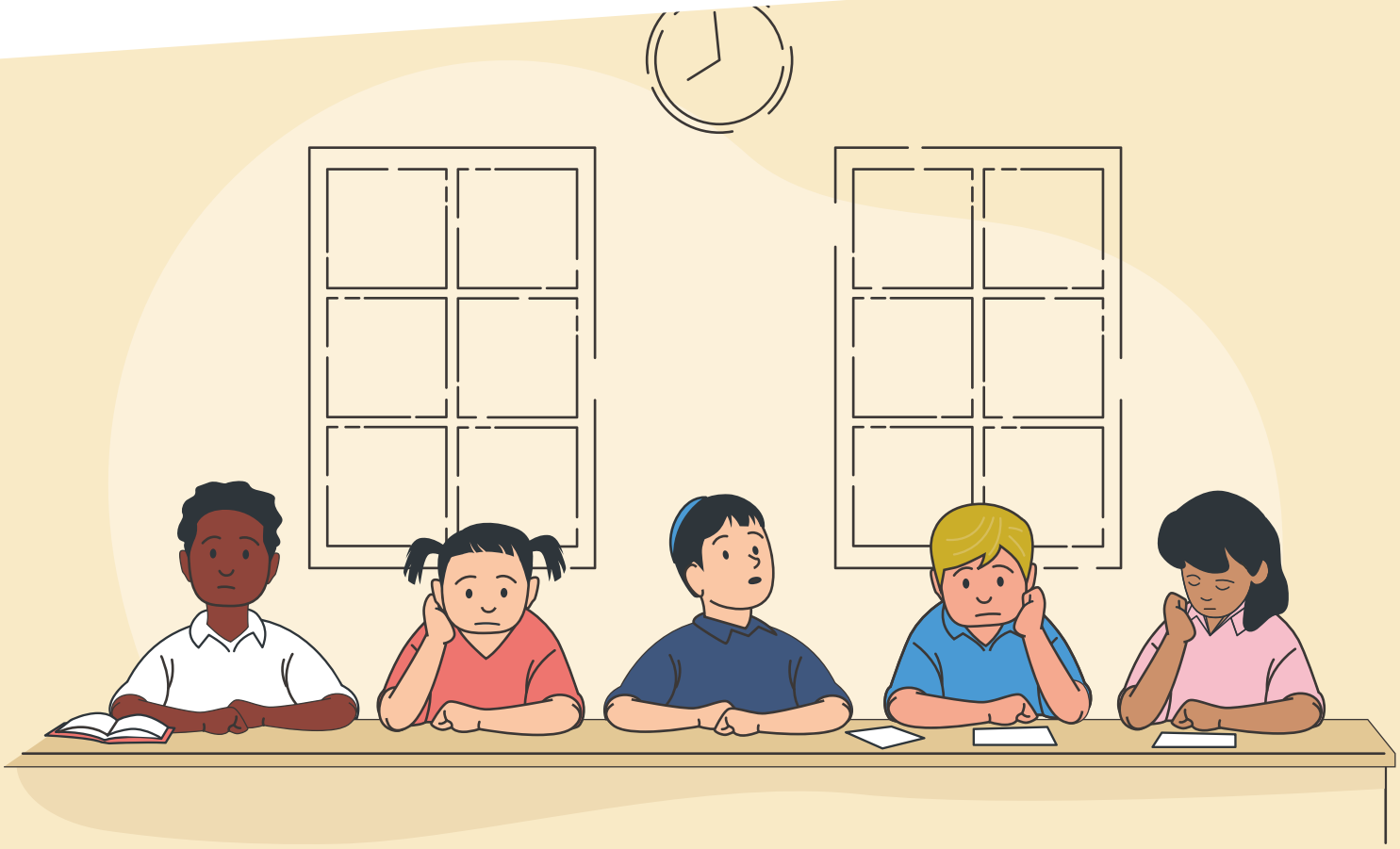
Humanist Society Scotland

For an ethical future



A Time for Reflection?

Understanding the data on religious observance in non-denominational schools

Contents

Executive summary 1

Introduction 2

Religious observance 101 4

A time for reflection in practice 6

Understanding the numbers 7

Key findings 8

Local authority profiles 10

- Aberdeenshire 10
- Dundee City 12
- East Dunbartonshire 14
- East Lothian 16
- Falkirk 18
- Fife 20
- Highland 22
- North Ayrshire 24
- Scottish Borders 26

Discussion 28

Our five recommendations for the Scottish Government 32

References 33

About Humanist Society Scotland

Humanist Society Scotland is the national voice for people in Scotland who live without religion. We bring people together around humanist values of dignity, compassion, equality and reason to help build a fairer, more inclusive Scotland. Our network of over 130 registered celebrants conducts thousands of weddings, funerals, and naming ceremonies for people, so that they can celebrate key life events in line with their personal beliefs and values.

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Executive summary

All state schools in Scotland are legally required to provide acts of religious observance (RO). This is distinct from religious education (RME) and usually takes the form of a whole-school assembly led by a faith leader.

While RO in denominational schools will be shaped by religious tenets and liturgy, the Scottish Government describes RO in non-denominational schools as inclusive, objective and pluralist. This policy aim reflects the predominantly non-religious and religiously diverse profile of Scotland's children and young people. However, no routine monitoring is carried out to understand if schools are delivering inclusive RO.

A survey of 750 non-denominational schools across nine Scottish local authorities found widespread non-inclusive practices during RO. Two thirds of activities held in 2025 were led by Christian representatives, and almost 40% involved acts of organised worship including prayers and hymns. In contrast, RO exploring non-Christian faith traditions and secular themes was much less common. Fewer than 20 of the 2,200+ activities identified were led by representatives of other belief groups. The councils included in the survey represent cities, towns and rural communities.

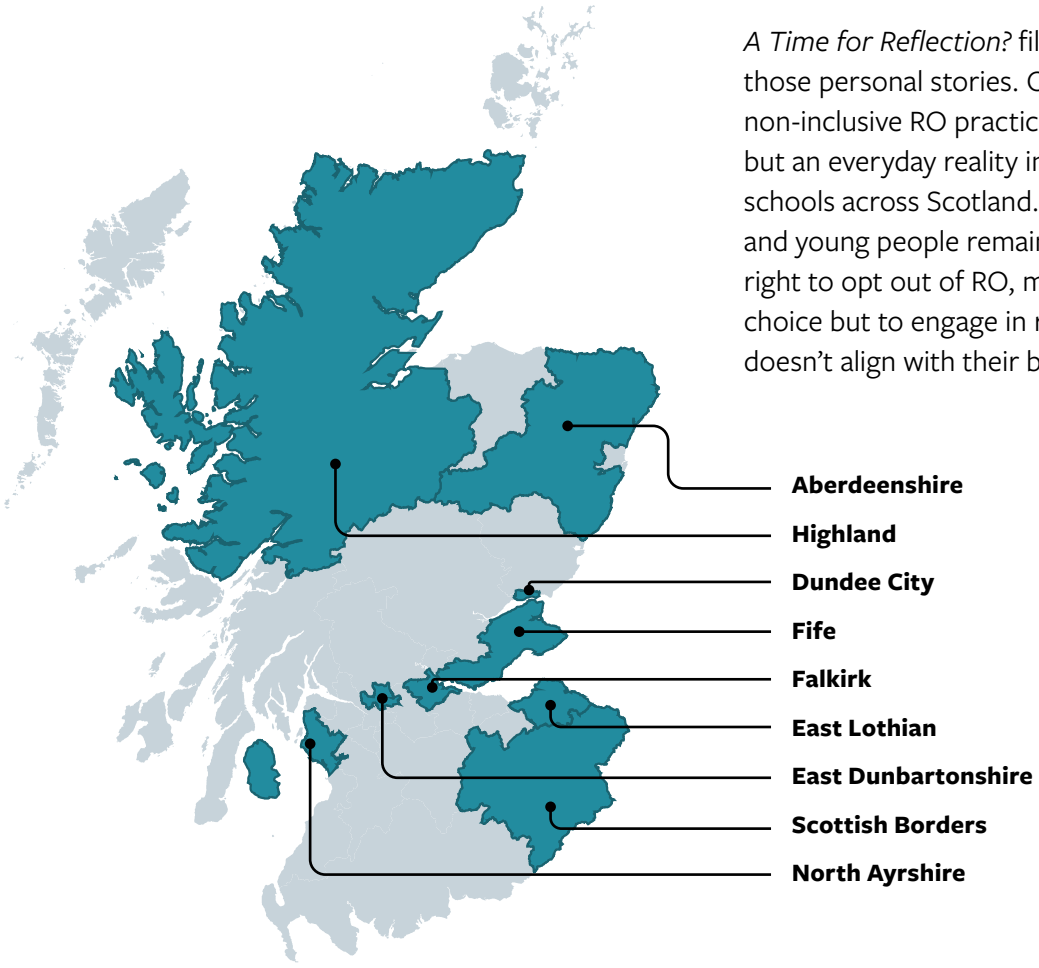
Humanist Society Scotland is calling for the replacement of RO with a fully-inclusive 'Time for Reflection' model in all non-denominational schools. This would explicitly forbid any acts of worship or teaching that one faith is 'the truth'. Activities would promote understanding and respect for a range of beliefs, facilitate greater involvement from minority faith groups, and recognise that most children's values and morals aren't grounded in religion.

The scale of worship-based RO strengthens the case for giving pupils the right to decide on participation. Recent legislative changes give children the independent right to *opt in* to RO, but no equivalent right to *opt out* without their parent's permission. This discriminates against non-religious pupils by affording children and young people who want to practice a faith more rights than those who don't. The Scottish Government must allow pupils to independently withdraw from RO, in line with recommendations made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Introduction

Scotland's children and young people are predominantly non-religious. They are also more religiously diverse than ever before. Yet the practice of religious observance (RO) in schools remains stuck in the past. While government guidance encourages an inclusive approach[1], RO activities are overwhelmingly Christian-led and commonly involve organised acts of worship. Schools seldom invite members of other belief communities to lead RO, and non-Christian faith traditions and secular themes are only occasionally explored.

Our survey of religious observance covered 750 schools in nine local authorities



These are the findings of a nationwide school survey on religious observance. Using freedom of information (FOI) laws, Humanist Society Scotland obtained data from 750 non-denominational schools in nine local authorities. The results give us first-hand insight into the themes explored through RO, who leads activities, where they are held, and the kinds of religious acts pupils are required to take part in. Schools also gave us information on the numbers of pupils withdrawn from RO and the alternative arrangements they were offered.

