

REVIEW OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND CURRICULUM

Response from Northern Ireland Humanists,
January 2025



ABOUT NORTHERN IRELAND HUMANISTS

Northern Ireland Humanists is a section of Humanists UK, working with the Humanist Association of Ireland. We want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted to promote humanism by 130,000 members and supporters, around 120 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group, and many supporters in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

Although Humanists UK has been active in Northern Ireland for decades, in 2016 we formally came together under the name 'Northern Ireland Humanists' to unite our members, supporters, campaigners, and activists.

We have many decades' history of work in education, children's rights and equality, with particular expertise in the 'religion or belief' strand. We provide materials and advice to parents, governors, students, teachers and academics, and school speakers, through our website Understanding Humanism: understandinghumanism.org.uk. Through it we provide presentations, activities, films, and assessment ideas. We train and accredit a network of school speakers across the country to visit schools and answer young people's questions about humanism – currently over 200 speakers in the network making over 700 visits across the UK in 2023. We train hundreds of teachers every year to support their subject knowledge about humanism and provide practical ideas for the classroom.

We have been involved in policy development around citizenship education, sex education and particularly religious education (RE) for over 70 years. We are a founding member of the RE Council for England and Wales in 1973, with one of our staff members on its Board ever since. For the last 25 years Humanists UK has also been represented on the steering groups of every major national initiative focused on reform of RE in England and Wales. 70% of standing advisory councils on RE in those jurisdictions and agreed syllabus conferences have humanist representatives as full members (in some cases for decades), including as Chairs and Vice-Chairs. Recent years have seen a rise in the number of humanists who are on standing advisory councils on RE (SACREs) in England and Wales, particularly following the Welsh Government choosing to legislate to make explicit in primary legislation the equal inclusion of humanists, and the 2023 judgment Bowen that made plain that human rights law requires equal treatment in England, too. As a result the vast majority of locally agreed syllabuses include humanism to some extent, and many do so to a high level of depth. We have not seen similar progress in Northern Ireland (and note there is an ongoing court case about the nature of RE) but hope to in due course.

We advocate for inclusive assemblies suitable for all pupils, regardless of belief. Our Assemblies for All website provides access to hundreds of inclusive assemblies: assembliesforall.org.uk.



We have long been involved in relationships and sexuality education (RSE), and advocacy around science education. Our campaign 'Teach evolution, not creationism' (supported by prominent scientists like David Attenborough and organisations like the British Science Association and Association for Science Education) led to the UK Government adding evolution to the Key Stage Two curriculum; and to it making clear that no state school should teach pseudoscientific ideas as scientifically valid. We hope to see similar progress in Northern Ireland.

SUMMARY

In this submission we submit that:

- RE should be reformed to be an objective, critical, and pluralistic subject in line with modern pedagogy and human rights case law. We suggest that it be on the Northern Ireland Curriculum like any other subject, and also that it be renamed to 'Religions and Worldviews'.
- The Northern Ireland Curriculum should explicitly require the teaching of evolution and natural selection to primary school pupils at Key Stage Two. Safeguards should be introduced to ensure that pupils are not taught ideas as scientifically valid that run against the established historical or scientific consensus.
- There should be a compulsory content standard for Relationships and Sexuality Education, and for the subject to be taught in a standardised, unbiased manner regardless of the character of the school.

QUESTION ONE: IN WHAT CAPACITY ARE YOU RESPONDING?

This is a response from Northern Ireland Humanists, an organisation that provides resources, speakers, and training for schools, and is actively involved in education policy. See the above description. It is being submitted by Boyd Sleator, Coordinator, who can be reached at boyd@humanists.uk or phone 07918 975795.

QUESTION TWO: WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON THE STRENGTHS OF THE NI CURRICULUM?

In general

- The Northern Ireland Curriculum is broad and mostly diverse, providing opportunities for pupils to explore a wide range of subjects and develop valuable skills for life. Its flexibility allows schools to adapt content to the needs of their communities, fostering a more personalised and responsive approach to education.

Focus on skills development

- The curriculum places a strong emphasis on cross-curricular skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. These skills, embedded in frameworks like Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities, are designed to help pupils develop independent thought,



adaptability, and transferable skills that prepare them for future education and employment. Research shows that fostering critical thinking and problem-solving in the classroom not only improves academic outcomes but also enhances young people's engagement and ability to navigate complex real-world challenges ([McGuinness, 1999](#); [Hattie, 2009](#)). Integrating these skills across subjects like science, history, geography, and Religious Education (RE) can deepen learning and better prepare pupils for life beyond school.

