

**Opening Statement – Andrew Copson
Joint Committee on Assisted Dying**

Hello, my name is Andrew Copson and I am the Chief Executive of Humanists UK, which incorporates Northern Ireland Humanists.

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together, we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them.

Founded in 1896, our work is now powered by 110,000 members and supporters. Northern Ireland Humanists has over 5,500 members; we are an executive member of the Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum and sit on the Communities Faith Forum and Belief Leaders Forum.

The humanist perspective on assisted dying is grounded in reason and compassion, and our policy has been shaped by individuals who have fought for a law to give them the right to make important decisions over their bodies, their treatment, and ultimately, their own deaths. In the UK, we intervened in support of our members Noel Conway, Omid T, Paul Lamb, and Tony Nicklinson throughout their attempts to overhaul the law on assisted dying by taking human rights cases through the courts. In all of these cases, the individual had an incurable condition, had received or been offered palliative care, and their quality of life had fallen below what they felt to be acceptable. We feel they should have had the option of an assisted death.

Humanists recognise that all life is valuable but believe someone's quality of life is also important when making decisions about life and death. We value human beings' personal autonomy, and we strongly defend the right of individuals who have come to rational, thought-out decisions about their own bodies to be able to carry out their own wishes.

Our support for assisted dying must be contextualised in changing societal views, outlooks on life, and religious beliefs. Recent census data in Northern Ireland shows that 1 in 6 now identify as non-religious, nearly doubling in just 10 years. The Republic of Ireland has seen a similar trend with over 730,000 people – representing 14% of the usual resident population – ticking 'no religion' in the 2022 Census, more than doubling since 2011.

The demographics of Irish society will continue to change and citizen's deeply held cultural and religious beliefs change. One of the best ways for democratic institutions to stay with the times and the social outlook of their societies is to give individuals a choice.

The best way for a system to cater to religious and humanist beliefs would be to give each person the right to choose their own path. Polling in Ireland suggests that a large majority of Irish people would like to have a choice over their own deaths.

This choice should not impose or restrict the rights of others whose views differ from my own. I'm not aware of any international jurisdiction that doesn't allow doctors the right to conscientiously object to assisted dying, as long as that objection doesn't prevent an individual from accessing their rights and their proper care. In short, if you don't agree with assisted dying, don't have an assisted death.

The current status quo, where assisting someone to die can be regarded as manslaughter or murder, puts families in a desperate, inhumane position. They essentially have three options. They watch their loved one suffer, they take matters into their own hands, or they spend extortionate amounts fleeing their home country to an assisted dying clinic in Switzerland. These options are immoral.

The myth that palliative care will be negatively impacted by assisted dying legislation has been debunked time and time again. Palliative Care Australia asked this very question before the country legalised assisted dying and they concluded that 'in jurisdictions where assisted dying is available, the palliative care sector has further advanced'.

Annual reports from Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Canada repeatedly show the same thing: the massive majority of people who use assisted dying laws are over 70, nearly all have already received, or have access to, good palliative care, and they are using the law to take control over the very end of their lives.

I believe eligibility for assisted dying should be based on reducing unnecessary suffering. Rather than being based on a doctor's prognosis of how long they have to live, it should be up to the individual to determine when their quality of life falls below what they deem to be tolerable – they should be in control and they should be allowed that option.

Individuals with neurological degenerative conditions could potentially live for years in unnecessary pain and suffering. There are other incurable physical conditions that make people's lives intolerable but won't lead to death in the foreseeable future. These people deserve a choice.

Humanist UK's policy is that adults of sound mind who are intolerably suffering from an incurable, physical condition, and have a clear and settled wish to die should have the option of an assisted death.

Austria, Canada, Belgium, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Colombia, Switzerland, and Spain have legalised assisted dying for both the terminally ill and incurably suffering. The Republic of Ireland could be the next country to give a compassionate choice to the people who are suffering.