



Fraser Sutherland

Chief Executive

fraser@humanism.scot | [@scottishhumanists](https://twitter.com/scottishhumanists)

Humanism is an ethical & philosophical life stance
15,000 active members of a registered charity
Part of a global network of humanist groups
Since legal recognition (2005) we have married over 60,000 people



The right to self-determination: the case of education and religion

Religious observance in Scottish schools:

“Community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school’s community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community”.

Scottish Government Guidance
on RO – March 2017



A differential approach?

Local factors, such as religion/beliefs of the local community to be taken into account to decide approach

Could involve 'acts of worship' but completely devolved to schools to decide

Religious Observance Review
Group, Scottish Executive, 2004



A differential approach?

The revised guidance instructs schools to be mindful of the increasing diversity of beliefs but maintains a focus on Christianity, stating:

In recognition of Scotland's Christian heritage, non-denominational schools are [...] encouraged to draw upon the rich resources of this tradition when planning religious observance

Scottish Government Guidance on
RO – March 2017



Right to Withdraw?

“There is a statutory provision in section 9 of the 1980 Act for parents to withdraw their children from participation in RO. This right should always be made known to parents and their views respected.”

“There is no equivalent statutory right to withdraw afforded to children and young people.”

Scottish Government Guidance
on RO – March 2017



Compatibility with UNCRC

Article 14 of the UNCRC says that children and young people are free to be of any or no religion.

Children and young people shouldn't be discriminated against because of their religion. They should be treated the same as everyone else, no matter what they believe.

The right to freedom of conscience is also covered by Article 14. This is a person's right to refuse to do things which they object to for real moral reasons.

Compatibility with UNCRC

“In Northern Ireland and Scotland, children do not have right to withdraw from collective worship without parental permission. The Committee recommends that the State party repeal legal provisions for compulsory attendance at collective worship in publicly funded schools and ensure that children can independently exercise the right to withdraw from religious worship at school.”

UN Committee on Rights of
Child fifth periodic review 2016



A future opt-out for RO?

“embed the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into policy and legislation, including the option of full incorporation into domestic law.” – Scottish Government 2017

“As part of this we ask for you to implement the right for children and young people to opt-out of religious observance in Scottish state schools.”

Joint letter to Scottish Government (December 2017) from:



A future opt-out for RO?

Scottish Government should conduct a review of religious observance which results in updated legislation and guidance that ensures full compliance with the UNCRC and other human rights treaties. Children should play a central role in this review.

Recommendation on the 2019 State of Children's Rights in Scotland report

