Mandatory but Undefined: Why Religion, Values And Ethics (RVE) Needs Clear National Entitlement in Wales

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ABSTRACT

Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE) is legally mandatory for all learners aged 3–16 under the Curriculum for Wales, yet the absence of a defined national entitlement for time and delivery creates a critical paradox. This article examines how ambiguity in operational guidance undermines equity, progression, and civic purposes, particularly following the removal of the short course GCSE Religious Studies. Drawing on statutory frameworks, historical context, and sector research, the analysis identifies systemic vulnerabilities: fragmented provision, erosion of subject expertise, and accountability blind spots. The article proceeds in four stages. First, it traces the evolution and statutory footing of RVE; second, it explores how ambiguity manifests in delivery models and impacts equity; third, it compares current arrangements with previous frameworks and considers risks at Years 10–11; and fourth, it evaluates cross-curricular integration and its implications for civic literacy. The article concludes by proposing a balanced package of reforms – including a national minimum time entitlement, strengthened inspection, transition guidance for Years 10–11, and investment in professional learning – to ensure that 'mandatory' translates into meaningful, equitable learning for all learners in Wales.

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1. Introduction: The Promise and the Problem

The Curriculum for Wales represents a landmark reform, designed to foster ambitious, capable learners, and ethical, informed citizens. It is a flagship initiative structured around four purposes and six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE). Within the Humanities Area of Learning and Experience, Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE) is designated as a mandatory element for all learners aged 3–16. Framed to be objective, critical, and pluralistic, RVE encompasses both religious and non-religious philosophical convictions and is firmly established in statute and guidance (Wareham, 2022; Barnes, 2025).

This mandatory status signals a progressive commitment to worldview literacy and civic engagement, with rich possibilities for holistic, creative, and learner-centred approaches to education. While this is commendable, the policy architecture contains a notable shortcoming: neither the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 nor statutory guidance prescribes a minimum allocation of curriculum time or a standard delivery model for RVE. Schools are required to design their own curricula in line with the statutory guidance, yet no entitlement is specified in terms of hours or frequency. Consequently, the concept of 'mandatory' has become ambiguously defined. Learners' experiences now vary radically. Some schools provide weekly RVE lessons taught by specialists; others integrate RVE across Humanities subjects such as History and Geography, embed it within tutor time, or meet the statutory requirement through occasional collapsed timetable days (National Centre of Religious Education for Wales, 2024). This ambiguity is not a minor technicality; it directly shapes provision and undermines educational equity and the civic purposes of the Curriculum for Wales.

The same legal duty therefore results in radically different entitlements for learners. Although Estyn's current inspection framework evaluates curriculum quality, the absence of national expectations for RVE time makes meaningful enforcement difficult (Estyn, 2023).

The tension becomes particularly acute in Years 10 and 11. Under the previous framework, large numbers of learners opted to study GCSE Religious Studies (RS), often through the short course. Recent qualification reforms have introduced a new GCSE RS, first taught from September 2025, but without a short course option. WJEC guidance confirms that Qualifications Wales currently has no plans to reinstate this route (WJEC, 2025). The removal of the short course eliminates a key mechanism that previously anchored time for meaningful study in these years. If the term 'mandatory' is to guarantee equitable entitlement, stronger national guidance and clear, monitorable expectations are now essential.

This article addresses that paradox and its implications through ten sections grouped into four thematic strands:

- **Sections 2–3:** Historical and statutory context, and how ambiguity manifests in delivery models and equity gaps.
- **Sections 4–5:** Comparison with previous frameworks and the pinch point at Years 10–11 following the removal of the short course GCSE.
- **Sections 6–8:** Cross-curricular integration and the risk of dilution; the civic stakes of entitlement for democratic resilience; and actionable recommendations for reform.
- **Sections 9–10:** Responses to objections, and a conclusion setting out how 'mandatory' can be made to mean something for every learner in Wales.

The article concludes by proposing reforms that balance local autonomy with national guardrails, ensuring that 'mandatory' translates into meaningful, equitable learning for every learner in Wales.

This analysis draws on wider curriculum theory, particularly work on knowledge, entitlement and curriculum enactment, which emphasises that access to disciplinary knowledge depends on sustained curricular exposure rather than nominal inclusion (Young, 2008; Young et al., 2014), while also acknowledging that curriculum policy is interpreted unevenly across institutional contexts (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015).

While the argument developed here operates at a system level, it is important to acknowledge that RVE provision is not uniform across Wales. Significant variation exists between primary and secondary phases, Welsh-medium and English-medium settings, and between schools with and without a religious character. These differences can shape curriculum time, pedagogical approach, and institutional priority.

However, the present article does not seek to offer a fully disaggregated account of these variations; rather, it identifies a common structural issue – the absence of a defined entitlement – that cuts across these contexts. Detailed, sector-specific analysis is therefore identified as an important priority for future empirical research.

2.0. What Mandatory Currently Means in Law and Guidance

2.1. The evolution of RVE in Wales

This section provides a concise historical framing, not as a full account, but to illuminate how earlier arrangements around compulsion, conscience, and curriculum control continue to shape current ambiguities in RVE provision.

Debates about compulsion and withdrawal in RVE in Wales have deep historical roots in nineteenth-century educational policy shaped by English legislation and cultural prejudice. The government-funded education inspection reports of 1847, known as the Blue Books, condemned the Welsh language and Nonconformity as causes of ignorance, sparking a national crisis that positioned education as a moral and linguistic assertion of identity (Williams, 1990). Amid fears of Anglican control, the Elementary Education Act 1870 introduced two enduring principles: the Cowper-Temple clause mandating non-denominational teaching and the conscience clause permitting parental withdrawal (Louden, 2004).

These provisions balanced compulsion with conscience, enabling Welsh Nonconformists to participate in state education without surrendering autonomy. The twentieth century consolidated this model through the 1902, 1944, and 1988 Acts, embedding local determination via Agreed Syllabi and Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs), while maintaining withdrawal rights. By the close of the century, religious education in Wales was compulsory for schools but optional for pupils – an enduring compromise between civic inclusion, diversity, and individual conscience that continues to shape RVE today.