This report follows *Preaching is not Teaching* (2025)[2] which explored parent, pupil and teacher experiences of RO in Scottish schools. Our testimonies found examples of exclusively Christian and worship-based RO, of parents being challenged when exercising their opt-out rights, and of pupils being refused meaningful alternatives.

A Time for Reflection? fills in the numbers behind those personal stories. Our survey proves that non-inclusive RO practices aren't the exception but an everyday reality in non-denominational schools across Scotland. For as long as children and young people remain without an independent right to opt out of RO, many will be left with no choice but to engage in religious worship that doesn't align with their beliefs.

Purpose of this report

A Time for Reflection? aims to address the evidence gap surrounding religious observance in non-denominational schools. In 2025, the Scottish Parliament Equalities Committee concluded that:

> **"There is no monitoring or oversight of how RO is delivered across schools. The Scottish Government indicates that delivery is inclusive, objective and pluralist, but no research has been undertaken to back this up.[3]"**

Methodology

The survey is based on data from 750 non-denominational schools in nine Scottish local authorities. This includes Aberdeenshire, Dundee City, East Dunbartonshire, East Lothian, Falkirk, Fife, Highland, North Ayrshire and Scottish Borders councils. Humanist Society Scotland used the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 to obtain this data, requesting information at local government level. Schools were asked to confirm the topic, location, leader (including the organisation being represented, if external) and details of any religious content (e.g. prayers, religious songs, worship) for every RO activity provided in 2025. In addition, information on the number of pupils withdrawn from RO and any alternative arrangements was requested from each school.

Due to capacity limitations, the survey was limited to one or two councils in every Scottish Parliament electoral region. The only region not represented in the survey is Glasgow. The local authorities represented cover a range of urban, suburban and rural communities.

The FOI exercise confirmed that local authorities do not understand how RO is delivered across their non-denominational schools. All nine councils were required to gather information from individual schools specifically to comply with the request. Three councils, Glasgow City, South Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire, refused to release the information due to the cost of this work exceeding £600. In addition, Midlothian council refused to comply with the request on the basis it would have to 'create new information':

> "The information you have requested on Religious Observance is not held by Midlothian Council in any reportable format and we do not routinely collate or report on Religious Observances. Any information that is held by schools on Religious Observances will be in an unstructured format within the various schools across the local authority... Accordingly, under section 17 (1) of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act we cannot comply with your request."

Data was released by local authorities in various formats. To ensure consistency and enable identification of quantitative trends, each local authority FOI release was input into a spreadsheet document. An overview sheet listed every non-denominational school in the local authority area and recorded whether they responded to the survey, provided RO (including if 3+ activities were Christian-led, and if any activities involved worship), pupil withdrawal numbers and information on alternative arrangements. An activity sheet listed all RO activities identified for each school, detailing the topic, location, leader and any religious content described.

For clarification purposes, additional data was gathered from publicly available information on RO resources and from school websites, including online school handbooks. Faith and belief statistics were gathered from Scotland's Census 2022.

Religious observance 101

All state schools in Scotland are legally mandated to provide acts of religious observance (RO)[4]. This requirement has existed since the establishment of universal education in 1872[5]. In practice, RO often takes the form of a whole-school assembly led by a faith leader. Pupils may be withdrawn from RO at their parents' request, and children opted out must be provided with a meaningful alternative.

Religious Observance
(noun)

Community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community[6].

[source: Scottish Government]

The statutory definition of RO captures a broad range of activities and could be interpreted by school leaders in many different ways. The terms 'spiritual development' and 'shared values' are vague and ill-defined.

RO is distinct from religious education. RME in non-denominational schools covers a variety of faiths, beliefs and philosophical worldviews in an objective and critical manner. It is essential for preparing children to live in a free and diverse society. Recent legislative changes ended the longstanding right to withdraw from religious education[7].

RO in denominational schools will be shaped by the tenets and liturgy of their faith. In contrast, non-denominational schools aren't aligned with a particular belief body and pupils will come from a range of faith and belief backgrounds. Indeed, recent census data indicates that a majority of pupils in most non-denominational schools have no religion.

The question of fostering pupils' spiritual development in a diverse, non-denominational setting is much more complex.

RO in non-denominational schools is described by the Scottish Government as inclusive, objective and pluralist'[8]. National guidance asks schools to draw upon the 'rich resources' of Scotland's Christian heritage when planning RO. But they also need to consider the diversity of their community and ensure all pupils and staff can take part 'without compromise to their personal beliefs'. Non-denominational schools are encouraged to replace the term RO with 'Time for Reflection'[9].

Pupils have the independent right to *opt in* to RO, but no equivalent right to opt out. In February 2026, MSPs passed the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education) Act[10]. This gives pupils a new right to refuse if their parent tries to opt them out of RO. But young people who wish to opt themselves out still need permission from home. This legislation creates a hierarchy of belief in schools by affording pupils who want to practice a faith more rights than pupils who don't.

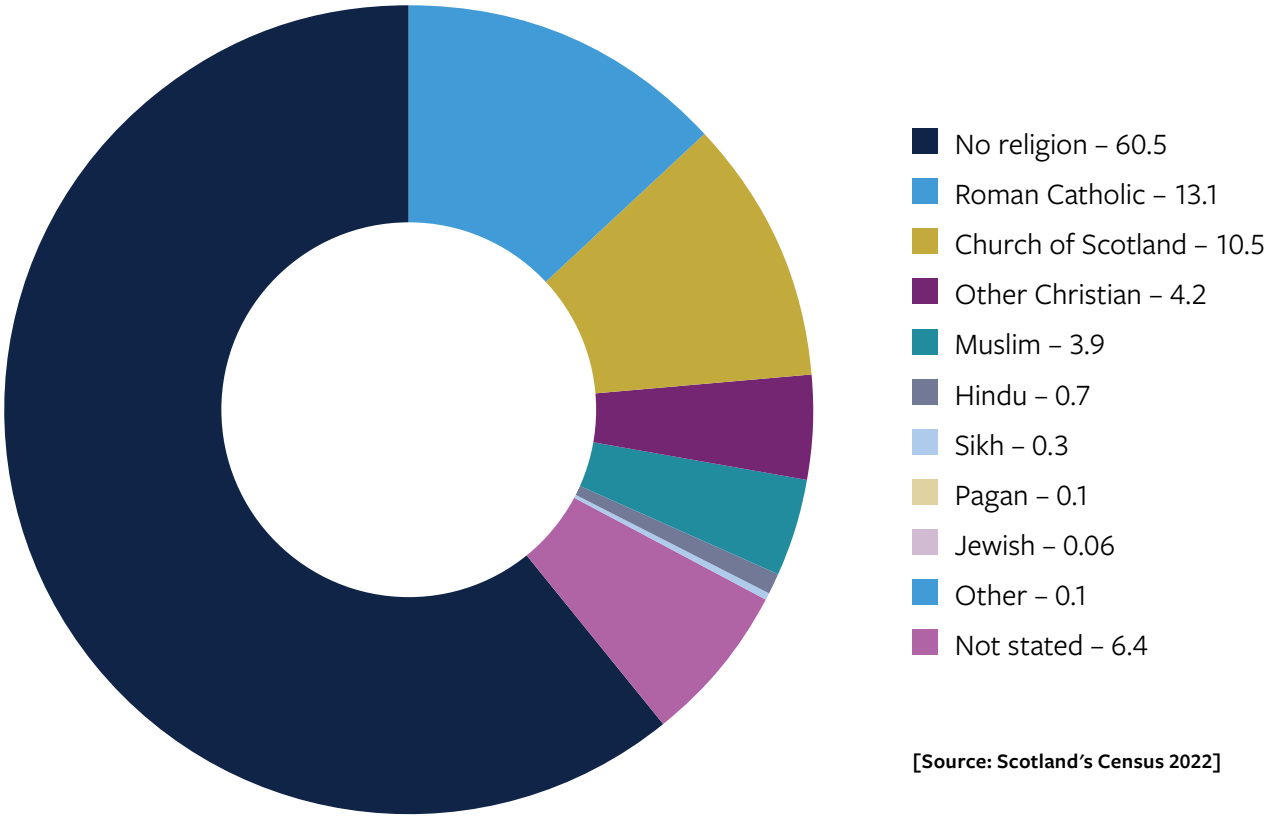
The Scottish Government has also ignored the twice-made Concluding Observation of the UN Children's Committee to allow children to independently withdraw from RO in Scottish schools. The Committee has criticised the status quo for failing to uphold pupils' right to be heard (UNCRC Article 12) and freedom of thought, religion or belief (Article 14)[11] [12]. An independent pupil opt out for RO is supported by every major human rights organisation in Scotland. This includes the Children and Young People's Commissioner[13], the Scottish Human Rights Commission[14], UNICEF UK[15] and Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights)[16].

How schools implement an inclusive RO programme is largely left up to headteachers. The government does not spell out what it considers 'good' or 'bad' practice, nor provide any illustrative examples of inclusive RO or alternatives to the traditional Christian-led model. Organised acts of worship are not explicitly discouraged, although the guidance does suggest such events may be 'distinct' and 'complementary' to the RO programme in a non-denominational setting. Schools are forbidden from incorporating RO into 'celebrating success' events such as prizegivings and leavers' assemblies. Inclusive and diverse RO is especially important when we consider that more than 70% of school children have no religion, or identify with a non-Christian faith (see chart below).

Christian-only and proselytising RO is unlawful under the European Convention of Human Rights. In November 2025, the UK Supreme Court ruled that Christian collective worship (RO) in Northern Irish schools amounted to "indoctrination" and a breach of human rights law, even with a right to withdraw. In the judgement, Lord Stephen states that: 'To teach pupils to accept a set of beliefs without critical analysis amounts to evangelism, proselytising, and indoctrination.' The Court also ruled that exercising the right to withdraw placed an undue burden on parents and risked stigmatising children. The judgement is binding across the UK[17].

The Scottish Government does not understand how RO is delivered across schools. No research has been undertaken to understand whether non-denominational schools are providing RO in line with government guidance. School inspection reports occasionally note if a school delivers RO, but rarely comment on the content of activities[18]. Improved monitoring would enable the government to identify examples of best practice, as well as cases of schools falling short of expected standards around inclusivity.

Percentage of school age population (aged 5-17) by religion or belief.



