

NI DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION: CONSULTATION ON THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CORE SYLLABUS



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 130 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.



In what capacity are you responding?

Charity with decades of experience in education – see above.

1. To what extent does the vision statement clearly capture the purpose, identity and distinctive contribution of the subject area?

To a moderate extent.

The vision statement's clear description of Religious Education (RE) as the study of both religious and non-religious worldviews is welcome, and its commitment to an 'informed, objective, critical and pluralistic approach' is particularly important following the Supreme Court's judgment in *JR87*. We also welcome that the new vision statement identifies RE as an academic subject that should be critical and rigorous. A focus on lived experience, ethical reflection and respectful participation in a diverse society is a substantial improvement on the existing syllabus.

However, we believe that the statement is undermined by the designation of Christianity as the 'core element'. Christianity should be studied in an appropriate depth because of its historical and continuing significance in Northern Ireland, but this should not require the whole subject to be structured through a predominantly Christian lens. As it stands, the current wording of the vision risks treating Christianity as central and other religious and non-religious worldviews as supplementary subjects. This could run contrary to the ruling on *JR87*. This concern is further reinforced by the statement that Christianity continues to play an important role in the 'ethos and identity of many schools'. At the end of the section on Christianity it says that:

'RE should therefore also provide opportunities for all pupils to learn about a range of other religious and non-religious worldviews, fostering mutual understanding and respect, and enabling them to engage constructively with difference'.

This risks implying that Christianity is where the meat is as an object of study, and other worldviews are to be learned merely for fostering mutual understanding. This is not the case, and the statement should be clarified to stress that there is as much academic value in the study of humanism, and other religions and worldviews, as there is Christianity. The purpose of a statutory core syllabus should be to define pupils' educational entitlement, not reinforce the religious ethos of particular institutions. All schools must deliver RE objectively, critically and pluralistically, regardless of ethos.

An inclusive vision statement is not sufficient on its own. The commitment to objective, critical and pluralistic RE needs to be reflected consistently throughout the syllabus, including in the examples used to illustrate its organising categories and substantive content. At present, there are places where the examples remain overwhelmingly or exclusively Christian, despite the vision's stated commitment to the study of religious and non-religious worldviews. This risks sending a contradictory message about what is regarded as the substantive core of the subject. The examples provided throughout the syllabus should therefore model the breadth and inclusivity



expected of schools, including appropriate examples drawn from humanism and other religious and non-religious worldviews.

To improve on the vision statement, we recommend that:

- Christianity is described as one important area of study, rather than the core through which other worldviews are encountered;
- Humanism is clearly understood as the principal non-religious tradition, and a required area of study, reflecting its significance as an established non-religious worldview;
- The vision makes clear that religious and non-religious worldviews should be accorded equal respect and treated in an educationally appropriate, objective, critical and pluralistic manner. As the High Court set out in [Fox \(2015\)](#), this does not require identical weighting. Christianity may properly receive substantial attention reflecting its historical and contemporary significance in Northern Ireland. However, that greater emphasis must not result in the marginalisation of substantive non-religious worldviews;
- There is an explicit expectation in the vision for RE to be educational rather than confessional and must not seek to promote, affirm or encourage any one worldview;
- The vision should recognise that pupils may still be exploring their beliefs and values, rather than assuming they already have a fixed religious or non-religious identity.

The final paragraph's suggestion that schools may adapt provision to reflect their ethos should also be qualified. Flexibility must not permit schools to reduce the breadth, balance or critical character of the statutory entitlement.

2. To what extent do the organising categories for content appropriately reflect the key dimensions of learning within the subject?

To a large extent, although further clarification is needed.

The three organising categories are broadly appropriate and move the treatment of the subject beyond an overly narrow focus on sacred texts or formal doctrine to a broader, balanced, and critical academic subject. Including aspects such as lived religion or belief (and diversity within these), identity, and contemporary ethical questions should help pupils understand how religions and worldviews are interpreted and expressed differently by individuals and communities.

However, we do not think the categories sufficiently identify the methods through which pupils will study this material. For example, the syllabus refers principally to theological and philosophical approaches. We believe it should also explicitly incorporate approaches such as historical and socio-scientific enquiry, and evaluation of evidence and interpretation. These are particularly important when studying non-religious worldviews such as humanism, which should not be presented merely as a set of values to be compared with religious teachings. Rather, young people should examine the history of humanism as a worldview, its central ideas and sources of knowledge, and how humanists understand the world and make ethical decisions, as well as how humanist ceremonies could work, and what humanist organisations exist.



3. How well does the RE syllabus cover the most important content that pupils should learn in this subject? Consider whether the syllabus includes the knowledge, concepts, skills and disciplinary understanding that matter most.

To a moderate extent.

