"RE deals with current affairs and stuff that's relevant to the world today. It's a living subject, and that's why it needs to be a core subject, because it teaches you about the world around you." (Youth group)

This civic function was also linked to concerns about where young people learn about religion if they do not learn about it in school. Several participants argued that school-based RE provides a more reliable and structured context for learning about religion

and belief than the informal sources pupils may otherwise encounter, such as the news, social media, or family opinions. In this sense, RE was valued not only for introducing pupils to different beliefs, but for helping them interpret those beliefs critically and avoid misinformation or prejudice.

> *"It's important to learn about other religions, and it's important that children are learning about those in a school context, rather than them hearing about it on the news or like hearing opinions from their parents or whatever. If you're being taught it in school, you're being taught facts." (Youth group)*

> *"There's a lot of propaganda and a lot of hate about different religions. I think it's really important to know from a young age how to interpret the world around you and different people's beliefs." (Integrated post-primary school)*

> *"The issue is, the real issue is, if you take RE out of schools, people are still going to learn about it. They're just going to learn about it in less controlled environments that will likely get more extreme." (Youth group)*

Younger pupils were more likely to describe the future usefulness of RE in concrete terms, linking it to family life, religious practice or particular vocations. For example, some pupils suggested that RE could help them to educate their children, become an RE teacher, or prepare for a religious role such as priesthood. These comments show that pupils could identify ways in which RE might have relevance beyond the classroom.

> *"Religion is going to be helpful when you're an adult. Say you have the children; you can teach them their prayers and all." (Maintained primary school)*

> *"I think RE is a useful subject if you want to be an RE teacher." (Integrated primary school)*

> *"RE is pretty important, especially if you want to be a priest." (Irish-medium school)*

Other participants framed the future value of RE in terms of religious understanding. For these pupils, RE was important because it helped young people explore both their own religion and the beliefs of others. This was not only about social awareness, but about engaging with questions of belief, truth, and meaning.

> *"RE is important so you can find out about your own religion and about other people." (Irish-medium school)*

> *"I do think RE is a useful subject. I think at any level, RE is useful subject, because I think that, in the end, religion is one of the most important things in life. Because, you know, whoever's right, that's a very important thing to figure*

out. And obviously I think I'm right, and if I didn't, then I wouldn't believe what I believe." (Youth group)

Taken together, these comments suggest that pupils understood the value of RE as extending beyond the classroom. While some pupils identified specific future uses, such as family life, religious practice or particular vocations, most described RE's future value in broader terms. They saw it as helping young people understand difference, interpret current affairs, engage with moral questions, develop their own beliefs, and participate more thoughtfully in society. In this sense, RE was valued not only for the knowledge it provides, but for the kind of people and citizens it can help pupils become.

4 Conclusion

This research set out to explore children and young people's experiences and views of Religious Education in Northern Ireland. Drawing on the thematic analysis of focus groups with children and young people across a range of settings, the findings suggest that pupils want RE to be serious, inclusive, relevant and intellectually meaningful. They valued RE when it provided substantive knowledge, encouraged questioning and discussion, recognised the significance of Christianity, engaged respectfully with religious and non-religious diversity, and helped them prepare for life in a complex society.

4.1 Treat RE as an Academic Discipline

The first key conclusion is that pupils value RE when it is treated as a serious academic subject. Across the focus groups, participants described RE as a subject with substantive content, specialist knowledge and academic demands. Pupils spoke positively about lessons that involved discussion, debate, creative activities, religious texts, ethical issues and opportunities to learn from those with specialist or lived experience of faith.

This suggests that children and young people do not simply want RE to be informal, occasional or peripheral. Rather, they value RE when it has clear curriculum content and is taught in ways that are engaging, structured and intellectually meaningful. Creative and interactive approaches were particularly valued because they helped pupils remember what they had learned and connect religious content to people, places and real-life questions.

