

Parents' Guide to the Proposed New RE Curriculum Consultation

Executive Summary & Purpose of This Guide

This guide is designed for parents, guardians, and carers who want to participate in the public consultation on Northern Ireland's proposed new Religious Education (RE) curriculum, but who may not have time to read the full draft syllabus or research its background.

It breaks down the history of how this new syllabus came about, explains key legal and rights-based concepts in plain language, and provides actionable advice on what to focus on in your optional consultation comments.

Context & History: How We Got Here - *Why is the RE Curriculum Changing?*

- **The High Court Judgment (JR87):** In 2022, a landmark High Court ruling found that the state's existing RE curriculum and compulsory collective worship in primary schools were unlawful because they were not delivered in an "objective, critical and pluralistic" manner.
- **The Legal Standard:** Under human rights law (specifically Article 2 of Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights), state-funded religious education must be unbiased and pluralistic. It cannot be used to promote a single faith or indoctrinate children.
- **The New Draft Syllabus:** In response, the Department of Education convened a drafting body to overhaul the syllabus. However, key consultation responses highlight that the draft still prioritises Christianity as its "core element" while treating non-religious worldviews and other faiths as secondary.

Key Concepts Explained in Plain Language

- **Objective, Critical, and Pluralistic:** RE must present information neutrally, encourage children to question and evaluate ideas independently, and give fair representation to diverse religious and non-religious worldviews.
- **Parity of Esteem:** The legal requirement that all religions, as well as non-religious worldviews (such as Humanism, secular ethics, and philosophical perspectives) receive equal depth, respect, and seriousness.
- **UNCRC & Child-Centred Education:** Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 14), education must serve the child's right to freedom of thought and personal development—not serve as a vehicle for preserving church legacies or traditional school ethos.

Section-by-Section Advice for Optional Consultation Comments

Question 1: The Vision Statement

- **Background:** The Vision Statement sets out the core purpose and ethos of RE.
- **Key Focus Areas for Parent Comments:**
 - Challenge "Christianity as a Core Element": Point out that framing Christianity as the central "core" risks implying that non-Christian or non-religious pupils exist as secondary or default-adjacent.
 - Demand Parity for Non-Religious Worldviews: Emphasise that non-religious worldviews should be integrated with equal depth from the beginning, not treated as optional extras or vague "opportunities".
 - Balanced History: Request that any study of Christianity's historical influence be objective and critical, including its complex or negative societal impacts (e.g., historical divisions, suppression of rights) alongside positive aspects.
 - Child Rights over School Ethos: Argue that a child's right to neutral, pluralistic education must take priority over a school's individual religious ethos or governance preferences.

Question 2: Organising Categories for Content

- **Background:** The draft organises RE into three main categories: *Beliefs, Teachings and Sources*; *Practices and Lived Religion*; and *Identity, Diversity and Ethics*.
- **Key Focus Areas for Parent Comments:**
 - Highlight Disproportionate Depth: While the categories sound balanced in theory, in practice Christianity is given "deep and sustained" exploration, whereas other worldviews are merely "encountered".
 - Avoid Christianity as the "Default" Lens: Note that comparing other worldviews and religions against Christianity treats Christianity as the standard norm. All perspectives should be presented on their own merits.
 - Include Non-Religious Practices: Ask for concrete examples of non-religious ethics, ceremonies and secular moral reasoning to be embedded directly into these categories.

Question 3: Coverage of Most Important Content

- **Background:** This section asks whether the syllabus covers the knowledge, concepts, and skills that matter most.
- **Key Focus Areas for Parent Comments:**
 - Missing Non-Religious Content: Highlight that key non-religious concepts—such as scientific origin stories (e.g., Big Bang, evolution), Humanist moral philosophy, and secular ethical frameworks—are virtually missing or vague.
 - Demographic Reality: Point out that religions other than Christianity as well as people with no religion represent a major demographic segment in Northern Ireland, yet non-religious worldviews receive a tiny fraction of the curriculum detail given to Abrahamic religions.
 - Lack of Diverse Faiths: Mention that polytheistic, non-Abrahamic, and historical local traditions (such as native seasonal/pagan history linked to holidays) are omitted or delayed until later key stages.

Question 4: Sequencing Across Key Stages (FS, KS1, KS2, KS3, KS4)

- **Background:** This asks whether content is appropriately ordered across Foundation Stage (ages 4–5) up to Key Stage 4 (GCSE level).
- **Key Focus Areas for Parent Comments:**
 - Early Years Imbalance (Foundation & KS1): Raise serious concerns about young children (ages 4–8) being exposed almost exclusively to Christian and Abrahamic stories while other religions and non-religious worldviews are omitted or reduced to a passing mention.
 - Risk of Early Conditioning: Highlight that young children are impressionable. Establishing a Christian based religious worldview as the default norm before children develop critical thinking skills undermines the objective intent of the curriculum.
 - Call for Early Inclusivity: Recommend that Foundation Stage and KS1 focus on shared human values, nature, empathy, and a diverse range of global stories rather than doctrinal focus.

Question 5: Additional Comments

- **Background:** Space for general feedback regarding the syllabus, equality impacts, and implementation.
- **Key Focus Areas for Parent Comments:**
 - Lack of Diverse Representation in Drafting: Express concern that formal consultative roles were given to church bodies without equal formal representation for non-religious or non-Christian groups.
 - Collective Worship Context: Note that RE cannot be viewed in isolation when daily Christian collective worship and church-led assemblies remain prevalent in schools.
 - Neutral Terminology: Recommend neutral language across all curriculum documents (e.g., using "god or gods" rather than assuming a single monotheistic God).
 - Transition to "Religion & Worldviews": Advocate for moving toward an objective, fully inclusive "Philosophy, Religion, and Worldviews" subject model.

Practical Tips for Writing Your Response

- **Use Your Own Words:** Personal, authentically written comments carry significant weight in public consultations.
- **Be Specific:** Mention key terms like *parity of esteem*, UNCRC Article 14, *objective*, *critical and pluralistic*, and *inclusion of non-religious worldviews*.
- **Focus on the Child:** Remind decision-makers that RE should serve the intellectual freedom and critical thinking of all pupils regardless of background.



**Questions?
We're here to help!**



Scan the QR code for our Linktree

✉ **parents4inclusiveeducation@gmail.com**