[Source: Scotland's Census 2022]

A time for reflection in practice

Humanist Society Scotland supports an inclusive 'time for reflection' approach to RO in non-denominational schools. At a basic level, Time for Reflection activities should be sufficiently objective, critical and pluralistic. This is in line with Scotland's obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Teaching about religions which falls below this standard amounts to indoctrination, which states are forbidden from pursuing in their education systems. **But what does inclusive practice look like in the classroom?**

Objective

Time for Reflection should not ask pupils to affirm their belief in a God through acts of organised worship, nor give belief representatives a platform to lead children in a particular direction, preach or evangelise. It is not enough to tell children that participation in prayers or hymns is optional. Children may feel pressure to take part, even when doing so goes against their own beliefs.

Community representatives must make clear that any religious belief they themselves profess is personal and may not be shared by others.

Critical

Time for Reflection should provide children with structures and space to explore their own beliefs and ethics, their sense of community, and their place in the world. Activities should facilitate meaningful pupil-led dialogue about different perspectives on a range of moral and philosophical questions.

Pluralistic

Time for Reflection cannot be inclusive when delivered by representatives from a single faith or belief group. Where community representatives are involved in RO, schools should invite a range of facilitators that reflect the diversity of their school community. Ideally, RO programmes should seek to recognise all pupils' beliefs equally.

Understanding the numbers

Counting RO activities

All RO activities described by schools were counted as 1 occurrence unless otherwise stated. Activities described as 'visits' or 'assemblies' without a specific number or corresponding list of themes were counted as 2 occurrences. Activities described as termly, monthly, and weekly were counted as 3, 9, and 38 occurrences, respectively – this is in line with the standard Scottish school year[19]. Six schools identified their entire weekly assembly programme as RO without any corresponding information on content or delivery. Similarly, a few schools identified daily morning or lunchtime prayers as RO. In these cases, the number of activities was counted as 1 to avoid skewing the results of the overall survey.

Religious education (RME / RMPS) classes, pupil-led prayer spaces (e.g. during Ramadan) and extracurriculars (e.g. Scripture Union clubs) were not counted as RO activities.

Counting Christian-led RO

All activities led (or co-led) by a representative of the Christian faith fell into this category. Examples include Ministers, school chaplains, church volunteers, Christian youth workers and Christian missionaries. Examples of RO led by non-Christian or secular representatives are cited in each local authority summary. All remaining activities were school-led.

Counting acts of worship

All activities which specifically mentioned worship, prayer, blessings, hymns, psalms or songs of praise were classed as involving organised acts of worship. Schools were often less specific, for example citing 'religious songs' as part of RO, and such cases were not included. Other forms of religious content, including bible readings, stories or Christian-led presentations, could potentially have proselytising elements but did not fall under the worship category.

Counting pupil withdrawals

Local authorities provided varying amounts of information on pupil withdrawal numbers.

Dundee City and Scottish Borders provided complete school-by-school data.

East Dunbartonshire, East Lothian, Falkirk, Fife and Highland did not provide exact figures where fewer than five pupils had been withdrawn, citing privacy concerns. In these cases, figures are presented as a range – from the baseline of confirmed withdrawals to the highest possible total.

Aberdeenshire only indicated whether pupils had been withdrawn in a school, rather than providing exact figures.

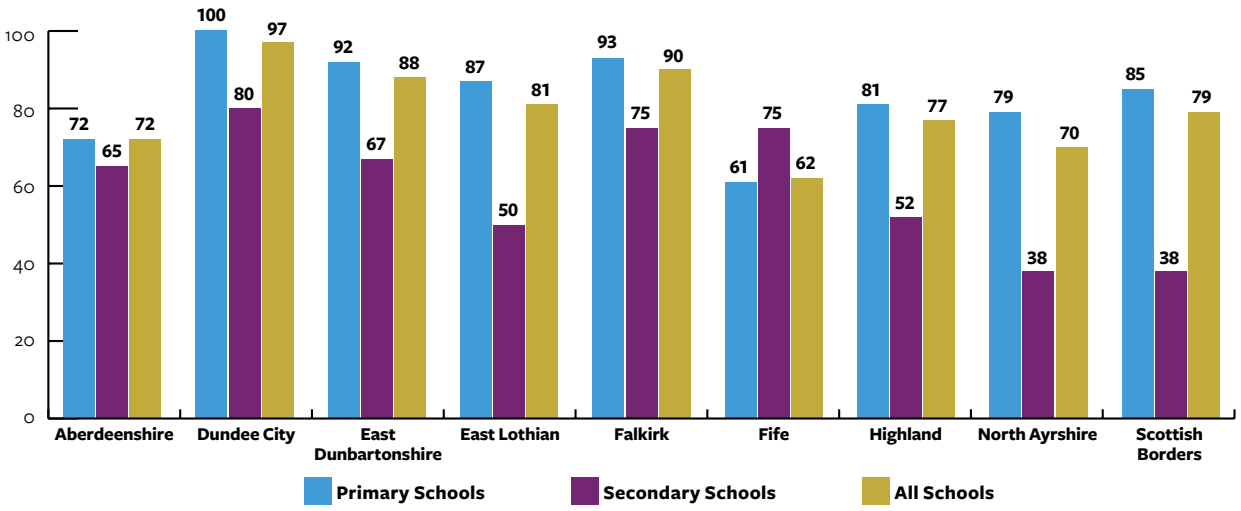
North Ayrshire did not release any information on pupil withdrawal numbers.

Key findings

In line with national trends, a majority of school-aged children in every local authority surveyed have no religion. It is worth noting that the share of 5-17 year-olds identifying as non-religious will likely be higher in non-denominational schools.

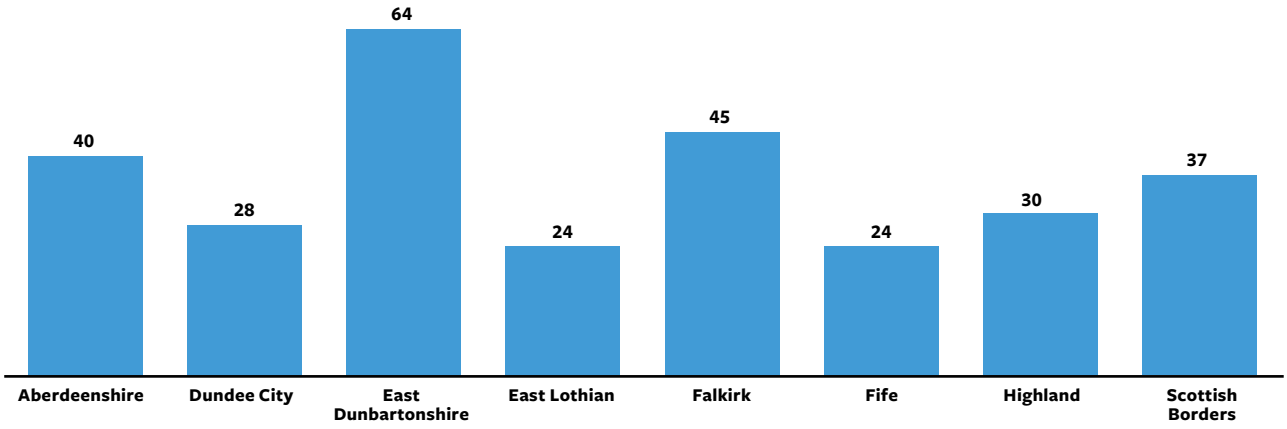
One quarter of schools surveyed provided no RO activities in 2025. In all local authorities except Fife, primary schools were more likely to fulfil the statutory RO requirement than secondary schools.

Schools which fulfilled the requirement for RO (%) by local authority in 2025



Pupils were withdrawn from RO in one third of schools. Based on information provided by seven local authorities, we estimate that between **439** and **703** pupils were opted out of RO activities in 2025.

Schools with RO withdrawals by local authority (%)



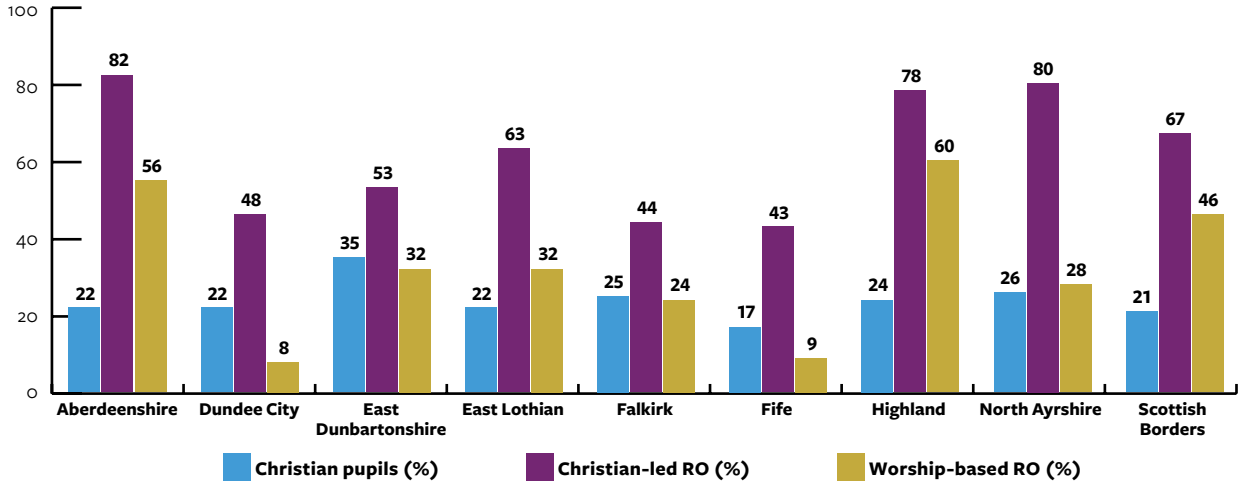
Our research identified over **2,200 RO activities** held in schools across 2025.

Two thirds of activities (66%) were led or co-led by a representative of the Christian faith. By contrast, our survey only identified 16 activities led by representatives of a non-Christian belief group across all 750 schools.

Acts of organised worship were a regular feature of RO in non-denominational schools. Almost four in ten activities (38%) asked pupils to affirm their belief in a God through prayer, worship or hymns.

The frequency of worship-based RO varied widely between councils. A majority of RO activities featured acts of worship in Highland (60%) and Aberdeenshire (56%), compared with fewer than 10% of activities in Fife and Dundee city schools.

