

VISION 2030: INTEGRATED EDUCATION STRATEGY

Response from Northern Ireland Humanists, May 2025



ABOUT NORTHERN IRELAND HUMANISTS

Northern Ireland Humanists is part of Humanists UK. Humanists UK is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people. Powered by 130,000 members and supporters, we advance free thinking and promote humanism to create a tolerant society where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We provide ceremonies, pastoral care, education, and support services benefitting over a million people every year and our campaigns advance humanist thinking on ethical issues, human rights, and equal treatment for all.

We have a long history of work in education, children's rights, and equality, with particular expertise in the religion or belief strand. We have been involved in policy development around the school and the curriculum for over 60 years. We also provide materials and advice to parents, governors, students, teachers and academics, for example through our Understanding Humanism website (understandinghumanism.org.uk) and our school speakers programme. We have made detailed responses to all recent Government consultations on education and reviews of the school curriculum in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and regularly submit memoranda of evidence to MPs, MLAs, civil servants, and parliamentary select committees on a range of education issues.

We are an active member of many organisations working in education in the UK, including the Religious Education Council for England and Wales (REC), of which we are a founding member; the Sex Education Forum; the PSHE Association; Rights of the Child UK (ROCK); and the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE). We also participate in a range of dialogue activities with other religion and belief groups and are a member of the Interfaith Forum of Northern Ireland.

Our primary interests in education concern the curriculum (in particular RE, PSHE/RSE, citizenship, and science), collective worship/school assemblies, and state-funded religious schools.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE ACT

Question 13: To help us measure the success of the strategy, please tell us to what extent you agree or disagree that the strategy and action plan helped you understand the requirements of the Act?

Neither agree nor disagree.

The strategy and action plan outline the basic expectations set out in the Act but do not fully translate these into clear, practical measures. For instance, the statutory definition of an integrated school, as set out in Section 1(2)(a),¹ requires that these schools support, promote, and advance an intentional 'ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none'. This reflects the changing demographics in Northern Ireland, with the latest Life and Times Survey reporting that 26% of people now identify as non-religious (the second

¹ Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, Section 1(2)(a) <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/15/section/1/enacted>



largest religion or belief group after Catholics, who represent 34% of the population).² However, there is little indication of how schools will be expected to meet this requirement in practice. Although the action plan contains actions related to ethos – including training, a school-based self-evaluation framework, and a commitment to review guidance – it overlooks the extent of change needed to make school practices inclusive of non-Christians, including the non-religious. This is especially true of collective worship and religious education (RE), which, in common with all other schools in Northern Ireland, currently reflect an exclusively Christian ethos.³ In addition to adopting ‘a Christian based rather than a secular approach’⁴ to their overall ethos, integrated schools are still required to use an RE syllabus devised by the four main churches,⁵ despite the *Independent Review of Education* stating this should ideally be replaced with a knowledge-based, objective version developed with ‘those of other faiths’ and ‘those with no religious affiliation’, to help pupils understand the society in which they live.⁶

2. THE VISION OF THE STRATEGY

Question 14. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the vision for Integrated Education is fitting and in line with the Act?

Neither agree nor disagree.

The vision for Integrated Education reflects the language of the Act, but, unfortunately, both the Act and the strategy it has engendered are unambitious. While the demand for Integrated Education is well evidenced – both through polling⁷ and oversubscription in the areas where integrated schools are located⁸ – the strategy fails to offer a particularly credible plan to scale provision. In part, this is because it is so dependent on meeting rather than increasing demand for Integrated Education (a provision that was watered down during the passage of the Act through the Assembly⁹).

² Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey, 2023, <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2023/Background/RELIGION.html>

³ Department of Education, *Religious Education and Collective Worship* guidance, 2023, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/religious-education-and-collective-worship>

⁴ NICIE (2022) *Statement of Principles for Integrated Education*, <https://nicie.org/what-is-integrated-education/integrated-ethos/sop/>

⁵ Department of Education (2007) *Core Syllabus for Religious Education* <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/religious-education-core-syllabus>

⁶ *The Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland*, 2023, <https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/files/independentreviewofeducation/2024-01/Investing%20in%20a%20Better%20Future%20-%20Volume%202.pdf>

⁷ Lucidtalk Northern Ireland Attitudinal Poll 2025, Integrated Education Fund, 2025, <https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/research/lucid-talk-ni-poll-2025/>

⁸ Ulster University, *Transforming Education in Northern Ireland*, 2019 <https://view.publitas.com/integrated-education-fund/transforming-education-in-northern-ireland-briefing-papers-collection/page/74-75>

⁹ Humanists UK, ‘Blow to future of education as Northern Ireland Assembly votes to weaken Integrated Education Bill’, 20 January 2025, <https://humanists.uk/2022/01/20/blow-to-future-of-education-as-northern-ireland-assembly-votes-to-weaken-integrated-education-bill/>



The vision also ignores Religious Education (RE), despite the centrality of the subject to considering questions about religion, belief, and culture in the classroom. While other curriculum areas (e.g. History, PDMU, Local and Global Citizenship, etc.) are referenced, RE – which, as noted above, remains based on a syllabus devised by the four main Christian churches – is entirely omitted. This is a significant oversight, especially given that the Act defines an integrated school as one which fosters respect between those of different religions and of none. An objective, critical, and pluralistic approach¹⁰ to RE that includes humanism would better reflect the ethos outlined in the legislation and support better integration between different religious and belief groups.

3. ACTION PLAN

Question 15. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the strategic aims for Integrated Education?

Disagree.

While the strategic aims set out in the Action Plan align in principle with the duties placed on the Department by the Act, they are ultimately too cautious. The plan focuses on explaining what Integrated Education is, improving data collection, and supporting schools that express an interest in transformation. These are all welcome in themselves, but the approach remains largely reactive. Without a strategy to actively drive demand or expand provision at scale, these aims are unlikely to keep pace with current or future need.

There is clear and growing public demand for a genuinely inclusive school system, particularly among the increasing number of non-religious families in Northern Ireland.^{11, 12} Meeting this demand requires more than improved communication (with schools, parents or the wider public). Instead it requires visible political leadership, investment, and a plan for Integrated Education to become a normal and widely available part of the system.

¹⁰ This is the phrase used in human rights case law pertaining to the school curriculum, including the High Court ruling on *Fox v Secretary of State for Education 2015* (<https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/r-fox-v-ssfe.pdf>) which, although it focused on the GCSE syllabus in England, is still relevant in the context of Northern Ireland.

For further detail on the wider application of the case, see Wareham, R (2022) 'Achieving pluralism? A critical analysis of the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in RE policy in England and Wales after R (Fox) v Secretary of State for Education' *British Journal of Religious Education*, 44(4), 455–471.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2022.2027344>

¹¹ Parents for Inclusive Education NI (2025) 'About Us' <https://parentsforinclusiveeducationni.org/about>

¹² A recent legal case, which has been heard by the Supreme Court who will issue a judgment in the coming weeks, further illustrates how the current, exclusively Christian nature of the RE curriculum and collective worship is unsatisfactory for many non-religious families (see *Summary of Judgment in JR87*, <https://www.judiciaryni.uk/judicial-decisions/summary-judgment-re-jr-87>). Although this case focuses on a controlled school, given their overarching Christian character, similar situations are just as likely to occur in integrated schools which, on the basis of their avowed inclusive character, should provide an alternative to this status quo.



At present, the strategic aims show a commitment to improving what already exists, but not to ensuring that every child in Northern Ireland has access to an inclusive, integrated school. Without bolder strategic ambition, the pace of progress will remain too slow to reflect the changing demographics and expectations of society.

It is also unclear how the strategic aims will solve the recent problem of the Education Minister denying a school's application to become integrated despite clear and vocal parental and community demand.¹³ The decision to simply ignore the fact that almost 79% of parents supported integration at Bangor Academy and 82% at Rathmore Primary School¹⁴ was justified on the grounds that NICIE guidance recommends a 40/40/20 split in integrated schools.¹⁵ It is unclear how integration can progress if Ministers interpret these principles as ironclad, allowing no room for change or for regional demographic variation. There needs to be a clear strategic aim to define minimum requirements for integration, take context into account, and consider legislative changes to support these clarifications and updated ratio guidance.

