



**RELIGIOSITY
INSPECTIONS:**

**THE CASE AGAINST
FAITH-BASED
INSPECTIONS OF
STATE SCHOOLS**

national
secular
society

CONTENTS

Executive summary.....	3
Arguments against religiosity inspections.....	6
Case study: The Dioceses of Chichester and Guildford.....	13
Inspection guidance frameworks.....	21
Recommendations: The way forward.....	24
What you can do.....	25
About the National Secular Society.....	26

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Families in England and Wales will be very aware of legally required Ofsted or Estyn inspections, which aim to provide an independent assessment of the quality and standards of education in schools and assess whether pupils are achieving as much as they can.

However, these are not the only inspections faced by schools. Around one third of state-funded schools have a faith designation. These schools face additional inspections by their sponsoring religious group, to ensure that in their opinion the schools' collective worship, denominational religious education and overall approach promote a rigorous religious ethos.

These publicly funded 'religiosity inspections' are required by law, in England through Section 48 and in Wales through Section 50, of the Education Act 2005¹. They are also often referred to as Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) within those denominational sectors.

Such inspections are an inappropriate use of public funds and can compel school leaders to impose a religious ethos on schools, which often have a mixed intake of pupils from a range of religion or belief backgrounds. School leaders are better placed than religious bodies to decide how the education they provide should be delivered. School leaders' control and accountability are undermined by the requirement for religious bodies to inspect schools and by the ability of those bodies to dictate change. These inspection frameworks blur the lines between school, religious community and the promotion of faith-based approaches to religious education, undermining progress towards ensuring all pupils receive a critical, pluralistic education.

This report provides the key arguments for removing faith-based inspections. It features numerous case studies, including accounts from leaders within faith schools who have felt pressured to religionise their schools against their better judgement. It also reviews the limited academic literature and includes an in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis of 40 SIAMS reports.

It shows that faith-based inspections:

- **Cost the taxpayer over three-quarters of a million pounds a year.**
Inspections cost taxpayers £760,000 a year on average over the eight academic years examined, and add between 7 and 14% to the cost of an average inspection.
- **Conflate religiosity with virtue, presenting widely shared moral values as being rooted in specific religions.**
82.5% of the reports we examined frame widely held values as uniquely or fundamentally 'Christian'. 62.5% of the reports urge schools to be more explicit or exclusive about this.
- **Promote religious organisations' theological approach to religious education and collective worship.**
50% of the reports we examined explicitly promote the Church of England's own evangelical resource. 57.5% of the reports conflated successful RE with promoting or eliciting Christian viewpoint responses.

This report recommends the repeal of the legal requirements for faith-based inspections, to create an equal inspection regime for all schools.

¹ The Act applies to maintained schools and to academies through funding agreements.

THE SITUATION ACROSS THE UNITED KINGDOM

ENGLAND

This report focuses on England as it has the largest faith school sector, and because this is where most concerns have been raised.

WALES

The principles and arguments against Section 48 and 50 religiosity inspections are the same as given for England, and while most of the specific examples are drawn from England, they apply in principle to Wales.²

NORTHERN IRELAND

By virtue of Section 23 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, the Department of Education is not permitted to inspect religious education unless requested by the governing body. As the vast majority of governing bodies are dominated by religious appointees, this means that RE is largely uninspected. Ministers of religion must be granted 'reasonable access' to pupils and to inspect RE provision. In practice, few clergy do such monitoring.³ The NSS has used the independent review of education to recommend the Department of Education develop an equally appropriate education regime in all schools.⁴

SCOTLAND

Both denominational and non-denominational (faith) schools are inspected by Education Scotland. There is no equivalent of Section 48 or 50 inspections.

2 Arguably, the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 strengthens the case for an equal inspections regime in all schools, as all are required to provide religion, values and ethics (RVE) based on a non-denominational locally agreed syllabus. However, this is not the default option in some faith schools.

3 <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2019/10/education-in-ni-shouldnt-be-a-tug-of-war-between-religious-interests>

4 <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2021/02/nis-education-review-is-a-golden-chance-to-take-a-stand-for-inclusion>



The new vicar was far more enthusiastic about his faith and overtly evangelical in his delivery. He seemed to use every opportunity to appeal to the children to come to the church – no doubt because the attendance was only a small elderly group.

After each SIAMS, a shift was happening. A lengthy end of the day prayer was added. I even saw some teachers berating children for not joining in. Children were drafted in to help lead assemblies. Posters openly promoting God were on display along with more visual Christian symbols.

Some staff found it difficult to separate their personal faith from lessons; or didn't seem to understand that being a 'Church school' shouldn't mean proselytising.

A Teacher⁵



SIAMS visits require large amounts of repeated work and gives near identical feedback to several schools including the number of crucifixes and age-appropriate understanding of the Trinity. SIAMS requires documentary evidence in the shape of a lengthy self-evaluation form and specific evidence of worship and Christian ethos and values. Ofsted recognised the administrative burden this level of documentation places on schools and removed these requirements a number of years ago.