Personal Development and Citizenship

- The inclusion of areas such as Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (at primary level) and Learning for Life and Work (at post-primary level) aims to help pupils develop self-awareness, empathy, and a broader understanding of their role in society. According to the [Education Reform \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1989](#), the curriculum's objective is to promote 'spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual, and physical development' and prepare pupils to become responsible citizens. Research, such as the [UNICEF report on 'Rights Respecting Schools'](#) and studies from UNESCO, highlights how integrating citizenship education and human rights into curricula fosters understanding of democracy, global citizenship, and civic responsibility, creating more engaged and empathetic young people.
- Citizenship education in Northern Ireland places a strong emphasis on human rights and democratic participation. The Learning for Life and Work strand, for example, includes modules on equality, justice, and the role of government, helping pupils understand the importance of protecting individual freedoms and respecting others' beliefs and identities.

Inclusive Framework

- At its best, the curriculum has the potential to promote diversity and inclusion. For example, the Mutual Understanding strand aims to build respect and empathy, particularly in Northern Ireland's unique post-conflict context. Evidence of its potential impact is found in reports like the Education and Training Inspectorate's report, '[How effectively are children being prepared for living in, and contributing to, a diverse society?](#)' which highlights the role of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding in supporting children to develop as contributors to society. The report emphasises that PDMU plays a crucial role in fostering concern for others, community spirit, tolerance, and respect.

Curriculum design flexibility

- The curriculum's design allows teachers to adapt content to meet their pupils' needs. For example, schools can select themes and projects that resonate with their local communities or address specific challenges. This adaptability aligns with research such as the *OECD's Framework for Responsive Pedagogy*, which highlights how [teacher flexibility in curriculum design](#) can enhance engagement and improve learning outcomes by tailoring education to the diverse needs of students and their communities. However, the lack of statutory requirements in some areas, like RE, continues to result in a narrow focus on what is perceived as 'majority religious identities'.



QUESTION THREE: WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON THE WEAKNESSES OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND CURRICULUM?

In general

- While the Northern Ireland Curriculum has the potential to provide a well-rounded education, several systemic weaknesses hinder its effectiveness and inclusivity. Key areas of the curriculum such as Religious Education (RE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) fail to adequately address the needs of a modern, diverse society. These weaknesses stem from limited input as only Christian churches contribute to the RE curriculum excluding other religions and non-religious perspectives, inconsistent implementation, and insufficient statutory guidance, which leave many pupils without access to the impartial, comprehensive education they are entitled to under [human rights principles](#). Without significant reform, these issues risk perpetuating inequality, alienating non-religious and minority pupils, and failing to prepare young people for life in an increasingly pluralistic and interconnected world.

Religious Education

- Religious Education represents one of the most significant weaknesses of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Its current structure is outdated, exclusionary, and inconsistent with human rights standards. RE is shaped by the four largest denominational churches in Northern Ireland, ensuring a predominantly Christian perspective that often excludes other religions and non-religious worldviews. This narrow framework does not reflect the realities of Northern Ireland's increasingly diverse population, nor does it provide a holistic understanding of religions and beliefs across the world
- [The Young Life and Times Survey](#) found that respondents identified as 37% Catholic, 23% Protestant, and 3% belonging to other religions, while 37% indicated that they belonged to no religion. This highlights the significant and growing proportion of non-religious young people in Northern Ireland. Yet the RE curriculum fails to represent these individuals by excluding non-religious worldviews like humanism, creating a disconnect between the curriculum and the society it serves.

Key Issues with Religious Education in Northern Ireland:

1. Exclusive Christian focus

The statutory syllabus for RE, devised by the four largest Christian churches, prioritises Christianity to the exclusion of other religions and non-religious worldviews. The statutory syllabus for RE fails to educate Northern Irish pupils on the diversity and complexity of religions and non-religious worldviews across the globe. By failing to reflect this diversity, RE alienates non-religious pupils and overlooks the richness of belief systems beyond



Christianity. This exclusion is inconsistent with legal precedents like [Fox v Secretary of State for Education judgment \(2015\)](#), which established that non-religious worldviews must be treated on an equal footing with religious perspectives.

2. Alienation of non-religious families

Non-religious pupils and their families feel excluded by an RE curriculum that does not represent their values or perspectives. This alienation is reflected by the number of parents who contact us looking for advice as schools push an overtly Christian RE curriculum that too many parents feel is confessional rather than educational. The curriculum's focus on religious teachings, rather than exploring broader philosophical and ethical questions, diminishes its appeal and relevance to the 37% of young people who identify as non-religious.