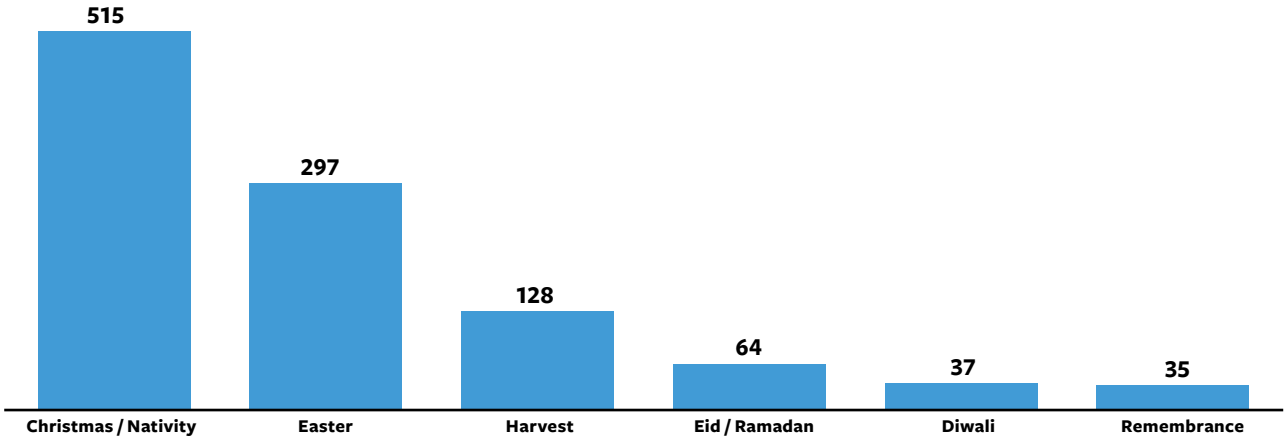
Christian belonging, Christian-led RO, and worship-based activities by local authority (%)



While the majority of RO activities took place in school, almost one fifth (18%) were held in a church. Church-based RO differed sharply across councils, spanning from 6% in Dundee City to 38% in East Lothian.

RO activities were predominantly Christian-themed across all local authorities. It was much less common for schools to explore non-Christian traditions or secular themes during RO.

Top RO themes by number of activities



Aberdeenshire

Summary

- Aberdeenshire school children are more likely to have no religion and less likely to identify as Christian than the Scottish average. Of the 1.5% of pupils who identify with another faith, roughly half say they are Muslim.

- Over half of schools held RO which involved asking pupils to affirm their belief in God through acts of worship. Eight schools stressed that participation in prayers and hymns was optional.

- It was common for Aberdeenshire schools to programme frequent Christian RO activities throughout the year. 30 schools held Christian-led assemblies between 3 and 19 times per year (often on a termly or monthly basis) in addition to Christmas, Easter and Harvest celebrations.

- Christian-led RO in Aberdeenshire schools was primarily delivered by representatives of the Church of Scotland. Assemblies of God Pentecostal Church and York Street Hall (Brethren) in Peterhead also had strong links with schools across parts of Aberdeenshire. In addition, Scripture Union groups led 'Bible Alive' courses in a number of primary schools.

- Three schools clarified that Christian representatives do not present their worldview as the truth. In one example, a school stated that "Ministers use phrases such as 'Christians believe...' and 'You can make your own choices about what you believe' as they are both aware that many of our children are not religious."

- Non-Christian traditions such as Diwali, Ramadan and Eid were rarely explored through RO and always led by school staff. There were no examples of RO activities led by an external representative of a non-Christian belief group.

- A small number of schools demonstrated good practice by celebrating a range of secular themes through RO. Examples included UNCRC, Human Rights, Burns Night and School Values. These activities were led by school pupils and staff.

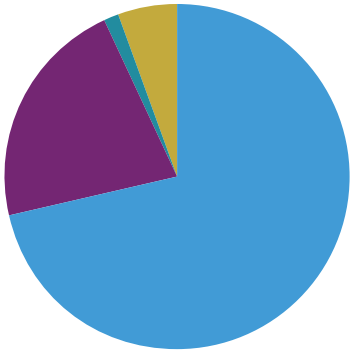
- Four schools used celebrating success assemblies as an opportunity for RO. All events were held in church and led (or co-led) by a Christian representative. Two of the occasions involved worship or prayer, and three involved pupils being withdrawn.

- Withdrawal was common with pupils opted out of RO in four in ten schools. When pupils were withdrawn, a number of schools indicated that no meaningful alternative had been provided (e.g. 'pupil placed with pupil support assistant', 'supervised at school', 'in school library with teacher to look after them'). Five schools indicated that pupils had been taken out of school altogether.

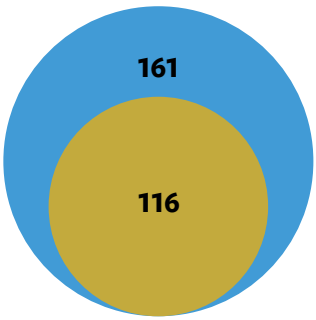
- Almost 30% of schools did not provide any RO in 2025. Primary schools were more likely to fulfil the statutory requirement for RO than secondary schools.

RO in numbers for Aberdeenshire

School aged population (aged 5-17) by religion or belief



No Religion **71.6%**
Christian **21.6%**
Other Religion **1.4%**
Not Stated **5.4%**
[2022 Census]



non-denominational schools
provided RO in 2025

451
RO activities

84% of activities were Christian-led

56% featured acts of worship

Pupils opted out of RO in **40%** of schools

17% of activities were held in church

Top 5 most cited RO activity themes

Dundee City

Summary

- School-aged children in Dundee City are more irreligious and less Christian than Scotland as a whole. Scotland's fourth largest city, Dundee is home to a religiously diverse population with around 8% of 5-17 year-olds identifying as Muslim.

- Christian organisations which led RO included the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church, Evangelical Alliance and Scripture Union. One school held weekly bible stories led by an evangelical Pastor. RO involving acts of worship was relatively uncommon and only took place in four Dundee schools. One school stressed that participation was optional.

- There was significant variation in Dundee schools' approach to RO. Six schools programmed Christian-led activities at least three times per year, while almost half of schools delivered RO without any involvement from faith leaders.

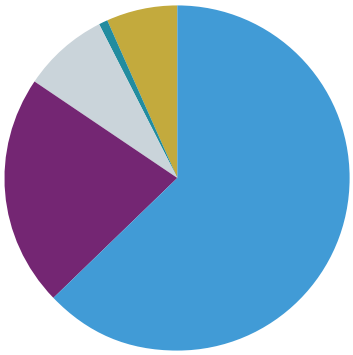
- Dundee schools often celebrated a range of non-Christian traditions and non-religious themes through RO. Examples included Holi, Rosh Hashanah, Chinese New Year, International Culture Day, Halloween, Passover, New Year and School Values. These activities were much more likely to be school-led than events marking Christian celebrations. Some schools invited pupils to share personal experiences of religious festivals, including Eid.

- Five activities were led by external representatives of a non-Christian faith. Three were Eid and Ramadan themed and included local Imams and parents. One school held an interfaith event involving a Minister and Imam celebrating shared values, diversity and respect. The activity included pupil presentations and songs celebrating different faith traditions. Dundee Interfaith also led an activity to improve awareness of the Baha'i faith.

- Pupils were withdrawn from RO in over one quarter of Dundee schools. Numbers were usually low at between one and five. An exception was one school where 66 children were withdrawn from the Easter and Christmas church services. These activities involved prayers and hymns. It was common for withdrawn pupils to be offered art and ICT (computing) activities as an alternative.

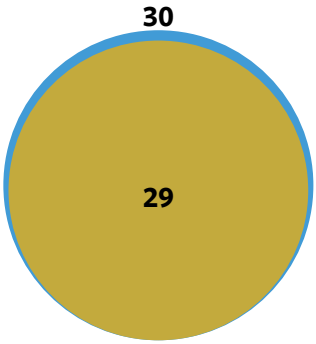
RO in numbers for Dundee City

School aged population (aged 5-17) by religion or belief



- No Religion **63.0%**
- Christian **21.7%**
- Muslim **7.8%**
- Other Religion **1.1%**
- Not Stated **6.4%**

[2022 Census]



non-denominational schools provided RO in 2025

148
RO activities

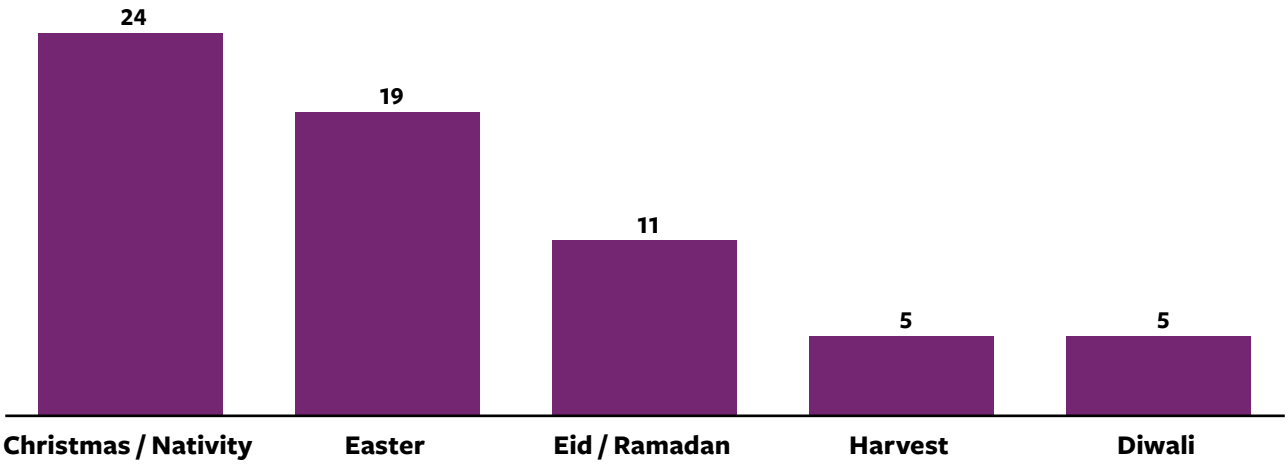
48% of activities were Christian-led

8% featured acts of worship

84 pupils were opted out of RO

5% of activities were held in church

Top 5 most cited RO activity themes



East Dunbartonshire

Summary

- East Dunbartonshire school pupils are majority non-religious. Just over a third of 5-17 year olds say they are Christian – higher than the national average. East Dunbartonshire is also home to Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities with around 5% of pupils belonging to a non-Christian faith.