A Governor⁶



SIAMS were a particular headache. The majority of the general public and school communities have no idea what these are and are often shocked to hear that they happen at all (at taxpayers' expense). Out of principle we never prepared for these even though the diocese frequently forwarded materials. We were confident that we lived up to our motto (A place for all to flourish) and could let the school speak for itself. The inspections were a dreadful waste of time and resources. They are designed to find out how the school is 'selling' the CoFE message. In particular, they pushed an approach to collective worship that was alien to the school, where we had always followed more of a community school approach.

John, from Nottingham

5 <https://www.nomorefaithschools.org/testimonials/2018/06/teachers-perspective-the-growing-evangelism-in-c-of-e-faith-schools1>

6 <https://www.nomorefaithschools.org/testimonials/2019/05/governors-perspective-how-faith-schools-prioritise-religion-over-education>

ARGUMENTS AGAINST RELIGIOSITY INSPECTIONS

1. THEY ARE EDUCATIONALLY INAPPROPRIATE

Religiosity inspections are used by faith bodies to exert influence over school leaders' choice of the way in which education is provided and the environment in which it is delivered. School leaders are more qualified and better placed than religious bodies to make these decisions. Polling has found that few families choose faith schools based on their religious character. Many parents have little option other than a faith school for their child.⁷ In a country with historically low and diverse levels of religious affiliation, a religious inspection regime gives religious bodies inappropriate and undue influence in publicly funded schools.

The argument that schools should have the same inspection regime has been made by groups with a range of views on faith schools. For example, The Woolf Institute's Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life called on state inspectorates "to be concerned with every aspect of the life of faith schools, including religious elements currently inspected by denominational authorities".⁸

2. THEY CONFLATE RELIGIOSITY WITH COMMONLY SHARED VALUES AND EFFECTIVE SMSC DEVELOPMENT

All schools teach values. Most schools inculcate similar values, regardless of religious affiliation. There is little evidence that faith schools do any better or worse in promoting such values.⁹ However, religiosity inspections actively encourage faith schools to frame such common values in more exclusive religious terms. Attempts to promote widely shared values as intentially or uniquely religious is likely to give pupils a skewed and poor understanding of ethics – and might encourage prejudicial attitudes against people of other faith and belief backgrounds.

All schools have a duty to promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of pupils.¹⁰ The secular inspection of schools already provides good routes to share best practice and ensure SMSC development is suitable for all pupils. Nothing in the guidance or legislation on SMSC requires a religious ethos. However, the term 'spiritual' in SMSC development is highly contested and likely to be defined differently within the theological framework imposed by religiosity inspections as opposed to the pedagogical framework of Ofsted and Estyn inspections.¹¹

For example, in 2007, a survey covering almost two thirds of head teachers of Church in Wales primary schools highlighted how encouraging theological interpretations might impact schools' approach to SMSC development. While head teachers in faith schools shared many views of 'spiritual development' which would align to that expected by secular

7 <https://www.secularism.org.uk/faith-schools/choicedelusion.html>

8 <https://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/research/publications/reports/report-of-the-commission-on-religion-and-belief-in-british-public-life>

9 <https://www.secularism.org.uk/faith-school-facts.html?category=17>

10 <https://www.smscqualitymark.org.uk/what-is-smsc/>

11 <https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2012.00518.x>

school inspections,¹² exclusively Christian interpretations were also strongly held. 83% of head teachers agreed with the view that spiritual development for pupils in church schools should mean ‘developing Christian beliefs’ and 79% agreed that it should refer to ‘exploring Christian spirituality’. In contrast, the view that this means ‘exploring the spiritual within non-Christian faiths’ was only accepted by 53% of respondents. 54% of head teachers agreed that ‘spirituality cannot be divorced from religion’.¹³

When evaluating SMSC development, Ofsted may gather evidence from anywhere relevant, including RE lessons and assemblies – including in faith schools. But inspectors are expected to “familiarise themselves with any issues raised in any section 48 inspection” and so might be reluctant to say anything which contradicts a SIAMS report. Given an already busy workload, inspectors might consider these areas already covered. This means pupils in faith schools might miss out on having their SMSC development objectively reviewed.

3. THEY DIVERT PUBLIC MONEY

It should be of significant public concern that hundreds of thousands of pounds a year of taxpayers’ money is given to religious organisations to promote their ethos in publicly funded schools.

In 2017-18, Ofsted estimated that the average cost per school inspection in England was £7,200.¹⁴ Where separate Section 48 inspections take place, this could add between 7 and 14% to an average inspection. In 2017, NSS research revealed that ending religiosity inspections could help Ofsted meet over 10% of their then budget deficit.¹⁵

The current grant levels are as follows:

£450 +£25 admin grant	All VC schools Including academies treated as VC schools for these purposes (such as sponsored or converter academies which were previously VC schools).
£550 +£25 admin grant	All VA primary schools Including academies treated as VA schools for these purposes (such as sponsored or converter academies which were previously VA schools).
£1,000 +£25 admin grant	All VA secondary schools Including academies treated as VA schools for these purposes (such as sponsored or converter academies which were previously VA schools).