3. Barriers to critical thinking

The current RE framework often emphasises the teaching of religious doctrines rather than fostering critical inquiry into broader philosophical and ethical issues. This limits opportunities for pupils to engage in reasoned debate and explore questions of morality, meaning, and belief. The [Ofsted report Deep and Meaningful? \(2024\)](#) highlighted this shortfall in England, with pupils noting the lack of content on non-religious perspectives and questioning the curriculum's relevance in their lives.

4. Inspection

In Northern Ireland, the inspection of Religious Education is notably distinct from other subjects. [The Education and Libraries \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1986](#) stipulates that the Department of Education is not permitted to inspect RE unless specifically requested by the school's governing body. Consequently, RE is often not inspected or inspection is carried out by a Minister of Religion. This framework results in a lack of systematic, external evaluation of RE, leading to significant variability in its delivery across schools

The *Core Syllabus for Religious Education*, written by the four largest Christian churches, is required to be taught in all schools. However, its implementation varies widely:

- 1. Catholic-maintained schools:** These schools often supplement the Core Syllabus with catechetical programs that focus on deepening understanding of the Catholic faith. For example, the [Catholic Council for Maintained Schools](#) states that 'they are funded by the state and teach the same common curriculum as all schools in Northern Ireland through the lens and values of catholic education.' This approach centres on faith formation and reinforces a specifically Catholic perspective, rather than a pluralistic or inclusive one.
- 2. State-controlled schools:** While officially non-denominational, these schools have historically been associated with Protestant communities. Their interpretation of the Core Syllabus often reflects a Protestant tradition, resulting in a lack of focus on other religions and non-religious perspectives.
- 3. Integrated schools:** While integrated schools attempt to bring together pupils from Catholic, Protestant and 'Other' backgrounds, they remain Christian in ethos, often reflecting the dual denominational roots of Northern Ireland's education system. This



model does little to address the growing numbers of pupils who identify as non-religious or adhere to other beliefs.

These inconsistencies create significant disparities in how pupils experience RE across different schools. Non-religious families, in particular, often feel excluded, as the curriculum and school ethos are predominantly Christian. This exclusionary framework is compounded by the lack of opportunities for pupils to engage with philosophical or ethical questions outside a religious context.

Recommendations:

1. Make RE objective, critical, and pluralistic

RE should be transformed into an objective, critical, and pluralistic subject that fosters understanding of a wide range of beliefs and worldviews. RE should be broadened from its current narrow Christian focus to a broad education of religious and non-religious beliefs and practices across Northern Ireland, the UK and globally. This would allow pupils to engage with philosophical and ethical questions, encouraging critical thinking and mutual respect.

2. Reform RE to include non-religious worldviews

The RE syllabus should be reformed to include non-religious worldviews, such as humanism, on an equal footing with religions. This aligns with *Fox v Secretary of State for Education*, reflects the principles of impartial education, and provides education relevant to the growing non-religious population of Northern Ireland.

3. Introduce a Northern Ireland Curriculum for RE

To ensure consistency, a statutory national curriculum for RE should be developed. This curriculum must provide clear, impartial guidance on the breadth and depth of content to be covered, ensuring that all pupils receive a balanced education.

4. Inspections should be consistent with other subjects

To ensure consistency and quality, Religious Education should be subject to systematic inspection by an independent body, as is the case with other curriculum subjects, to address the current lack of oversight and variability in delivery across schools

5. Invest in teacher training

Teachers should receive comprehensive training to deliver inclusive RE. This includes equipping educators with the knowledge and confidence to teach about non-religious worldviews, as well as fostering a neutral and non-confessional approach to the subject.

Relationships and Sexuality Education

- Relationships and Sexuality Education is a mandatory element of the Northern Ireland curriculum, aiming to support pupils' health, well-being, and understanding of relationships and reproductive rights. Recent amendments, particularly those mandated by the Secretary of State, have introduced significant changes to address long-standing inconsistencies and gaps in delivery. However, challenges remain in ensuring all pupils receive age-appropriate,



comprehensive, and scientifically accurate education, free from undue religious or ideological influence.

Key Issues with RSE in Northern Ireland

1. Inconsistent Implementation

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has highlighted [significant variation in the delivery of RSE across schools](#). Sensitive topics, such as consent, contraception, LGBT relationships, domestic abuse, and access to abortion, are often avoided or covered superficially. These gaps leave many young people ill-prepared to make informed decisions about their health and relationships.

2. Religious influence

As discussed above, all schools in Northern Ireland have a Christian ethos, which influences the content and delivery of RSE. In Catholic-maintained schools, topics like abortion and contraception are often excluded or presented through a lens shaped by religious doctrine. Similarly, in state-controlled schools, the ethos and the role of Church Transfer Representatives grant schools substantial autonomy over decisions regarding when, how, and by whom RSE is delivered.

