

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.

To what extent do you agree the proposed aim of the new curriculum is effective and relevant?

Agree.

Education should expand the range of lives young people are able to consider and pursue, rather than direct them towards predetermined outcomes. The proposed aim of equipping young people with the knowledge, skills, and experiences required to develop their skills, make genuine choices, and informed and responsible decisions is welcome. The commitment to high expectations for every pupil is also positive.

We think the aim would be strengthened by an explicit reference to supporting young people to participate fully in a democratic, diverse, and pluralistic society. In Northern Ireland, education has a particularly important role in developing mutual understanding across religious, non-religious, cultural, and political differences. This should be visible in the curriculum's overarching purpose rather than left to individual subjects.

The intention to create a curriculum that is both inclusive and flexible is welcome. Flexibility can allow teachers to respond to pupils' different needs, interests, backgrounds, and circumstances. However, flexibility must also operate within a clearly defined common entitlement. The present curriculum demonstrates that, where statutory expectations are too broad or insufficiently specified, flexibility can result in significant differences in what pupils are taught according to the school they attend. Young people should receive a consistent education regardless of where they live in Northern Ireland or what school they attend. The revised curriculum should therefore distinguish between flexibility in how content is taught and discretion over whether essential content is taught at all.

To what extent do you agree the proposed objectives of the new curriculum are effective and relevant?

We agree, with some caveats.

The addition of environmental stewardship and lifelong learning is particularly valuable. We also support the statement that the education system should expect excellence and place no predetermined limit on what young people can achieve. This properly places responsibility on the system to maintain high expectations and provide every pupil with access to an ambitious curriculum.

However, the objective of developing as a 'member of society' is too broad to capture the particular civic responsibilities of education in Northern Ireland. It should explicitly refer to becoming an active and informed participant in a democratic, rights-respecting, and pluralistic society. This



should cover respect for people of different religions and beliefs, including those who hold non-religious worldviews.

We also have some concerns about allowing the objective of becoming 'a contributor to the economy' to assume disproportionate importance. There is no doubt that economic participation is valuable, but the purpose of education is, and should be understood, as wider than employability and productivity. Young people should also be supported to pursue knowledge, creativity, relationships, ethical reflection, democratic participation, and personal flourishing as worthwhile ends in themselves.

To what extent do you agree that the nine capabilities reflect the key qualities and attributes that education in Northern Ireland should aim to develop?

Agree.

The nine capabilities are broad, relevant, and generally well balanced. We are particularly supportive of the inclusion of reasoning and problem-solving, emotional understanding, environmental responsibility, and social and civic participation. These recognise that education should support people to participate thoughtfully and fully in society. We welcome the decision not to treat these capabilities as generic, separately assessed skills. Critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving depend upon secure knowledge and take different forms within different disciplines. The proposal that capabilities should emerge through a rich and coherently taught curriculum is therefore sensible.

We believe that there are two areas that should be strengthened:

- **Critical evaluation of evidence and information should be more explicit.**

Pupils must be able to distinguish facts from opinions, assess the reliability of sources, recognise misinformation and manipulation, and revise their views in light of evidence. This is partly contained within reasoning and problem-solving, language and communication, and digital learning, but it is sufficiently important to be clearly identified.

- **Social and civic participation.**

This should explicitly include understanding and respecting freedom of religion or belief, equality, human rights, democratic institutions, and the legitimacy of disagreement. In a pluralistic society, pupils should learn not only to participate, but to do so alongside people with different religious, non-religious, cultural, and political perspectives.

A commitment to inclusion should also extend to meaningful pupil participation. Young people should be involved in the development, implementation, and evaluation of curriculum areas that directly affect their lives, particularly PSCC and relationships and sexuality education. This would



help make sure that provision is relevant, age-appropriate, and responsive to pupils' experiences, while also putting the proposed capability of social and civic participation into practice.

Subjects and Key Stages

Language and Cultural Awareness

We agree with the review's recognition that language learning can widen pupils' perspectives, challenge stereotypes, and foster understanding of other cultures.