At the same time, pupils' comments highlighted concerns about the status and consistency of RE within schools. Some pupils described RE as being taught less frequently than other subjects, or as a subject that could be displaced within the timetable. Others noted variation between schools in relation to content, resources, and staffing. These findings suggest that treating RE as a serious subject requires not only good individual teaching, but also sufficient curriculum time, appropriate staffing, coherent progression and a clear sense of pupil entitlement across settings.

The findings also raise questions about assessment, particularly at GCSE level. Pupils valued the depth and challenge of GCSE RE, especially ethical debate and textual study, but some felt that assessment structures relied too heavily on long written responses, memorisation, and speed. This suggests that assessment should reflect the breadth of learning taking place in RE, including knowledge, interpretation, evaluation, personal reflection and engagement with different viewpoints.

4.2 Develop Critical and Analytical Skills

A second key conclusion is that RE has significant potential to develop pupils' critical and analytical skills. Older pupils in particular described RE as a space where they could ask questions, consider different perspectives, interpret texts, and form their own views. They valued RE because it did not always require one fixed answer, but invited them to think carefully about belief, morality, identity and meaning.

This was closely connected to the idea of RE as a safe space. Pupils described RE as one of the few places in school where young people could discuss difficult questions, express what they believe and encounter disagreement. Participants also made a clear distinction between being taught about beliefs and being pressured to adopt them. They valued RE when teachers provided knowledge, support and perspectives, while allowing pupils to decide for themselves what they thought. In this sense, RE was seen as contributing to independent judgement rather than indoctrination.

The findings suggest that RE's critical value lies in the relationship between substantive knowledge and reflective engagement. Pupils did not describe RE as simply a space for unsupported opinion. Instead, they valued being asked to justify their views, consider alternative arguments, interpret religious teachings and understand perspectives they did not necessarily share. This positions RE as a subject that can contribute meaningfully to pupils' intellectual development, moral reasoning and ability to engage respectfully with contested issues.

4.3 Retain Christianity as the Central Focus

A third conclusion is that pupils recognised Christianity as an important and familiar focus within RE, particularly in schools with a Christian ethos. Many participants described Christianity as culturally, historically and locally significant in Northern Ireland, and used this as a rationale for retaining a strong focus on Christianity within the curriculum.

For some pupils, Christianity mattered because it was connected to their school ethos, family background, local community or personal faith. For others, Christianity was important because it helped explain aspects of culture, history, ethical debate and social life. However, support for Christianity as the central focus did not usually mean support for an exclusively Christian curriculum. Furthermore, pupils often distinguished between learning about Christianity and being required to believe it. Many participants defended Christianity as important curriculum content while also emphasising pupils' freedom to interpret, question, and respond for themselves.

This suggests that future RE provision should avoid framing Christianity and pluralism as opposites. The findings point instead towards an approach in which Christianity remains prominent and is taught in depth, but not in a way that excludes meaningful

engagement with other religions and worldviews. Pupils' views suggest the need for Christian literacy that is serious, contextual, critically informed, and open to dialogue.

4.4 Be Pluralist and Inclusive

A fourth conclusion is that pupils generally supported RE being pluralist and inclusive. Across the focus groups, participants argued that RE should help pupils understand people who believe differently from themselves and encounter a range of religious and non-religious perspectives. Pupils associated this with respect, open-mindedness, social understanding, and the ability to interact sensitively with others.

The findings suggest that pluralist RE is not simply about adding more religions to the curriculum. Pupils wanted learning about religion to be relevant, respectful and connected to real people. Some suggested that RE should respond to the pupils and beliefs represented in the classroom, particularly where classmates came from different religious or cultural backgrounds. Others recognised the practical impossibility of covering every religion in depth, highlighting the need for careful curriculum selection.

Participants differed in how they understood neutrality and school ethos. Some pupils felt that schools with a particular religious ethos could teach about other religions from within that tradition, provided this was done respectfully. Others valued a more neutral approach, where no religion was presented as more normal or authoritative than another.

