

FIVE YEARS OF NORTHERN IRELAND HUMANISTS





Northern Ireland Humanists is a section of Humanists UK, working with the Humanist Association of Ireland. Humanists UK is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people. Powered by 100,000 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.



**FOR A KINDER,
MORE RATIONAL
SOCIETY**



Anniversary congratulations for Northern Ireland Humanists have come in from across the political spectrum

'Congratulations to Northern Ireland Humanists on your fifth anniversary. You've achieved so much over these past five years and I'd like to thank you for the enormous contributions that humanists have made to Northern Ireland in that time.'

Paula Bradley MLA
Deputy Leader of the
Democratic Unionist Party



'I would like to congratulate Northern Ireland Humanists on your fifth anniversary. During that time, we have seen major changes in society and important steps towards equality here in the north. I would like to commend you for being part of this change through your important campaigning and wish you all the best for the future. Ádh mór!'

Michelle O'Neill MLA
Deputy First Minister
and Leader, Sinn Féin



'Congratulations to all those who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to help the Northern Ireland Humanists reach their fifth anniversary this year. This marks an exciting new chapter for the year ahead. Wishing you all the best for the future ahead.'

Doug Beattie MLA
Leader, UUP



'In the last five years Northern Ireland Humanists has boldly shaped the agenda in Northern Ireland, fearlessly standing up for human rights and equality. Wishing you many congratulations on your anniversary.'

Colum Eastwood MP
Leader, SDLP



'Thank you for all of your endeavours towards an inclusive and equal Northern Ireland and congratulations on your fifth anniversary. We look forward to working with you on many more campaigns including repealing Northern Ireland's blasphemy laws.'

Naomi Long MLA
Leader, Alliance Party



'I congratulate Northern Ireland Humanists on all the important work they have done over the last number of years around issues such as abortion rights, same-sex marriage and giving a voice to people who are normally excluded from political discourse here. I wish them well on their anniversary and I look forward to seeing the work they complete over the next five years and beyond.'

Gerry Carroll MLA
People Before Profit





FOREWORD

This report celebrates five years since the founding of Northern Ireland Humanists, which has quickly established itself as one of Northern Ireland's leading human rights organisations. As well as charting its accelerating growth, hard work and achievements, the report also looks to the future – at what may be in store for Northern Ireland Humanists in the years to come.

While Humanists UK has been active in Northern Ireland for decades, Northern Ireland Humanists came together in 2016 to unite its growing number of members, supporters, and campaigners, and respond to increasing demand to put humanism into practice, including through work in schools, ceremonies, and campaigns for a more secular, inclusive vision of Northern Ireland. This in turn helped to motivate Humanists UK, then known as the British Humanist Association, to rename in 2017 to fully include the newly formed Northern Ireland Humanists.

Despite the population of Northern Ireland being mostly religious (see Figure 1), the non-religious are the fastest-growing segment of the population, with the proportion of people in Northern Ireland belonging to no religion now at a record high of 27%, according to the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey.

This is up from 12% a decade ago – in other words, more than doubling in a decade.¹ This upward trend matches similar demographic shifts across the rest of the UK.²

Since its formation, Northern Ireland Humanists has grown significantly in all directions. Membership has increased rapidly from 230 members and supporters in 2016 to nearly 3,000 today. It has provided frequent and well-attended events, trained dozens of celebrants, pastoral carers, and school speakers across the country, and campaigned successfully across human rights and equality issues such as legally recognising humanist and same-sex marriages, public ethical issues like abortion rights, and equal access for non-religious pastoral carers in hospitals and prisons. This report will expand on these many achievements and what the future holds.

Here's to the next five years being as successful as the first five!

Boyd Sleator
Northern Ireland Humanists Coordinator

THE CHANGING FACE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Historically Northern Ireland has been known as a country dominated by two communities – Catholic and Protestant – but this belies a rich history of humanism, rationalism, and freethinking. Today, Northern Ireland's non-religious community is coming ever increasingly to the fore.