However, the contemporary shift to RVE is best understood not only within this Welsh trajectory, but also in relation to wider developments across England and Wales; in particular, the 2018 report of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE), 'Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward', which advanced the idea of worldviews literacy, reframing the subject as a universal entitlement encompassing both religious

and non-religious ways of understanding the world. On this basis, the report argued for the removal of the parental right of withdrawal and the establishment of a clear national entitlement to secure consistent provision (CoRE, 2018).

Although Wales has pursued its own legislative path, these ideas are clearly reflected in the design of RVE within the Curriculum for Wales. The emphasis on critical, objective and pluralistic engagement with diverse religious and non-religious philosophical convictions, alongside the removal of withdrawal rights, marks a similar conceptual shift from confessional instruction to civic and intellectual formation (Welsh Government, 2021; Hwb, 2022b). The argument advanced in this article for a defined baseline of provision likewise echoes CoRE's concern that entitlement must be meaningful in practice rather than purely formal.

At the same time, such developments represent the continuation of longer-standing trends within the field. Moves toward plural and critical forms of Religious Education can be traced at least to the Schools Council Working Paper 36 (1971), which reimagined the subject as an exploratory, multi-faith discipline concerned with understanding rather than transmission (Copley, 2008). Subsequent decades embedded this orientation through agreed syllabi and curricular reform, gradually expanding the scope of the subject to reflect increasing social and philosophical diversity.

RVE therefore represents less a rupture than a consolidation and extension of long-standing trajectories toward plural, critical forms of religious education. What is distinctive about the present moment is not the direction of travel, but the combination of high conceptual ambition with comparatively weak specification in terms of curriculum entitlement. Earlier historical settlements balanced compulsion with safeguards—through locally agreed syllabi, shared norms of provision, and, later, qualification structures. By contrast, the current framework removes many of these implicit anchors while intensifying the subject's civic and educational expectations. This historical perspective underscores a central claim of the article: that the ambiguity surrounding 'mandatory' provision is not incidental, but reflects a shift in how entitlement itself is conceptualised and enacted.

2.2. Statutory footing

Section 71 of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 provides the statutory basis for RVE. Schools must design their curricula with regard to the

statutory RVE guidance issued by the Welsh Government. The Act makes explicit that RVE is mandatory for all learners aged 3–16, placing it alongside Welsh, English, and Relationships and Sexuality Education as a universal entitlement within the new framework (Hwb, 2021). Unlike History or Geography, RVE is mandatory; it is legally guaranteed for every learner. As the official guidance states:

> Religion, values and ethics (RVE) is a statutory requirement of the Curriculum for Wales and is mandatory for all learners from ages 3 to 16. RVE forms part of the Humanities Area. This Area encompasses geography; history; religion, values and ethics; business studies; social studies. These disciplines share many common themes, concepts and transferable skills, whilst having their own discrete body of knowledge and skills.
>
> There is no parental right to request that a child is withdrawn from RVE in the Curriculum for Wales. (Hwb, 2022a)

A key policy change was the removal of the parental right to withdraw. This marked a significant departure from previous practice in Wales and across the wider UK. The reform reflects the reframing of RVE, which is no longer presented as confessional instruction but as critical, objective and pluralistic education that addresses both religious and non-religious philosophical convictions (Hwb, 2022b). Welsh Government consultation papers repeatedly emphasised that RVE is about worldview literacy and ethical engagement, not indoctrination or compulsory participation in any faith tradition (Welsh Government, 2021). In principle, the statutory footing of RVE is stronger than ever. It is no longer a subject that parents can opt out of, and its place in the curriculum is secured by law. The challenge, however, is that the Act defines RVE as mandatory but leaves the terms of that mandate – particularly time allocation and delivery – under-specified. This combination of strong legal status with weak operational clarity is the central paradox of RVE within the Curriculum for Wales.

2.3. Absence of a national time entitlement

Neither the Act nor the statutory guidance specifies minimum hours or frequency, leaving both at the discretion of schools. Locally adopted syllabi aligned with national RVE guidance do not impose time allocations, reflecting the Curriculum for Wales's emphasis on local autonomy. However, this raises questions about whether the statutory entitlement is being met. The contrast is stark when compared with

the Church in Wales advisory note for voluntary aided schools, which recommends allocating 5–10 per cent of curriculum time to RVE – a minimum of roughly 48 to 90 hours per year (Church in Wales, 2025). While advisory only, this benchmark has become influential among schools with a religious character. The fact that these schools operate with clearer expectations than state schools highlights a core inequality: RVE provision may depend more on institutional ethos and priorities than on national standards.

The significance of this comparison lies not in the fact that Church in Wales schools traditionally devote more curriculum time to Religious Education – a longstanding feature of their distinctive ethos – but in what it reveals about current provision. Before the Curriculum for Wales, even state schools generally operated within an implicit norm of regular timetabled RE, supported by agreed syllabi and, at Key Stage 4, the GCSE short course. Although provision was uneven, there remained a broadly shared baseline. In the absence of a defined national entitlement, that baseline has weakened. The continued clarity of provision in Church in Wales schools now highlights a growing divergence between structured and increasingly variable provision, raising questions about whether statutory entitlement is being realised equitably across all schools.

2.4. Mandatory but ambiguously specified

Estyn's inspection framework addresses curriculum quality, breadth, and progression but without explicit national expectations for RVE time, inspectors' leverage is limited. Schools can claim compliance through cross-curricular mapping or occasional inputs. This absence of entitlement is not a minor technicality but a fault line that undermines the very aims of the Curriculum for Wales. RVE is intended as a central vehicle for achieving the four purposes, particularly the aspiration to develop ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world (Hwb, 2022a). That ambition presupposes time, depth, and progression. Learners need repeated, sequenced opportunities to engage with religious and non-religious philosophical convictions, practise critical reasoning, and encounter lived diversity (Hwb, 2022b). Research underscores this need. Drawing on key analyses of Finnish education, Åhs et al. (2019) argue for integrating worldview education to help pupils appreciate and value differing perspectives. Shaw (2022) contends that worldview literacy should not be treated merely as an educational outcome but an ongoing process of engagement

and reflexivity. This approach, Shaw maintains, encourages students to analyse critically and continuously their own worldviews alongside those held by others, thereby deepening their understanding of the complexities inherent in a pluralistic society (Shaw, 2022).