3. Parental opt-out

Current legislation allows parents to withdraw their children from RSE lessons. This raises concerns about pupils' rights to access vital education on relationships, consent, and sexual health. [The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission recommended](#) that the Department of Education work to co-develop and evaluate RSE policies with students to ensure their rights are prioritised.

Recommendations:

1. Full, comprehensive and age-appropriate RSE on the Northern Ireland curriculum

RSE should be provided at all stages in an age-appropriate manner, covering all relevant topics in an objective and evidence-based manner. RSE should be provided in the curriculum to ensure it is given the appropriate time and resources to be effective. Topics such as consent, LGBTQ+ relationships, contraception, and abortion should be required learning at age-appropriate stages.

2. Inclusive content delivered in partnership with young people

RSE must cover content that is relevant to young people in modern Northern Ireland - including LGBTQ+ relationships, gender identity, contraception, abortion, staying safe online and consent. Lessons should be co-produced with young people, as recommended by the [Any Use Report \(2019\)](#) and the [Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission \(2023\)](#).

3. Teacher training and support

All teaching staff should receive RSE training on a level with all other subjects on the curriculum to ensure they are confident and well-prepared to deliver the subject. Trainers should be equipped to address sensitive topics in a non-judgmental and inclusive manner.

4. Parental and guardian engagement

Programmes should be offered to parents and guardians to foster understanding and



support for RSE. This would help address concerns and ensure alignment between home and school education.

5. **Regular monitoring and evaluation**

RSE delivery should be regularly assessed to ensure consistency and quality. Pupils should play an active role in evaluating lessons to ensure they meet their needs and expectations.

Science, evolution, and creationism:

- In Northern Ireland, science is a core component of the curriculum, but it is [not compulsory at Key Stage 4 \(ages 14–16\)](#). Schools are only required to offer access to at least one course leading to a qualification in science, meaning students can opt out of studying science entirely during these critical years. By contrast, in England and Wales, science is a mandatory subject at Key Stage 4, ensuring all students receive consistent exposure to essential scientific knowledge, which better prepares them for higher education and employment in STEM fields
- Unlike England, where the law explicitly requires the teaching of evolution and [prohibits the presentation of pseudoscientific theories such as creationism or intelligent design as scientifically valid](#), Northern Ireland's statutory curriculum lacks similar safeguards. Terms like 'evolution' and 'natural selection' are absent from statutory guidance in Northern Ireland, allowing schools to potentially exclude these foundational concepts. In England, this explicit requirement ensures that pupils are equipped with a robust understanding of evidence-based science, fostering critical thinking and scientific literacy.

Recommendations

1. **Mandate the Teaching of Evolution**

Amend the statutory curriculum to explicitly include the teaching of evolution and natural selection as core components of science education from Key Stage Two onwards, ensuring that pupils gain a thorough understanding of these foundational scientific principles.

Prohibit the teaching of pseudoscience

Prohibit the teaching of pseudoscientific ideas such as creationism or intelligent design as scientifically valid in all state schools. These views may only be discussed as ones that people believe in for example Religious Education, so long as it is clear that they are not scientifically supported.

QUESTION FOUR: TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU THINK THE NORTHERN IRELAND CURRICULUM HAS BEEN SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENTED IN SCHOOLS, AND WHAT DO YOU PERCEIVE THE BARRIERS (IF ANY) TO ITS IMPLEMENTATION?

In general

- The Northern Ireland Curriculum has achieved some successes, particularly in its design to encourage flexibility and skill development, but its implementation is hindered by systemic



barriers that create inconsistencies in delivery and outcomes. The curriculum's potential to meet the needs of all pupils remains unrealised. The focus on 'orange' and 'green' and Catholic and Protestant issues in Northern Ireland also denies the reality of many young people's identities. [In the 2023 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey](#) the breakdown of self-described community identities was Unionist (30%), Nationalist (28%) and Neither (37%). Similarly, 37% of young people in Northern Ireland do not identify as religious. By continually crafting the curriculum, particularly the RE curriculum, through a lens of Unionist v Nationalist and Catholic v Protestant historical binaries, the curriculum is hindered in delivering high quality educational content that reflects the diversity and reality of the modern Northern Ireland population, especially its young people.

