

SENEDD CYMRU | WELSH PARLIAMENT: PRIORITIES FOR EARLY YEARS, CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Response from Wales Humanists, September
2026



ABOUT WALES HUMANISTS

Wales Humanists is a part of Humanists UK. At Humanists UK, 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. Since 1896, our work has been helping people be happier and more fulfilled. By bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Together with our partners Humanist Society Scotland, we speak for 150,000 members and supporters and around 140 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group.] 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.

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 847 visits across the UK in 2025. We train hundreds of teachers every year to support their subject knowledge about humanism and provide practical ideas for the classroom. Every Standing Advisory Council on RVE has a [humanist representative](#) serving on it.

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. Our Wales Policy and Campaigns Manager currently serves as its company secretary and is also an executive member of the Welsh Association of SACs. 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.

What do you consider to be the main priorities or issues that the Committee should consider during the Seventh Senedd, and why?

Wales Humanists urges the Early Years, Children, Young People and Education Committee to make reform of compulsory collective worship in schools a priority during the Seventh Senedd.



In particular, we recommend that the Committee undertake an inquiry into whether the current statutory requirement for collective worship remains compatible with children's freedom of religion or belief, and into replacing compulsory religious worship with inclusive assemblies that can bring together the whole school community.

Collective worship is increasingly out of step with the Welsh education system

Welsh education law continues to require maintained schools to provide a daily act of collective worship. In schools without a religious character, this must be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character.

This requirement sits increasingly uneasily alongside the principles that now underpin the Curriculum for Wales. Through the [introduction of Religion, Values and Ethics \(RVE\)](#), Wales has taken important steps towards making sure that pupils learn about both religious and non-religious beliefs in an objective, critical and pluralistic way. RVE recognises that pupils come from a wide range of religious and non-religious backgrounds and that education about religion and belief should reflect the diversity of modern Wales.

Yet the same pupils are then required to take part in an activity whose purpose is not education about religion, but religious worship. This creates an obvious inconsistency and places an undue burden on teachers to deliver this worship which often does not align with their own personal beliefs. The curriculum recognises the importance of approaching religion and belief inclusively and impartially, while the law governing collective worship continues to privilege Christian religious practice.

The Committee should examine whether this contradiction can any longer be justified.

Collective worship is increasingly out of step with modern Wales

The statutory requirement for broadly Christian collective worship is also increasingly difficult to reconcile with the religious and non-religious make-up of modern Wales.

The [2021 Census found that 47% of people in Wales ticked 'No religion'](#), compared with 44% who ticked 'Christian'. Among younger people, the shift is even more pronounced, with a majority of people aged 73 and under selecting 'No religion'. Most importantly for this submission, 59% of school-age pupils selected 'No religion'. These figures matter because, as we have stated earlier, collective worship is not education about religion but practice. In schools without a religious character, pupils are still subject to a statutory framework that privileges Christian worship as the default communal activity, despite most children in Wales now identifying with no religion.

This creates a growing disconnect between the population schools in Wales serve and the legal framework governing school life. It is clear that a system designed around the assumption that Christian worship is an appropriate default for all pupils no longer reflects modern Wales. That strengthens the case for replacing compulsory collective worship with inclusive assemblies which can bring together pupils of all religions and beliefs, including the non-religious, on an equal basis.



The implications of the Supreme Court judgment in *JR87*

The [Supreme Court's judgment in *JR87*](#) in November 2025 has created an urgent need for reform to collective worship requirements.

That case concerned religious education (RE) and collective worship in a primary school in Northern Ireland, and the court concluded that the arrangements did not meet the requirement that teaching concerning religion should be conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner. Of particular significance was the Supreme Court's treatment of withdrawal rights. The existence of a parental right to withdraw a child was not regarded as an automatic answer to an otherwise rights-incompatible system.

The Court recognised that requiring parents to withdraw their children could place an undue burden on families, including by forcing parents to disclose their religious or non-religious convictions or by risking their being regarded as difficult or awkward. The statutory framework in Wales is not identical to that considered in *JR87*. Nonetheless, the [judgment raises important questions for Wales](#).

The present Welsh system similarly relies heavily on withdrawal as the protection available to pupils and families who do not wish to participate in collective worship. The Committee should therefore examine whether that remains an adequate safeguard in light of *JR87*.

Withdrawal is not an adequate solution

Parents currently have the right to withdraw their children from collective worship, while pupils over compulsory school age may withdraw themselves. But withdrawal does not resolve the fundamental problem, and children should not have to remove themselves from an important part of school life in order to exercise their freedom of religion or belief.

School assemblies are often about much more than worship. They may include school notices, celebrations of pupil achievement, discussion of events affecting the school community, moral reflection, and opportunities for pupils and staff to come together. A child who is withdrawn may therefore face a choice between participating in religious observance they do not share or being separated from their classmates and missing aspects of communal school life.

This can be particularly difficult for younger pupils, who do not possess an independent right to withdraw and whose participation depends entirely upon a decision made by their parents.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly [criticised compulsory school worship arrangements in the UK](#) and has called for children themselves to be able to exercise withdrawal rights. However, we believe that reform should go further than extending withdrawal rights. The preferable solution is to remove the need for withdrawal altogether by replacing compulsory religious worship with inclusive assemblies in schools without a religious character.



Guidance alone cannot resolve the issue

We welcome the [Welsh Government's commitment](#) to review, consult on, and update the existing guidance on collective worship. That review is timely, particularly following *JR87*, however, revised guidance cannot resolve the underlying problem because the requirement to provide collective worship is statutory. Guidance may influence how worship is organised, but it cannot transform religious worship into an objective, critical and pluralistic activity. Nor can it remove the legal expectation that schools without a religious character provide worship that is wholly or mainly broadly Christian.

Education is devolved in Wales, and the Senedd has legislative powers to reform the statutory framework governing collective worship. The fact that the current duties derive from Westminster legislation does not prevent the Senedd from amending or replacing those provisions as they apply in Wales. This means that meaningful reform is within the Senedd's own power to deliver. The Welsh Government's review of guidance is welcome, but guidance alone cannot remove the statutory requirement. Primary legislation would therefore be needed if Wales is to replace compulsory collective worship with a more inclusive model. This is why Senedd scrutiny is now necessary.

Replacing compulsory worship with inclusive assemblies

We believe that compulsory collective worship should be replaced in schools without a religious character by a requirement to provide inclusive assemblies.

These assemblies could continue to perform the valuable communal functions presently associated with school assemblies, while avoiding the requirement for pupils to participate in religious observance. They could provide opportunities for pupils to reflect on shared values, ethical questions, important events, relationships, and to promote community cohesion. They could also support pupils' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development.

With Humanists UK, we have demonstrated what this approach can look like in practice through its [Assemblies for All](#) programme. Assemblies for All provides schools with hundreds of high-quality, inclusive assembly resources which are educational and reflective without constituting acts of collective worship or promoting any particular religion or belief. The resources have been produced by a wide range of organisations, including Amnesty International, Oxfam, UNICEF, the UK Parliament and the BBC, and cover themes and events such as human rights, equality, the environment, democracy and important dates in the calendar. This demonstrates that assemblies can retain their educational, reflective and community-building role while being genuinely inclusive of pupils from all religious and non-religious backgrounds.

The important distinction is that pupils would not be required to participate in religious observance or affirm religious beliefs in order to take part in the shared life of their school. Religious worship could still be made available separately for pupils and families who actively wished to participate in it. This would protect freedom of religion as well as freedom from religion, and such a model would



be more consistent with the inclusive approach Wales has already adopted through the Curriculum for Wales and mandatory RVE.

What the Committee should examine

We recommend that the Committee undertake an inquiry into collective worship during the Seventh Senedd. That inquiry should consider:

- whether the current statutory requirement for collective worship is compatible with children's rights to freedom of religion or belief, particularly following the Supreme Court judgment in *JR87*;
- whether parental withdrawal and the limited pupil right of withdrawal provide adequate safeguards;
- the experiences of children, parents, teachers, and schools under the present arrangements;
- the relationship between compulsory collective worship and the objective, critical and pluralistic approach adopted through RVE and the wider Curriculum for Wales;
- the impact and limitations of the Welsh Government's forthcoming revision of collective worship guidance; and
- the case for Welsh legislation to replace the statutory requirement for collective worship in schools without a religious character with a requirement to provide inclusive assemblies.

Recommendation

Wales has already led the way within the UK in developing a more inclusive approach to religion and belief through the Curriculum for Wales. However, the continued requirement for broadly Christian collective worship is an increasingly anomalous part of that settlement. The Supreme Court's judgment in *JR87*, together with the Welsh Government's decision to review its guidance, makes the Seventh Senedd an opportune moment to address the issue.

We therefore urge the Committee to undertake an inquiry into collective worship and to recommend that the Welsh Government bring forward legislation to replace compulsory religious worship in schools without a religious character with inclusive assemblies accessible to all pupils, regardless of religion or belief.

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

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