Without a guaranteed entitlement of curriculum time, some learners experience meaningful depth while others encounter only fragments. Put starkly, a mandatory subject without defined entitlement risks not being mandatory at all in practice. It reduces RVE to institutional paperwork rather than lived classroom experience, leaving provision vulnerable to timetabling pressures and competing curriculum demands. This is not simply a technical gap; it is a systemic weakness that compromises equity and risks hollowing out the civic purposes of the new curriculum.

3. How Ambiguity Plays Out: Variations and Vulnerabilities

The absence of a nationally defined entitlement does not remain an abstract policy gap; it translates directly into the everyday experience of learners. In the vacuum created by the lack of guidance on time and delivery, schools have developed their own approaches to RVE. Some are comprehensive and sustained, while others are minimal (National Centre of Religious Education for Wales, 2024). The result is a patchwork of provision that depends more on institutional priorities and resourcing than on a shared national standard. This diversity is not inherently negative, as local curriculum autonomy can foster innovation, but in the case of RVE, it too often results in inconsistency, fragmentation, and inequity of entitlement. The 2024 report of Bangor University's National Centre of Religious Education for Wales confirms what practitioners have long observed: hours allocated to RVE vary significantly across schools, with wide disparities in depth, frequency, and staffing.

3.1. Three common models of delivery

When schools interpret an undefined mandate, three broad patterns of provision typically emerge. Each reflects local autonomy but carries distinct implications for depth, progression and equity. Outlining these models not only illustrates how

schools currently meet the statutory duty but also explains why learners' experiences vary so markedly from one setting to another.

1. **Discrete weekly lessons (curriculum entitlement model):** RVE is taught as a timetabled subject, usually 50–60 minutes per week, by specialists. This model mirrors the previous RE structure and is most likely to secure coherence, progression, and subject identity. Research by Gamaliia et al. (2024) highlights the importance of thoughtful lesson design and innovation to enhance student engagement and ensure relevance to contemporary societal challenges.
2. **Cross-curricular embedding (distributed model)**: In this approach, RVE concepts are integrated into Humanities or other subjects, such as examining the Reformation in History or exploring ethical themes in English literature. While this model can enrich learning when planned with disciplinary integrity, in practice it often results in episodic and incidental coverage of RVE, with little cumulative knowledge or vocabulary to support progression. Kaufman et al. (2020) stress that successful cross-curricular and interdisciplinary models require robust structures and distributed leadership to avoid dilution.
3. **Drop-down days or token provision (event-based model)**: Some schools meet the statutory requirement through annual or occasional RVE days, assemblies, or tutor sessions. Although these can raise awareness of specific issues, they rarely build sustained knowledge or evaluative reasoning, reducing RVE to enrichment rather than a continuous strand of education.

Currently, all three models are treated as equally valid ways of meeting the mandatory requirement, yet they produce radically different educational experiences. Without a national entitlement, there is no mechanism to guarantee that *every* learner in Wales receives the depth and progression envisaged by the Curriculum for Wales.

3.2. Implications for equity, progression, and civic literacy

The existence of different delivery models is not inherently problematic; a flexible curriculum can, in principle, enable schools to adapt to local contexts and integrate

RVE into rich interdisciplinary learning. The difficulty lies in the absence of national expectations. Osborne and Barker (2010) highlight the interpretive nature of teaching and the gap between local curriculum development and overarching national standards. They note that while teachers are expected to create local expressions of national requirements, this often produces ambiguity in implementation and inconsistent educational experiences across schools. Such inconsistency can affect learners' understanding of religious and ethical concepts, as teachers approach content with varying depth and rigour, diluting overall quality. Without entitlement benchmarks, the three models outlined above generate systemic inequities and weaken the contribution of RVE to the four purposes.

a) Equity of entitlement

Learners in schools offering discrete weekly lessons may experience 35–40 hours of RVE annually, whereas those in schools relying on drop-down days may experience only five or six hours. Both approaches satisfy the statutory duty, yet the disparity is stark. Recent Ofsted research confirms that when Religious Studies is delivered through occasional days, 'the quality of RE is weaker' (Ofsted, 2024). Although this research was conducted within the English context, comparable trends are evident in Wales. This postcode lottery undermines the principle that every learner in Wales should access a broad and balanced curriculum. This aligns with a wider body of curriculum research which argues that access to powerful knowledge is dependent on structured and sustained curriculum time (Young et al., 2014). Where exposure becomes episodic, learners are less able to develop the conceptual and disciplinary understanding required for progression.

b) Progression and assessment

The Curriculum for Wales places strong emphasis on progression, which depends on sustained, sequenced encounters with concepts and disciplinary methods. Event-based or highly distributed provision makes such sequencing difficult, leading to repetition of basic content, gaps in knowledge, and underdeveloped evaluative writing. Fragmented delivery also renders assessment tokenistic or absent, leaving teachers and learners without a clear sense of progress.

c) Specialist teaching and subject knowledge

Discrete provision typically relies on trained RVE or RS specialists, preserving professional expertise. In contrast, distributed or event-based models often fall to teachers whose specialism lies elsewhere, which can dilute subject knowledge and confidence. Sensitive issues – such as pluralism, contested truth claims, or non-religious philosophical convictions – require skilled handling. Without specialists, there is a real risk of superficial or distorted representations of religious and non-religious philosophical convictions.

d) Civic literacy and the Four Purposes

RVE is uniquely positioned to foster respectful dialogue across difference and critical reflection on ethical issues. These civic and moral literacies cannot be developed through occasional exposure alone. If learners encounter RVE only in assemblies or occasional projects, they miss the cumulative practice in reasoning, interpretation, and debate that equips them to become ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world.

Taken together, these implications demonstrate that ambiguity in mandatory provision creates vulnerabilities at the heart of the Curriculum for Wales. Instead of being a guaranteed entitlement, RVE becomes contingent on local priorities, resourcing, and inspection interpretation. This variability not only undermines equity between learners but also risks hollowing out one of the curriculum's core civic ambitions.