There has long been a humanist tendency in Northern Ireland, encompassing prominent Enlightenment freethinkers like John Toland (1670–1722), described as 'a man of fine parts, great learning, and little religion', and novelists like Forrest Reid (1875–1947), whose 1926 autobiography was entitled *Apostate*. Throughout Northern Ireland's history there have also been many who have fought against sectarianism and for equality and civil rights for all, challenging harmful religious division in all areas of society.

Humanists UK's presence in Northern Ireland dates back to 1896, the same year the organisation was founded as the Union of Ethical Societies in London. At that time, some of Belfast's most active radicals formed the Belfast Ethical Society, which two years later became part of the Union of Ethical Societies (today's Humanists UK). The Society promoted 'right conduct on a purely natural and human basis and the intellectual advancement of its Members,' aiming 'at the development of character, independent of theological speculations.' Its leaders, J.H. Gilliland and W.M. Knox, were self-described agnostics, who were also active in efforts for broad social reform. The group met for weekly meetings for over

sixteen years, welcoming many of the era's most prominent secularist speakers, and leaders of the early humanist movement.

In 1931, *The Literary Guide* (now *New Humanist*), reporting on a provincial 'meeting of Rationalists' in Northern Ireland, was confident enough to state the 'common knowledge that, without exaggeration, practically half the population are Rationalists at heart'. Belfast members of the *Guide's* publishers, the Rationalist Press Association, were encouraged to 'make a united effort to realize this latent force'. These efforts were stagnated by the war, but self-identified 'humanist' groups emerged again during the 1960s, as part of a decade of widespread activism for civil rights and concerted efforts for integrated education.

Though Humanists UK has had a presence and affiliated groups in Northern Ireland going back to 1896, it was only in 2016 that Northern Ireland Humanists came together in its own right, bringing together existing Humanists UK members, campaigners, celebrants, and service providers under one umbrella, and with the support of the Humanist Association of Ireland. For the first time, the humanist movement now found itself in a position to hire Northern Ireland's first full-time humanist organiser. It was this which allowed for the creation of a dedicated, national humanist presence in the form of Northern Ireland Humanists, whose five-year anniversary this publication marks.

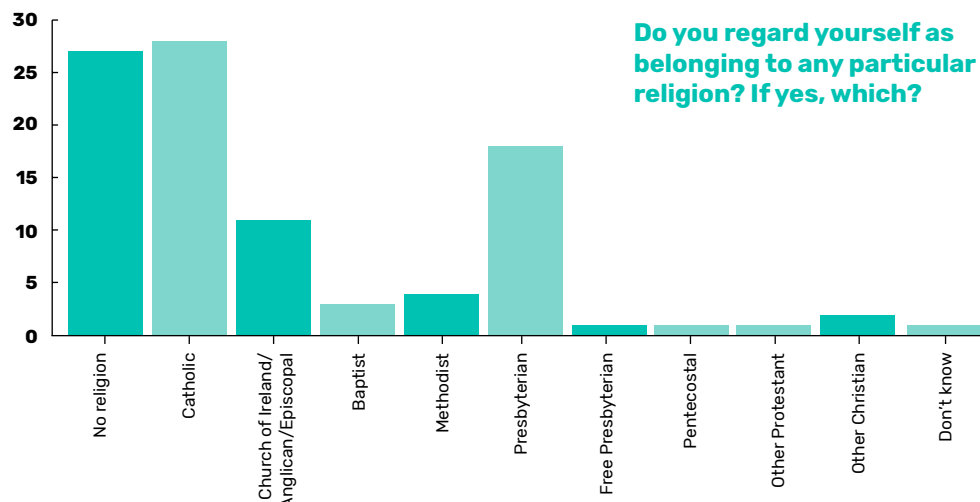
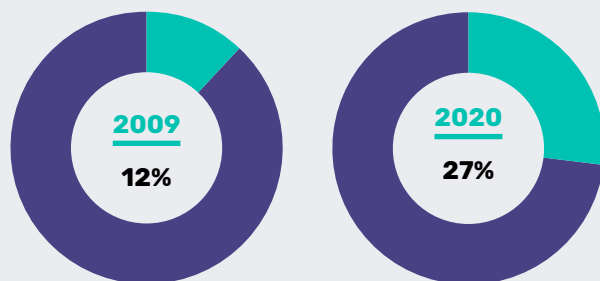
¹ Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. 2009. Available at: <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2009/Background/RELIGION.html>

