

What are the new style Ofsted reports saying about Religious Education?

As of Monday 16 February, 160 new-style Ofsted reports have been published for primary, secondary and cross-phase schools, excluding schools with a religious character. In the past, the RE community has raised concerns that Religious Education has been overlooked in inspection reports, even allowing for the fact that RE is not normally inspected by Ofsted in schools with a religious character. The early evidence from the new-style reports suggests that this is not the case any longer. Around half of the published reports in schools without a religious character, refer to the teaching of religious beliefs or faiths. The breakdown is shown below.

NEW STYLE OFSTED REPORTS PUBLISHED UP TO 16TH FEB	
PRIMARY	118
SECONDARY	39
CROSS PHASE	3
TOTAL	160

NEW STYLE REPORTS THAT EXPLICITLY MENTION RE		
	NUMBER	%
PRIMARY	58	49
SECONDARY	17	44
CROSS PHASE	1	33
TOTAL	77	48

Of the 77 reports that explicitly mention RE, only two references appear under the curriculum and teaching heading. Both are positive comments relating to primary schools. In one case, leaders had adapted the RE curriculum to include a wider range of worldviews. In another, the school was recognised for its creative use of web-based resources to broaden pupils' understanding of religions and worldviews. It is worth noting that the new-style reports focus strongly on the child's experience of school. They do not include subject deep dives and rarely highlight individual subjects in either primary or secondary phases, particularly beyond English and Mathematics.

All other references to RE appear within the personal development and wellbeing section. Again, it is rare for RE to be named explicitly as a subject. Instead, around half of reports refer more generally to pupils learning about religious beliefs within the broader personal development framework.

This indicates that Ofsted recognises the role of RE in preparing pupils for life in an increasingly diverse society. However, there is a potential risk if this leads school and trust leaders to view RE solely as a vehicle for personal development, rather than as a subject with its own distinctive body of knowledge and disciplinary approaches. There is a danger that citizenship, RSE and RE could be blended together in ways that dilute subject depth - a concern reflected in Ofsted's recent subject report on RE.¹

Within the 76 reports that explicitly mention the teaching of religious beliefs in the personal development and wellbeing section, eight include critical comments. These concerns focus on lack of depth or on pupils struggling to recall what they have been taught. Of the 77 reports that explicitly mention RE, two include next steps specifically related to strengthening pupils' knowledge of faiths.

Personal Development and Wellbeing Judgements

The table below shows the distribution of grades awarded for personal development and wellbeing across the 160 schools.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELLBEING								
	PRIMARY		SECONDARY		CROSS PHASE		TOTAL	
	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%
EXCEPTIONAL	1	1	6	15	0	0	7	4
STRONG STANDARD	52	44	12	31	2	67	66	41
EXPECTED STANDARD	62	53	21	54	1	33	84	53
NEEDS ATTENTION	3	3	0	0	0	0	3	2
URGENT IMPROVEMENT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	118	101	39	100	3	100	160	100

The table below shows the number and percentage of schools within each rating for personal development and wellbeing that explicitly mention RE. For example, there are six secondary schools rated as exceptional for personal development and wellbeing, and three of these (50%) explicitly mention RE

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOLS MENTIONING RE AT EACH PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELLBEING RATING								
	PRIMARY		SECONDARY		CROSS PHASE		TOTAL	
	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%
EXCEPTIONAL	0	0	3	50	0	0	3	50
STRONG STANDARD	28	54	5	42	1	50	34	52
EXPECTED STANDARD	30	48	9	43	0	0	39	46
NEEDS ATTENTION	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
URGENT IMPROVEMENT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Most schools are judged to be at expected standard or above for personal development and wellbeing. All schools that explicitly mention the teaching of religious beliefs are graded at expected standard or above in this area. Of the six schools judged exceptional, half include an explicit reference to teaching about faiths or religious beliefs.

Overall, 52% of schools rated strong standard for personal development and wellbeing include an explicit mention of teaching about faith or religious beliefs. In the primary sector this figure is 54%.

Conclusion

Early evidence from the new-style Ofsted reports suggests that learning about religious beliefs is increasingly recognised as an important element of pupils' personal development. However, RE is rarely discussed explicitly as a curriculum subject, and only a very small number of reports reference it in relation to curriculum intent or teaching. This raises important questions for school and trust leaders about how RE is positioned within wider personal development agendas.

While it is encouraging to see inspectors valuing pupils' understanding of religion and belief, there is a risk that, without explicit recognition as a subject discipline, RE becomes absorbed into broader pastoral or values-based provision, with a potential unintended consequence of reduced curriculum time. There therefore remains a need to ensure that RE is not marginalised in this way but

continues to be developed and protected as a rigorous subject with its own knowledge, concepts and disciplinary approaches.