

NSS calls for end to state funded 'religiosity inspections' in schools

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The National Secular Society has called for Ofsted to inspect religious education in faith schools after research revealed that millions of pounds of public money has been paid to religious organisations to carry out additional inspections of denominational RE.

Inspections under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005 evaluate the distinctiveness and effectiveness of a school as a religious institution, including its provision of collective worship and RE.

In the last six school years, [figures](#) from the Department for Education (DfE) show that almost £5 million in Section 48 grants has been handed out to "faith bodies". The vast majority of the £4,904,800 grant money went to the Church of England (over half a million pounds per year) and the Catholic Church (over a quarter million). The Association of Muslim Schools, the Board of Deputies and two Sikh organisations also received tens of thousands of pounds.

The National Secular Society has now written to schools minister, Nick Gibb, urging him to ensure that Ofsted, rather than 'religious authorities', inspect schools' RE provision.

Stephen Evans, National Secular Society campaigns director, commented: "The purpose of state funded inspections should be to ensure that schools are serving the needs of their pupils, not the interests of religious organisations.

"Putting all schools on the same inspection regime should have no discernible impact on Ofsted's costs as they already inspect these schools, but it would save millions in unnecessary grants to religious bodies. More importantly it would better ensure that religious education in faith schools is broad and balanced and not being used to promote religion or inculcate pupils into a particular faith.

In Anglican and Methodist faith schools the Section 48 inspections are known as SIAMS reports. Staff and governors at church schools have raised fears with the NSS that such inspections are being used to 'pressure' church schools to advance a more rigorous religious ethos – whether or not it's suitable for their school community.

At a time where Ofsted is facing a 'funding black hole', the NSS argues that getting rid of Section 48 inspections and giving the money to the school inspectorate could help them meet over 10% of their budget [deficit](#).

Defending the separate inspection regime, a Church of England spokesperson told [Schools Week](#) that the Church was "legally obliged to ensure the religious education in its schools was consistent with its ethos".

Mr Evans said that a big part of the problem was that schools are still delivering denominational RE, rather than objective education about religions and beliefs.

"We want to ensure that all pupils to have the same entitlement to high quality, non-partisan education about religion and belief. Under the current legal framework, the religious education syllabus is decided locally by committees dominated by faith representatives or by religious bodies responsible for running faith schools.

"The whole legal framework around religious educations needed serious review. Denominational RE and 'local determination' survives merely because of the privileged position of churches and other religious organisations. The needs of pupils growing up in 21st century Britain must now take priority."

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