

NORTHERN IRELAND CURRICULUM REVIEW – CURRICULUM SURVEY

Response from Northern Ireland Humanists,
November 2025



ABOUT NORTHERN IRELAND HUMANISTS

Northern Ireland Humanists is a section of Humanists UK, working with the Humanist Association of Ireland. 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 130,000 members and supporters, around 120 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group, and many supporters in the Northern Ireland Assembly. 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 700 visits across the UK in 2023. 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. 70% of standing advisory councils on RE in those jurisdictions 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 and 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 (and note there is an ongoing court case about the nature of RE) but hope to in due course.

We advocate for inclusive assemblies suitable for all pupils, regardless of belief. Our Assemblies for All website provides access to hundreds of inclusive assemblies: assembliesforall.org.uk.



We have long been involved in relationships and sexuality education (RSE), and advocacy around science education. Our campaign 'Teach evolution, not creationism' (supported by prominent scientists like David Attenborough and organisations like the British Science Association and Association for Science Education) led to the UK Government adding evolution to the Key Stage Two curriculum; and to it making clear that no state school should teach pseudoscientific ideas as scientifically valid. We hope to see similar progress in Northern Ireland.

24. In what role are you responding?

Stakeholder with involvement in education policy – see above.

25. Do you wish to respond to subject focused questions or general?

General

32. What skills and qualities should education help pupils develop that should be recognised as overarching capabilities or dispositions across the whole curriculum?

- **Developing critical thinking:** The whole curriculum should develop critical thinking skills, and this should cut across all subjects. 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.
- **Promoting community cohesion:** It is essential to enable all children from a range of backgrounds to participate fully in a free and open society. The promotion of community cohesion should underpin the entire curriculum. The curriculum should allow pupils to grow in their ability to understand other people's perspectives and experiences, including those with very different beliefs and identities from their own, and to handle disagreement without resorting to hostility or prejudice.
- **Developing 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.



33. How could the current statutory Northern Ireland curriculum framework be improved?

Religious Education

- Religious Education 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, ensuring a predominantly Christian perspective that often excludes other religions and humanism. This narrow framework does not reflect the realities of Northern Ireland's increasingly diverse population, nor does it provide a holistic understanding of religions and beliefs across the world. While RE was excluded from the Strategic Review, the recent Supreme Court ruling that an exclusively Christian RE is 'indoctrination' now means that there is an urgent need to review RE and make sure it is taught in an unbiased, pluralistic, and balanced manner. RE should be brought back into scope for this review as a result of this ruling.

Recommendations:

1. **Make RE objective, critical, and pluralistic**

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.

2. **Reform RE to include humanism**

The RE syllabus should be reformed to include humanism on an equal footing with religions. This aligns with *Fox v Secretary of State for Education*, reflects the principles of impartial education, and provides education relevant to the growing non-religious population of Northern Ireland.

3. **Inspections should be consistent with other subjects**

To ensure 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

4. **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.

Relationships and Sexuality Education



- Relationships and Sexuality Education is a mandatory element of the Northern Ireland curriculum, aiming to support pupils' health, well-being, and understanding of relationships and reproductive rights. Recent amendments, particularly those mandated by the Secretary of State, have introduced significant changes to address long-standing inconsistencies and gaps in delivery. However, challenges remain in ensuring all pupils receive age-appropriate, comprehensive, and scientifically accurate education, free from undue religious or ideological influence.

