

Community cohesion inquiry: a submission by the RE Policy Unit

The inquiry

The Women and Equalities Committee will examine community cohesion at a local and national level in the UK. This inquiry aims to gather diverse evidence and investigate barriers to cohesion, examples of best practice and how to ensure cohesion for the next generation.

Relevant questions for RE

- What can be done at a local and national level to improve community cohesion?
- What examples are there of best practice which has positively impacted community cohesion?
- How should community cohesion be best approached in schools?

Executive Summary

This submission focuses on the role of religious education in helping to support community cohesion. Research in the UK consistently suggests that Religious Education (RE) plays a crucial role in supporting community cohesion. By fostering mutual respect, understanding, and dialogue between people with different religious and non-religious worldviews, RE helps students navigate the complexities of a multicultural and multi-religious and multi-secular society. The studies reviewed highlight the importance of a well-designed RE curriculum, teacher training, and inclusive policies. Continued research and policy development are essential to ensure that RE remains an effective tool for building social integration and a cohesive society.

1. Religious Education and Social Cohesion

- **SACREs (Standing Advisory Councils on RE) are statutory bodies, government funded that are established in each local authority to oversee Religious Education locally.** Each council is made up of people representing teachers, elected councillors and those from different religious and non-religious groups in the area. In addition to their main responsibilities, they have considerable freedom to discuss matters linked to their remit and are often concerned with community cohesion. SACREs tend to be overlooked by policy makers in their potential to support community cohesion. www.NASACRE.org.uk
- **Promoting Understanding and Tolerance:** The inquiry asks what can be done at local level to increase community cohesion. Research highlights how RE can foster understanding and tolerance between diverse religious, non-religious and cultural groups. For example, in giving evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education, the late Lesley Prior said, “I am personally involved in a European RE network. What we do in SACREs [standing advisory councils on RE], where we have all these people from very different backgrounds working together, is looked at with wonder and fascination and is seen as an excellent model of good practice in community cohesion, bringing people together and sharing what is on offer. ([Lesley Prior: oral evidence to the APPG](#)).
- **The RE: The Truth Unmasked report concludes,** “Religious literacy matters for everyone. Religious Education has a vital and powerful contribution to make in

equipping young people, whatever their backgrounds and personal beliefs with the skills to understand and thrive in a diverse and shifting world.

- **RE provision in schools is on the decline nationally.** The value of the contribution of RE to community cohesion has not been widely recognised by policy makers. A raft of recent policies have had the effect of downgrading RE in status on the school curriculum, and the subject is now under threat as never before, just at the moment when it is needed most. The Commission on RE report (2018) and the Ofsted subject report (2024) all evidence these threats, along with urgent proposals for meeting them head on. So far, these recommendations have been largely ignored.
- **RE and good community relations report (2014):** In his introduction to the APPG report of this title, Former MP for Eastbourne; Stephen Lloyd said, “Good community relations are at the heart of a society where people can live together harmoniously as neighbours, work colleagues and fellow citizens even if they may disagree over some of their fundamental religious beliefs or worldviews. Religious education is uniquely placed to help children and young people develop the knowledge and skills they need to play their part in today's society and tomorrow's world.”
- **National Studies and Ofsted:** National reports such as the [Commission on Religious Education \(CoRE\) report \(2018\)](#) emphasise the potential role of RE in fostering social cohesion. The CoRE report recommended that RE include teachings about a wide range of worldviews to promote mutual respect and address integration challenges. This aligns with the [DCSF Guidance on Community Cohesion \(2007\)](#), which stresses that RE (well taught) encourages respect for diversity and promotes shared values to help children develop a better understanding of society's complexities.
- **The Ofsted subject report on Religious Education (2024),** titled "Deep and Meaningful?", highlights the importance of well taught RE in promoting community cohesion and social integration. The report states, "RE helps pupils understand and appreciate diverse religious and non-religious beliefs, fostering mutual respect and understanding." It also notes “"Effective RE teaching can contribute to pupils' personal development and help them navigate a complex world with diverse perspectives."
- **Inter faith and belief dialogue:** RE serves as a platform for inter faith and belief dialogue, encouraging engagement with diverse belief systems. For instance, a study by the [Birmingham RE Network \(2015\)](#) examined how RE curricula in diverse schools in Birmingham facilitated dialogue between students of different faiths and beliefs, improving cross-cultural understanding and reducing misconceptions. The [Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit \(WRERU\) \(2015\)](#) also surveyed nearly 12,000 students aged 13 to 15 across the UK, and their findings suggests that RE significantly influences students' positive attitudes towards religious diversity, which is crucial for fostering social cohesion.
- **European interest in the role of religious education in promoting intercultural understanding** A special issue Intercultural Education published in 2019 on issues discussed in the Council of Europe book Signposts: policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious worldviews in intercultural education ([Jackson 2014](#)) and considers the contribution of ‘inclusive’ religious education to intercultural understanding,

2. Curriculum Design and Impact

- **Curricular choice and community cohesion:** The choice to study GCSE Religious Studies as part of the curriculum have been shown to impact community cohesion. For example, [research from the University of Warwick \(2016\)](#), found a small but significant positive association was found between taking Religious Education as an examination subject and attitude towards religious diversity. This approach was also reinforced by the [DCSF Guidance on Community Cohesion \(2007\)](#) quoted above, which emphasised the importance of an inclusive RE curriculum in promoting respect for all students.

