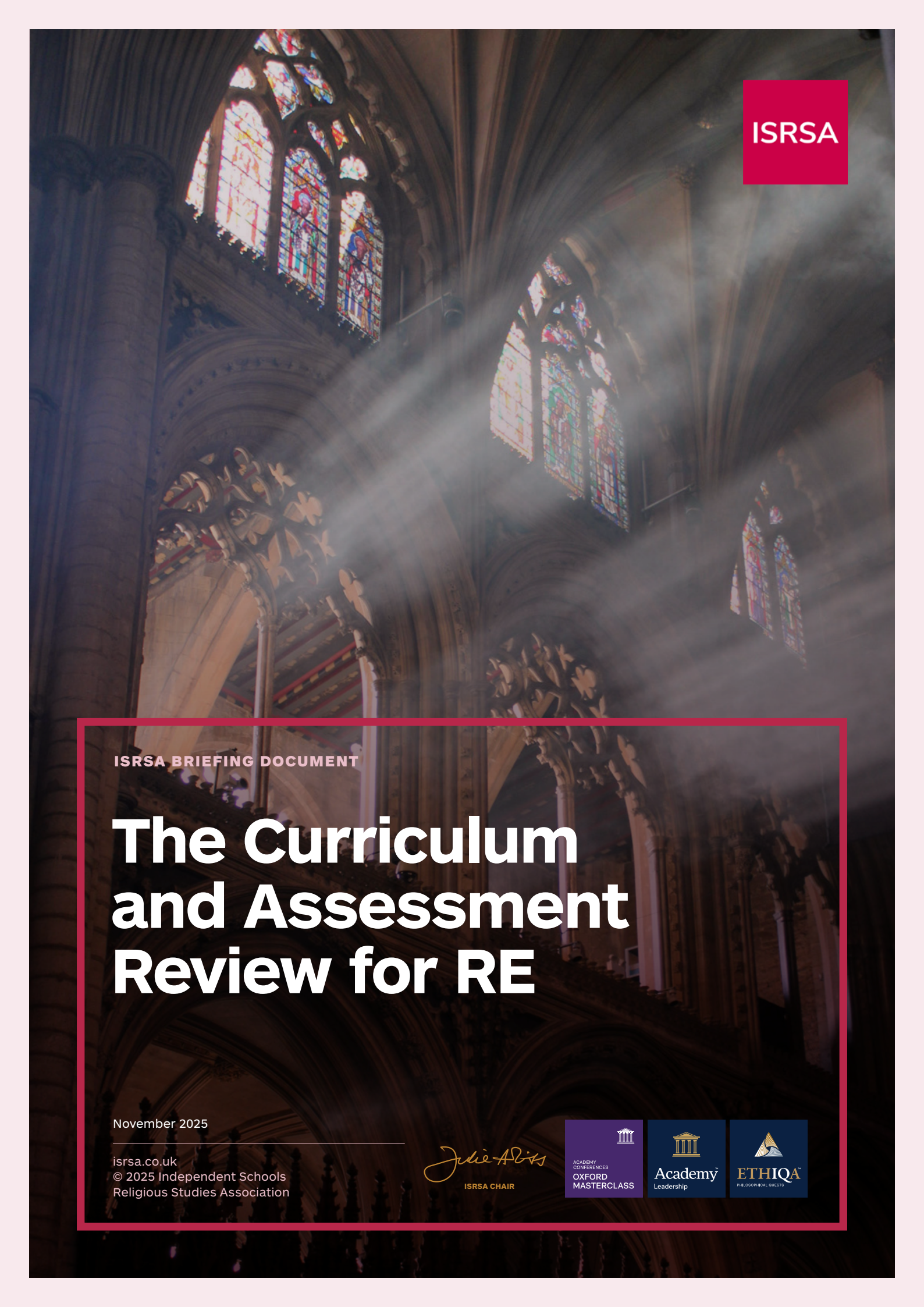




ISRSA

ISRSA BRIEFING DOCUMENT

The Curriculum and Assessment Review for RE

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Religious Studies Association

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ABOUT ISRSA

The ISRSA affirms that Religious Studies, Theology and Philosophy are academically rigorous subjects of vital relevance with a challenging and timeless voice.

We exist to support RS teachers in British independent schools, to provide networking and training opportunities.

We are also the voice for our teachers. We vigorously defend the value of our subject and present our views to educational decision makers.

We carry out cutting-edge research into our subject.

We hold a national annual conference and other smaller regional conferences.

We are always keen to welcome new members to our organisation or our Council. Please contact us at admin@isrsa.co.uk if you would like to join.

Our patrons are:

- Liam Gearon, Associate Professor in Religious Education at Oxford University,
- The Ian Ramsey Centre University of Oxford,
- Tom Greggs, Professor of Divinity at Aberdeen University and co-founder of the Aberdeen Centre for Protestant Theology
- Professor David Aldridge, Head of Secondary and Further Education at Edge Hill University.

Purpose

This document provides an initial response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review as it relates to Religious Education (RE), with consideration of implications for curriculum development, inspection, and teacher training.

ISRSA schools are deeply invested in these developments. Although many of our schools are independent, changes to the national framework will have significant downstream effects on GCSEs and A Levels.

