

# CALL FOR EVIDENCE: REVIEW OF THE RE CORE SYLLABUS

Response from Northern Ireland Humanists  
March 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 100 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](http://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.

#### **4. In your view, how should a revised Religious Education syllabus be designed and developed in order to meet the RE "Review Principles"?**

##### **a) Treat RE as an academic discipline – structured in an objective manner to promote intellectual engagement and respect for diverse perspectives.**

Religious Education (RE) 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, which means a predominantly Christian perspective dominates to the extent that it excludes other religions until KS3 – with humanism almost entirely absent. This narrow framework does not reflect the realities of Northern Ireland's increasingly diverse population, nor does it provide a broader understanding of religions and beliefs across the world. Any academic discipline delivers core knowledge. In the case of RE: knowledge of the local and global landscape of religion and belief that young people in Northern Ireland will have to navigate. It is important, then, that RE is fully inclusive of world religions and humanism.

In *JR87* the original [High Court](#) ruling made clear that the problem identified was systemic, not the fault of any individual school. The court explained (at paragraphs 134–135) that the unlawfulness arose from the legal requirement in Article 21(1) and (2) of the 1986 Order that RE and collective worship must be based on the Holy Scriptures. In other words, the issue came from the way the law itself is written and operates. The court said this was 'mischief which needs to be addressed.' The Supreme Court later reinstated the High Court's declaration, confirming that this was the correct way to understand the problem. The key point for this consultation is therefore that the courts have located the issue in the statutory framework, not in the behaviour of particular schools. The difficulty arises from how the legal duties interact, especially the requirement that RE be based on the Holy Scriptures and the way that requirement shapes the core syllabus. This means that meaningful reform needs to address the legal framework itself, rather than treating the issue as if it were simply a matter of individual schools' practice.

A key lesson from the [Supreme Court ruling on JR87](#) is that the RE syllabus must be delivered in an objective, critical and pluralistic way, consistent with human rights standards. In practice, we think the RE syllabus should:

1. Teach about religion and belief as part of how people live and make sense of the world, not seek to proselytise or promote a particular faith,
2. Be fully inclusive of humanism as the principal non-religious tradition,



3. Be clear about what pupils are being asked to do. That is, understand what different people and beliefs believe, think carefully about reasons and evidence, and discuss different views, without the syllabus presenting any one religion as 'the right one'.
4. Have proper checks in place such as clear guidance, training, and monitoring, so that RE is genuinely fair and balanced in every school, especially in light of the *JR87* ruling, which warned that RE in Northern Ireland amounts to indoctrination as it isn't taught in an objective, critical and pluralistic way.

For this to happen, 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.

For this to happen, the subject needs to be supported with significant investment in teacher training and with an improved, independent, inspection framework. We would suggest:

- **Inspections should be consistent with other subjects:** To maintain 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
- **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 humanism, as well as fostering a neutral and non-confessional approach to the subject.

**b) Develop critical and analytical skills – fostering analytical and critical thinking by engaging pupils in interpreting texts, evaluating arguments and understanding historical and cultural contexts.**

We strongly support critical and analytical skills being central to RE, and the Supreme Court ruling on *JR87* underlines why these skills matter. A syllabus explicitly designed around analysis, evidence, and dialogue is one of the strongest protections against proselytisation.

If taught well, the subject is uniquely placed to help pupils learn how to interpret and contextualise sources and practices, evaluate arguments fairly and carefully, and recognise the difference between respecting people and uncritically accepting ideas. The subject should:

- **Develop critical thinking:** Pupils should learn how to question claims, weigh up evidence, and recognise bias and misinformation. Learning to recognise the latter is particularly important and equipping pupils with the skills to test claims against evidence is a vital part of the education process. Pupils should also be supported to make their own minds up about issues, and develop their own worldviews.



- **Develop young citizens:** Pupils should leave school with a sense of civic responsibility and democratic engagement. This should include understanding how decisions are made, feeling confident to take part in public life, and recognising that their choices have consequences for others, locally and globally. Developing young citizens in the curriculum would include scientific, digital, and media literacy, and the ability to scrutinise information critically.