3.3. Professional identity and capacity

The absence of a clear entitlement affects not only learners but also the professional standing of RVE and those who teach it. Ambiguity over what constitutes mandatory provision gradually undermines the subject's professionalism in several ways:

Erosion of specialist expertise: When schools collapse RVE into generic Humanities provision, History and Geography specialists are often redeployed to cover RVE (National Centre of Religious Education for Wales, 2024). This practice erodes a distinct body of subject expertise developed over decades, including

pedagogies for handling sensitive or controversial material and assessment strategies for argumentation and evaluative writing. The loss of this specialist base risks reducing RVE to superficial discussions of values detached from disciplinary rigour. This reflects wider findings on curriculum enactment, which show that teachers interpret and realise curriculum frameworks in ways shaped by their subject knowledge, institutional context, and professional capacity (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015).

Weakening of professional networks: Advisory structures – formerly SACREs and now Standing Advisory Councils (SACs) – depend on a pool of specialist teachers and subject leaders to sustain dialogue between schools, communities, and policymakers. National organisations such as the Wales Association of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (WASACRE) and National Advisory Panel for Religion, Values and Ethics (NAPfRE) likewise rely on the presence of confident professionals in schools to ensure robust representation. Ambiguity makes this harder. If RVE is absorbed into a generic Humanities framework, fewer staff are designated as subject leaders, and professional networks struggle to function effectively.

Calls for clarity from the profession: This pressure is evident in sector communications. In April 2025, the Chair of WASACRE wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Lynne Neagle MS, seeking urgent clarity on securing meaningful RVE across Wales, particularly for Years 10 and 11 where the removal of the short course GCSE has left provision especially fragile (WASACRE, 2025a). This is telling. The demand for clearer entitlement and guidance is not only coming from critics of the Curriculum for Wales but also from the professional body most closely linked to its delivery.

Taken together, these factors show that ambiguity risks hollowing out the subject's professional base, making it harder to sustain expertise, networks and accountability.

3.4. Accountability blind spots

The problem is compounded by weaknesses in inspection and accountability mechanisms. Estyn's framework is designed to evaluate curriculum breadth, coherence, and progression; however, when a school claims that RVE is embedded throughout the curriculum, inspection often becomes an audit of policy statements

and curriculum maps rather than a reliable check on the lived classroom experience of learners.

Without a defined entitlement, inspectors lack a national benchmark of time or structure against which to measure adequacy. A school delivering 35 hours of sequenced RVE across a year and a school offering a single collapsed timetable day can both, on paper, demonstrate compliance with the statutory duty. As a result, schools with minimal provision may still be judged as meeting requirements – satisfying the letter but not the spirit of the law.

This creates an important limitation in the national evidence base. Estyn provides valuable insight into curriculum design, implementation, and quality within the schools it inspects, but inspection evidence alone cannot provide a comprehensive picture of the sufficiency of RVE provision across all schools in Wales.

4. Comparing with the Previous Religious Education Framework

Examining the framework that governed Religious Education prior to the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales is instructive. It reveals both what has changed and what has been lost in the transition from RE to RVE. In particular, it shows that although the previous system was not without flaws, it provided a stronger sense of time, structure, and expectation than the current arrangement.

Under the pre-2022 regime, Religious Education in Wales was compulsory for all learners and delivered under locally agreed syllabi overseen by SACREs. While this system was fragmented – each local authority maintained its own syllabus – the Welsh Government sought to bring coherence through the National Exemplar Framework for RE (2008), produced by the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) and Awdurdod Cymwysterau, Cwricwlwm ac Asesu Cymru (ACCAC: Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales). Many local authorities adopted this framework wholesale or adapted it closely, resulting in a relatively high degree of alignment across Wales (WASACRE, 2025b).

Perhaps most importantly, there was a widely understood norm of weekly timetabled RE lessons. Although some syllabi explicitly stated that there were no statutory constraints on time, they almost always urged schools to allocate provision comparable to other non-core subjects. This amounted to an implicit entitlement benchmark. For example, Cardiff's 2008 syllabus advised:

> There are no constraints relating to time allocation … but schools should ensure provision is comparable to the non-core subjects and sufficient to deliver the programmes of study. (Cardiff SACRE, 2008)

Although such statements were advisory rather than binding, they carried significant weight. Schools generally interpreted them as requiring regular timetabled provision – typically one lesson per week for Years 7–9 – and often some form of accredited course or structured programme for Years 10–11. In short, while the previous system left some ambiguity, it provided clearer expectations than the current lack of national guidance.

Under the Curriculum for Wales, most Standing Advisory Councils for RVE have opted not to produce new locally agreed syllabi, instead endorsing the Welsh Government's national RVE guidance as sufficient for statutory compliance. This reflects the wider curricular move away from prescriptive specification towards a principles-led framework that foregrounds professional autonomy and local curriculum design. Nevertheless, three SACREs in Wales have taken a different approach by developing locally agreed syllabi aligned with the Curriculum for Wales. Importantly, these syllabi do not function as mandated curricula; rather, they operate as illustrative and enabling frameworks, offering exemplars of how RVE might be conceptualised, structured, and delivered within the new system. Their purpose is to support coherence and progression without reimposing detailed prescription.

This divergence is significant. While the Curriculum for Wales formally removes the need for locally agreed syllabi, the fact that a small number of SACREs have nonetheless chosen to develop aligned local guidance suggests lingering uncertainty about what meaningful RVE provision looks like in practice. Because these syllabi are optional and inconsistently adopted, however, they cannot compensate for the absence of a shared national entitlement.

4.1. GCSE RS and the GCSE short course as structural anchors

Under the previous framework, GCSE RS acted as a key structural anchor for Religious Education at what was then Key Stage 4 (Years 10–11). Many schools entered entire cohorts for the short course, which could be delivered in a modest allocation of curriculum time – often one lesson per week over two years. The model offered several benefits: it provided external validation through a nationally

recognised qualification, offered a structured syllabus and assessment framework that supported teaching quality and progression, and created a strong organisational incentive for schools to timetable RE meaningfully in Years 10 and 11, since exam entries and outcomes contributed to accountability measures.

While the statutory framework now refers to RVE, the qualification pathway continues under the title of RS. This raises important questions about the role and purpose of RVE for 15- and 16-year-olds, particularly for those preparing for GCSE RS. Although the two frameworks share some content, they diverge significantly in ethos: RVE is designed as an inclusive, pluralistic exploration of religious and non-religious philosophical convictions within the Humanities Area, whereas GCSE RS remains an assessed subject with prescribed content and objectives. Without clear guidance, schools risk duplicating effort or prioritising GCSE preparation at the expense of the broader aims of RVE.

Curriculum autonomy under the Curriculum for Wales gives teachers flexibility, but this freedom is constrained by ambiguity. Beyond the four purposes, there is little national direction on the knowledge, skills or conceptual understandings needed to ensure smooth progression into GCSE RS. This lack of alignment risks disparities between schools and local authorities, especially where resources or specialist expertise vary. Greater clarity is therefore essential – not to restrict professional freedom, but to secure coherence between statutory RVE and examination pathways, preserving both the integrity of the new curriculum and equitable learner outcomes.

4.2. The Donaldson turn and the Curriculum for Wales

The Donaldson review, 'Successful Futures' (2015), marked a decisive philosophical shift in Welsh education. It advocated moving away from prescribed content towards a purpose-led, locally designed curriculum, organised around the four purposes and six AoLEs. The integration of RVE into the Humanities AoLE reflected this vision. Donaldson's proposals aimed to tackle underachievement and low self-esteem by placing Religious Education within the Humanities Area as a statutory subject from Reception class onwards.

This approach paved the way for a more pluralistic model outlined in 'Our National Mission' (Welsh Government, 2019), which proposed lowering the starting age for RE to three, extending provision to sixteen, and incorporating 'non-religious

philosophical convictions' such as Humanism. Despite significant opposition – two-thirds of consultation respondents objected to these changes, particularly the inclusion of non-religious perspectives and the removal of the parental right to withdraw (O'Prey and Usher, 2020) – the Welsh Government proceeded. By 2020, Religious Education (RE) was renamed RVE, introducing a 'Pluralistic Requirement' to teach both religious and non-religious beliefs. This was enacted through the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021, making RVE compulsory for learners aged 3–16.

However, attempts to define religion and ensure inclusivity have sparked ongoing debates about pedagogy, pluralism, and the autonomy of schools with a religious character. In principle, the reform was progressive. It aligned Religious Education with other humanistic disciplines, encouraged interdisciplinary learning, and supported the broader goal of developing ethical, informed citizens. Local flexibility was expected to be exercised within a framework that ensured core knowledge and experiences were protected.

The difficulty is that in practice, those guardrails – particularly minimum entitlements of time and structure – have largely disappeared. The advantages of local flexibility are now being purchased at the cost of equity and consistency. Schools with strong leadership and specialist staff continue to deliver rich RVE, while others, constrained by performance pressures and limited guidance, reduce it to fragmented provision (National Centre of Religious Education for Wales, 2024).

Previously, the RE framework provided implicit clarity through norms, qualifications, and advisory benchmarks. The current system offers only statutory mandatory status without operational definition. As a result, entitlement is now less secure than before, even as the subject's civic and educational importance has grown.

5. Years 10 and 11: Navigating the Pinch Point without the Short Course

Years 10 and 11 have always been a critical stage for Religious Education in Wales. At this point learners are mature enough to engage with complex ethical debates and contested questions about religion, ethics, and values. Yet curriculum pressures intensify as schools prepare learners for public examinations, and timetables are dominated by GCSE courses. Historically, the short course GCSE in RS provided a

structural solution, offering external validation and incentivising schools to allocate regular curriculum time for RE. Its removal creates what can fairly be described as a pinch point for RVE.

From September 2025, Wales introduced a made-for-Wales GCSE in RS, aligned with the Curriculum for Wales and incorporating a greater role for non-examination assessment. On paper, this is a positive development – a qualification tailored to the Welsh priorities, emphasising enquiry and reflective engagement. However, the absence of a short course option marks a decisive break with past practice. For two decades, the short course was the principal way most learners in Wales engaged with RE for Years 10-11. Both Qualifications Wales and WJEC have confirmed there are no plans to reintroduce it (WJEC, 2025).

This change matters for three interlocking reasons. First, timetabling incentives: the short course justified a modest but regular allocation of curriculum time – often a weekly lesson over two years – because exam entries contributed to accountability measures. Without this anchor, schools under pressure may redeploy those lessons to Welsh Baccalaureate-style subjects or newer GCSEs perceived as higher stakes. Second, cohort coverage: the full course GCSE RS will not be a universal entitlement. Where offered as an option, it will attract only a minority, leaving most learners dependent on non-examined RVE provision, which is highly variable and often minimal. Third, equity: all learners need a secure foundation in religious and ethical literacy to engage critically with diverse worldviews, challenge prejudice, and participate meaningfully in a pluralistic society. Limited access risks gaps in understanding that can fuel misunderstanding, prejudice, and discrimination.

These concerns are real and pressing. Sector experts have consistently raised warnings. Russell Sandberg argued that, without clear guidance for those not pursuing GCSE RS, RVE could easily be sidelined and drift into neglect (Sandberg, 2022). Similarly, the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) and other professional bodies have highlighted the decline in short course entries in the years leading up to reform and its negative impact on participation. The trajectory is clear: without strong safeguards, provision in Years 10 and 11 will shrink.

The wider implication crystallises the central theme of this article. A mandatory subject without defined entitlement is vulnerable. In a system where qualification pathways drive timetabling, the disappearance of an examined route for all via the

short course leaves RVE reliant on the goodwill of schools and their subjective interpretation of statutory duty. Some schools will maintain comprehensive provision through the full GCSE or robust non-examined courses; others will reduce RVE to token coverage. The risk is that those most in need of meaningful engagement with religion, values and ethics are least likely to receive it.

6. Cross-curricular RVE: Opportunity or Risk of Dilution?

One of the defining features of the Curriculum for Wales is its emphasis on cross-curricular design. Schools are encouraged to build connections between subjects, and within the Humanities AoLE, disciplinary perspectives are expected to work in dialogue. For RVE, this offers genuine opportunities. When done well, integration can deepen learning – for example, using sociological methods to explore religion in local communities or applying philosophical analysis to interrogate ethical dilemmas in contemporary issues. Such approaches make RVE visible beyond its own timetable slot and highlight its relevance to wider human concerns.