- Christian-led RO was predominantly delivered by the Church of Scotland, with one activity led by a representative of the Baptist Union. Almost half of East Dunbartonshire schools programmed Christian-led activities on a termly or monthly basis.

- Acts of worship were held in over half of East Dunbartonshire schools. Two schools stressed that participation in these elements was optional, while one school clarified that Christian representatives did not present their worldview as the truth. In the latter example, the school stated that 'the local Minister will attend assemblies of Christianity focus and briefly speak. However this is always introduced as the sharing of Christian viewpoints.'

- It was common for non-Christian faith traditions and secular themes to be explored through RO. Examples included Diwali, Hanukkah, Chinese New Year, Holocaust Memorial Day, Cultural Diversity, Rights Respecting Schools and Chinese New Year. These were all led by school staff and pupils. Describing their RO programme, one school stated that "No prayers or religious songs were used in any assembly. Each assembly centers around UNCRC article 14 – children are free to be of any or no religion. Assemblies focus on sharing what celebrations look like in different cultures and religions, often with children or adults sharing their lived experience if they are comfortable doing so."

- There were no examples of RO activities led by an external representative of a non-Christian faith or community.

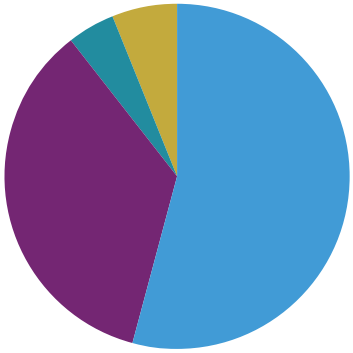
- Two schools used celebrating success assemblies as an opportunity for RO. Pupils were withdrawn from both events, which were held in church and led by a Christian representative.

- The number of pupils opted out of RO was usually fewer than five, although withdrawals happened in most East Dunbartonshire schools. In three schools, 10, 12 and 22 children were opted out of church services involving prayer, respectively.

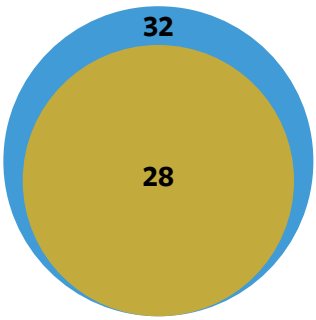
- Most schools said they offered other activities to withdrawn pupils but provided little detail. In some cases, school responses indicated that a meaningful alternative hadn't been provided (e.g. 'alternative room with member of staff', 'additional support needs assistant', 'watched as audience members'.) Three schools indicated that pupils had been taken out of school altogether.

RO in numbers for East Dunbartonshire

School aged population (aged 5-17) by religion or belief



No Religion **54.4%**
Christian **35.1%**
Other Religion **4.5%**
Not Stated **6.0%**
[2022 Census]



non-denominational schools provided RO in 2025

117
RO activities

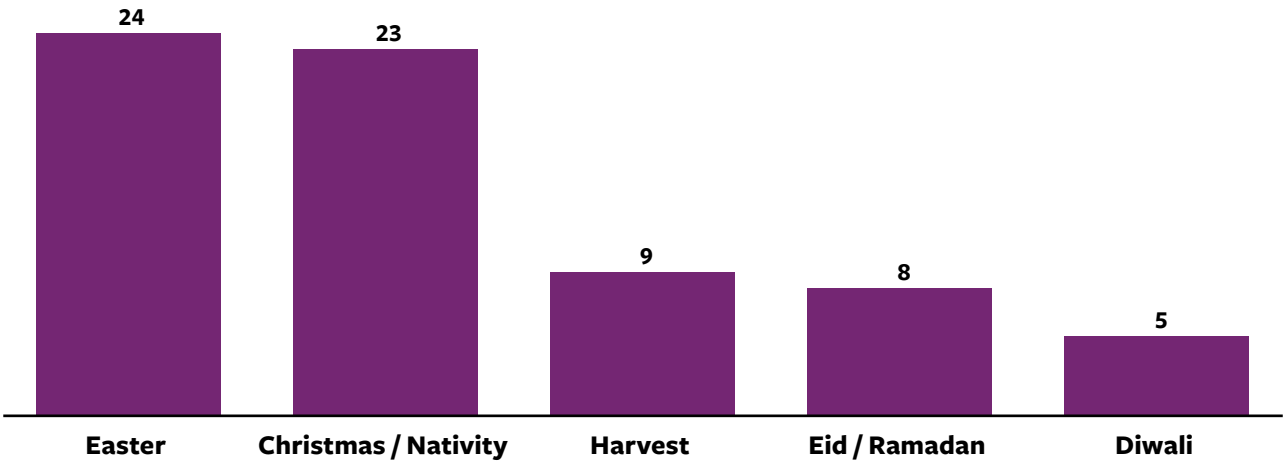
53% of activities were Christian-led

32% featured acts of worship

60 – 102 pupils were opted out of RO

22% of activities were held in church

Top 5 most cited RO activity themes



East Lothian

Summary

- School pupils in East Lothian are significantly more likely to identify as non-religious than the national average. Around one fifth say they are Christian, and over half of the 2% of pupils from a non-Christian faith background identify as Muslim.

- Worship based RO was relatively common and took place in almost a third of schools. Two schools stressed that participation in hymns and prayers was optional. In one example, a school noted that: "the faith leader did pray and explained what this was and allowed children, parents and staff to choose if they joined in".

- Christian-led RO was predominantly delivered by the Church of Scotland. In addition, Gideons International delivered a presentation and distributed bibles to first-year pupils in one high school. A Minister from Lighthouse Central Church in Prestonpans also led Christmas and Easter services in a local primary school.

- Non-Christian traditions such as Diwali and Eid were seldom explored during RO and mostly led by school staff or pupils. Only three activities were led by external representatives of other belief groups. One school invited a Muslim and Hindu parent to speak about Eid and Diwali, respectively. Another school facilitated an "All Faith Gathering" involving presentations and Q&As with a Christian, Sikh, Hindu, Muslim and Humanist.

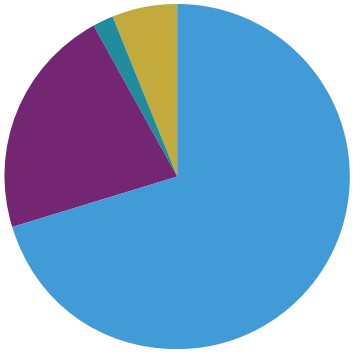
- Three schools used celebrating success events as an opportunity for RO. All three events were held in church and led (or co-led) by a Christian representative, two of the occasions involved worship or prayer, and one involved pupils being withdrawn.

- Pupils were withdrawn from RO in around one-quarter of East Lothian schools and numbers were usually low at between one and five. Information on alternatives for withdrawn pupils provided little detail (e.g. 'pupils joined others in a separate room', 'planned supervised activities', 'seasonal craft activities'). Three schools provided no information at all.

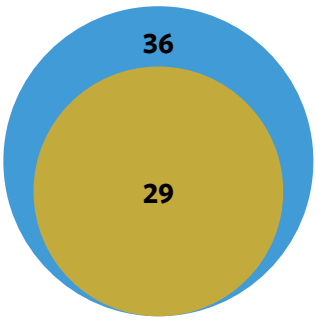
- Around 20% of East Lothian schools did not provide any RO in 2025, including three out of the seven secondary schools.

RO in numbers for East Lothian

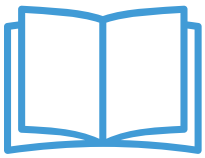
School aged population (aged 5-17) by religion or belief



No Religion **70.5%**
Christian **21.6%**
Other Religion **1.8%**
Not Stated **6.1%**
[2022 Census]



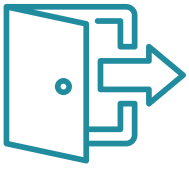
non-denominational schools provided RO in 2025



65
RO activities

63% of activities were Christian-led

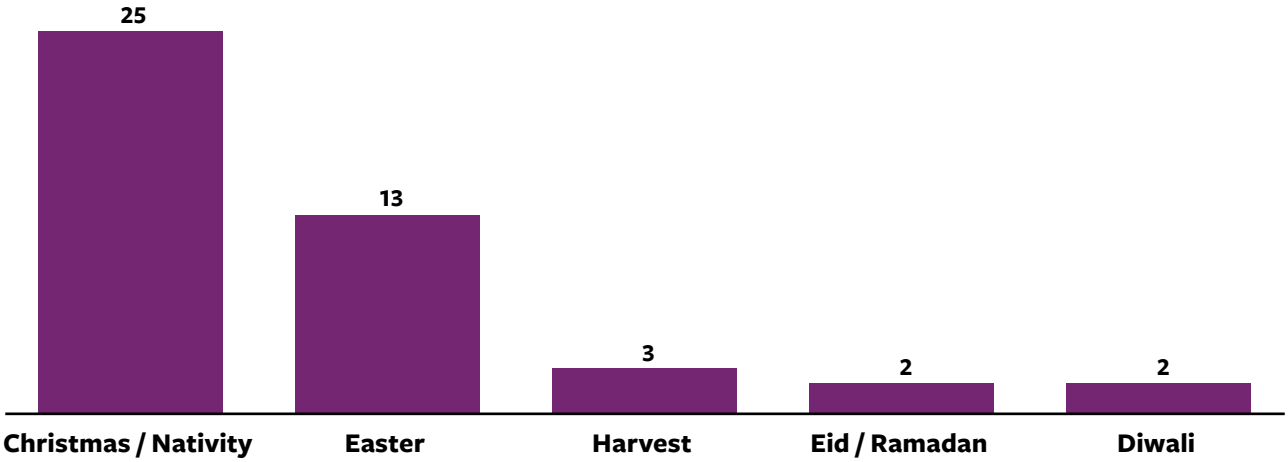
32% featured acts of worship



12 – 30 pupils were opted out of RO

38% of activities were held in church

Top 5 most cited RO activity themes



Falkirk

Summary

- Falkirk's school-aged population is more non-religious and less Christian than Scotland as a whole. Falkirk is also home to a small Muslim community which make up most of those who identify with a non-Christian faith.

- Over 40% of schools held RO involving acts of worship – four schools stressed that participation in these elements was optional. It was also common for Falkirk schools to programme frequent Christian-led RO. 15 schools held Minister or Chaplain-led assemblies at least three times a year, often on a termly or monthly basis.