Recommendations:

1. **Full, comprehensive, and age-appropriate RSE on the Northern Ireland curriculum**
RSE should be provided at all stages in an age-appropriate manner, covering all relevant topics in an objective and evidence-based manner. RSE should be provided in the curriculum to ensure it is given the appropriate time and resources to be effective. Topics such as consent, LGBTQ+ relationships, contraception, and abortion should be required learning at age-appropriate stages.
2. **Inclusive content delivered in partnership with young people**
RSE must cover content that is relevant to young people in modern Northern Ireland – including LGBTQ+ relationships, gender identity, contraception, abortion, staying safe online and consent. Lessons should be co-produced with young people, as recommended by [Any use? report \(2019\)](#) and the [Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission \(2023\)](#).
3. **Teacher training and support**
All teaching staff should receive RSE training on a level with all other subjects on the curriculum to ensure they are confident and well-prepared to deliver the subject. Trainers should be equipped to address sensitive topics in a non-judgmental and inclusive manner.
4. **Parental and guardian engagement**
Programmes should be offered to parents and guardians to foster understanding and support for RSE. This would help address concerns and ensure alignment between home and school education.
5. **Regular monitoring and evaluation**
RSE delivery should be regularly assessed to ensure consistency and quality. Pupils should play an active role in evaluating lessons to ensure they meet their needs and expectations.

Science, evolution, and creationism:

- In Northern Ireland, science is a core component of the curriculum, but it is [not compulsory at Key Stage 4 \(ages 14–16\)](#). Schools are only required to offer access to at least one course leading to a qualification in science, meaning students can opt out of studying science entirely during these critical years. By contrast, in England and Wales, science is a mandatory subject at Key Stage 4, ensuring all students receive consistent exposure to essential scientific knowledge, which better prepares them for higher education and employment in STEM fields.



- Unlike England, where the law explicitly requires the teaching of evolution and [prohibits the presentation of pseudoscientific theories such as creationism or intelligent design as scientifically valid](#), Northern Ireland's statutory curriculum lacks similar safeguards. This is despite the fact the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, Article 4(2) says that the curriculum in every grant-aided school must be a *"balanced and broadly based curriculum"*. Terms like 'evolution' and 'natural selection' are absent from statutory guidance in Northern Ireland, allowing schools to potentially exclude these foundational concepts. In England, this explicit requirement ensures that pupils are equipped with a robust understanding of evidence-based science, fostering critical thinking and scientific literacy.

Recommendations

1. **Mandate the teaching of evolution**

Amend the statutory curriculum to explicitly include the teaching of evolution and natural selection as core components of science education from Key Stage Two onwards, ensuring that pupils gain a thorough understanding of these foundational scientific principles.

2. **Prohibit the teaching of pseudoscience**

Prohibit the teaching of pseudoscientific ideas such as creationism or intelligent design as scientifically valid in all state schools. These views may only be discussed as ones that people believe in for example Religious Education, so long as it is clear that they are not scientifically supported.

34. What are the biggest challenges currently facing the curriculum?

- **Assumes Christianity by default:** The curriculum still assumes a broadly Christian 'default' rather than genuinely reflecting the pluralism of modern Northern Ireland. This shows up most clearly in RE and assemblies, but it also influences how 'spiritual' and 'moral' development are framed across the curriculum. Humanism is usually not mentioned at all, rather than taught as part of the normal landscape of beliefs and values that pupils should study on an equal footing.
- **A human rights problem:** The UK Supreme Court has now ruled that the way RE and collective worship are 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 and on mandatory Christian worship – with withdrawal also ruled as 'stigmatising' – is now clearly out of step with basic rights and with the diversity of today's Northern Ireland.
- **Resistance to change:** Historical and cultural resistance to reform in Northern Ireland creates challenges in modernising the curriculum. Efforts to introduce more inclusive content or address sensitive topics often face opposition from schools, communities, and political actors.
- **The curriculum itself is inadequate:** As long as there is too narrow a focus on Christianity in the RE curriculum there cannot be successful RE as pupils do not receive a relevant or



broad education in global religious and non-religious beliefs and worldviews. As long as RSE is not properly integrated into the curriculum and lacks clear content on vital issues such as reproductive health, abortion, consent, LGBTQ+ identities, it cannot be successfully implemented as it simply fails to provide young people with the information they need to have healthy and happy adult relationships.

35. Would you be interested in taking part in a focus group to discuss issues relating to your specific subject area?

Yes – boyd@humanists.uk.

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

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