Yet these benefits are fragile without clear entitlement benchmarks. In the absence of minimum expectations, cross-curricular RVE can easily drift into dilution. Under pressure to rationalise timetables or meet accountability demands, schools may fold RVE into other subjects not as enrichment but as a survival strategy. What was intended to enhance the subject risks undermining its coherence.

Several vulnerabilities follow from this situation. First is the loss of disciplinary integrity. RVE is not simply about values; it involves distinct disciplinary methods – textual interpretation, philosophical argument analysis, and sociological enquiry – that require explicit teaching and practice. From a knowledge-led perspective, there is a risk that when disciplinary boundaries become overly diffuse, curriculum coherence weakens. Maton (2014) argues that learners require access to specialised forms of knowledge-making in order to develop cumulative understanding; where subjects are reduced to generic themes, progression becomes difficult to sustain. When RVE is collapsed into generic Humanities or spread thinly across English, History, or Geography, these methods risk being reduced to superficial conversations about morality or cultural difference, with little of the depth or rigour envisaged by statutory guidance.

The second vulnerability concerns progression. The Curriculum for Wales is structured around progression steps from ages 3 to 16, but progression depends on continuity. Distributed inputs, however creative, rarely add up to a coherent developmental model. Research underscores this point. Instructional coherence strongly correlates with achievement (Newmann et al., 2001), and fragmented design diminishes educational benefits (Kivarina and Makarevich, 2020). In practice, this often results in repetition of safe, familiar topics – festivals, food, generic respect messages – while avoiding contested or contemporary issues such as non-religious philosophical convictions, secularisation, or lived diversity in Wales today. Learners are left with gaps in their knowledge and underdeveloped evaluative reasoning. Research on values and religious education in international contexts similarly indicates that meaningful ethical and worldview education depends on coherent pedagogy and sustained curriculum engagement, rather than intermittent or pastoral delivery (Lovat et al., 2010; Ofsted, 2024).

The third vulnerability relates to assessment opacity. If RVE is declared to be everywhere, it often ends up being assessed nowhere. Where assessment does occur, it is frequently against criteria belonging to another subject – extended writing in English, source analysis in History, or data interpretation in Geography – rather than against RVE specific success criteria. This weakens feedback, obscures learner progress, and makes inspection and evaluation difficult.

These risks are not unique to RVE. Comparative research on locally designed curricula, in Wales and internationally, shows that autonomy without guardrails tends to widen gaps between schools and between learners (OECD, 2021; WISERD, 2022). Well-resourced schools with strong leadership may deliver rich integrated provision, while others experience fragmentation and minimalism. This concern is echoed in the Estyn review of the Humanities AoLE (Estyn, 2025), which identifies RVE as comparatively underdeveloped in curriculum realisation across schools, reinforcing the gap between policy intent and enacted provision. The lesson is clear: curriculum autonomy requires entitlement benchmarks if it is not to undermine inclusion and equity.

The need becomes even more pressing when we consider transition to GCSE RS. Learners studying RVE up to Year 8 require clear benchmarks to prepare for the distinct academic expectations of GCSE RS. Without direct curricular continuity, learners risk encountering a significant shift in content and skills. Establishing explicit progression steps – more clearly defined than the general the broad national

progression steps, whose interpretation is currently left to teacher discretion – would help bridge this gap and support a smoother, more equitable transition.

In short, cross-curricular approaches are a double-edged sword. They have the potential to connect religious and philosophical enquiry with wider human concerns, but without a clearly defined entitlement, they risk hollowing the subject out into a diffuse, tokenistic presence that fails to build knowledge, skills, or civic literacy.

7. The Civic and Educational Imperative for RVE

The weaknesses identified so far – the absence of time entitlement, variable models of delivery, the loss of structural anchors in Years 10 and 11, and the risks of dilution through cross-curricular teaching – are not technical details. They strike at the heart of what the Curriculum for Wales is designed to achieve. RVE is not a marginal subject; it is central to the civic and educational mission of the curriculum. If it is allowed to drift into tokenism, the consequences will be felt not only by individual learners but by Welsh society as a whole.

7.1. Educational purposes and legal foundations

The Curriculum for Wales is built around the four purposes: developing ambitious, capable learners; creative contributors; healthy, confident individuals; and ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world. Of these, the last is most directly served by RVE. This subject equips learners to understand diverse worldviews, evaluate truth claims, analyse ethical arguments, and engage respectfully with those who think differently. Without sufficient time and structure, these aims remain aspirational. Occasional events or generic lessons cannot build the vocabulary of ethical reasoning or the habits of dialogue across difference that citizenship in a plural society demands.

The statutory guidance frames RVE as objective, critical, and pluralistic, aligning with European Convention on Human Rights jurisprudence on education about religion and belief (Hwb, 2022a). This was central to the Welsh Government's decision to remove the parental right of withdrawal (Welsh Government, 2021). Universal participation is lawful and desirable – but only if the subject is delivered with depth and continuity. Without clear entitlement, pluralism risks becoming a

policy slogan rather than a classroom reality, creating legal vulnerabilities. Tokenistic provision could invite challenges that RVE fails to meet the standards of objectivity and pluralism required by law.

7.2. Civic cohesion and democratic resilience

The stakes extend beyond education. In a world marked by polarisation and misinformation, the ability to engage respectfully with diverse worldviews is a democratic necessity (Hwang, 2025; Zrudlo, 2022; Lackner, 2021). Structured engagement with religion and ethics cultivates empathy across difference, the capacity to interpret complex moral claims, and the skill to argue without hostility. These civic virtues do not appear in headline attainment data, but their absence is visible in public life. Weaker worldview literacy, diminished empathy, and reduced capacity for public reasoning leave societies vulnerable to populism and extremism. RVE is therefore not only about learning outcomes; it is about sustaining the civic fabric of Wales.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that without sustained curriculum time, disciplinary clarity and specialist expertise, mandatory status alone is insufficient to guarantee meaningful educational entitlement.