² The British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey and the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey have charted a long-term and stable trajectory towards a non-religious population albeit at considerably higher levels – over 50% belonging to no religion. Humanists UK. 'Massive rise in non-religious identity in Northern Ireland'. 2021. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2021/06/10/massive-rise-in-non-religious-identity-in-northern-ireland/>

FIGURE 1

The Life and Times survey responses

Number of people identifying as non-religious in Northern Ireland in 2009 and 2020



Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion? If yes, which?

The latest Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey has the non-religious at a record high of 27% of the adult population. This is up from 12% a decade ago – in other words, more than doubling in a decade.³

Surveys from Britain suggest that around half of non-religious people hold humanist beliefs and values, meaning that around 15% of Northern Ireland's population has a humanist outlook on life.

Furthermore, younger people in Northern Ireland are less likely to be religious – in 2019, 37% of 25-34 year olds reported themselves as being not religious – suggesting that recent trends are set to continue.⁴ This should have profound implications for the education system in particular, where essentially all state schools are Christian in character.

³ Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2009 and 2020. Available at: <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2009/Background/RELIGION.html>

⁴ Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2020. Available at: <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2019/Background/RELIGION.html>

OUR CAMPAIGN SUCCESSES

Northern Ireland Humanists has achieved several-high profile campaign successes since its launch five short years ago. Here we will explore these victories, and examine priorities for future campaigning.

HUMANIST MARRIAGES

One of our landmark successes was achieving legal recognition of humanist marriages in 2018 after the Belfast Court of Appeal ruled there was a human right to humanist marriages.⁵ Up until this point, humanists in Northern Ireland were able to have a humanist wedding ceremony reflecting their beliefs and values which were mirrored by their celebrant, but unlike religious couples, were unable to have that wedding recognised in law. If they wished to be legally married, they were forced to have a separate civil marriage and face an additional cost and administrative burden.

The court case was won by Northern Ireland Humanists patrons Laura Lacole, a model and public speaker, and Eunan O'Kane (pictured), then a Leeds United and Republic of Ireland midfielder, with Humanists UK and Northern Ireland Humanists supporting them in their claim. The couple first won their battle at the High



Photo from the wedding of Laura Lacole and Eunan O'Kane

Court in 2017 but this was appealed by the Attorney General. The Court of Appeal initially granted Laura and Eunan the right to have a legally recognised humanist marriage, which took place on 22 June 2017, and later upheld the legalisation of humanist marriages more widely.⁶ The first humanist marriage following this judgment took place on 25 August 2018.⁷

⁵ Humanists UK. 'Victory! Court of Appeal in Belfast rules humanist marriages must be legally recognised'. 2018. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2018/06/28/victory-court-of-appeal-in-belfast-rules-humanist-marriage-must-be-legally-recognised/>

⁶ Northern Ireland Humanists. 'First ever legal humanist wedding ceremony takes place in Northern Ireland'. 2017. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2017/06/23/first-ever-legal-humanist-wedding-ceremony-takes-place-in-northern-ireland/>

⁷ Northern Ireland Humanists. 'First legal humanist marriages in Northern Ireland since Court ruling to occur this weekend'. 2018. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2018/08/22/first-legal-humanist-marriages-in-northern-ireland-since-court-ruling-to-occur-this-weekend/>

This brought our country into step with the Republic of Ireland and Scotland, which have had legally recognised humanist marriages since 2012 and 2005, respectively. It is also ahead of England and Wales, which is yet to grant legal recognition, to the distress of non-religious couples there. A current court case there is looking to build upon the precedent set by the Northern Ireland courts.

