

Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland

Outline briefing for Education Committee on the Mini-Inquiry into RSE

6th November 2024

The Evangelical Alliance

The [Evangelical Alliance](#) was established in 1846 and represents and connects hundreds of Christian charities, thousands of churches, and tens of thousands of individuals.

We exist to serve and strengthen the work of the Church in our communities and throughout society. We have been working in Northern Ireland for over 35 years and engage on a wide range of policy issues from poverty and reconciliation to issues of human dignity and education. We pursue policies that seek the welfare and common good of everyone, in line with our Christian understanding of the world.

Religious belief and practice in Northern Ireland

The 2021 census showed that 80% of people in Northern Ireland identified as 'Christian' compared with 46% of people in England and Wales.

Earlier this year the Evangelical Alliance in Northern Ireland released [Good News People](#) which Professor of the Sociology of Religion, Dr Gladys Ganiel called "*the most comprehensive snapshot of religion in Northern Ireland in more than two decades.*" As part of this research, we commissioned Savanta ComRes to independently poll over 1000 people across Northern Ireland. They found that:-

- 50% of people in Northern Ireland identify as a practising Christian.
- 21% of people in Northern Ireland identify as both a practising Christian and an evangelical Christian.
- 38% of practising Catholic Christians also identify as evangelical.

There is a lot more research in the report on the practices and beliefs of the wider population. We would encourage the committee to read this report by way of background when it comes to the religiosity of the population in Northern Ireland and the particular distinctives in religious practices and beliefs among what we call in the report, 'classic evangelicals'.

Good News People - <https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Good-news-people-A4-Sept-24-HIGH-RES.pdf>

Time to Talk

In 2022, we produced [Time to Talk](#), a resource which is designed to help Christian parents/carers have better conversations with their children and their child's school about RSE. This resource is aimed at parents across the UK and was published before the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023. However, we would suggest that this could be helpful background reading for the committee in terms of understanding the principles and broad approach that we would encourage parents to take when it comes to engaging on these issues.

Time to Talk - <https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Time-to-Talk-23.pdf>

Key points

Below are some of the key points we wish to make as stakeholders:

- The importance of acknowledging worldview when discussing RSE.
- There is so much common ground between Christians and non-Christians when it comes to the teaching of healthy relationships, consent, preventing violence against women and girls, sexualisation and concerns about social media, sexting, pornography etc.
- There are a few specific areas where views and beliefs are very distinctive for example sexuality, gender and abortion. However, we are not claiming that these things should not be taught, or that Christian theology should be 'forced' on anyone. The questions are about how this is taught allowing for a diversity of beliefs, what is age-appropriate, scientifically accurate and ultimately constitutes harm.
- One of the areas in the terms of enquiry is about comparing the approaches to RSE in these islands. We would particularly draw the Committee's attention to 'What is being taught in relationships and sex education in our schools?' a report published in 2023 by New Social Covenant and commissioned by Mirriam Cates MP. This highlights some of the concerns that many parents, Christian and non-Christian might have, about some of the RSE provision, content and providers in England and Wales¹. The report can be accessed here - <https://www.newsocialcovenant.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/nscu-education-2023-v1.pdf>
- Perceptions and experiences of 'Christian ethos'.
- The views of some Christian young people who have recently experienced RSE education.
- The non-binding nature of much of the international human rights guidance on the teaching of RSE eg. Unesco International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education is voluntary and recognises that different states will take different approaches.
- There are important distinctions between bullying and disagreement, facts and ideology, identity and behaviour, and pastoral care and what is taught as normative on the curriculum.
- Our approach: RSE is very important and we support it being taught in schools. In our view, the current situation balances appropriate standardisation, flexibility and accountability. The teaching of RSE is compulsory and standardised through minimum content requirements. However, there is flexibility in that each school must draw up its own RSE policy in line with its ethos, and teachers are trusted to decide how the curriculum should be delivered and which resources to use. Parents also have the ability to request that their child be withdrawn from the teaching on specific issues.

We look forward to meeting with the committee in person and thank the committee for this opportunity.

¹ For example (pages 63-64) one provider created content which advises teenagers on 'choking' or 'breath play'. This practice is very dangerous and carries significant risk, having been the subject of new legislation to try to tackle the defence of 'rough sex' where someone has been severely injured or even died.