

# Legislative proposals for religion, values and ethics (RVE)

Question 1: Do you agree that religion, values and ethics (RVE) should encompass both religious and non-religious beliefs that are philosophical convictions (in line with the European Convention on Human Rights) as described in the consultation document?

Neither agree nor disagree

**Supporting comments (no more than 250 words):**

Good religious education (RVE) naturally engages with non-religious philosophical convictions as well as with religions. The St Mary's Centre supports that positive engagement. However, the St Mary's Centre identifies some areas of real concern:

1. Why is an area of 'content' being legislated for in this way? This is part of good practice in religious education (RVE) and there are other ways of ensuring and developing good practice without generating difficult and potentially controversial legislative issues regarding what is being counted as 'philosophical convictions' and how this is demonstrated in school practice, for example.
2. Why is it being proposed that new 'groups' be introduced on SACREs for those who hold 'philosophical convictions'? SACREs in Wales have been (and are increasingly) incorporating relevant 'groups' who hold 'philosophical convictions' within their existing structures, and this additional proposal is an unnecessary legislative step, which undermines the local democracy necessary for SACREs to determine their representation from religions, denominations and philosophical convictions well-placed to contribute to the work of SACREs in their local area (note: representation on the Agreed Syllabus Conference is separate to this and the Welsh Government may be confusing SACRE membership with syllabus content). Also, if new 'groups' are created on SACRE, these could negatively impact on existing balances within the committee structure e.g. respective representational weightings between the more extensive religions and their denominations and the numerically few (in terms of membership figures) 'philosophical convictions'. Any proposed change to SACRE committee structure should be part of a separate consultation.

Question 2: Do you agree that agreed syllabus conferences must have regard to statutory guidance when they are developing their locally agreed syllabus?

Neither agree nor disagree

**Supporting comments (no more than 250 words):**

The St Mary's Centre sees much benefit in agreed syllabus conferences being informed and supported by statutory guidance because it is essential for religious education (RVE) to continue to make its distinctive contribution to the curriculum in integrated and effective ways.

However, the St Mary Centre 'neither agrees nor disagrees' with the question because of the following concerns:

1. It is unclear what the legal status of 'must have regard to' is. In practice, how would this impact on the work of the agreed syllabus conferences in the future? Currently, religious education in a widely accepted form is supported by the Welsh Government, however, with the frequency of curriculum reviews the situation may be different in the future. The potential strength of 'must have regard to' needs unpacking to protect religious education in the future.
2. Since devolution, SACREs (helped by national organisations in Wales such as WASACRE and NAPfRE) have worked closely with Welsh Government in order to shape religious education that is responsive to developments within the wider educational context in Wales. The St Mary's Centre also recognises that the Welsh Government has shown that it takes seriously its relationships with faith organisations in Wales. On the basis of these significant relationships developed over two decades, the St Mary's Centre is concerned that the Welsh Government may now be trying to legislate for these relationships, which may send signals of mistrust for relationships already working well.

Question 3: Do you agree with our proposal that community schools and foundation and voluntary schools without a religious character must be required to have regard to an agreed syllabus in designing and implementing RVE?

Disagree

**Supporting comments (no more than 250 words):**

This undermines the status of the locally agreed syllabus. Currently, schools in Wales must teach 'in accordance with' their locally agreed syllabus. The following points are emphasised:

1. With such weakening of the status of the locally agreed syllabus, the position of religious education would also be weakened in schools. The locally agreed syllabus is an important statutory safeguard for religious education in schools in Wales.
2. The use of the word 'an' in 'an agreed syllabus' is unclear. Any suggestion that schools without a religious character have the option of using a syllabus other than their own locally agreed syllabus is strongly opposed because it undermines the value of local pertinence and local democracy in religious education.
3. This proposal appears to assume that there will be instances in which a locally agreed syllabus would 'get in the way of' the new curriculum. As already stated, in the past two decades SACREs and Welsh Government have worked well together to help ensure that this not the case, so why is a 'loophole' of this nature being suggested? The St Mary's Centre hopes that SACREs in Wales will be able to adopt/adapt the Supporting Framework for RVE as their agreed syllabi and this is something worth working towards without introducing legislative measures that might weaken religious education through weakening SACREs and their locally agreed syllabi.