Significantly, legal recognition of humanist marriages has served to enhance the options available to same-sex couples to get married since the passing of progressive same-sex marriage reform in 2020. This enables couples to choose how and where they marry, in line with their beliefs, and we continue to be one of the only groups to provide same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland.

BELOW: A group of Northern Ireland Humanists march for Pride.

Northern Ireland Humanists billboards celebrating legal same-sex marriages.



SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Northern Ireland Humanists and Humanists UK have campaigned for years for reform of marriage laws to enable same-sex marriages, and humanist celebrants have performed same-sex weddings for decades, ever since the invention of humanist ceremonies and long before they came with any legal recognition.

We worked with Humanists UK to campaign in favour of the amendments to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation)

Act 2019 by Connor McGinn MP, which were also supported by members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group in the UK Parliament.⁸

We are proud to have been the first organisation to advertise legal same-sex marriages, through billboards across Belfast with the jubilant slogan 'Love wins for everyone', and were delighted to hold the first legal same-sex humanist marriage in Northern Ireland shortly after the law changed.⁹



⁸ Humanists UK. 'Parliament passes landmark Northern Ireland abortion, same-sex marriage legislation with early 2020 implementation date'. 2019. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2019/07/19/parliament-passes-landmark-northern-ireland-abortion-same-sex-marriage-legislation-with-early-2020-implementation-date/>

⁹ Northern Ireland Humanists. 'Humanists launch Northern Ireland's first billboards advertising legal same-sex marriages'. 2019. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2019/11/05/humanists-launch-northern-irelands-first-billboards-advertising-legal-same-sex-marriages/>

ABORTION RIGHTS

For decades we have campaigned for abortion rights in Northern Ireland, which until recently, had one of the most restrictive laws in Europe. There were no exceptions from the ban on abortion even in the cases of fatal foetal abnormality or sexual crime. This prohibitive law forced those seeking abortions to either travel to Britain, or to risk prosecution by procuring illegal online abortion pills, or to continue their pregnancies against their will and in violation of their human rights.

After years of campaigning, amendments supported by members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Act 2019 heralded the decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland. This came into force in 2020.

Prior to decriminalisation, we intervened in all the legal cases to grant abortion rights including the case of Sarah Ewart, a woman who was denied an abortion despite having a tragically fatal foetal abnormality; *JR76*, which involved a mother who was prosecuted for unlawfully buying abortion pills for her 15 year old daughter; *A and B*, whereby a mother and her daughter from Northern Ireland had to pay for using NHS abortion services after being forced to travel to England for an abortion, when if they had been British residents the services would have been free; and a case brought by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission surrounding abortion in cases of sexual crime and fatal foetal abnormality. These four cases were essential steps along

the way to the eventual passage of the 2019 Act – which built on their successes. A and B also led to women being able to access free abortions in Britain, rather than having to pay.

In spite of this progress, we know the battle for abortion rights is not yet won. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission started legal action against the Department of Health, the Northern Ireland Executive, and Secretary of State, over the Department's failure to commission abortion services following decriminalisation one year ago.¹⁰ More recently, the Northern Ireland Secretary has decided to intervene to make sure services are commissioned.¹¹ We will continue fighting so that this critical human right is delivered as enshrined in domestic and international law.



¹⁰ Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. 'Human Rights Commission Takes Legal Action on Lack of Abortion Services in NI'. 2021. Available at: <https://www.nihrc.org/news/detail/human-rights-commission-takes-legal-action-on-lack-of-abortion-services-in-ni>

¹¹ Northern Ireland Humanists. 'UK Government to intervene to guarantee Northern Ireland abortion provision'. 2021. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2021/03/19/uk-government-to-intervene-to-guarantee-northern-ireland-abortion-provision-reports/>

WHAT'S NEXT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND HUMANISTS?