3. Case Studies and School-Level Research

- **Case Studies in Diverse Schools:** This mirrors the report by Alan Brine (former Ofsted HMI) in [Religious Education and Community Cohesion by RE:ONLINE \(2012\)](#), which discussed how RE promotes understanding, respect, and shared values among students from different religious and non-religious backgrounds.
- **Teacher Training and Attitudes:** Teacher training is another important factor in how RE contributes to community cohesion. Research from the [University of Cumbria \(2020\)](#) highlights the importance of teachers' specialist subject training in this area. In Elton-Chalcraft's (2020:52) study of 97 student teachers the majority said that 'while they felt positive about teaching for diversity they felt lack of subject knowledge and limited competence in pedagogical strategies might impede their ability to teach children from diverse backgrounds and also teach for equality'. While some students felt 'doubly disadvantaged' with both an absence of knowledge about religions and world views coupled with a naïve attitude towards the issues inherent in teaching for diversity, others students having gained formal qualifications in Religious education felt confident in their awareness of the complexities in teaching for diversity.

Findings reveal that the research process itself enabled some students to move from a 'dysconscious racist' stance (King 2004 cited in Elton-Chalcraft 2020) to a more enlightened understanding about teaching for diversity and an unenlightened stance is not unusual in teacher education particularly in predominantly white areas. Solutions include only planning lessons after a practitioner has interrogated their own mindset and endeavoured to develop informed and research based understandings of the complexities, nuances and problems presented terms such as anti racism, decolonisation, intersectionality, white allyship, white saviourism, community cohesion, unconscious bias, bystander and change maker etc) (Elton-Chalcraft, Brown and Yates 2024:36; Sheehan and Elton-Chalcraft 2023).

4. Government and other reports and policy

- **The Commission on Religious Education (CoRE):** The [CoRE report \(2018\)](#) made significant recommendations on how RE can better contribute to community cohesion. It called for a curriculum that includes both religious and non-religious worldviews to reflect the diversity of modern Britain. This approach was seen as crucial for fostering

mutual understanding and addressing social divisions, providing a balanced view of different cultures and beliefs to support community cohesion.

- **The Department for Education's Role:** Government reports, including the [DfE 2019 report on preventing extremism](#), emphasised the importance of RE in promoting understanding of different cultures and religious beliefs. The report highlighted that RE can combat prejudice and radicalization, positioning RE as a vital tool for social integration and unity. The [DCSF Guidance on Community Cohesion \(2007\)](#) underscored that RE plays a crucial role in developing respect for diversity, which is central to fostering a cohesive society.
- **The All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education (APPG on RE)** has highlighted the importance of Religious Education (RE) in fostering positive community relations, particularly in a diverse and multicultural society. In their [Understanding Religion and Belief in the UK report \(2013\)](#), the APPG emphasised the following key points:
 - **Promoting Understanding and Respect:** The report stressed that RE plays a vital role in promoting understanding between different religious and cultural groups. By educating students about a variety of beliefs, RE helps foster respect for diversity and reduces prejudices, contributing to positive community relations.
 - **Reducing Social Tensions:** The APPG noted that RE is particularly important in reducing social tensions and addressing intergroup conflicts. By teaching about various religious and non-religious worldviews, RE helps students appreciate religious and cultural diversity, which in turn can help prevent misunderstandings and tensions within communities.
 - **Support for Social Cohesion:** The APPG identified RE as a key tool in supporting social cohesion. By encouraging mutual respect and understanding, RE helps to bridge gaps between different groups, contributing to a more integrated and harmonious society.
 - **Combating Extremism:** The APPG also emphasised the role of RE in preventing radicalization and extremism. By providing a balanced understanding of different beliefs and worldviews, RE helps students develop critical thinking skills, which can prevent the spread of extremist ideologies and foster more positive intergroup relationships.

Community cohesion and religion and belief literacy. [The Bloom review \(2023\)](#) cites another APPG on Religious Education report, 'Improving religious literacy', and quotes it as follows "religious literacy within schools "will enable communities and individuals to understand each other better, to communicate with one another on a more informed basis and promote community cohesion within a more inclusive and holistic society". The report also states that schools are "one of, if not the most, important sites for improving religious literacy in society more widely".

