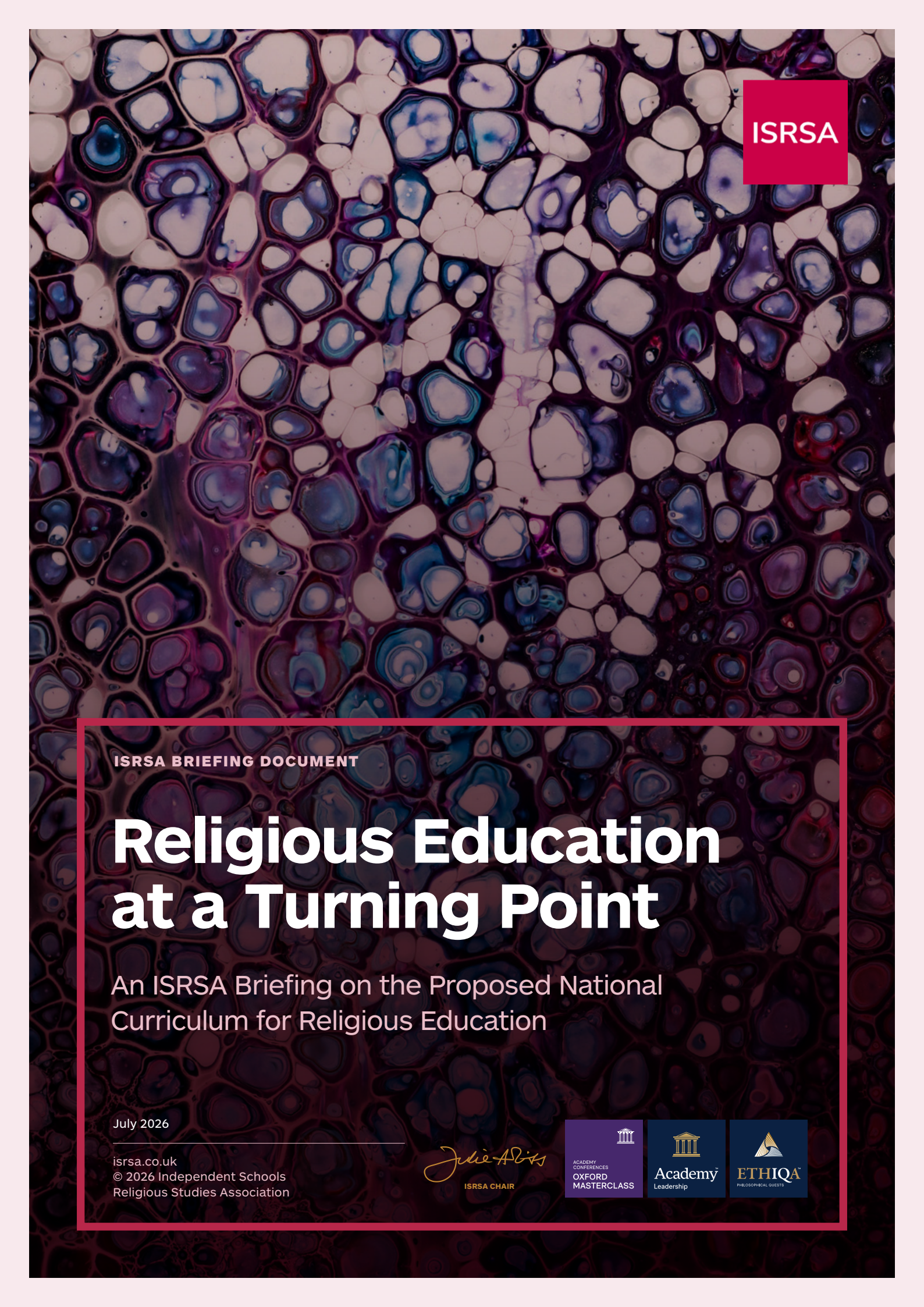




ISRSA

ISRSA BRIEFING DOCUMENT

Religious Education at a Turning Point

An ISRSA Briefing on the Proposed National
Curriculum for Religious Education

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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.

Introduction

Religious Education stands at one of the most significant moments in its recent history.

The Government intends to introduce Religious Education into the National Curriculum, accompanied by new national Programmes of Study. A public consultation is expected shortly before final decisions are made.

Many colleagues in independent schools may assume these proposals concern only the maintained sector. They do not.

National curriculum frameworks quickly influence examination specifications, teacher education, published resources, inspection expectations and the wider understanding of what constitutes ex-

cellent Religious Studies. The decisions made now are therefore likely to shape the subject across all sectors for many years to come.

ISRSA participated directly in the drafting process through members serving on the Reference Groups. Following that involvement, ISRSA formally dissented from both the process and the resulting proposals and subsequently published its own recommendations for Religious Education.

This briefing explains why we believe every Religious Studies teacher and school leader should engage with the forthcoming consultation.



What Is Being Proposed?

The Government proposes to move Religious Education into the **National Curriculum** and replace the current locally determined arrangements with national Programmes of Study.