While we've had many successes over the last five years, there is still more change needed for Northern Ireland to become an inclusive society. Here we explore some of our priority campaigns for the months and years ahead, and we expect in five more years' time we'll have helped progress and achieve these goals.

Our campaign aims are underpinned by our unwavering commitment to uphold human rights and equality to enable those living in Northern Ireland to have the fullest possible freedom of choice to shape their own lives, limited only by the rights and freedoms of others in a fair and equal society. That includes being committed to women's rights, LGBT rights, and ending racism in all its forms.

END BLASPHEMY LAWS

Blasphemy and blasphemous libel remain crimes in Northern Ireland. England and Wales repealed their blasphemy laws in 2008, followed by the Republic of Ireland in 2020 and Scotland in 2021. We are campaigning for Northern Ireland to follow suit, and hope success is on the horizon.

As well as violating human rights to freedom of expression, blasphemy laws protect religious beliefs, practices, institutions, and leaders from legitimate criticism. Even where they are not used, their presence



legitimises their use in countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia where people are put to death for blasphemy or apostasy. What's more, even 'dead letter' blasphemy laws' in countries which claim to not use them can be revived because they're still in law. For example, in 2017 Humanists UK's patron Stephen Fry was investigated for blasphemy in the Republic of Ireland!¹² Ireland subsequently held a referendum on whether to remove its blasphemy laws with 'Yes' winning by an overwhelming majority. Similarly, Denmark's blasphemy law was revived in 2015, and then repealed by the Danish Parliament in 2017. It's time we caught up too.'

¹² BBC News Online. 'Campaign to get rid of NI blasphemy laws'. 2019. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-47722457>



In recent years, we've mobilised our members and supporters to write to their MLAs to abolish our outdated blasphemy laws and gained support from all the major political parties in favour of repealing these laws except for the DUP.¹³ However, a growing number of DUP MLAs are also now backing repeal. Since the resumption of power-sharing, we've met with more than 15 MLAs about this campaign, including the Communities and Justice Ministers.

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS AND CURRICULUM

We want to see an inclusive school system where all children and young people can learn with, from, and about each other, regardless of religion or belief.

We recently voiced our concerns to the Children's Law Centre which held a call for evidence to inform the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's next report on how

well the nations of the UK are meeting their obligations with respect to the Convention. In this we raised our concerns about religiously segregated schools whereby most are still educated apart from one another along Catholic/Protestant lines, with teaching staff and governing bodies similarly divided. We told them that as well as presenting a huge barrier to community cohesion, inclusion, and tolerance, this also threatens the freedom of religion or belief of pupils educated in this segregated system.

We want to see an end to collective worship in school assemblies.

And we campaign for reform of Religious Education (RE) which currently, and unlike in the rest of the UK, teaches almost exclusively about Christianity, with little mention of world religions or humanism. In 2016 we organised a joint letter signed by prominent Northern Ireland politicians and representatives of Northern Ireland

Humanists and the Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum, who all believe Northern Ireland can do more to put sectarianism behind it by delivering a broad and inclusive RE curriculum covering the full spectrum of religious and non-religious beliefs in the country.¹⁴

We also want to see high-quality, comprehensive Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) lessons in all schools. Not only would this provide essential knowledge underpinning happy, healthy, and safe lives, but would help to tackle misogynistic attitudes that fuel violence against women and girls, and uphold LGBT rights. This would be achieved through the objective teaching of essential topics such as consent and about LGBT relationships.

The Department of Education is currently setting up an independent review of education, with a view to establishing a single education system. We welcome this, and know that all the major political parties back this outcome. The only question is how this is brought about. We will look to play a constructive role in this process.