Our member schools work closely with colleagues across the maintained sector and share a strong commitment to the flourishing of RE nationally. The health of the subject across all sectors is vital to our shared educational and civic life.



ISRSA Review

General Assessment

The review presents a **measured and constructive** set of recommendations. It does not call for immediate structural change. Instead, it creates space for **sector-led consultation and careful development**, avoiding unnecessary disruption and allowing the RE community time to shape the detail of future policy. The overall direction aligns with existing professional expectations and provides a stable basis for progress.



Inclusion of RE in the National Curriculum

The proposal to make RE a national curriculum subject is a significant and positive development.

Benefits include:

- Preventing schools from using work-arounds to avoid offering RE.
- Strengthening the subject's status within the curriculum.
- Enabling Ofsted to **inspect the content of RE provision**, rather than focusing solely on allocation of time or staffing.

“We recognise that making RE a national curriculum subject is not a panacea that will automatically improve the quality and quantity of compulsory RE.”

The review itself notes:

This is an important qualification. Making RE part of the national curriculum **does not guarantee universal delivery**, because:

- Academies and independent schools are **not required to follow the national curriculum**.
- If RE were placed only in the national curriculum, **academy trusts could legitimately opt out**, weakening entitlements for many pupils.

For the reform to be meaningful:

- RE must **retain its position in the basic curriculum**, and/or
- The Children and Schools Bill must be framed so that academies are required to provide national curriculum RE.

Without this, the improvements will be unevenly distributed across the school system and many pupils' entitlement to high-quality RE will remain insecure.



Sector-Led Curriculum Development & Flexibility

The review commits to developing a future national curriculum **in collaboration with the full range of RE stakeholders**. This reduces the risk of a single ideological framing and recognises the complexity of the subject.

Looking ahead, a balanced model will be needed:

- **A shared core of disciplinary knowledge**, ensuring rigor, coherence and academic seriousness and
- **Clear options or pathways** that allow schools with different ethos, tradition, or pupil composition to select approaches suitable to their context.

This would support **coherence without uniformity**, ensuring high standards while respecting diversity across the system.

We also welcome the review's mention of renaming the subject and would support a title such as **Theology Philosophy and Religion** to reflect its alignment with the major academic disciplines from which RE draws its intellectual strength.

Updating Non-Statutory Guidance

The recommendation to update non-statutory guidance is promising.

A professionally framed, balanced guidance document produced by the ISRSA already exists and could be adopted with minimal controversy.

Leadership of the Review

The recommended appointment of **Vanessa Ogden** to lead the review team is especially welcome. She has demonstrated:

- A commitment to the intellectual seriousness of RE
- A clear understanding of the educational purpose of the subject

The **absence of “religion and worldviews” terminology** in the review is welcome, signalling a return to disciplinary clarity and academic grounding.

The National Content Standard (REC)

The review states:

“Some work to improve and standardise a curriculum offer for RE has been done, most notably by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC), which published its National Content Standard for RE in England in 2023. This has received consensus from across the sector and laid strong foundations for change. We believe it has potential as a catalyst for more substantial reform.”

This wording implies a **level of consensus which is not currently present**. Those involved in the sector will recognise that there is **no consensus** around the particular framing adopted in the REC's **National Content Standard**. The review does not treat the NCS as final. Rather, it appears to position it as:

- A **reference point for discussion**, not a settled model,
- A **catalyst**, not an endpoint.

ISRSA welcomes this approach. The ongoing development of a national curriculum must remain **open, collaborative, and inclusive**, ensuring that consensus is built, not assumed.

We also note that some groups have interpreted the review as endorsing a move to place particular secular perspectives, such as Humanism, on an equivalent footing with the major religious traditions. The review itself does not make this claim. Any future national curriculum must be developed on the basis of **disciplinary coherence and educational purpose**, rather than the policy interests of individual organisations. It should not be assumed that one secular perspective speaks for all who do not identify with a religion.

Teacher Supply & Higher Education Capacity

A pressing concern is the **shortage of specialist RE teachers**. Without addressing this, reform will be difficult to implement effectively.

- There is a **national shortage of specialist RE teachers**, which will limit the speed and effectiveness of reform.
- **The university sector is contracting**, particularly in theology, philosophy and related humanities, reducing the capacity to train future RE specialists.

Although not discussed in the review, this challenge is central to achieving sustainable improvement. ISRSA and its partner organisations stand ready to contribute to **teacher training and professional development**, but success will require strategic investment and coordination across the sector.

Summary and Outlook

The review creates a **thoughtful and encouraging opportunity** to strengthen RE. It:

- Raises the subject's status and visibility
- Affirms value of sector-led development
- Provides a framework for rebuilding confidence in RE

However, three conditions are essential if reform is to succeed:

1. RE must remain part of the **basic curriculum**, or legislation must require academies to follow national curriculum RE.
2. Teacher supply / university sector capacity **must be addressed** to ensure viable delivery.
3. The national framework must include **clear options or pathways** to accommodate schools with differing ethos, traditions and pupil composition.

With these conditions met, the sector can create a curriculum that is rigorous, inclusive and aligned with the great academic disciplines of Theology, Philosophy and Religion.