**c) Retain Christianity as the central focus – recognising the historical, cultural and legal context of Northern Ireland and the enduring role of Christianity as the predominant religious belief in shaping education and society in Northern Ireland.**

**Our position is that:**

1. Christianity should be taught in context, not as the organising principle of the whole subject.
2. The RE syllabus should be designed around a worldviews education (religious and inclusive of humanism), with Christianity included as a key worldview among others. This would reflect both Northern Ireland's history and contemporary diversity.
3. Any attempt to maintain 'centrality' risks perpetuating precisely the issues that *JR87* has highlighted as problematic, and it risks marginalising pupils from other faith and belief backgrounds.

We recognise that Christianity has played an important role in Northern Ireland's history, culture and public life, and it should be taught properly and in depth. However, Northern Ireland's history has also been shaped by Enlightenment and civic ideas, labour organising, rights-based politics, and secular and non-religious organising in public life. Teaching Christianity *substantively* is very different from making it the 'central focus' of the subject. The language of 'central focus' signals that one religion is treated as the default norm with other religions and humanism being treated as secondary. The 'Christianity as the central focus' approach is also difficult to reconcile with the objective, critical and pluralistic standard emphasised in the Supreme Court ruling *JR87*, particularly when the legal challenge itself concerned the effects of an exclusively Christian RE, and the inadequacy (and potential stigma) of relying on withdrawal as a remedy.

A syllabus that retains too narrow a focus on Christianity will not deliver the type of RE required by the ruling, because pupils will not receive a relevant, rounded education about the range of religious and non-religious beliefs that shape Northern Ireland and the wider world. It also risks failing pupils educationally by restricting their understanding of belief, identity, ethics, and lived diversity to a single tradition as the default frame. With [35% of 16 year olds](#), and [31% of 18-24 year olds](#), in Northern Ireland describing themselves as having no religion, an RE syllabus that seeks to retain Christianity as its central focus will remain out of step with those people most impacted by it.

The UK Supreme Court has now ruled that the way RE is provided in Northern Ireland schools does not meet 'objective, critical, and pluralistic' requirements. The unanimous ruling said that this amounts to indoctrination and breach of children's and parents' rights under the European Convention on Human Rights. A curriculum that relies on a core RE syllabus written by churches



with Christianity retained as the 'central focus' – and with withdrawal also ruled as 'stigmatising' – is now clearly out of step with basic rights and with the diversity of today's Northern Ireland.

**d) Be Pluralist and Inclusive – ensuring pupils explore a range of religious and non-religious worldviews and encourage engagement with questions of belief, ethics, identity and meaning, reflecting the diversity of contemporary society.**

We strongly agree that RE must be pluralist and inclusive. However, that has to mean more than covering a selection of 'world religions', it must explicitly include humanism as the principal non-religious worldview, alongside religions, in a planned and coherent way.

The Supreme Court's *JR87* judgment reinforces that state-funded education must respect freedom of religion or belief in the full sense. That includes the right to hold non-religious philosophical convictions. In that context, 'pluralism' cannot be achieved by simply adding a brief reference to non-religion within an otherwise Christian or confessional structure. Tokenistic inclusion risks leaving many pupils—particularly those from non-religious families—feeling like outsiders in their own education.

For pluralism to be meaningful, we recommend:

- **Humanism is included on an equal footing with religions:** The RE syllabus should be reformed so that pupils learn about Humanism clearly and systematically as a major non-religious worldview—its ethical approach, values, and how non-religious people make meaning and moral decisions. This reflects principles of impartial education and ensures the curriculum is relevant to the growing non-religious population in Northern Ireland.
- **A genuinely inclusive 'worldviews' approach:** Pupils should study a range of religious and non-religious worldviews with sufficient depth, including diversity within traditions, rather than treating any one belief system as the default and others as add-ons.
- **Consistency in content and teaching:** Inclusion must be built into curriculum planning, resources, teacher training and quality assurance, so that pluralism is delivered reliably across schools—not dependent on local interpretation.