The draft RE syllabus includes several elements that were largely absent from the previous core syllabus, including greater engagement with religious and non-religious worldviews, lived experience, and philosophical and ethical enquiry. It also gives welcome attention to critical thinking, secularisation, and the interaction between religion, politics, and identity in Northern Ireland. The emphasis on RE's potential contribution to challenging sectarianism and supporting reconciliation and peacebuilding is also positive.

Nevertheless, important weaknesses remain.

- **Non-religious worldviews are still presented as marginal and optional**

At Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, pupils are principally given only an awareness that some people hold non-religious worldviews. Humanism is mentioned only twice in the entire core syllabus, and neither reference provides a clear entitlement for pupils to study its beliefs, values, practices, or contribution to society in any depth. This risks leaving humanism as an occasional point of comparison rather than a substantive worldview that pupils should understand alongside major religious traditions.

This problem continues as pupils progress through the syllabus. At Key Stage 2, pupils are required to encounter introductory learning about Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism, but only one non-religious worldview. At Key Stage 3, pupils continue their study of the named religious traditions while again studying only one non-religious worldview.

The syllabus also specifies considerably more substantive content for religious traditions than for non-religious worldviews. At Key Stage 2, for example, pupils are directed towards sacred texts, religious figures, worship, festivals, pilgrimage, and named concepts within particular religions. Non-religious worldviews, by contrast, tend to appear generically as sources of values or perspectives for comparison. At Key Stage 3 there is a welcome expectation that pupils engage with religious and non-religious perspectives on philosophical and ethical questions, but the syllabus still does not identify a body of substantive knowledge about humanism which pupils are entitled to acquire.

There are also a number of places where non-religious worldviews appear to have been added as an afterthought, rather than being developed with the same level of substance as religious traditions. For example, the syllabus gives pupils detail about where religious beliefs and ideas come from, including sacred texts, traditions, religious figures, and stories, but then refers only generically to learning that 'others hold non-religious worldviews about life



and meaning'. A genuinely balanced approach should provide comparable substance here. Pupils should also learn that non-religious worldviews such as humanism draw on human experience, reason and evidence, our understanding of the natural world, and shared stories and ideas about human values, relationships, and how we should live. Without this kind of detail, non-religious worldviews risk being presented as an undefined absence of religion rather than as substantive ways of understanding the world and living a good life.

Key Stage 4 is an improvement because pupils are expected to undertake an in-depth study of one non-religious worldview alongside Christianity, one other Abrahamic worldview, and one Dharmic worldview. It also introduces valuable material on secularisation, philosophical arguments, ethical frameworks, and religious and non-religious approaches to contemporary issues. However, this comes very late in pupils' education and the non-religious worldview remains unspecified. There is therefore still no guarantee that every pupil will acquire substantive knowledge of humanism at any point between Foundation Stage and the end of compulsory schooling.

This is particularly difficult to justify in light of changing patterns of religion and belief in Northern Ireland. The [2025 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey](#) found that 33% of 18–24-year-olds and 40% of 25–34-year-olds belong to no religion, compared with 27% of the population overall. An RE syllabus intended to prepare pupils for life in modern Northern Ireland should reflect this growing diversity by ensuring that pupils study at least one substantive non-religious worldview, including humanism, as part of their core entitlement rather than leaving this to teacher or school choice.

The weakness at primary level is especially significant in light of the *JR87* case itself. *JR87* concerned a child from a non-religious family attending Years 1–3 of primary school. Despite this, the proposed syllabus still offers pupils at Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 very little substantive teaching about humanism or other non-religious worldviews. Simply making young children aware that some people are non-religious does not provide the balanced and pluralistic education needed to address the problem identified in *JR87*.

A clear example is the treatment of human origins. Where pupils encounter religious creation stories, they should also be introduced, in an age-appropriate way, to the scientific account of human and cosmic origins. This gives pupils the essential knowledge that religious creation accounts are not the only explanations of our origins, and that there are evidence-based, non-religious ways of understanding the natural world. Including this alongside religious accounts would help ensure that pupils are not presented with a religious explanation in isolation and would better reflect the requirement for RE to be objective, critical, and pluralistic.

The near-complete exclusion of substantive non-religious worldview content from the earliest stages also raises serious questions of compatibility with Article 2 of Protocol 1. In *Fox*, the High Court held that, although pluralism does not require equal weighting, the complete exclusion of non-religious beliefs throughout an entire key stage was incompatible



with A2P1. A syllabus which provides young children with little more than an awareness that non-religious people exist, and which subsequently leaves the study of humanism optional, risks reproducing aspects of the same problem.