- Christian-led RO activities were mostly delivered by the Church of Scotland in Falkirk schools. In addition, Riverview Church (Pentecostal), Larbert Churches Youth Trust (Scripture Union) and Found Church (Pentecostal) all had links with local primary schools. The content of Christian-led activities included prayers, bible readings, sermons, presentations, and religious songs and hymns.

- While RO was predominantly Christian-themed, many schools also explored a variety of non-Christian traditions and secular themes during RO. Examples included Hanukkah, Diwali, Chinese New Year, Bodhi Day, Values and Emotions, UNCRC, Holocaust Memorial Day, International Day of Peace and Global Goals. These events were much more likely to be delivered by staff than activities marking Christian occasions.

- Only three activities were led by an external representative of a non-Christian faith. In those examples, members of the Muslim community were invited to speak about Ramadan, Eid traditions and Hajj (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca), respectively.

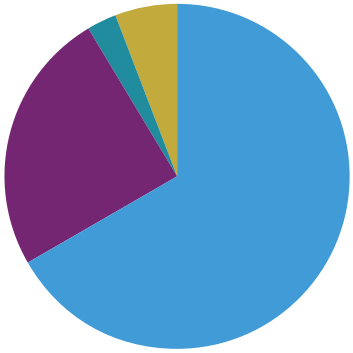
- Some schools demonstrated good practice by inviting non-faith organisations to lead RO. Examples included the Holocaust Memorial Trust, Humanist Society Scotland and Time for Inclusive Education (TIE).

- Pupils were opted out of RO in almost half of Falkirk schools. Withdrawal numbers tended to be fewer than five. In three schools, nine, 15 and 36 pupils were withdrawn from church services involving acts of worship, respectively.

- When pupils were withdrawn, some schools indicated that they had been 'babysat' rather than offered a meaningful alternative (e.g. 'pupils would be offered nurture room', 'Pupils would remain in school during church service with a teacher'). In one school, five pupils who opted out of RO were removed from school altogether.

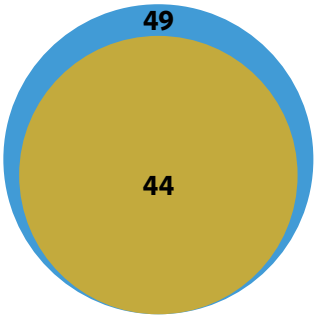
RO in numbers for Falkirk

School aged population (aged 5-17) by religion or belief



- No Religion **66.6%**
- Christian **24.8%**
- Other Religion **2.9%**
- Not Stated **5.6%**

[2022 Census]



non-denominational schools provided RO in 2025

202
RO activities

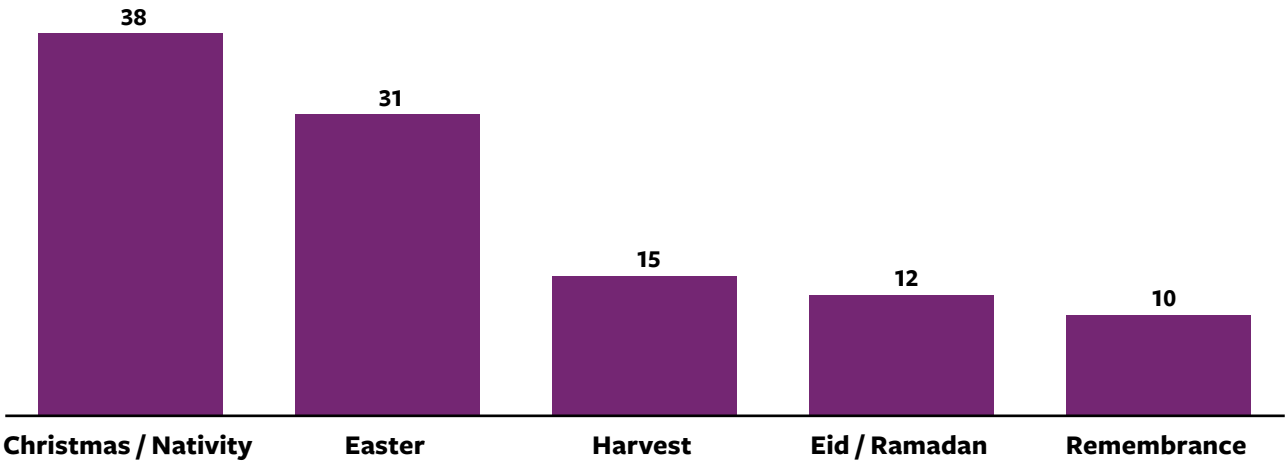
44% of activities were Christian-led

24% featured acts of worship

95 – 134 pupils were opted out of RO

13% of activities were held in church

Top 5 most cited RO activity themes



Fife

Summary

- Fife school pupils are significantly more non-religious and less Christian than Scotland as a whole. Muslim communities in Dunfermline and Kircaldy make up around two thirds of the 3% who identify with a non-Christian faith.

- Worship based RO was held infrequently in Fife schools. Around one sixth of schools asked pupils to affirm their belief in a God during RO, with around half stressing that pupils could decide for themselves whether to take part. In contrast, over four in ten Fife schools delivered RO without any involvement from faith leaders.

- The Church of Scotland delivered most Christian-led RO in Fife schools. The Scottish Episcopal Church, the Baptist Union of Scotland, Scripture Union (including as part of GROW Christian Trust), Gideons International and Newcraigs Evangelical Church also had links with local schools. The content of Christian-led activities included prayers, songs and hymns, bible stories, bible distribution, dramatisations, and readings.

- Fife schools occasionally programmed frequent visits from external Christian representatives. Chaplain or Minister-led assemblies were held at least three times a year in 12 schools. One school held weekly bible stories for primary one children led by a youth pastor.

- While RO was predominantly Christian-themed, Fife schools also explored a range of non-Christian traditions and secular themes. Examples included Diwali, Chinese New Year, Vesak, Holi, St Andrews Day, Martin Luther King Day and children's rights. These activities were much more likely to be school-led than events exploring Christian themes. Only two activities were led by a representative of a non-Christian faith, in addition to two activities led by Interfaith Scotland and Intercultural Youth Scotland, respectively.

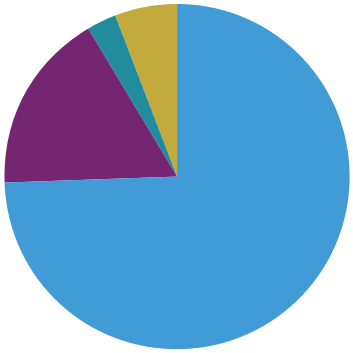
- Two schools used celebrating success events as an opportunity for RO. Both events were held in church and led (or co-led) by a Christian representative. Pupils were withdrawn from RO in one of the schools.

- Pupils were withdrawn from RO in around one-quarter of schools. In most cases, withdrawal numbers were fewer than five. The highest number of withdrawals in a single school was nine, where termly church services were held. When pupils were withdrawn, schools did not always indicate they had been offered a meaningful alternative (e.g. 'reading for enjoyment', 'a quiet space out of class', 'helping around the school'). In one school, children had been taken out of school altogether.

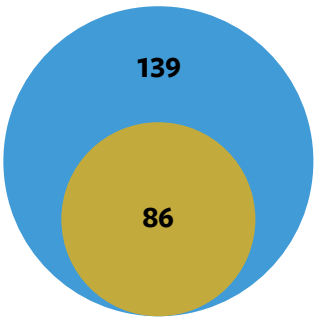
- Almost four in 10 Fife schools provided no RO in 2025. Secondary schools were more likely to meet the legal requirement for RO than primary schools.

RO in numbers for Fife

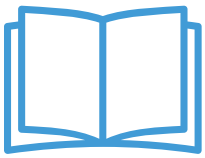
School aged population (aged 5-17) by religion or belief



No Religion **74.6%**
Christian **17.0%**
Other Religion **2.6%**
Not Stated **5.8%**
[2022 Census]



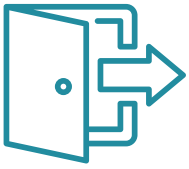
non-denominational schools provided RO in 2025



350
RO activities

43% of activities were Christian-led

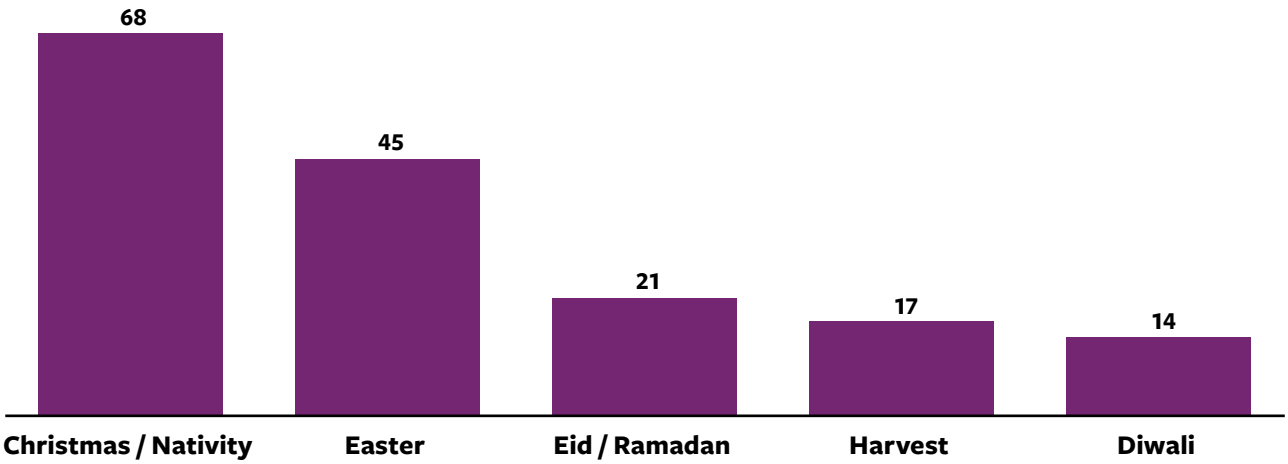
9% featured acts of worship



35 – 92 pupils were opted out of RO

14% of activities were held in church

Top 5 most cited RO activity themes



Highland

Summary

- Highland school pupils are more irreligious and less Christian than their peers in the rest of Scotland. Around 1% of 5-17 year-olds identify as Muslim, the largest non-Christian faith community in the Highlands.

- Acts of worship were a regular feature of Highland RO. Over 80 schools held activities which involved asking pupils to affirm their belief in God, including two schools where pupils prayed on a daily basis. Eight schools stressed that participation in active worship was optional.