ORGAN DONATION

We believe organ donation is one of the most significant things a person can do to help others after their own life has come to an end. We have for many years campaigned for an 'opt-out' system where a person is presumed to have consented to donate their organs after death unless they have specifically opted out. Evidence shows this increases the number of organs

available for transplant and better reflects the willingness of the population to donate, saving lives.

Northern Ireland is currently the only part of the UK that does not operate under an opt-out system. We are hopeful that this may soon change, as the Department of Health recently consulted on a proposal to move to an opt-out system and has committed to bringing legislation forward within this session of the Assembly.

We have warmly welcomed this move and called on our members, supporters, and the wider general public to respond and support the plans.¹⁵ We submitted a response in favour in collaboration with humanist philosopher Richard Norman, Professor Emeritus of Moral Philosophy at the University of Kent.¹⁶

CONVERSION THERAPY

Conversion therapy is a discredited and harmful practice, usually rooted in false and often pseudoscientific religious beliefs about what causes people to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans. We have campaigned for a ban on so-called 'conversion therapy' or 'gay cure' therapy for many decades.

In 2019, we proactively sent freedom of information requests to all health trusts and discovered that, shockingly, none had any guidance to tackle conversion therapy. As a result, we launched a campaign to make sure that government and local health care providers in Northern Ireland sign up to the Coalition against Conversion Therapy's

¹³ Northern Ireland Humanists. 'DUP opposes repealing Northern Ireland's blasphemy laws while all other parties come out in favour'. 2019. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2019/07/12/dup-opposes-repealing-northern-irelands-blasphemy-laws-while-all-other-parties-come-out-in-favour/>

¹⁴ Northern Ireland Humanists. 'Humanists and religious groups join forces to demand religious education reforms for Northern Ireland'. 2016. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2016/10/27/humanists-religious-groups-and-interfaith-associations-demand-religious-education-reforms-for-northern-ireland/>

¹⁵ Northern Ireland Humanists. 'Northern Ireland Government backs opt-out organ donation'. 2020. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2020/12/11/northern-ireland-government-backs-opt-out-organ-donation/>

¹⁶ Northern Ireland Humanists. 'Northern Ireland Humanists calls for opt-out organ donation'. 2021. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2021/02/18/northern-ireland-humanists-calls-for-opt-out-organ-donation/>



Memorandum of Understanding, that would commit them to support an end to conversion therapy, within healthcare and in other settings. All NHS trusts in Britain are already signed up.

We also became the first Northern Ireland members of the Coalition against Conversion Therapy, a coalition of leading psychological, psychotherapeutic, and counselling organisations committed to ending the inhumane practice.¹⁷

We were elated when Communities Minister Carál Ní Chuilín said the practice was harmful and must be outlawed in September 2020.¹⁸ We will continue campaigning to bring forth legislation to outlaw conversion therapy and have met with members of the Executive to push for the ban, including the Communities and Justice Ministers.

To this end, we were one of the founding members of Ban Conversion Therapy Northern Ireland which, over four days, gained the support of over 25,000 people who wrote to their MLAs in support of John Stewart's Bill on Conversion Therapy. The Bill was voted in favour of by 54 to 29

which was a major victory. If successful, we will have helped to lead the way for Northern Ireland to be the first part of the UK to end this practice.

ASSISTED DYING

We support the right for those who are terminally or incurably ill who have made a clear decision, free from coercion, to end their lives to be able to access an assisted death.

More and more countries around the world have legalised assisted dying including Austria, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Switzerland, and parts of the United States and Australia. Portugal looks set to soon follow. This demonstrates that such laws can be introduced with stringent safeguards.

The current law that prohibits assisted dying is no longer fit for purpose. We want to see a compassionate and safe law introduced to offer a choice to those facing heartbreaking and unimaginable situations.

At the time of writing, the Republic of Ireland's Oireachtas has voted to move forward to legalise assisted dying via a Dying with Dignity Bill which would enable those who are terminally ill to have the right to die. It is currently pending further debate and votes.

We have started engaging MLAs on this issue and how we can afford for everyone in Northern Ireland to have the choice and right to die with dignity.

COMMUNITY SERVICES

In a few short years, Northern Ireland Humanists has made great strides in bringing together and serving humanists across the country.

PASTORAL SUPPORT IN HOSPITALS AND PRISONS

Through the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network we provide high-quality pastoral, spiritual, non-religious care in hospitals and prisons. To put it simply, just as religious people will have religious needs related to their beliefs that require a denominationally specific approach, non-religious people have spiritual and pastoral needs that should be approached equally.

In law, non-religious prisoners have legal rights to request and be provided with a humanist pastoral supporter in the same way that religious prisoners have rights to see a religious chaplain. However, and as seen across the UK, in practice it has been a challenge to introduce non-religious pastoral care into prisons and hospitals due to reluctance by some chaplains and a lack of understanding about the requirements for equal treatment under the law. In hospitals, chaplaincy departments within the trusts have been reluctant to have them as part of their teams. Because of this, we are now seeking that the Department of Health takes action to make sure non-religious pastoral care is available.



In July 2018, non-religious pastoral carers entered prisons in Northern Ireland for the first time at Maghaberry Prison, and clocked up more than 100 visits to non-religious prisoners in the first six months of the programme there.¹⁹

Beyond this, Ciarán McWilliams recently became the first pastoral carer to be appointed to provide support to players, coaches, and fans at Ophir Rugby Football Club in Mallusk reflecting the wider institutional demand and desire for non-religious pastoral care.²⁰

¹⁷ Northern Ireland Humanists. 'Humanists become first Northern Ireland member of member of Coalition Against Conversion Therapy'. 2020. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2020/10/19/northern-ireland-humanists-become-first-ni-member-of-coalition-against-conversion-therapy/>

¹⁸ BBC News Online. 'Gay conversion therapy should be outlawed, minister says'. 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-54354400>

¹⁹ Northern Ireland Humanists. 'Non-religious pastoral carers enter Northern Ireland prison for the first time'. 2019. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2019/12/26/non-religious-pastoral-carers-enter-northern-ireland-prison-for-the-first-time/>

²⁰ Northern Ireland Humanists. 'First humanist appointed as pastoral carer to rugby team in Northern Ireland'. 2021. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2021/06/25/first-humanist-appointed-as-pastoral-carer-to-rugby-team-in-northern-ireland/>



HUMANIST CEREMONIES

Our accredited and trained celebrants carry out non-religious ceremonies to mark life's significant milestones, including weddings, funerals, and naming ceremonies. These ceremonies are personal, unique, and constructed to perfectly match the beliefs and values of the family or couple.

WEDDINGS

We are Northern Ireland's only legally recognised provider of humanist marriages, and provide both opposite-sex and same-sex services. The popularity of humanist weddings has rocketed since they were legally recognised in 2018, increasing from only 55 taking place in 2018 to 203 in 2019 – a whopping increase of 269%!

The success of our weddings and the talent of our celebrants was recognised last year as Humanist Ceremonies network member Emma Bailie won Celebrant of the Year at the fifth Northern Ireland Wedding Awards.²¹

FUNERALS AND MEMORIALS

Humanist funerals and memorials are non-religious ceremonies that support family and friends to mourn and to celebrate the person who has died. Each one is unique and shines a light on and is reflective of the individual's life. While the global Covid-19 pandemic has had a big impact on how ceremonies are conducted, our celebrants have worked with families and friends to remember their loved ones in meaningful, innovative, and safe ways, for instance using technology to overcome restrictions in the numbers of people who can attend in person.

PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF HUMANISM

Our trained, talented, and experienced school speakers have delivered many assemblies in Catholic, state, and integrated schools at no cost over the last five years. During the Covid-19 pandemic we quickly adapted to offer free remote visits by humanist school speakers, so children still have the opportunity to hear about humanism beyond the textbook.

In 2017, we sent free copies of Michael Rosen and Annemarie Young's book *What is Humanism?* to primary schools across the country following a successful crowdfunding campaign so children, their parents and carers, and teachers would have an opportunity to learn about humanism.²²

Teachers from both the state and integrated sectors have taken up our teacher training on humanism and we will be delivering more courses in tandem with the training colleges and other professional education bodies over 2021.

In 2020, for the very first time we ran our 'One Life' course for humanists in Northern Ireland to increase understanding of humanism online through quotes, videos, images, and other stimuli, via an online social learning platform. The course probes some of life's big questions and explores the humanist approach.

ENGAGING IN INTERFAITH AND BELIEF DIALOGUE

Since the launch of Northern Ireland Humanists we have rapidly developed our dialogue work with religious people, to promote mutual understanding and tolerance. We now attend interfaith and belief forums at the local and national level.

Most notably, our Coordinator, Boyd Sleator, sits on the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action's Faith Engagement Project which connects faith and belief leaders with the Northern Ireland Executive to respond to the impact of Covid-19. And equally significantly, Boyd has also been elected secretary of the Interfaith Forum.

In late 2020, a network of volunteers trained to better engage in dialogue was established. They have attended over 30 interfaith and belief events, and humanist values have been shared with over 700 people in just the short time since then. We will be expanding this work and are set to train more dialogue volunteers in 2021.



²¹ Humanists UK. 'Humanist celebrants win 'Celebrant of the Year' at national wedding awards in England and Northern Ireland'. 2020. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2020/01/30/humanist-celebrants-win-celebrant-of-the-year-at-national-wedding-awards-in-england-and-northern-ireland/>

²² Humanists UK. 'Schools across the UK receive free copies of What is Humanism from the British Humanist Association'. 2017. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2017/02/21/schools-across-uk-receive-free-copies-of-what-is-humanism-from-british-humanist-association/>



BRINGING HUMANISTS TOGETHER

In an overwhelmingly religious country, it's important for humanists to have the time and space to come together with people who share their beliefs and discuss humanism, and Northern Ireland Humanists has stepped up to the plate.

Northern Ireland Humanists holds regular events to celebrate and inspire humanism and humanists. Our annual event, 'A Night of Humanism', celebrates humanism and informs attendees about the work humanists are doing to advance rational thinking and kindness in Northern Ireland with high-profile patrons, such as philosopher A.C. Grayling and comedian Tim McGarry.



Prior to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic we held weekly, well-attended 'secular brunch' events all over Northern Ireland to provide a space for families to come together to discuss their beliefs, and these will resume as and when it's safe to do so again.

We have also brought our members and supporters together to campaign for significant humanist issues. In 2019, we protested against Northern Ireland's blasphemy laws and raised awareness of their damaging impact in justifying similar laws abroad, where people can face death or extreme punishments for expressing their views on religion.

Our Faith to Faithless service supports those who are leaving or have left high-control religions and we are proud to have held events including a panel debate entitled 'Finding Acceptance: LGBT and Apostasy'.

We have also held events on 'Why LGBT Inclusiveness Matters' and LGBT Awareness training to promote understanding of LGBT issues and we are proud to have attended Belfast Pride several years in a row and Pride in Newry and Foyle Pride too.

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS:

Christin and Gareth's wedding (front cover),
Simple Tapestry

Laura and Erica's wedding (p.5)
Simon Hutchinson

LGBT Humanists at Pride (p.10)
TJ Photography

Robert and Mervyn's wedding (p.11)
LIT Photography

Celebrant Jean Barrett-Quinn. (p.18)
Emma Kennedy

Photos from a Night of Humanism. (p.20)
TJ Torrens Photography



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