

Why humanists should have a role on SACREs/SACs and ASCs

Including humanism in religious education

Religious education is a space in the curriculum where young people have the opportunity to explore questions of identity, belief, values, meaning, and purpose. Today, it is essential that it includes non-religious as well as religious perspectives on the questions and themes it explores. It is therefore important that **Standing Advisory Councils on RE (SACREs)** in England and **Standing Advisory Councils for Religion, Values and Ethics (SACs)** in Wales include humanist representation to support them to guarantee high-quality, inclusive RE in UK schools.

Humanists are supportive of religious education. However, they want to ensure that it is inclusive of humanism as an example of a non-religious worldview or non-religious [philosophical conviction](#). Inclusiveness is an important principle underpinning good RE and RVE, which usually sees itself as concerned with a range of responses to ultimate questions and ethical issues, and offering pupils the opportunity to reflect on their own beliefs and values and to learn about those of others.

Including humanism in religious education supports all the aims and outcomes of the subject. It supports the acquisition of essential knowledge about our heritage and culture, and of the modern landscape of religion and belief; it contributes to the goals of social cohesion and mutual understanding; and it helps support young people's personal development of their own worldview. Inclusive RE or RVE contributes to pupils' [spiritual, moral, social, and cultural \(SMSC\) development](#).

Humanism features in the Religious Studies GCSE specifications¹, demonstrating the need for students to receive accurate teaching about it. In previous years the absence of knowledge about humanism has led to students missing out on marks in their examinations².

As part of its [research review into religious education](#) (2021), Ofsted made it clear that the subject requires the inclusion of both religious and non-religious worldviews:

'If pupils are to make sense of the 'bigger picture' of a multi-religious, multi-secular world, then they need depth of knowledge about religious and non-religious traditions.'

¹ DfE Religious Studies GCSE Subject Content : Programme of Study: In addition, all specifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the fact that:

- the religious traditions of Great Britain are, in the main, Christian
- religious traditions in Great Britain are diverse and include the following religions: Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism, as well as other religions and non-religious beliefs, such as atheism and humanism.

² Eduqas: 2019 Summer Examination - summary report: 'Our Religious Studies team and Examiners felt that, following the performance in the recent assessment, candidates found the following areas particularly challenging: Candidates should avoid mis-representing the non-religious beliefs of atheists and humanists; some seemed to think that not believing in God meant they had no principles or ethical views on anything.'

‘A cumulatively sufficient education in RE must include the global and the complex features of religion and non-religion...’

And that teaching about humanism should include more than simply an exploration of atheism:

‘It is important for subject leaders in primary and secondary schools to plan precise and accurate representations of religious and non-religious traditions in their curriculums. When those representations are inaccurate, pupils end up having misconceptions. For example, if subject leaders plan for pupils to learn about humanism only in relation to atheism, pupils will not gain wider knowledge of humanism as a way of life.’

Support for the inclusion of humanism within religious education is widespread:

- **The Commission on RE’s [final report](#)** (2018) recommended the subject of RE be renamed Religion and Worldviews, and be reformed to ensure full inclusion of humanism.
- **Several other major reports** on RE released over the last few years have called for the subject to be more inclusive of non-religious worldviews such as humanism ([Living with Difference](#), [A New Settlement](#), and [RE for REal](#)).

The 2015 [R \(Fox\) vs Secretary of State for Education High Court judgment](#) made it clear that humanism was to be treated with ‘equal respect’ to religious worldviews within the curriculum. This was also referenced in the 2023 Bowen/Kent judgment (see below).

In Wales, following the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021, religious education has been renamed ‘Religion, Values and Ethics’ (RVE) to more accurately reflect the broad scope of the subject’s pluralistic requirement. This was rolled out in nursery and primary settings in September 2022 and is now being implemented in secondary schools.

The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 requires that teaching and learning:

1. must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Wales are mainly Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Wales, and
2. must also reflect the fact that a range of non-religious philosophical convictions are held in Wales.

The Welsh Government has provided statutory [RVE guidance](#) along with guidance on how the [legislation has changed](#) which states:

The Act makes it explicit that any agreed syllabus for RVE must reflect both religious beliefs and also non-religious beliefs which are philosophical convictions within the meaning of A2P1³. These include beliefs such as humanism...

There will no longer be a right to withdraw from RVE, as it is required to be delivered in an objective, critical, and pluralistic manner. It is therefore important that humanism (as a non-religious

³ Article 2, Protocol 1 (the right to education) in Schedule 1 of the Human Rights Act 1998.

philosophical conviction) is included in its own right as an area of study, from ages 3 - 16, and not just as a comparison to religious beliefs.

Support from teachers for more inclusive religious education can also be demonstrated via the significant increase in demand for resources and requests for humanist school speakers over the past few years. The [Understanding Humanism](#) website was visited by over 50,000 users in 2023.

What is humanism?

There exist both religious and non-religious worldviews. [Humanism](#) is a non-religious worldview that has developed over thousands of years, and is influenced by ideas from historical thinkers across the globe. It shares with religions an interest in the ultimate questions about the nature of reality, the basis for morality, and of meaning and purpose in life.

Roughly speaking, the word humanist has come to mean someone who:

- trusts to the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural (and is therefore an atheist or agnostic)
- makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals
- believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.

Who are Humanists UK?

[Humanists UK](#) is the largest humanist organisation in Britain (with over 100,000 members and supporters). It has been actively involved in supporting education about religions and non-religious worldviews for over 50 years. Humanists UK was a founding member of the Religious Education Council for England and Wales in 1973, and was involved in the development of the 2004 English *Religious education: The non-statutory national framework*, the 2010 non-statutory guidance, and the 2013 subject framework.