- Many of the barriers to the successful implementation of the Northern Ireland Curriculum have already been covered in this response, including inconsistencies in delivery, resources, gaps in accountability, and insufficient training for teachers in key areas. However, it is important to revisit these challenges and emphasise their cumulative impact on educational outcomes. Additionally, there are further barriers worth highlighting, such as limited engagement with pupils in curriculum planning, resistance to curriculum changes due to cultural and religious sensitivities, and the challenges posed by curriculum overload, which can dilute the effectiveness of teaching.

Barriers to the successful implementation of the Northern Ireland Curriculum

1. **The curriculum is inadequate**

The Northern Ireland Curriculum cannot be successfully implemented because the curriculum itself is inadequate. As long as there is too narrow a focus on Christianity in the RE curriculum there cannot be successful RE as pupils do not receive a relevant or broad education in global religious and non-religious beliefs and worldviews. As long as RSE is not properly integrated into the curriculum and lacks clear content on vital issues such as reproductive health, abortion, consent, LGBTQ+ identities, it cannot be successfully implemented as it simply fails to provide young people with the information they need to have healthy and happy adult relationships.

2. **Inconsistent delivery**

The curriculum's flexibility allows schools to adapt its content to their ethos, but this leads to significant variation in its delivery. The autonomy given to schools, combined with the influence of religious and denominational factors, results in inconsistencies in teaching, particularly in subjects such as RE and RSE. This undermines equitable access to education for all pupils.

3. **Focus on sectarian identities**

The curriculum often prioritises issues tied to Northern Ireland's traditional Catholic and Protestant communities. While addressing these historical divisions is important, it often comes at the expense of acknowledging the identities and needs of other groups. The rise in pupils identifying as non-religious highlights the importance of creating a more inclusive curriculum that reflects Northern Ireland's increasing diversity.

4. **Lack of accountability and inspection**

The absence of regular and consistent inspection, particularly in subjects like RE, leaves



gaps in oversight. Without external evaluation, schools are free to interpret the curriculum in ways that may exclude or misrepresent certain perspectives, such as non-religious worldviews or scientific concepts like evolution.

5. Teacher training and support

Many teachers lack the training and confidence to deliver complex and sensitive subjects, such as RSE, in a neutral and comprehensive manner. This is particularly concerning given the gaps identified in areas like consent, LGBTQ+ relationships, and reproductive health. Adequate professional development and guidance are essential to improve delivery.

6. Parental opt-out provisions

The ability of parents to withdraw children from certain lessons, such as RSE, undermines the curriculum's goal of providing all pupils with a comprehensive education. This opt-out provision is particularly problematic in ensuring that all young people are equipped with the knowledge needed for healthy relationships and informed decision-making.

7. Resistance to change

Historical and cultural resistance to reform in Northern Ireland creates challenges in modernising the curriculum. Efforts to introduce more inclusive content or address sensitive topics often face opposition from schools, communities, and political actors.

QUESTION FIVE: BEARING IN MIND THIS IS A REVIEW OF THE CURRICULUM, AND NOT OF QUALIFICATIONS AND ASSESSMENT, IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO DRAW ATTENTION TO THAT YOU THINK SHOULD BE A FOCUS OF THE REVIEW?

The RE Curriculum must be broadened from its solely Christian perspective

- A vital issue that should be addressed in this curriculum review is the narrow and exclusively Christian nature of RE in Northern Ireland. While RE is a core part of the curriculum, it is currently shaped by the four largest denominational churches, meaning that pupils are primarily taught from a Christian perspective, with little to no inclusion of other religions or non-religious worldviews such as humanism. This is an unacceptable limitation of pupil's access to information and understanding of the world and the beliefs - both religious and non-religious - that shape the lives of people across Northern Ireland, the UK and around the world. It fails to acknowledge the religious and cultural diversity of Northern Ireland and the world. In particular, it fails to be of relevance to a significant minority of young people who do not identify as religious and who deserve a curriculum that reflects their perspective, beliefs and moral and ethical frameworks.
- [The Independent Review of Education](#) stated:

'It may be that the outcome of litigation ongoing at the time of the publication of our Report may make the drawing up of a new religious education syllabus an immediate necessity. However, we consider that the increasing diversity of Northern Irish society makes it highly desirable that a review be undertaken in the near future, regardless of the legal processes. It is a strength of the current arrangements that all



four main churches were able to agree the existing syllabus. It would now be desirable if they, together with representatives of other faiths and of those with no religious affiliation, were to collaborate with the new curriculum body in devising a replacement course.'

- Humanists UK strongly supports the recommendation of the Independent Review of Education. Humanist representatives must be a part of the development of any new RE curriculum to ensure that the perspectives and beliefs of the non-religious are included, alongside representatives of non-Christian faiths.

For more details, information, and evidence, contact Humanists UK:

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