Our concern is that this is merely optional at KS2. We believe all pupils should receive a meaningful introduction to linguistic and cultural diversity before entering post-primary education, and that the core entitlement should be statutory. Care should also be taken not to present cultures as fixed, uniform, or synonymous with religion or belief. Pupils should also be supported to understand that cultures are diverse and changing, and that individuals may relate to cultural, linguistic, and religious and belief traditions in many different ways or reject them altogether.

Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC)

While we would prefer Relationships and Sex Education to be established as a distinct subject, if it is to form part of PSCC the framework should identify it explicitly as a coherent entitlement, rather than dispersing it across a number of individual topics.

The Department of Education's [own report on the implementation of RSE](#) reinforces the need for this approach. The report records significant inconsistency in existing provision, including gaps in teaching on consent, child sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and menstrual wellbeing. It also recognises that excessive flexibility within the existing curriculum has resulted in pupils of the same age receiving significantly different content depending on the school they attend.

The new framework should address these problems by setting clear minimum content and progression requirements that apply consistently across every school:

- **No faith-based carve outs.**

Every young person, regardless of the school they attend or their religious or non-religious background, should receive the knowledge and skills they need to form healthy relationships, understand their rights, make informed decisions, and navigate adult life. A school's religious ethos should not allow it to omit, dilute, or present statutory RSE content in a way that compromises its scientific accuracy or objectivity. All pupils should receive comprehensive, age-appropriate, scientifically accurate and evidence-based RSE throughout their schooling. Flexibility for individual schools should relate to matters such as examples, sequencing, and appropriate pedagogy, not to whether essential content is taught or whether factual information is presented objectively.



- **Entitlement from KS4.**

We are concerned that the proposed PSCC framework does not establish the same coherent subject entitlement through Key Stage 4. This is particularly anomalous given that existing legislation already requires pupils at both Key Stages 3 and 4 to receive age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights. PSCC should therefore remain a compulsory entitlement until the age of 16. RSE at Key Stage 4 should not be treated as a narrow residual statutory requirement detached from the wider learning about relationships, consent, equality, rights, wellbeing, and personal decision-making developed through PSCC. Young people arguably need this education most as they approach adulthood.

Science

We welcome that the framework is clear about how pupils should understand not only established scientific knowledge, but how scientific claims are tested, evaluated, refined, and sometimes revised.

- **Explicit inclusion of evolution.**

We particularly welcome the explicit inclusion of evolution by natural selection. Evolution should be taught clearly as established science in every school, without being qualified or undermined on religious grounds.

However, the final framework and guidance should make clear that creationism and intelligent design are not scientific theories and must not be presented as scientifically valid alternatives to evolution. Schools should discuss religious accounts of origins in appropriate subjects, but they should not be taught as science.

We also welcome the inclusion of climate change, biodiversity, reproduction, contraception, vaccination, and infectious disease. These areas must also be taught in a consistent, balanced, and evidence-based manner, not according to a school ethos.

- **Compulsory entitlement ends at KS3.**

However, we are deeply concerned and oppose any proposal that science should cease to be a compulsory entitlement at Key Stage 4. Scientific literacy is an essential part of every young person's education, not simply preparation for further scientific study or science-related careers. All pupils should be entitled to substantive science education throughout compulsory schooling, including between the ages of 14 and 16. Removing that entitlement would risk leaving some young people without the knowledge and critical understanding they need to engage with scientific evidence, evaluate claims, and make informed decisions in adult life.



Please provide any final comments, should you wish.

Successful implementation will require sufficient curriculum time, high-quality resources, and ongoing professional development. Consistent independent inspection will also be vital. The Department should monitor not only whether schools nominally cover the new curriculum, but whether pupils across different school types receive the same substantive entitlement. Inspection should examine whether teaching is inclusive, accurate, and appropriately ambitious, and whether school ethos has resulted in the omission, distortion, or unequal treatment of statutory content.

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

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