**e) Prepare children and young people for Future Learning and Citizenship by promoting respect, tolerance and understanding of different beliefs and cultures.**

In *JR87*, the Supreme Court underlined the need for RE in state-funded schools to be objective, critically engaging and pluralist, and it also drew attention to the practical problems of relying on withdrawal, including the burden placed on families and the risk that children can be singled out or stigmatised. That context strengthens the case for an RE syllabus that enables every pupil to take part fully, as part of normal school life, without needing special arrangements.

RE should help prepare pupils for life in a diverse democracy. This is particularly important in Northern Ireland, where community relations remain a significant part of the educational context.



However, preparation for citizenship should be grounded in rights, dialogue and critical literacy, not in deference to any particular tradition or in approaches that assume one worldview is the default.

Our position is that the promotion of community cohesion should underpin the whole curriculum, not sit only within RE. Education should enable children from all backgrounds to participate confidently in a free and open society. This includes helping pupils to understand other people's perspectives and lived experiences, including those very different from their own, and to handle disagreement without hostility, prejudice or stereotyping.

Within that wider goal, RE has a particularly valuable role to play in helping young people develop:

- an understanding of freedom of religion or belief, including the right not to believe;
- skills for respectful disagreement and constructive dialogue;
- ethical reasoning linked to real civic questions and contemporary issues, including rights, equality, democracy, and community life.

This is directly relevant to the Department of Education's current review and call for evidence. It should be used as an opportunity to ensure that citizenship outcomes are clearly embedded within a modern RE syllabus that is inclusive, educationally robust, and consistent with the requirements highlighted in *JR87*.

## **5. Are there examples of RE syllabi from other countries that the drafting group should consider to inform its work? If so, please provide details, explaining the particular features and strengths of any such syllabi.**

### **Wales - Religions Values and Ethics**

Wales is one of the most useful comparators for Northern Ireland because it has modernised RE into a rights-compatible, inclusive worldviews subject that is designed for all pupils, and is explicitly required to be objective, critical and pluralistic.

What Wales has done that might be useful to inform the work of the drafting group:

- **Reframed the subject:** Religious Education is now '[Religion, Values and Ethics \(RVE\)](#)' and it sits within the Humanities Area of Learning and Experience. This encourages connections with the wider curriculum such as history, geography, social studies, and civic learning.
- **Made inclusion explicit in law and policy terms:** Welsh Government guidance makes clear that RVE must include religions and non-religious philosophical convictions, and must meet the objective, critical and pluralistic requirement linked to ECHR compatibility. We do, however, have concerns with the phrase 'non-religious philosophical convictions' as it can be vague and lead to confusion. In the RVE guidance the phrase refers to convictions which are not non-religious, but could be held for either religious or non-religious reasons, e.g.



veganism. We would much prefer to see humanism be included as the principal non-religious worldview, to avoid that confusion and create clarity on what should be taught.

- **Designed as enquiry-led and educational, not confessional:** the RVE approach encourages 'rich contexts for enquiry' into concepts like worldview, identity, culture, meaning, authority and ethics. This supports critical thinking and disciplined study rather than one that promotes a particular religion over other beliefs.

### Norway - Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of Life and Ethics

Norway is worth considering in light of *JR87* because it shows how a public school system can set clear, enforceable guardrails for a compulsory subject dealing with religion and belief. In its subject, Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of Life and Ethics (KRLE), the Education Act requires its teaching to be 'objective, critical and pluralistic', and curriculum content emphasises that the subject is intended to be an inclusive one that brings pupils together. That statutory clarity is significant because it makes the standard a baseline expectation.

Norway is also a practical example of separating classroom learning from religious practice. Guidance for families commonly states that 'services' are not part of KRLE and that any exemptions relate to particular activities that feel like participation, not to the whole subject. This helps to avoid exclusion while respecting freedom of religion or belief. For Northern Ireland, the transferable strengths are therefore the rights-based guardrails, the clear distinction between learning and practice, and the coherent worldviews structure. It also shows that you only get this right in practice if schools have the right training, good teaching resources, and proper oversight, so the rules are followed consistently in everyday classrooms.