- Christian-led RO was predominantly delivered by the Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland in Highland schools. The Scottish Episcopal Church, the Free Church of Scotland continuing, the Roman Catholic Church, the Bethany Gospel Hall, the Salvation Army, COOL Scotland (Christian Outlook on Lochalsh), Gideons International and the Christian theatre group 4Front Theatre also led RO activities with schools.

- Two schools clarified that Christian representatives did not represent their worldview as the truth. In one example, a school stated that "the Minister read the Christmas story, very much in the lines of this is what Christians believe."

- Non-Christian traditions and secular themes were very seldom explored during RO and almost always led by school staff. Only one activity was led by a representative of a non-Christian faith. This was a Holi festival dance worship run by KZ Dance Company, which included stories and colour powder. Examples of a non-faith organisation leading RO included a school carol concert supported by Wick Orchestra Company.

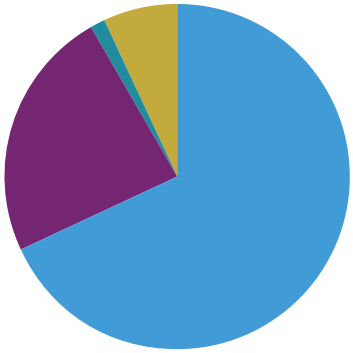
- It was common for Highland schools to programme regular Christian visits for RO. Over 40 schools held chaplain, missionary or pastor led-assemblies at least 3 times a year. Two schools invited local Ministers to lead prayer and bible-based assemblies on a weekly and twice-weekly basis, respectively.

- Pupils were withdrawn from RO in 30% of Highland schools. Withdrawal numbers tended to be fewer than 5. However, in three schools 12, 15 and 16 children were opted out of Christian-led church services, respectively. Some schools indicated that no meaningful alternative was provided to withdrawn pupils (e.g.'child remained at school with staff', 'children stayed at school', 'library time'). Six schools indicated that children had been removed from school altogether.

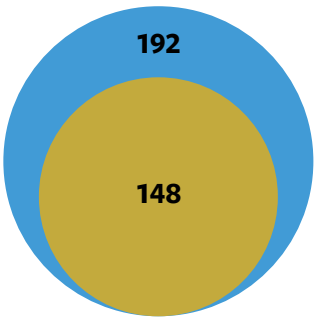
- Around one quarter of Highland schools did not meet the statutory RO requirement in 2025. This included almost half of secondary schools.

RO in numbers for Highland

School aged population (aged 5-17) by religion or belief



No Religion **68.1%**
Christian **23.6%**
Other Religion **1.5%**
Not Stated **6.8%**
[2022 Census]



non-denominational schools provided RO in 2025

564
RO activities

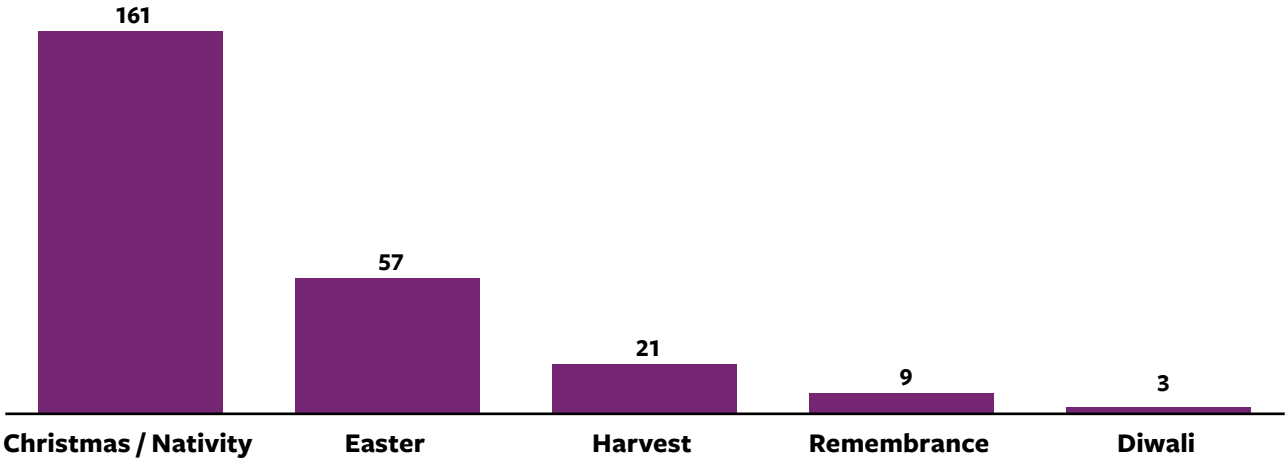
78% of activities were Christian-led

60% featured acts of worship

105 – 213 pupils were opted out of RO

19% of activities were held in church

Top 5 most cited RO activity themes



North Ayrshire

Summary

- More school-aged children in North Ayrshire say they have no religion and fewer identify as Christian than Scotland as a whole. The largest non-Christian faith group is Islam, representing just over 1% of North Ayrshire pupils.

- Acts of worship were a feature of RO in four in ten North Ayrshire schools. One school clarified that pupils could decide for themselves whether to participate in those elements.

- The Church of Scotland was most often cited as the organisation leading Christian RO. Bridgend Gospel Hall in Kilwinning also had links with a number of local primary schools. Seven schools held RO activities led by a 'children's missionary' but provided no detail on their organisation or affiliation. The content of Christian-led RO included moral and bible stories, guidance, religious songs, prayers, readings and drama (including bible-themed puppet shows).

- Frequent Christian visits were common in North Ayrshire schools. In addition to Christmas, Harvest and Easter celebrations, 11 schools held chaplain, missionary or pastor-led assemblies at least three times a year (often on a termly or monthly basis).

- North Ayrshire schools rarely explored non-Christian traditions or secular themes during RO. Two activities were Eid and Ramadan themed and both were led by school staff. There were no examples of a representative of a non-Christian faith leading RO.

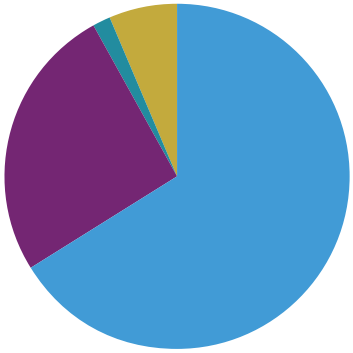
- One school used a P7 leavers' assembly as an opportunity for RO. The event was held in a church, Christian-led, and involved hymns and prayers.

- Around 30% of North Ayrshire schools did not fulfil the statutory requirement for RO in 2025, including 5 out of the 8 secondary schools.

- North Ayrshire schools did not provide any information on pupil withdrawal numbers.

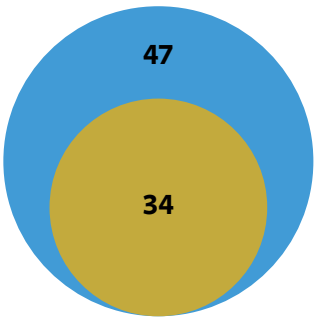
RO in numbers for North Ayrshire

School aged population (aged 5-17) by religion or belief



- No Religion **66.2%**
- Christian **25.9%**
- Other Religion **1.7%**
- Not Stated **6.2%**

[2022 Census]



non-denominational schools provided RO in 2025

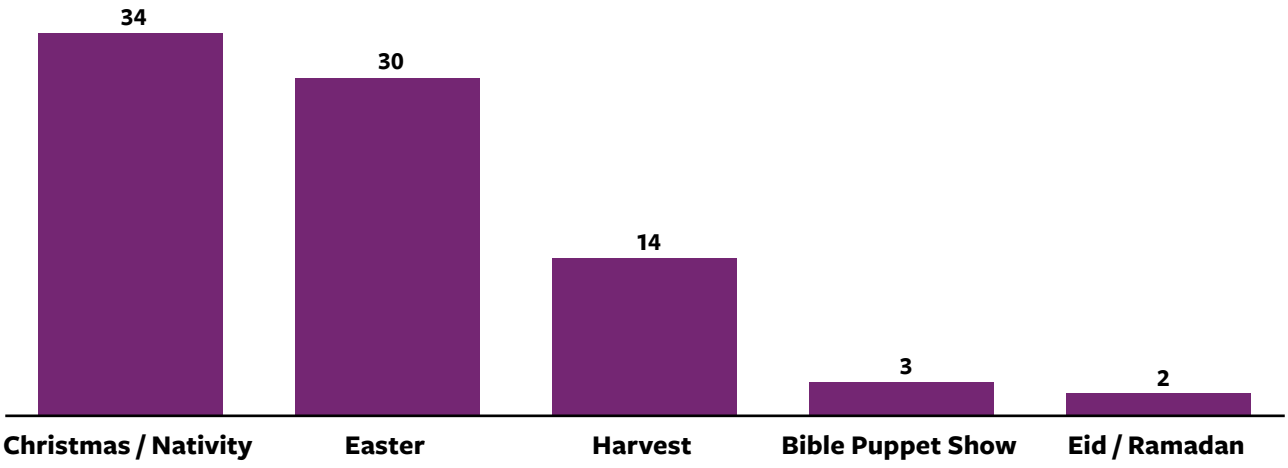
174
RO activities

80% of activities were Christian-led

28% featured acts of worship

11% of activities were held in church

Top 5 most cited RO activity themes



Scottish Borders

Summary

- Scottish Borders school pupils are significantly more likely to have no religion and less likely to identify as Christian than children nationwide. Of the 1% of pupils who belong to a non-Christian faith, around half say they are Muslim.

- RO featuring organised acts of worship was held in over half of Borders schools. Eight schools indicated that pupils could choose for themselves whether to participate in hymns and prayers.

- The Church of Scotland was the largest provider of Christian-led RO in Borders schools. The Free Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Berwickshire Christian Youth Trust (Scripture Union) also had links with local schools, as well as cross-denominational church collectives in Peebles and Selkirk. The content of Christian-led activities included hymns, prayers, bible readings, stories, songs and presentations.

- Borders schools occasionally programmed frequent visits from an external Christian representative. 12 schools held chaplain or Minister-led assemblies 3 or more times per year. Two schools clarified that Christian representatives did not present their beliefs as the truth, stating that 'Chaplains are encouraged to talk in general terms about what Christians believe if talking about matters of faith' and 'reference is made each time to what Christians believe but that is not every family's belief'.

- Non-Christian festivals such as Hannukah, Diwali, Ramadan and Eid were only occasionally explored during RO and almost always school-led. There was one example of an RO activity led by a representative of a non-Christian faith.