Question 16. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Actions proposed in the Action Plan deliver on the Department and EA's duty to encourage, facilitate and support Integrated Education?

Neither agree nor disagree.

While the Action Plan includes welcome steps to support and facilitate Integrated Education – such as improved guidance, transformation funding, and better data collection – it does not go far enough to fulfil the statutory duty to encourage it.

As noted in previous responses, the overall approach remains overly reactive. The Call for Transformation appears to offer a more structured and visible mechanism than some of the other proposals, but it lacks detail and will still depend on schools or communities initiating the Transformation process themselves. While the plan includes demand profiling in under-served areas, this is not (yet) matched with a fully worked out strategy to increase provision in such areas or to overcome the barriers that may prevent Transformation.

While we recognise that the development of such a strategy is partly contingent on the various reports and actions cited in the action plan, this still marks a significant gap given the rising demand for inclusive education across Northern Ireland. The fact that the work the Department says it will commission NICIE to undertake engaging with stakeholders in under-served areas is only

¹³ Givan, P. (2025) 'Paul Givan [Minister for Education]: Why I turned down schools proposals for integrated status', *News Letter* 10 January 2025, <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/opinion/columnists/paul-givan-why-i-turned-down-schools-proposals-for-integrated-status-4937783>

¹⁴ Kenwood, M (2025) 'Bitter council row erupts over Minister's refusal to grant integrated status to two schools' *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 February 2025, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/bitter-council-row-erupts-over-ministers-refusal-to-grant-integrated-status-to-two-schools/a1846794249.html>

¹⁵ NICIE (2022) *Statement of Principles for Integrated Education* <https://nicie.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/NICIE-Statement-of-Principles.pdf>



scheduled to commence in September 2025, with no deadline for completion listed, is particularly concerning. A strategy that actively encourages Integrated Education needs to set more ambitious targets, promote Integrated Education as a mainstream option, and take steps to address structural constraints within the system as a matter of urgency.

At present, the proposed actions may help to improve on existing provision, but they fall short of the ambition needed to expand Integrated Education in an impactful and meaningful way.

Question 17. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed targets?

Strongly disagree.

We have selected 'strongly disagree' for this question because many of the most important targets are missing, unclear, or deferred. The accompanying data and benchmarking documents provide vital baseline information about current provision and change over time, but do not set out concrete goals for increasing Integrated Education provision in future. This includes the absence of specific targets for new schools, pupil places, and rates of transformation. The Action Plan refers to a suite of indicators and a red/amber/green system for monitoring progress, but there is no clarity on what constitutes meaningful progress – for example, how much of an increase in pupil places or transformed schools would qualify as 'green'?

This is a significant weakness in the Action Plan. If the strategy aims to expand access to Integrated Education, specific, measurable, time-bound targets – which make it clear what success looks like – are essential.

Question 18. Are you aware of any other issues, actions or targets not currently included within the Strategy or Action Plan that might be included?

Yes.

As noted in our earlier responses, the strategy fails to mention Religious Education (RE). This is surprising given the formative role this subject – when taught in a critical, objective, and pluralistic manner – can play in educating pupils about religion and belief and in helping to foster community cohesion. We suspect this omission may be due to the peculiar way in which the RE syllabus has been devised in Northern Ireland, with the four main churches responsible for an almost exclusively Christian curriculum.¹⁶ This syllabus covers other world religions only in one module in the post-primary phase and entirely omits non-religious worldviews such as humanism.

With this in mind, a target should be included to move towards pluralistic, knowledge-based RE that is inclusive of a range of religions and humanism in Integrated Schools. In addition, the current assumption of a Christian ethos in integrated schools should be reviewed. A further target should be introduced to ensure that integrated schools are no longer defined by a residual Christian

¹⁶ Department of Education (2007) *Core Syllabus for Religious Education* <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/religious-education-core-syllabus>



character, but instead reflect the diversity required by Section 1(2)(a) of the Act – which includes those of different religions alongside the non-religious.

4. DEMAND

Question 19. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Department's definition of demand is suitable for assessing and monitoring demand?

Strongly disagree.

We strongly disagree that the Department's definition of demand is suitable. It relies heavily on interpreting parental admissions preferences in existing schools, but this conflates actual choice with available choice. Parents selecting non-integrated schools does not necessarily mean they do not want Integrated Education – it may simply reflect the absence of local provision or a lack of accessible alternatives. This is particularly problematic in areas where integrated schools are extremely oversubscribed, as parents may not even list them among their preferences if there is no realistic prospect of securing a place. Consistent polling has shown the majority of people in Northern Ireland want integrated education to be the main model of schooling. In 2024, a polling found 67% of people agreed that 'Integrated schools- which intentionally educate together children every day in the same classrooms, inclusive of different religions, gender, and race- should be the main model for our education system.'¹⁷ But when only 7% of schools are integrated, it would not follow that the majority of parents would not be able to make the choice to have an integrated school as their preference, even if they want integrated education. Integrated schools are limited and not in all areas of Northern Ireland, there will be schools closer and more convenient, children may have built friendships in non-integrated primary schools that can only be upheld in non-integrated secondaries, older siblings or cousins may be in non-integrated schools. School preference cannot be used to determine demand for integrated education in an environment where there are insufficient integrated schools to outweigh other factors for school preference.

The current definition compares a potential situation (what parents might choose if Integrated Education were accessible) with a real one (what they are able to choose now). And, although it includes 'societal demand' – measured through surveys and successful parental ballots – it risks failing to properly account for unmet or suppressed demand, particularly among non-religious families and others poorly served by existing options. It is also unclear how the different types of demand (societal and behavioural) will be weighted in practice. Recent decisions – such as the refusal to approve transformation proposals from Bangor Academy and Rathmore Primary School despite overwhelming parental support – suggest that current enrolment data and the presence of a 'reasonable' number of Catholic and Protestant pupils are being used to override broader indicators of interest.¹⁸ This interpretation fails to recognise that minority representation often

¹⁷ IEF, *LucidTalk Northern Ireland Attitudinal Poll 2024*, <https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/research/northern-ireland-attitudinal-poll-2024/>

¹⁸ Bain, M (2025) 'Minister's decision to deny integrated status to NI's biggest post-primary "has made things very difficult" for schools seeking switch', *Belfast Telegraph*, 13 March 2025, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co>



increases after transformation and can take time to achieve.^{19, 20} A more appropriate framework would include explicit guidance on how real-world behaviour will be fairly balanced with community-wide indicators, and allow for future potential, rather than simply accepting existing circumstances.

Question 20. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the measures of demand outlined in the Action Plan are sufficient to measure demand for Integrated Education?

Strongly disagree.

As outlined in our response to Question 19, the core problem lies not only in the measures themselves but in how they are applied. While the Action Plan identifies both societal and behavioural indicators, there is no clarity on how these will be weighted or interpreted in practice.

Recent decisions suggest that behavioural data – such as existing enrolment patterns – are given disproportionate emphasis, even where broader indicators point to clear demand. Without guidance on how the different measures will be used together, the current framework risks reinforcing limited access rather than revealing unmet need.

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

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[uk/news/education/ministers-decision-to-deny-integrated-status-to-nis-biggest-post-primary-has-made-things-very-difficult-for-schools-seeking-switch/a429802155.html](https://www.nicie.org/news/education/ministers-decision-to-deny-integrated-status-to-nis-biggest-post-primary-has-made-things-very-difficult-for-schools-seeking-switch/a429802155.html)

¹⁹ NICIE (2025) 'Statement on Bangor Academy & Sixth Form College and Rathmore Primary School', 8 January 2025, <https://nicie.org/statement-on-bangor-academy-and-sixth-form-college-and-rathmore-primary-school/>

²⁰ IEF (2025) IEF Response to the Minister of Education, 10 January 2025, <https://www.ief.org.uk/2025/01/10/response-the-minister-of-educations-decision/>