However, we would add an important caveat. Despite those guardrails, Norway's model gives Christianity a structurally privileged position (including an explicit expectation that a large share of teaching time is devoted to Christianity). We would be concerned about importing that feature into Northern Ireland, given the need for RE to be demonstrably objective, critical and pluralistic for all pupils.

## 6. Are there papers or research evidence relating to this matter that the drafting group should review to inform its work?

First, the OSCE/ODIHR [\*Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools \(2007\)\*](#) should be treated as a core reference point. It is one of the clearest, most practical international frameworks for how a public education system can teach about religion and belief in a way that is fair, balanced and non-confessional. It is especially valuable because it moves beyond high-level principles and addresses the 'how' of curriculum development and delivery, including safeguards to avoid bias, the importance of teacher competence and training, and making sure that teaching about religion and belief does not slip into faith formation.



The drafting group should also consider the 2018 Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) report, [Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward](#). This remains a significant proposal for moving from RE as an uneven (and potential confessional) subject, to a coherent religion and worldviews model for all pupils, including non-religious worldviews. Importantly, the direction of travel recommended by CORE has since been reinforced by the Curriculum and Assessment Review in England, which [recommended](#) that RE should be included within the National Curriculum. This is an indication that reform towards greater consistency and parity is now being considered at national level. Alongside this there has been substantial work by the REC that the drafting group can use as practical evidence and implementation support. The [REC's National Content Standard for RE in England \(2023\)](#) and its wider suite of Religion and Worldviews curriculum-writing resources (including a handbook and frameworks) provide concrete examples of how a worldviews approach can be operationalised in curriculum design, expectations, and quality benchmarks.

On legal judgments, the drafting group should prioritise cases that directly address what 'balanced, inclusive provision' means in practice. As discussed throughout this submission,, the Supreme Court's decision in *JR87* is clearly central in setting the direction of travel for a lawful, rights-compatible syllabus, which includes an emphasis on RE being delivered in an objective and pluralistic manner, and its recognition of the problems created by relying on withdrawal. In addition, the group should consider [R \(Fox\) v Secretary of State for Education \(2015\)](#), which is helpful on the question of how humanism is treated within state education frameworks, and why curriculum wording and design need to be sufficiently clear to avoid non-religious perspectives being sidelined in practice.

## **7. Are there any other comments you wish to make?**

We have a concern about process and governance which is that the churches will continue to maintain a significant influence over the RE syllabus and its review. A syllabus intended for all pupils in state-funded education must be developed through a process that is independent, transparent and balanced, rather than primarily shaped by religious bodies. If the process is perceived as church-led, it risks undermining public confidence and makes it harder to demonstrate that the outcome will meet the objective, critical and pluralistic standard highlighted in the Supreme Court ruling on *JR87*.

For that reason, we believe the Department should reduce the churches' formal role in drafting and approval of the RE syllabus and replace this with an approach that is clearly education-led and rights-based. Churches and other religious bodies should be consulted as stakeholders like every other organisation or individual - they should not hold a privileged position in determining the curriculum for all children.

We would urge the Department to make the drafting arrangements provide equal and meaningful representation for a wider range of stakeholders, including minority faith communities, non-religious communities, teachers and school leaders, and children's rights experts. The process should also include clear publication of: who is involved in drafting, how decisions are made, how



evidence is weighed, and how the final syllabus will be quality assured for impartiality and inclusivity.

More broadly, reform must address implementation as well as content. Even a well-written syllabus will not succeed without time, training and resources. We encourage the Department to pair the revised syllabus with clear non-confessional guidance, accredited teacher training/CPD, and high-quality resources that include non-religious worldviews in a planned way.

Finally, the revised syllabus should be designed so that every pupil can participate fully as a normal part of school life, without families feeling they must rely on withdrawal and children being singled out. It should equip pupils for life in contemporary Northern Ireland by building understanding of diverse beliefs and identities, respectful dialogue, ethical reasoning linked to real civic issues, and a clear grounding in freedom of religion or belief, including the right not to believe. Schools should also be given clear guidance on what meaningful alternative supervision or learning looks like where withdrawal is used, to avoid exclusion or lost learning time.

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

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