Question 4: Do you agree with our proposal that parents/carers of learners in schools without a religious character must no longer be able to request provision of RVE in line with tenets of a particular faith?

Agree

**Supporting comments (no more than 250 words):**

'Agree' has been selected because the St Mary's Centre recognises the relationship between this question and the Welsh Government's decision to remove the right to withdraw from religious education. It is also recognised that parents/carers rarely make use of this right in schools in Wales.

However, the St Mary's Centre identifies the following issues with this proposal:

1. There may be legal challenges if the Welsh Government removes this right from parents of faith, based on potential human rights infringements.
2. On the few occasions that schools have to engage with this issue, it allows for an important dialogue between school and family about the purpose and nature of religious education today, and why withdrawal is unnecessary. Therefore, the proposal would remove the need for such dialogue because schools could simply cite the law to parents (while the sources of the grievance and misunderstandings would remain). It is possible that these parents may decide to remove their children from state-maintained education as a consequence.

Question 5: Do you agree with the proposal that voluntary controlled schools with religious character can teach RVE in accordance with the trust deeds of the school or the tenets of the faith of the school if requested by parents/carers?

Agree

**Supporting comments (no more than 250 words):**

The St Mary's Centre supports this proposal and notes that the current situation would remain unchanged as a result.

However, the St Mary's Centre draws attention to the following:

1. Trust deeds refer to RE and not to RVE and this may have consequences for these schools.

Question 6: Do you agree that voluntary-aided schools with a religious character should be required to teach the agreed syllabus where a parent/carer requests it and should not have discretion to refuse to do so?

Disagree

**Supporting comments (no more than 250 words):**

The St Mary's Centre disagrees strongly with this proposal because it introduces a new and unacceptable requirement for voluntary aided schools:

1. There appears to be an underlying assumption that religious education in voluntary aided schools is not pluralistic and has the effect of indoctrination. This is not the case in either the Church in Wales sector or the Roman Catholic sector.
2. The distinctive contribution of these schools to education in Wales should be understood and taken seriously. For example, the St Mary's Centre has been involved in significant research projects that show after taking into account the influence of home environment and other factors, value is added by voluntary aided schools in ways that promote individual wellbeing and societal wellbeing. E.g. there is an enhanced sense of purpose in life (which is the psychological agency), lower endorsement of self-harm and anti-social behaviours. Both self-harm and anti-social behaviours carry costs for society. The pressure today on trying to remove or dilute religion from the public sphere by pressure groups may well have the unintended consequence of damaging/removing important individual and societal benefits, which come with these schools when compared with other schools.
3. Proposal threatens to dilute the faith identity and ethos of voluntary aided schools, potentially creating divisive communities focused around 'religious' divergences.
4. The positive working relationships developed between Welsh Government and the Churches risk being undermined through the proposal.
5. From a practical perspective, the extra workload for schools to offer two syllabi is unreasonable.

Question 7: We would like to know your views on the effects that these proposals in relation to religion, values and ethics would have on the Welsh language, specifically on: i) opportunities for people to use Welsh ii) treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language What effects do you think there would be? How could positive effects be increased, or negative effects be mitigated?

There is a risk that the proposals may undermine the Welsh language if the position of SACREs and locally agreed syllabi are unintentionally weakened in Wales. SACREs have a rich and diverse membership and the influence of the Welsh language is various according to location in Wales. For example, in many Welsh-speaking heartlands in Wales the relationships between language, locality and religion are particularly strong and important aspects of this may be lost to future generations.

Question 9: We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them:

Note: point 28 appears to be in the wrong place (i.e. why is it in the voluntary-aided school section?): 'Schools will continue to need to assure themselves that their RVE provision satisfies the pluralistic requirement created by human rights legislation[,] and SACRES, ASCs and Local Authorities will continue to need to assure that any agreed syllabus their [they] develop and then adopt also meets these requirements.'

However, if the proposed legislation included just this paragraph, surely this would be enough without adding the other unnecessary and problematic legislative measures being proposed in this consultation.

## Submit your response

Do you live in Wales?

Yes

Do you have a business interest in Wales?

Yes

Please provide the first part of your home postcode, e.g. CF10

LL33

You are about to submit your response. Please ensure you are satisfied with the answers you have provided before sending.

**Name** Dr Tania ap Sion

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If you want to receive a receipt of your response, please provide an email address. Email address

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