The issue of opting out further highlighted the complexity of inclusion. Many pupils argued that RE should be understood as curriculum learning rather than religious observance, and therefore should be shared by all pupils. For these participants, the distinction between learning and believing was crucial. However, the findings also show that withdrawal may be viewed as a response to provision that is experienced as divisive, exclusionary or insufficiently educational. This reinforces the importance of high-quality RE that is clearly educational in purpose, inclusive in practice and accessible to pupils from a range of religious and non-religious backgrounds.

4.5 Prepare Children and Young People for Future Learning and Citizenship

The fifth conclusion is that pupils understood RE as having value beyond the classroom. While some pupils identified specific future uses for RE, such as family life, religious practice or particular vocations, most described its future value in broader social and civic terms. They saw RE as helping young people understand difference, interpret current affairs, engage with moral questions and develop their own beliefs and values.

Participants argued that RE can help pupils prepare for life in a society where they will encounter people with different religions, cultures and worldviews. This was not always about retaining specific factual content, but about developing dispositions of openness, respect, confidence and curiosity. Pupils suggested that learning about religious diversity from a young age could make future encounters with difference less unfamiliar or unsettling.

Several participants also linked RE to current affairs, public debate and misinformation. They argued that if pupils do not learn about religion in school, they will still encounter religious ideas through the news, social media, family opinion or wider public discourse. In this sense, school-based RE was seen as having a protective and civic function: helping pupils interpret information responsibly, avoid prejudice and engage more thoughtfully with contested issues.

4.6 Conclusion

These findings suggest that RE should be understood not only as a subject about religion, but as a subject that contributes to pupils' formation as thoughtful citizens. It provides a space to explore belief, identity, morality, disagreement and respect. In doing so, it can help children and young people make sense of the world they are growing up in.

This study highlights the value children and young people place on Religious Education when it is taught as a serious, inclusive, and intellectually meaningful subject. Pupils recognised RE as a space for learning about Christianity, other religions, non-religious worldviews, ethical issues, identity, and difference. They valued RE when it enabled them to ask questions, consider different perspectives, develop their own views and engage respectfully with beliefs other than their own.

The findings suggest that future RE provision should not be reduced to a simple choice between Christianity and pluralism, or between knowledge and personal reflection. Pupils' views point instead towards a more integrated model of RE: one that is rooted in the local significance of Christianity, open to religious and worldview diversity, rigorous in its treatment of content, and attentive to pupils' questions, identities and future lives.

At the same time, the research highlights the importance of consistency and entitlement. While pupils thought it was appropriate that RE reflects school ethos and local context, they also identified variation in provision, teaching, resources, staffing and curriculum content. Ensuring high-quality RE for all pupils will therefore require careful attention to curriculum coherence, teacher expertise, assessment, inclusion and the distinction between education and religious instruction.

Overall, the findings offer a clear message: children and young people see RE as valuable when it helps them understand themselves, others and the world around

them. They want RE to be meaningful, respectful, challenging and relevant. As the RE Core Syllabus is reviewed, these findings provide evidence that pupils themselves have a thoughtful and nuanced understanding of what RE is for and why it matters. Any future development of RE should therefore take seriously the voices of pupils themselves, recognising them not only as recipients of the curriculum, but as thoughtful contributors to decisions about its purpose, content and delivery.

5 Appendix One: Interview Schedule

1.0 Opening question: Getting a general sense of RE in school

Tell me about your RE lessons

- What year are you in?
- How often do you do RE in school?
- What do you usually do in RE? What would a normal RE lesson look like?
- What do you like most about RE?
- What do you like least about RE?

If you had to describe RE in three words, what would they be?

2.0 Traffic Light Cards: Responses to RE Statements

Each pupil gets 3 cards: Green = Agree, Yellow = Not sure, Red = Disagree. Researcher reads each statement and pupils hold up a colour representing their answers.