Humanists UK dedicates significant resources to producing classroom [materials](#) to support religious education, providing [school speakers](#) to visit schools, and [training](#) RE teachers in schools and initial teacher training institutions. Humanists UK supports humanist SACRE/SAC reps on over 130 SACREs/SACs in England and Wales.

How many humanists are there?

The 2021 [Census recorded 37% of the UK population identifying as non-religious](#) (and that there are [more non-religious people than Christians among people under age 67](#)). However, the Census asks a weighted question, 'What is your religion?' More regular data can be found in the annual [British Social Attitudes Survey](#). This identifies over half the population as non-religious (53% in 2021), a figure that has grown steadily over the past 40 years. The survey also records around 70% of 15-24-year-olds as having no religion. Including non-religious worldviews in the RE syllabus ensures that young people do not feel marginalised or excluded as a result of their beliefs.

The Census also offers a poor guide to how many humanists there are. There is no option to select 'humanism' on the census so the only figures recorded are for those people who ticked the 'other religion' box and then wrote in the word 'humanist'. These numbers are small (around 10,000 in 2021). This is perhaps not surprising as, given humanism is a non-religious worldview, most humanists choose not to select 'other religion', and Humanists UK encourages humanists to tick the 'no religion' box. More on some of the misconceptions connected with the census can be found [here](#).

Surveys indicate that around [5% of the population self-identify as humanist](#). However, many more people hold humanist beliefs and values but do not use the label to describe themselves. Often this is because people are not aware of the label or what it means. The label 'humanist' is often employed differently to a label such as 'Christian' or 'Muslim'. Religious labels are often applied before or during the formation of associated beliefs, while many humanists discover the label later in life and realise it applies to the beliefs and values they already held. [Surveys](#) show that around one in five of the population are non-religious and hold humanist beliefs.

The above should be taken into account by SACREs/SACs when considering how many humanists there might be in the local area and can be helpful should a SACRE reject humanist membership on the basis of a claim that there are very few humanists in the local area.

What does the law say? Can humanists be included on SACREs/SACs and ASCs?

Over 130 SACREs already have humanist members with almost 100 including humanists within group A as **full voting members** (and more applying for group A following the Kent/Bowen judgment). It is important to note that it is the local authority rather than the SACRE that determines whether an individual should be a full member of the SACRE or **Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC)**.

England

In 2023 [the Bowen/Kent High Court judgment made it clear that humanists could sit on group A on SACREs](#) and that a Local Authority should determine whether to admit a humanist as a full member of group A on exactly the same basis as they would determine whether to admit a religious representative. Kent County Council was found to have acted unlawfully by refusing Steve Bowen, Chair of Kent Humanists, a place on group A of its SACRE. In his decision, Mr Justice Constable concluded that it was 'unlawful' behaviour and that it is:

'clearly discriminatory to exclude someone from SACRE Group A solely by reference to the fact that their belief, whilst appropriate to be included within the agreed syllabus for religious education, is a non-religious, rather than a religious, belief.'

The judgment also stated that 'it is only those non-religious people who nevertheless have a belief system protected by the ECHR that may be eligible' [to join a SACRE]. In other words, 'generally non-religious' people cannot be appointed to SACREs. Only those representing protected belief systems can be. Humanism is protected by the ECHR.

Further information can be found in the more detailed documents below:

- [The Kent/Bowen High Court Judgment](#)

- [DfE guidance for local authorities about membership of SACREs](#)
- [High Court rulings on Religious Education and the Composition of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education](#), legal guidance from Professor Satvinder Juss

The Kent/Bowen judgment was based on the fact that **human rights law** interprets ‘religion’ as inclusive of non-religious worldviews. According to Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR):

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes the freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.⁴

At the domestic level, the Human Rights Act (HRA) 1998 gives ‘further effect to rights and freedoms guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights’ and Section 3(1) states that:

‘So far as it is possible to do so, primary legislation and subordinate legislation must be read and given effect in a way which is compatible with the Convention rights.’⁵

This means, when it comes to who can be included within group A, that the term ‘religions’ must be interpreted to include religious and non-religious worldviews such as humanism. Only if SACREs ensure that they understand the term in this way can they also ensure they meet the requirements of the HRA where the legal understanding of ‘religion’ encompasses both religious and non-religious beliefs.

Wales

In November 2018 the Welsh Government [announced](#) that humanists must be given the same right as religious representatives to sit on SACREs. In a [letter](#) to all local authority Directors of Education, the Welsh Government explained that its existing guidance, barring humanists from being full members of SACREs, does not ‘comply with current legislation’, specifically ‘the Human Rights Act’. The latter change began with a legal challenge by Humanists UK to the refusal of one Welsh LA, the Vale of Glamorgan, to appoint a humanist to group A.

In Wales, following the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 it is now explicit that persons who represent holders of non-religious philosophical convictions (e.g. humanists) can be appointed in Group A of the SAC in the same way as persons who represent holders of religious beliefs. It is a matter for the local authority to decide on the appointment of appropriate persons. The final decision on an appointment is dependent on the LA’s determination that such a representative would help ensure the relevant traditions of the area are appropriately reflected. The LA must take

⁴ European Convention on Human Rights (www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf)

⁵ Human Rights Act (www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/section/3)

all reasonable steps to ensure that the membership of the group is broadly proportional to the strength of each religion, denomination, or conviction in its local area.

Further support for the inclusion of humanists on SACREs followed the [Commission on RE](#)'s extensive research into the status and aims of religious education. Its [final report](#) called for full inclusion of humanism on Local Advisory Networks for Religion and Worldviews (its proposed replacement for SACREs). The Commission's final report represents the views of a wide spread of the RE community and was supported by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales.

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Humanists UK, 39 Moreland Street, London, EC1V 8BB

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