12 For example, on the meaning of the term ‘spiritual development’, respondents showed high levels of agreement on statements such as developing ‘an ability to relate to others’ (100%), ‘a sense of community’ (99%) and ‘a personal identity’ (98%)

13 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13644360701714985>

14 <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Ofsteds-inspection-of-schools.pdf>

15 <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2017/06/nss-calls-for-end-to-state-funded-religiosity-inspections-in-schools/>

SECTION 48 INSPECTIONS (ENGLAND)

The DfE spends an average of over three quarters of a million pounds a year on religiosity inspections. Two thirds of grants are received by the Church of England and there is significant variation between years, including a high of £870,150 and low of £555,425.

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Average
Total	£870,150	£858,225	£655,275	£797,950	£807,825	£915,375	£639,225	£555,425	£762,431
Catholic	£229,225	£394,150	£371,500	£224,600	£207,225	£248,175	£188,075	£228,625	£261,447
CofE	£632,550	£463,050	£264,775	£559,425	£592,925	£653,150	£451,150	£320,025	£492,131
Other	£8,375	£1,025	£19,000	£13,925	£7,675	£14,050	£0	£6,775	£8,853

SECTION 50 INSPECTIONS (WALES)

The Welsh government spends an average of six and a half thousand pounds a year on religiosity inspections. Two thirds of grants go to the Church in Wales. The figures for Section 50 religiosity inspections grants are significantly smaller in proportionate and absolute terms.¹⁶

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20 ¹	Average ²
Total	£10,000	£6,850	£3,950	£4,800	£7,350	£3,300	£6,590
Church in Wales	£6,350	£4,600	£2,600	£4,350	£4,650	£2,850	£4,510
Catholic	£3,650	£2,250	£1,350	£450	£2,700	£450	£2,080

1 For 2019/20 figures were only available up to September 2019.

2 Average only includes the five years with full figures available.

4. THEY PRIORITISE FAITH PROMOTION OVER OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

For an ethos to be appropriate to a school community, it should not be imposed externally but emerge from that school community, albeit within an accepted framework.

In faith schools, the ethos will be sustained by the selection of senior leaders and through the influence of the governing body. Faith-based selection of pupils might also contribute. External religious bodies should not have the ability to impose their vision on the school through a separate inspection regime.

A key aim of the SIAMS inspection system is to establish and promote “Christian distinctiveness”.¹⁷ The inspection regime and dioceses’ increased focus on evangelism means Church of England schools, which might have historically opted for a

16 The English population has been between 17 and 17.5 as large as Wales during the period of comparable figures. It should also be noted that the Welsh government, unlike the English DfE, did not include an admin fee component in the totals.

17 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617671003666688>

lighter touch or more community-focused ethos, are encouraged to increase the religiosity – however incongruous this might be with the school community. SIAMS reports are remarkably unsympathetic to the context of faith schools where a less rigorous religious ethos has been created which might be more suitable for the community it serves.

A 2010 study in the *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, consisting of data from 45 Church of England schools, explored how they understood the term “Christian distinctiveness”. The findings suggest that school leaders understood it to mean “strong links with the Church and a significant religious dimension in the corporate life of the school”, and “seeking to establish a way of life informed by Christian beliefs”. This included “a belief that Christian faith offers a foundation for the lives of children and young people”.

5. THEY PROMOTE FAITH BODIES’ THEOLOGICAL AND EVANGELICAL APPROACHES TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND COLLECTIVE WORSHIP

If religious education is a genuine academic subject, it should receive the same scrutiny as any other area of the curriculum. Like any academic subject, it should be judged according to agreed secular standards. Religiosity inspections conflate the promotion of a religious ethos with good RE. In our view, the two are mutually exclusive.

There are already mechanisms in place intended to promote high quality religious education in all schools. There is no evidence to suggest that provision suffers without religiosity inspections.¹⁸

Public support for religious education is significantly undermined by a perception that the subject is used to promote religious viewpoints rather than provide young people with a rigorous, critical and pluralistic education about religions and beliefs and their impact on society. A law requiring religious bodies to inspect RE provision can only further undermine confidence in RE being a genuine academic subject.

Religiosity inspections are often justified by the ‘dual system’, whereby faith schools take a different approach to religious education, often with the freedom to teach from a denominational perspective. The NSS and others have long called for a unified secular and academic approach to the study of worldviews to address this discrepancy.¹⁹

Calls to end the discrepancies caused by the dual system are far from exclusive to opponents of faith schools. Arguing for a “single new subject embracing disciplinary clarity” in 2020, academic and independent consultant on religious education, