

NORTHERN IRELAND COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION: EDUCATION INSPECTIONS BILL



Response from Humanists UK, September 2026

ABOUT NORTHERN IRELAND HUMANISTS

Northern Ireland Humanists is a section of Humanists UK that works with the Humanist Association of Ireland. 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. Founded in 1896, we are trusted to promote humanism by 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.

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 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.

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. 90% of standing advisory councils on RE 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, with a 100% representation in 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 but hope to in due course.



1. In what capacity are you responding?

Charity with decades of experience in education - see above.

6. Do you agree with the policy objectives of the Bill?

We broadly support the Bill's central purpose, which is to strengthen the statutory framework for inspection of schools and other education settings in Northern Ireland. Effective and independent inspection is vital for accountability, safeguarding, and maintaining educational standards.

We particularly welcome Clause 2, which removes the exemption that currently prevents the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) from inspecting religious education (RE) without the agreement of a school's Board of Governors. The Bill's own Explanatory and Financial Memorandum states that one of its purposes is to make sure inspection arrangements for religious education are brought into line with all other areas of the curriculum.

7. Do you think the provisions of the Bill will be effective in achieving the policy objectives?

The effectiveness of the Bill depends heavily on implementation. Removing the exemption is necessary, but not a sufficient act on its own. Inspection of RE must be meaningful, independent, and rights-based. It should not simply assess whether schools are delivering the current RE syllabus, but whether RE is being taught in a way that is objective, critical, pluralistic, and inclusive of non-religious worldviews such as humanism.

We also note that the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum states that there should not be any additional expense incurred as a result of the Bill. However, if ETI is to inspect RE properly following *JR87*, this is likely to require clear inspection guidance, inspector training, and appropriate expertise on freedom of religion or belief, human rights, and non-religious worldviews. Without that preparation, there is a risk that RE inspection becomes superficial or simply validates existing provision, rather than assessing whether it is rights-compliant.

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The Committee should therefore seek evidence from the Department and ETI about whether existing resources, training, and inspector expertise will be sufficient to discharge this new responsibility effectively.

We therefore believe the Bill can be effective, provided that it is accompanied by clear ETI guidance, appropriate inspector training, sufficient capacity and expertise, and transparent reporting on RE provision.

10. Do you agree that the categories of establishments that may be inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) should be extended?

We support, in principle, the extension of inspection to other education-providing institutions established, maintained, or managed by Northern Ireland departments. Publicly funded or state-linked education should be subject to appropriate independent oversight, particularly where children's and young people's rights, safeguarding, curriculum quality, and equality are engaged.

12. Do you agree with the aims of this clause to enables inspectors to evaluate RE in the same manner as other curricular areas.

Northern Ireland Humanists **strongly agrees** with the aim of enabling inspectors to evaluate RE in the same manner as other curricular areas.

RE is a statutory part of pupils' education and can have a significant impact on their understanding of religion and belief, as well as promoting cohesion and mutual understanding. It should therefore be subject to the same independent scrutiny as other subjects. There is no good reason for RE to be uniquely shielded from inspection, particularly where public money is funding the education being provided, or given a special status.

The Supreme Court judgment in *JR87* underlined the importance of making sure RE and collective worship are not delivered in a way that breaches the rights of children or parents. The Bill's Explanatory and Financial Memorandum records that the Court reinstated a declaration that the RE syllabus and collective worship arrangements in the school concerned were not delivered in an objective, critical, and pluralist manner, and that this breached the rights of the child and parent. *JR87* therefore demonstrates why removing the exemption is not simply an administrative tidying-up exercise. The judgment found that statutory educational provision was being delivered in a manner incompatible with Convention rights. An inspection system unable independently to scrutinise that provision leaves a significant accountability gap.

For that reason, we welcome Clause 2 as a necessary and long overdue reform. Inspection of RE should be routine, independent, and capable of assessing whether provision is inclusive and rights-compliant. It should include consideration of whether pupils are taught about both religious and non-religious worldviews, including humanism, in a fair, accurate, and age-appropriate way.



13. Do you want to make any changes to this clause? If so, what change would you suggest?

We support Clause 2 as drafted and do not believe the repeal of the existing exemption should be weakened. However, we recommend that the Education Committee seeks assurances from the Department about how the clause will be implemented in practice.

In particular, we would welcome either an amendment to the Bill or a clear commitment in statutory or inspection guidance to make sure that inspection of RE assesses whether provision is:

- objective, critical, and pluralistic;
- inclusive of non-religious worldviews, including humanism;
- respectful of pupils' and parents' freedom of religion or belief;
- accurate, balanced, and age-appropriate;
- not reliant on withdrawal as a substitute for rights-compliant provision.

If an amendment is considered appropriate, it could require the Department or ETI to publish guidance on the inspection of religious education, including how inspectors will assess compliance with human rights standards and inclusion of religious and non-religious worldviews.

At a minimum, we recommend that the Committee ask the Department to confirm that ETI will be equipped to inspect RE in a way that reflects the Supreme Court's judgment in *JR87*. This should include training for inspectors, publication of clear inspection criteria, and transparent reporting of findings relating to RE.

We recognise that some of the wider issues arising from *JR87*, including collective worship, school ethos, and withdrawal arrangements, fall beyond the direct scope of this Bill. However, they form important context for how Clause 2 should be implemented. The Committee should seek clarification from the Department about how inspection of RE will interact with these wider matters, particularly where they affect whether pupils receive rights-compliant provision.

We also recommend that the Committee seek clarification on how inspection of RE will interact with the wider issues raised by *JR87*, including collective worship, school ethos, and withdrawal arrangements. Clause 2 is welcome, but it is only one part of the response required to ensure that education in Northern Ireland respects the rights of all children and families, regardless of religion or belief.

14. Do you agree with the aims of this clause setting out explicit statutory powers for officials and defining certain deliberate acts by teachers, such as obstructing or failing to cooperate with inspectors, as unacceptable professional conduct.

We support the creation of clear inspection powers, provided they are exercised proportionately. In relation to RE, inspectors must be able to review not only classroom teaching but also curriculum



plans, teaching materials, withdrawal arrangements, school policies, and wider evidence of how religion or belief is treated in school life.

This is particularly important in RE because determining whether provision is objective, critical, and pluralistic cannot necessarily be achieved through observation of an individual lesson. Inspectors may need to consider the curriculum as a whole, the materials pupils encounter over time, and the way withdrawal and any alternative provision operate in practice. Clear powers of access and cooperation are therefore important if inspection is to provide a meaningful assessment of whether provision is rights-compliant.

For more details, information, and evidence, contact Northern Ireland Humanists:

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