8. From Mandatory to Meaningful: Recommendations for Reform

The analysis in this article shows that while RVE is mandatory in law, the absence of a nationally defined entitlement leaves it fragile in practice. To secure equity and quality while preserving the local flexibility that is central to the Curriculum for Wales, the Welsh Government should adopt a balanced package of reforms. The following interlocking recommendations aim to ensure that 'mandatory' translates into meaningful learning for every learner.

8.1. Set a national minimum time entitlement

The most urgent step is to set a national floor of curriculum time for RVE. This does not need to be excessive, but it must be sufficient to allow progression, depth, and assessment. A reasonable entitlement would be:

- Primary (ages 3–11): An average of 60 minutes per week, delivered as discrete lessons or integrated sequences, provided schools can demonstrate equivalent time and progression.
- Lower secondary (ages 11–14): An average of 50–60 minutes per week, or the equivalent across a fortnight, taught by subject specialists wherever possible.
- Years 10–11 (ages 14–16): A minimum of 30–40 hours per year for all learners not following GCSE RS, with clear, assessable outcomes aligned to the statutory RVE guidance.

The Church in Wales advisory recommendation of 5–10 per cent of curriculum time (a minimum of roughly 48 hours per year) shows that such expectations are already considered feasible in parts of the sector (Church in Wales, 2025). A national floor pitched below this, but above tokenistic provision, would strike a balance between equity and flexibility.

8.2. Define delivery expectations for integrated models

Cross-curricular models can succeed only if they retain disciplinary integrity. Schools using such models should be required to provide:

- A curriculum map showing coverage of RVE concepts and disciplinary lenses across the year.
- A time ledger evidencing that the minimum entitlement is met.
- Assessment evidence using RVE-specific criteria.

In addition, every school should deliver at least one substantive, sequenced unit per year explicitly labelled as RVE in the timetable or reporting cycle. This would preserve learner visibility and subject identity, preventing RVE from disappearing into the background noise of generic 'values' education.

8.3. Strengthen inspection and reporting

Inspection is only as effective as the standards it measures. Estyn should update its handbooks with explicit prompts such as:

- What is the total time entitlement for RVE by year group?
- How is disciplinary progression evidenced?
- What proportion of lessons are taught by specialists?

Alongside these prompts, Estyn should publish exemplars of strong cross curricular models to guide schools in implementing integrated approaches effectively. At governance level, each school's governing body should publish an annual 'RVE Statement of Entitlement' setting out the time allocation, delivery model, staffing, and arrangements for Years 10 and 11. This would make provision transparent to parents, inspectors, and local advisory councils.

8.4. Provide transition guidance for Years 10 and 11

The removal of the short course GCSE RS has left a significant gap for learners who do not opt for the full GCSE. To support schools during this transition, Welsh Government should publish illustrative examples of high quality RVE provision for Years 10 and 11. These examples would not prescribe content or act as ready-made schemes of work; rather, they would demonstrate what effective practice looks like in line with the spirit of the Curriculum for Wales.

For instance, exemplars could show how schools might structure provision around two broad strands per year – such as *Ethics and Society* and *Worldviews in Wales and the World* – with suggested enquiry questions, indicative progression steps, and examples of assessment tasks. The purpose is to highlight what coherence, depth, and progression look like in practice, while leaving schools free to design their own localised versions.

Centres unable to offer full-course GCSE RS at scale could be encouraged to use enquiry projects aligned with the ethos of the new GCSE's non-examination assessment component. This would help ensure that even non-GCSE learners develop high-level competencies in critical reasoning, analysis of diverse worldviews, and structured argumentation – skills valued in formal qualifications.

8.5. Sustain subject expertise

No entitlement will succeed without skilled professionals. Welsh Government should fund regional professional learning through bodies such as WASACRE,

NAPfRVE, and the National Centre of Religious Education for Wales, Bangor University. Training should focus on disciplinary teaching methods, handling sensitive or controversial issues with confidence, and assessing argumentation and evaluative writing.

The 2024 report of the National Centre of Religious Education for Wales identified variable time and inconsistent implementation across Wales. Professional learning can mitigate these weaknesses, but only if it is backed by a clear entitlement framework that guarantees RVE sufficient space in the curriculum.

8.6. Clarify national communications

Finally, communication with the public is essential. Parents and carers need to understand what 'mandatory' actually means. Welsh Government should publish a jargon-free leaflet for parents or carers stating: RVE is mandatory; your child's entitlement is X hours per year; here is what they will learn. Welsh Government should also update Hwb pages with an *Entitlement and Delivery FAQ*, covering minimum time, integration requirements, and expectations for Years 10 and 11.

These steps would make entitlement visible not only to schools and inspectors but also to learners and their families, reinforcing trust in the system.

9. Addressing Objections: Autonomy, Integration, and Accountability

Having outlined a proposed framework for securing a national entitlement to RVE, it is important to address potential objections. The Curriculum for Wales prioritises local autonomy, and concerns about prescription, integration, and accountability are therefore significant. However, as the preceding sections show, the risks associated with the absence of clear entitlement, namely inequity, fragmentation, and weakened progression, mean that these objections require careful scrutiny.

Objection 1: National hours undermine local autonomy

The Curriculum for Wales is built on the principle of subsidiarity – the belief that schools are best placed to design their own curricula in response to local needs.

From this perspective, prescribing minimum hours for RVE might seem like a betrayal of the reform's philosophy, dragging schools back toward a more centralised model.

While this concern reflects an important principle, it assumes a misleading contrast between national entitlement and local autonomy. A national entitlement need not operate as a straitjacket; rather, it establishes a baseline level of provision below which practice should not fall. Wales already accepts this logic in other areas of the Curriculum for Wales, where compulsory status is accompanied by non-negotiable guarantees.

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) offers a useful and instructive comparison. Like RVE, RSE has been reconceptualised as a mandatory, principles-driven area of learning, supported by national guidance, and the parental and carer's right of withdrawal for parents and carers has been removed (Hwb, 2022c). Crucially, however, RSE has been underpinned by extensive national framing, developmental guidance, and sustained investment in professional learning.