At present, Religious Education occupies a unique constitutional position. Unlike most subjects, it forms part of the Basic Curriculum rather than the National Curriculum. In maintained schools, its content is determined locally through Agreed Syllabus Conferences, bringing together teachers, local authorities and representatives of religious communities.

The proposed reforms would fundamentally change this model.

Although independent schools are not required to follow the National Curriculum, these proposals matter to the whole profession. **National curriculum frameworks frequently shape examination specifications**, curriculum resources, teacher education and wider educational expectations.

For these reasons, every Religious Studies teacher has a professional interest in understanding the proposals and responding to the consultation.



Why ISRSA Dissented

The Secretary of State has described the proposed reforms as reflecting “genuine consensus” across the Religious Education sector.

ISRSA does not accept that description.

Our representative participated directly in the Reference Groups established to inform the drafting process. Our participant was not permitted a copy of the draft Programmes of Study, was unable to scrutinise the documents fully between meetings and had only limited opportunities for meaningful discussion before being asked to approve them.

Furthermore, participants did not operate on a level playing field. Some were given privileged access to draft materials and greater influence over the development of the Programmes of Study than others.

For reforms of such constitutional and educational significance, ISRSA believes greater transparency, wider engagement and genuine professional deliberation were essential. We therefore formally recorded our dissent.

The Francis Review

The Francis Review, which recommended that Religious Education should become a National Curriculum subject, also set out clear principles for how this should be achieved. It envisaged an independent chair leading a genuinely sector-led process that brought together faith communities, educational organisations and subject experts to build broad professional consensus.

ISRSA believes that the process which followed departed from those recommendations in significant respects. The restrictions placed upon scrutiny of draft documents, the composition of the groups and the limited opportunities for meaningful deliberation meant that genuine consensus was never established.

Confidence in curriculum reform depends not only upon the quality of the proposals themselves but also upon confidence in the process by which they are developed.

A Different Vision for Religious Studies

ISRSA welcomes many of the aspirations expressed during the drafting process.

However, we believe the proposed curriculum is organised around the wrong educational framework.

The draft Programmes of Study are structured around three strands of progression: substantive knowledge, disciplinary knowledge (ways of knowing) and personal knowledge.

ISRSA believes that Religious Studies should instead be organised around the academic disciplines of theology, philosophy and the study of religion. This reflects the conclusions of Ofsted’s Religious Education Research Review (2021), which argues that progression in Religious Education depends upon increasingly secure disciplinary knowledge.

The purpose of Religious Studies is to deepen pupils’ understanding of religion and belief through disciplined scholarship, enabling them to evaluate truth claims, understand religious traditions on their own terms and engage thoughtfully with profound philosophical and ethical questions.

Breadth or Depth?

The Ofsted Research Review emphasises that curriculum design requires difficult decisions about what knowledge is of greatest value. A curriculum cannot continually broaden while maintaining the same depth. Every addition requires a corresponding decision about what will receive less time and attention.

ISRSA believes the current proposals have not demonstrated that this balance has been struck appropriately. The proposed framework significantly expands the breadth of content, expecting pupils to encounter six principal religions, non-religious world-views, new religious movements and local spiritual traditions. This approach sits uneasily alongside the conclusions of Ofsted's Religious Education Research Review (2021)

Why This Matters for Independent Schools

Whether or not independent schools adopt the proposed Programmes of Study directly, they are likely to influence:

- GCSE and A Level Religious Studies
- teacher education and professional development
- published textbooks and curriculum resources
- university expectations
- the wider public understanding of Religious Studies.

The future of Religious Studies depends not only on statutory status but on its strength and credibility as an academic discipline. If the subject loses its distinctive disciplinary foundations, it risks becoming less attractive to schools, students and graduates considering teaching as a profession.

The experience in Wales should give policymakers serious pause. Despite reforms intended to strengthen the subject, there has been a marked decline in A Level entries and in the number of graduates choosing to train as Religious Education teachers. For any academic subject, declining student uptake and a shrinking pipeline of specialist teachers are warning signs that cannot be ignored.

This consultation is therefore not simply a main-tained-sector issue. It concerns the long-term health of Religious Studies across England. The decisions taken now will influence not only what is taught, but whether the subject continues to flourish as a respected academic discipline in schools, universities and the teaching profession.

ISRSA's Position

ISRSA supports ambitious, knowledge-rich Religious Studies rooted in theology, philosophy and the academic study of religion.

We welcome reform that strengthens the subject, broadens scholarship and prepares pupils for higher education and thoughtful engagement with the world's religious traditions and philosophical questions.

We also believe reforms of this significance should emerge from transparent processes that command the confidence of the profession and should be founded upon the principles of a knowledge-rich academic curriculum identified by Ofsted.

We Encourage You to Engage

The forthcoming consultation will help determine the future direction of Religious Education for many years to come.

We encourage every member to:

- Read the consultation documents carefully.
- Consider the educational issues they raise.
- Submit a response to the consultation.
- Encourage colleagues and school leaders to engage with the debate.

Professional associations exist to contribute thoughtfully to the development of their subjects. This consultation provides an important opportunity for Religious Studies teachers to do precisely that.

ISRSA Recommendations for Religious Education

<https://isrsa.co.uk/2025/05/proposed-statutory-guidance-for-re>