We therefore recommend that humanism should be expressly included as substantive core content, with clear and age-appropriate progression from Foundation Stage onwards. Pupils should progressively develop knowledge and understanding of humanist approaches to knowledge and the natural world, ethics and morality, meaning and purpose, practices and ceremonies, and the historical and contemporary contribution of humanists to society. This would better reflect the syllabus's stated commitment to objective, critical, and pluralistic RE and ensure that non-religious worldviews form a meaningful part of pupils' entitlement throughout their education.

- **Lack of understanding of what a worldview is.**

At Key Stages 2 and 3, schools need to study only one non-religious worldview, described as 'Atheism, Agnosticism or Humanism'. We are very concerned with this as it conflates a worldview with a belief. A worldview (whether non-religious or religious) is a person's way of understanding, experiencing and responding to the world. Humanism is a coherent non-religious worldview in that it sees the world as a natural place with no supernatural side, and proposes that science and reason provide the best guide to understanding reality. Humanists make claims both about the best way to understand the world and how we should live and treat each other.

In contrast, atheism and agnosticism are positions concerning belief or knowledge about gods; they are not, by themselves, developed worldviews equivalent to Christianity, Islam, or humanism in that they do not tell you anything else about a person's wider beliefs.

Presenting 'Atheism, Agnosticism or Humanism' as interchangeable alternatives therefore creates a significant weakness in the syllabus. A school could technically meet the requirement by teaching only the meaning of atheism or agnosticism, without examining any substantive non-religious worldview. This is likely to encourage more space for discussion of religious ideas and concepts about non-religious worldviews rather than developing the necessary broader understanding of what it means to be non-religious.

Our recommendation is that the understanding of what constitutes a 'worldview' is refined (our Understanding Humanism team have produced [this useful explainer piece](#)). humanism should be named as required content throughout. Atheist and agnostic perspectives can be explored within the study of humanism and other non-religious approaches, but they should not substitute for it. The syllabus would also benefit from clearer required content on humanism as a coherent worldview.

- **Continued focus on Christianity.**

Christianity continues to be the central or principal focus at every stage. At Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, pupils study Christianity alongside either Judaism or Islam, while



non-religious worldviews receive only brief mention. At Key Stage 2, all five other major religions and one non-religious worldview are introduced while Christianity remains the principal religion. This risks producing considerable depth in Christianity but a more superficial understanding of everything else. It may also make meaningful comparison difficult because pupils will not have acquired sufficiently secure knowledge of the other worldviews being compared. The statutory syllabus should establish a more proportionate entitlement across religious and non-religious worldviews.

- **A lack of clarity on what is 'participation' and what is 'learning'.**

Some wording also risks blurring the distinction between learning about a practice and participating in it. Foundation Stage pupils are expected to experience observing and participating in celebrations. Pupils may learn through visits, artefacts, stories, and demonstrations, but they must not be required to participate in worship, prayer, or religious observance as part of RE. The syllabus should state this expressly.

- **Content continues to be framed through religious traditions.**

Suggesting that Christianity and other worldviews use creation stories does not adequately distinguish religious creation narratives from scientific accounts of origins. We also have concerns with some phrasing in the syllabus. For example, 'sanctity of life' is a specifically religious phrasing and should not be presented as neutral. The statement that religious and non-religious stories provide a guide for how 'we should live' is also too prescriptive and should instead refer to how different people understand how life ought to be lived. The syllabus should use more neutral phrasing such as the value of life, human dignity, autonomy, rights, welfare, and human flourishing.

4. Is content appropriately sequenced across the Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2, Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4?

To a moderate extent.

There is a clear progression from recognising stories, practices, and belonging at Foundation Stage, through comparison and interpretation at Key Stages 1 and 2, to analysis, evaluation, and sustained argument at Key Stages 3 and 4. The later stages appropriately introduce more complex concepts such as textual interpretation, internal diversity, secularisation, ethical frameworks, and philosophical arguments.

However, the syllabus frequently states that pupils will encounter, explore, or experience material, but it does not always identify precisely what prior knowledge later learning is expected to build upon. We also have concerns that non-religious worldviews are introduced in a very limited manner at the earliest stages. Pupils should encounter age-appropriate examples of humanist beliefs, values, ceremonies, and ways of living from Foundation Stage onwards, rather than merely being made aware that non-religious people exist.



For example, at Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, pupils could learn that some people make sense of life without belief in gods and may celebrate important events through non-religious ceremonies. At Key Stage 2, they could explore the importance of evidence, empathy, and fairness. At Key Stage 3, they could study humanism's historical development, diversity, and approaches to meaning and ethics. At Key Stage 4, they could examine humanist philosophy, ethical reasoning, secularism, rights, and responses to contemporary issues. Our Understanding Humanism team has produced an ['Understanding Humanism: Core Knowledge \(ages 5-14\)'](#) document that might be useful.