I'm going to read some sentences. Show me what you think using your colours. There are no right or wrong answers.

1. RE is a proper school subject, like maths or history
2. In RE, we learn about what different people believe
3. In RE, I get to make up my own mind about what I think
4. RE should mostly be about Christianity
5. In RE, we should learn about different religions and beliefs, including having no belief
6. RE helps me understand people who are different from me
7. Everyone is treated with respect in RE lessons
8. What I learn in RE helps me in real life
9. I get to share my own ideas in RE
10. I like studying RE

3.0 RE as an Academic Subject (Objective, Structured, Respectful)

When you think about RE, how is it similar to other subjects, like History or Maths?

- How is it different from other subjects?

What kinds of things do you learn in RE?

- Can you give an example of something you learned in RE?
- What other religions or beliefs do you learn about in RE?
- How do you think RE might be similar or different in other schools?

How are things explained in RE lessons?

- Do you get to ask questions or share your ideas?

What makes an RE lesson feel fair or balanced?

Is there anything that would make RE lessons better?

- Discussions / debates / videos or media / visitors from different backgrounds / trips?

4.0 Critical & Analytical Skills (Thinking, Questioning, Interpreting)

Sometimes in RE, we talk about big questions. These are questions that don't always have one right answer, and people might have different ideas about them. These could be questions about life, what's right and wrong, or what people believe.

- Do you talk about questions like these in RE? What kinds of big questions should RE help young people think about?
- Do you look at more than one viewpoint or idea?
- What happens in RE when people have different ideas or opinions? Can people disagree?
- How important is it that people hear different viewpoints in RE? Why?
- Do you think RE has a role in helping pupils think for themselves? Why or why not?
- What helps you think more deeply in RE lessons?

5.0 Christianity as the Central Focus

I'd like you to draw something that represents what you learn in RE, or what RE is about.

- Can you tell me about your drawing?

We're now going to think a bit more about what RE focuses on.

- What do you learn about in RE? What religion do you learn the most about in RE?
- What do you think RE should focus on?
- Do you think Christianity should be the main focus in RE? Why or why not?
- How important is it to learn about other religions and beliefs in RE? How do you think RE could include different religions and beliefs in a fair way?

6.0 Pluralism & Inclusion (Different Religions & Worldviews)

Do you learn about different beliefs in RE?

- What different religions or beliefs have you learned about in RE?
- Do you learn about people who don't follow a religion as well?
- What religions, beliefs, or worldviews do you think RE should include?

Do you feel comfortable sharing your own ideas or beliefs in RE?

- Do you think everyone feels included in RE lessons? Why or why not?
- How do teachers make sure everyone is treated fairly in RE?
- What helps people feel respected in RE lessons?

- What would make RE feel more welcoming or inclusive for everyone?

Do you feel like RE reflects the world we live in today?

- What beliefs or worldviews do you think RE should include?
- How important is it that RE includes lots of different beliefs and viewpoints? Why?

7.0 Future Learning and Citizenship (Respect, Living Together)

Has RE helped you understand people who are different from you?

- Can you give an example?
- Has RE helped you think about how to treat others?

Do you learn about real-life issues or situations in RE? What kinds of things?

- Do you think what you learn in RE is useful outside of school? Why or why not?
- Are there things you've learned in RE that you use in everyday life?
- Does RE help you understand things happening in the world today?

What should RE teach young people about living together in society?

- How important is it that RE helps people respect others with different beliefs? Why?
- What topics or issues should RE talk about more? (e.g. diversity, conflict, social media, climate, equality, community)

Can you think of a time when something you learned in RE helped you in real life? What would make RE more helpful for real life?

8.0 Closing Reflections

What is the most important thing RE should do for young people?

If you could change one thing about RE, what would it be? Bearing in mind the court's ruling, what would make RE better?

What do you think RE should be like in the future?

If you were in charge of designing RE in Northern Ireland, what would you include? What would you remove?

Is there anything we haven't asked that you think is important?