RVE shares the same statutory status – it is compulsory for all learners aged 3–16, with no right of withdrawal – but it has not been afforded an equivalent level of conceptual clarification or systematic embedding. The argument advanced here is not that RVE should mirror RSE, but that it requires a comparable degree of strategic attention and pedagogical coherence if it is to realise its intended educational and civic purposes within the Curriculum for Wales.

Objection 2: Cross-curricular models can deliver as much as discrete lessons

Proponents of integration argue that RVE can be enriched by embedding it across the Humanities or linking it with other subjects. A History unit on the Reformation may naturally include discussion of religion's social role, an English unit on literature may raise ethical dilemmas that connect with RVE concepts. From this perspective, a timetabled subject seems unnecessary.

This argument has merit in theory, but in practice, cross-curricular RVE only works under strict conditions. Schools must map coverage of RVE concepts across the curriculum, ensure disciplinary integrity so that theological, philosophical, and social scientific approaches are taught explicitly, provide clear assessment frameworks specific to RVE, and guarantee an equivalent amount of curriculum time to what would be provided through discrete lessons. Few schools achieve all

of this (National Centre of Religious Education for Wales, 2024). Many integrated models collapse into tokenism, with RVE reduced to incidental references or thematic assemblies. A national baseline entitlement does not forbid cross-curricular models; it ensures they deliver genuine depth and progression rather than rhetorical compliance.

Objection 3: Estyn can already judge whether provision is adequate

Inspection is often presented as the safety net. If schools are not delivering sufficient RVE, Estyn can highlight weaknesses and demand improvement. From this perspective, no further national prescription is necessary.

This assumption fails to recognise a structural gap. Estyn's framework is not designed to measure time entitlement. Inspectors can evaluate the coherence and breadth of curriculum design, but they lack a benchmark against which to judge whether RVE provision is adequate in practice. If a school claims that RVE is embedded everywhere, inspection becomes an audit of curriculum maps and policy statements rather than a reliable check on what learners actually experience in the classroom. Schools offering only a handful of hours per year can still appear compliant. A defined entitlement would give Estyn a clear standard to measure against, strengthening inspection and ensuring judgments are rooted in learner experience rather than paperwork.

Objection 4: The new GCSE RS will secure provision

With the introduction of the made-for-Wales GCSE RS in 2025, some may argue that provision will naturally be protected. Schools offering the full course will timetable sufficient hours, and learners who wish to pursue RVE in depth can opt for the qualification. From this perspective, the removal of the short course does not matter.

This view assumes that qualification pathways will guarantee coverage, but this misunderstands the reality of option choices in Years 10 and 11. The full course GCSE RS will secure strong provision, but only for those learners who choose it. Recent evidence suggests that many will not (NATRE, 2025). For them, entitlement depends on non-examined RVE, which, as earlier sections demonstrated, is highly variable and often minimal. The short course previously provided a structural guarantee that most learners would engage with RE in a sustained way for Years 10 and 11. Its absence

leaves a vacuum. Without a protected entitlement for those not taking GCSE RS, a large proportion of learners in Years 10 and 11 may receive only tokenistic coverage. This undermines both equity and the statutory status of RVE as a mandatory subject.

9.1. Why these objections fall short

Taken together, these objections highlight important considerations—respect for local autonomy, the potential of cross-curricular learning, the role of inspection, and the promise of qualifications. Yet none outweighs the civic, legal, and educational case for clear national entitlement. Autonomy without equity is not true freedom. Integration without benchmarks is dilution. Inspection without defined standards is limited. Qualifications without universal coverage leave many behind. If RVE is truly mandatory, these objections must be addressed not by retreating from entitlement, but by designing it wisely.

10. Conclusion: Making Mandatory Mean Equitable and Coherent

This article has advanced a deliberately system-level analysis and, as such, has not attempted a detailed examination of how RVE provision varies across specific sectors, phases, or linguistic contexts.

The Curriculum for Wales has taken a bold and principled step by making RVE a statutory entitlement for all learners aged 3–16. This reform reflects a commitment to pluralism, civic literacy, and the development of ethical, informed citizens. Yet, as this article has demonstrated, mandatory status without operational clarity is insufficient. The absence of a defined national entitlement for time and delivery has created systemic ambiguity, resulting in fragmented provision, inequality between learners, and erosion of professional expertise. These weaknesses are amplified in Years 10–11 by the removal of the short course GCSE RS, which previously acted as a structural anchor for timetabling and progression.

The risks are not merely technical. They strike at the heart of the curriculum's civic and educational purposes. Without sustained, sequenced engagement, learners cannot develop the worldview literacy, ethical reasoning, and dialogical skills that democratic resilience demands. Tokenistic provision undermines both the spirit of the law and public confidence in the system.

This paper has argued for a balanced package of reforms:

- A national minimum time entitlement across all phases, including a protected allocation for learners not pursuing GCSE RS.
- Clear delivery expectations for integrated models, ensuring disciplinary integrity and assessable outcomes.
- Strengthened inspection and transparency, with Estyn equipped to evaluate provision against explicit benchmarks.
- Illustrative guidance for Years 10–11, bridging the gap left by the short course and supporting coherent progression.
- Investment in professional learning and subject networks, safeguarding expertise and capacity.
- Clear public communication, making entitlement visible to parents, learners, and communities.

These measures do not undermine local autonomy; they provide the guardrails necessary to ensure that autonomy serves equity rather than perpetuating inconsistency. They respect the philosophy of the Curriculum for Wales while addressing its most significant vulnerability.

If Religion, Values and Ethics is to fulfil its statutory and civic promise, Welsh Government must act decisively. Anything less risks reducing a mandatory subject to a patchwork of good intentions, leaving learners' ethical and worldview literacy contingent on geography and timetabling. To make 'mandatory' mean something, Wales needs not only principled aspiration but practical entitlement – clear, enforceable, and equitable for every learner in every school.

Future research should prioritise closer examination of how entitlement is enacted in different school contexts, including primary and secondary settings, Welsh-medium and English-medium provision, and faith and non-faith institutions, as well as longitudinal analysis of the impact of recent qualifications reform on Years 10–11.

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