The Department should provide progression maps for substantive and disciplinary knowledge, clearer minimum content for each worldview, required progression for humanism, guidance on appropriate depth rather than repeated superficial encounters, and clear attainment statements.

5. Do you have any other comments regarding the RE syllabus?

The success of any new syllabus will depend not only on changes to the wording, but on how it is implemented, resourced, inspected, and reviewed:

- **Guidance is required.**

The Department should publish clear guidance explaining what an objective, critical, and pluralistic approach requires in practice. This should include an explicit distinction between 'religious education' and worship, prayer, or other devotional activity. Schools should not be permitted to narrow the statutory entitlement or alter its academic character to reflect their religious ethos, but should be required to teach a broad, balanced, and critical religion and worldviews education.

- **Improved training and support.**

Teachers will also need training, improved subject knowledge, and high-quality resources to teach religious and non-religious worldviews accurately and with sufficient depth. This is especially important in relation to humanism, and the use of historical, philosophical, and socio-scientific methods of inquiry.

- **Improved and consistent inspection frameworks.**

Inspection arrangements should examine whether pupils receive the full breadth of the statutory syllabus and whether teaching is genuinely objective, critical, and pluralistic in every grant-aided school. Compliance should not be inferred simply from a school's policies or schemes of work. We understand inspection of RE is being considered in the Education Inspection Bill and we are contributing to that Call for Evidence.

- **Regular review.**

Finally, the syllabus should be subject to regular, transparent review. Faith and belief organisations, independent subject experts, and teaching professionals should participate



on an equitable basis. No religious body should have privileged control over the content, interpretation, or future development of the statutory syllabus.

6. Please provide any final comments, should you wish.

Important progress has been made but, as we have been clear throughout, there are still areas that require further work for this syllabus to be properly inclusive.

Christianity continues to function as the core, while humanism and other non-religious worldviews are frequently treated as generic or peripheral. This imbalance is particularly concerning because the Supreme Court has made clear that the state must make sure that teaching is objective, critical, and pluralistic and cannot rely on withdrawal to remedy an unbalanced curriculum.

The final syllabus should require substantive study of humanism at every key stage, stop conflating beliefs such as atheism and agnosticism as substitutes for a non-religious worldview, replace the designation of Christianity as the 'core element' with a balanced entitlement to in-depth study, and distinguish academic RE explicitly from worship and faith formation.

We recommend that:

- **Humanism is named throughout the syllabus and required at every key stage.**

It is an established non-religious worldview with a long intellectual and cultural history, rather than simply a lack of religious belief. The references to 'Atheism, Agnosticism or Humanism' should therefore be replaced with a requirement to study humanism, while recognising that humanists are generally atheists or agnostics and that not every non-religious person is a humanist.

- **Christianity should receive substantial attention, but not be given special status as the 'core element' of RE.**

The topic should receive substantial attention, including its diversity and role in Northern Ireland, however; describing it as the 'core element' at every stage risks replicating the structural imbalance that reform is intended to address. A better approach would require in-depth study of Christianity, humanism, and a suitable range of other religious worldviews, selected according to clear educational criteria.

- **The syllabus should be explicit that RE is an academic subject, not a confessional one.**

It should be clear that worship, prayer, devotional exercises, or activities intended to nurture faith are not education. References to pupils participating in religious celebrations should be amended, and we believe this is essential following *JR87*. A statutory statement of objective and pluralistic intent will not be sufficient unless the content, resources, and inspection arrangements consistently reflect it.



- **The syllabus should be expressly neutral.**

It should avoid assuming that young people are religious, that all families share a single worldview, or that religious belonging is inherited and fixed. Examples should reflect mixed-belief families, changing beliefs, non-practising identities, and pupils who do not use worldview labels. The phrase 'their own worldview' should be used carefully, as children may be exploring ideas rather than possessing a developed or settled worldview.

- **Right to withdraw.**

As the Supreme Court made clear in *JR87*, the right of withdrawal is not an adequate substitute for an inclusive syllabus, and parents should not have to remove their child from ordinary classroom teaching in order to protect their freedom of religion or belief, particularly where doing so may single out or stigmatise the child. The revised syllabus must therefore be objective, critical, and pluralistic in its own right, so that withdrawal is a genuine last resort rather than the principal safeguard for non-religious families.

- **Implementation will be important.**

We understand there is a separate consultation on the inspection of RE and have contributed to that. Briefly, we think the Department should make sure regular inspection of RE in all grant-aided schools looks at whether teaching is genuinely objective, critical, and pluralistic. No religious body should control the content or interpretation of the statutory syllabus. Non-religious worldview organisations and independent subject experts must be represented equally in its development and review.

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

Boyd Sleator

Northern Ireland Coordinator

07918 975795

boyd@humanists.uk

humanists.uk