However, the Bloom review's call for evidence asked respondents if they felt that RE is comprehensive enough within the English education curriculum to provide a good understanding of different faiths and beliefs. Although many didn't know, a considerable

amount of those who did offer a view (around 63%) said no. Probable explanations for this response can be found in the [Commission on RE report 2018](#) and [Ofsted's 2021 research review](#) and [2024 Subject report](#) which identify many systemic issues in the provision for religious education that are contributing to the subject failing to realise its potential.

5. The Role of Religious Education (RE)

[The Department for Education Panel on Promoting Integration of Children and Young People](#) (2023) referenced two key initiatives aimed at fostering integration and community cohesion: the **Shared Space** project and the **School Linking** project. Both projects provide important examples of how schools can engage in religious education (RE) and partnerships that promote dialogue between people with different religious and non-religious worldview and social integration.

Both the **Shared Space** and **School Linking** projects have a significant connection to **Religious Education (RE)**. These initiatives provide students with opportunities to engage with people from different religious backgrounds in real-life settings, complementing the theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom. Through these programs, students develop a deeper understanding of religious diversity and the importance of dialogue between people with different religious and non-religious worldviews.

- In the **Shared Space** project, RE lays the groundwork by helping students understand different religious and non-religious worldviews, equipping them with the knowledge necessary for meaningful dialogue.
- The **School Linking** project directly supports RE by allowing students to apply the concepts they've learned about religious and non-religious worldviews and culture in collaborative, real-world environments.

The **Shared Space** and **School Linking** projects highlighted by the Department for Education represent effective models for promoting social integration, dialogue between people with different religious and non-religious worldviews, and community cohesion. These projects not only support the aims of **Religious Education** but also provide students with the opportunity to engage with peers from diverse backgrounds, fostering mutual respect and understanding. By participating in these initiatives, students can navigate the complexities of a multicultural society, helping to build stronger, more integrated communities.

A. The Shared Space Project

[The Shared Space project](#) is an initiative from the University of Bristol and the National Association of Teachers of RE. It was designed to foster dialogue and understanding between young people from different religious and non-religious backgrounds. The project creates shared spaces where young people engage in discussions and collaborative activities to challenge stereotypes, foster tolerance, and promote understanding between people with different religious and non-religious worldviews and intercultural understanding.

- **Promoting Dialogue:** The Shared Space project was cited in the Department for Education Panel on Promoting Integration of Children and Young People report, as a model for how RE can complement classroom learning by providing students with opportunities to engage with individuals from diverse religious and non-religious traditions. These dialogues help deepen students' understanding of religious diversity and challenge preconceived notions.
- **Interfaith Interaction:** The project encourages interactions between people with different religious and non-religious worldviews, which are crucial for community cohesion. By engaging students in shared spaces, it can promote mutual respect and understanding, allowing them to break down barriers and better understand people's differences.
- **Impact Example:** One notable outcome highlighted in the report was that students involved in the Shared Space project reported a greater sense of empathy and understanding towards people with different religious and non-religious worldviews. For example, students who had misconceptions about certain religious practices found their views changed through direct engagement with peers from those communities.

For more information, visit the [Shared Space project website](#).

B. The School Linking Project

[The School Linking project](#) focuses on encouraging partnerships between schools from different communities—often those serving different religious and non-religious or demographic groups. This initiative promotes social cohesion through joint activities, fostering understanding between people with different religious and non-religious worldviews and community integration.

- **Partnerships Between Schools:** The School Linking project encourages schools to collaborate with others that may serve different religious or cultural groups. These partnerships allow students to participate in cross-cultural and activities alongside people with different religious and non-religious worldviews, helping them appreciate their diversity. For example, schools may hold joint events, discussions and panels or collaborative social action projects.
- **Supporting RE Curriculum:** By engaging in these activities, students extend their classroom learning in RE, where they are taught about different religious and non-religious practices and beliefs. These hands-on experiences help reinforce the theoretical knowledge gained in RE lessons and allow students to see diversity in action.
- **Promoting Understanding and Tolerance:** The project works to reduce intergroup tensions and promote understanding. As students interact with peers from different faith backgrounds, they gain a better appreciation for cultural and religious diversity, helping reduce prejudices and misconceptions.
- **Impact Example:** Schools involved in the School Linking project reported that students showed improved attitudes toward diversity and a better understanding of other cultures. For instance, students in a school linked with a school with a different religious character, were better equipped to understand the practices of their peers, contributing to greater social integration and harmony.

The Commission on RE report (2018) also emphasises the role of RE in community cohesion. As follows:

- “A number of studies have shown that Religious Education, taught well, provides a safe space to discuss, experience and respond well to difference – a space where students can engage with controversial issues and learn to disagree respectfully with each other.
²⁹This can play a key role in fostering good relationships between different groups within the school and in later adult life.
- 29 University of Bristol (2018): Encounter, conversation and interaction: improving community relations through religious education Policy briefing 56. Arweck, Elisabeth, (ed.) Young People’s Attitudes to Religious Diversity. Ashgate AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Series . Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 3-18. ISBN 9781472444301 (2017).

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