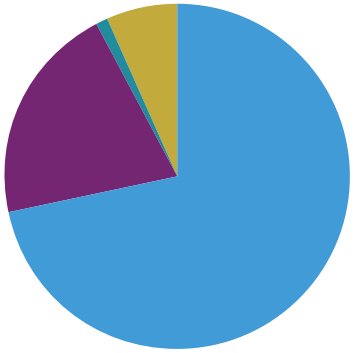
- One school used their P7 leavers' assembly as an opportunity for RO. The event was held in church and co-led by a Christian representative.

- One fifth of Borders schools did not fulfill the statutory requirement for RO in 2025. This included a majority of secondary schools.

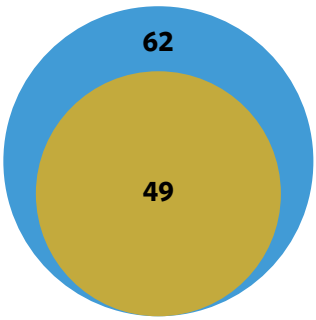
- Pupils were opted out of RO in nearly 40% of Borders schools. Withdrawal numbers in schools were usually below 5. The highest number of withdrawals in a single school was 7. A large number of schools provided no information about the alternative arrangements made for pupils. Others provided little detail (e.g. 'play activities', 'seasonal activities offered in school', 'alternative arrangements were provided within the school').

RO in numbers for Scottish Borders

School aged population (aged 5-17) by religion or belief



No Religion **71.7%**
Christian **20.7%**
Other Religion **1.2%**
Not Stated **6.4%**
[2022 Census]



non-denominational schools provided RO in 2025

140
RO activities

67% of activities were Christian-led

46% featured acts of worship

48 pupils were opted out of RO

36% of activities were held in church

Top 5 most cited RO activity themes

Discussion

The quotes presented throughout this section first appeared in our testimony report, Preaching is not Teaching (2025).

Religious observance in schools was enshrined in Scots Law at a time when almost everyone identified as Christian. Indeed, the parental right to opt out was introduced to address concerns from minority Christian groups, not atheists or agnostics. That Scotland no longer exists. Most children and young people today don't have a formal faith, and more identify as Muslim, Hindu and Sikh than ever before. **The findings of our survey suggest that RO provision in many non-denominational schools doesn't reflect this increasingly secular and pluralist reality.**

The Scottish Government says RO should foster the shared values and spiritual development of school communities. But in practice, it isn't clear what opportunities minority- and non-religious pupils are being offered to develop and reflect on their own values, beliefs and place in the world.

"In the schools I've worked in, there has been a varied level of involvement from local ministers. I've never witnessed a leader of any other religion being invited in."

Teacher

Two thirds of RO identified in our survey was led or co-led by Christians and, where activities had a distinct theme, they predominantly explored Christian themes. By contrast, activities exploring non-Christian faith traditions were much less common and almost always led solely by school staff. Representatives of non-Christian beliefs delivered fewer than 20 of the 2,200+ activities identified. But where schools seemed to struggle most is the recognition of children with no religious beliefs. Staff and pupil-led events discussing topics like school values and children's rights were welcome examples of good practice, but they were the exception not the rule. Children should be able to 'see themselves' through RO, and this won't happen when activities are consistently delivered through the prism of a single faith.

At almost four in ten activities, the scale of worship-based RO identified in our survey is highly concerning and suggests that pupils' beliefs are being compromised on a daily basis. RO involving acts of worship cannot be inclusive and has no place in non-denominational schools. Our findings also reflect a lack of leadership from the Scottish Government on good practice for schools. National guidance must be absolutely clear that no activity which asks pupils to affirm their belief in a God is acceptable during RO.

"We became aware that my daughter was being forced to pray because she told us how uncomfortable she felt. She was told by an adult she was being disrespectful if she didn't go along with it. She was upset and embarrassed by this."

Parent

It is also striking how many schools clarified that participation in acts of worship is optional. Some may consider this a positive accommodation for pupils who don't feel comfortable praying or singing hymns. But allowing pupils to be 'present but not participating' fails to recognise the pressure children feel to fit in and avoid being singled out. The risk of pupils experiencing stigma from all forms of withdrawal was highlighted by

the UK Supreme Court in the recent ruling on collective worship in Northern Irish schools. The judges also stressed that the ECHR guarantees school children an education that respects their independent right to believe or not believe[20].

> One child asked me whether he had to pray and sing hymns. I told him I wouldn't make him do anything he was uncomfortable with. That same child later told me he felt pressure to join in with hymns and prayers at assembly."
>
> Teacher

Schools rarely clarified whether other forms of religious content such as bible stories, dramatisations, and minister-led presentations were presented objectively. Further research is required to understand the content and delivery of Christian-led RO, and the extent to which some elements could be considered proselytising.

> "The minister doesn't use words like 'Christians believe' and instead uses words that imply it's a fact."
>
> Pupil

Beyond the content of activities, our survey identified various examples of schools disregarding government guidance on RO. No parent should feel compelled to choose between their own conscience and their child marking important milestones with their classmates. Yet prizegiving ceremonies and leaver assemblies were used as opportunities for RO in almost every local authority surveyed. Our findings also confirm that pupils opted out of RO aren't consistently offered a meaningful alternative. Many schools cited supervision by support staff or simply remaining in school when asked about alternative arrangements. Children were removed from school altogether in at least 20 schools. These are all clear examples of pupils being placed at a disadvantage as a result of withdrawing from RO, which the current law strictly forbids.

> "In my current school, a girl in my class recently took a day off school because she didn't want to attend church or sit in a room with no meaningful engagement."
>
> Teacher

In a few schools, large numbers of pupils were withdrawn from church services involving acts of worship. However, these cases proved to be outliers. Pupil withdrawals happened in a minority of schools and numbers tended to be below five. In view of the scale of non-inclusive RO practices, these figures could suggest that the right to withdraw isn't accessible in practice. In *Preaching is not Teaching*, challenges raised by parents included poor transparency about their rights and what will happen in RO assemblies, hostility from school leaders, a lack of meaningful alternatives, and apprehension about withdrawing their children for fear of stigma and exclusion.

> "The school has made out this is my problem – they say very few parents complain or opt their children out. When I raised my concerns with the headteacher, they replied: 'I won't apologise, this is a Christian country.'"
>
> Parent

And from poor practice to no practice, one in four schools didn't provide any RO in 2025. Our survey didn't uncover the reasons behind this trend. Some headteachers may not have the time or resources to provide an RO programme. Others may not feel confident they can deliver RO in a truly inclusive way, particularly as existing guidance provides no clear alternative to the traditional Christian-led model. If the Scottish Government wants to improve compliance, it should seek to better understand why school leaders opt out of delivering RO.

"I don't believe schools are currently given enough support on how to deliver more inclusive RO and I think most schools would benefit greatly from clearer examples and expectations."

Teacher

The findings of our survey strengthen the case for a wholesale rethink of RO in non-denominational schools.

Time for Reflection should be considered a distinct approach that recognises we no longer share a religion, rather than a mere name change disguising non-inclusive practices. To be clear, this doesn't negate the positive contribution faith communities can make to school life. In a political climate where minoritised groups face growing hostility, RO should provide opportunities to promote understanding and respect for different cultures, traditions, and belief systems. Interfaith and minority faith led RO should be much more commonplace than evidenced in this report.

But Time for Reflection must also recognise that most children's values and morals aren't grounded in faith. Schools should be encouraged to facilitate more activities which don't involve or refer to religion, but still give children opportunities to deepen their sense of self, find meaning and purpose, and develop an understanding of others' value and worth. One example could be Philosophy with Children, a structured approach to dialogue that enables children to engage with ideas and fundamental questions that articulate with their lives and lives of others[21]. The goal is to create shared meaning, though not necessarily agreement on the question at hand. Importantly, there is no need to opt out where all views and beliefs are given equal footing.

In the absence of immediate and substantial changes in schools, it is difficult to see how concerns about children's freedom of belief can be addressed without allowing them to independently withdraw from RO. The Scottish Government now recognises that children are capable of *opting themselves into* RO, but remain unwilling to contend that children who want to opt out can decide for themselves. This position is lopsided, discriminatory, and ultimately unsustainable. For as long as RO remains an opt-out activity, pupils must be given a voice and a choice on participation. Anything less undermines Scotland's commitment to children's rights and fostering a culture where all faiths and beliefs are treated equally.

Our five recommendations for the Scottish Government

1. Update national guidance to make clear that RO in non-denominational schools must not seek to proselytise, involve teaching that any one faith is "the truth", nor involve any acts of worship.

2. Develop resources for schools on inclusive RO, including case studies illustrating best practice and clear examples of activities which recognise the beliefs of all children equally.

3. Provide schools with additional resources to ensure children opted out of RO are offered an educational and purposeful alternative, as is their right under the current law.

4. Ask His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) to carry out an independent review into RO in non-denominational schools. The review should consider whether schools are adequately supported to implement inclusive RO and ensure the right to withdraw is accessible in practice.

5. Guarantee all children and young people's freedom of religion and belief by allowing pupils to independently withdraw from RO, in line with UNCRC Concluding Observations.

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Note of Thanks:

We extend our sincere thanks to Gordon Agnew, John Bishop, Paul Dickson, Tom Hudson and Ian Rodger who volunteered their time to ensure the data from all nine councils was consistent and accessible.

Who are humanists?

Humanists strive to be ethical. We believe that being moral and making good decisions is part of being human. We don't look to religion to tell us what is right and wrong.

Humanists believe everyone is equally important. We reject all forms of discrimination and prejudice and seek a world where diversity and individuality flourishes. We believe people should be empowered to live their lives on their own terms, even if radically different to our own. We support peace, democracy, the rule of law, and universal legal human rights.

Humanists strive to be rational. A humanist understanding of the world is based on reason and science. We are confident that humanity's problems can be solved through empirical observation and free inquiry. As the world we live in evolves and we experience new things, we also recognise the importance of challenging and developing our beliefs.

Humanists strive for fulfilment in their lives. We believe this is the only life we have, and we have a responsibility to ourselves, our fellow living beings, and the natural world to live that life as best we can. This means treating others with kindness, compassion and respect, and finding things that bring us happiness, purpose and joy.

These principles are enshrined in the Amsterdam Declaration of Modern Humanism. The declaration was last reviewed and democratically agreed upon at the 70th General Assembly of Humanists International, held in Glasgow in 2022.

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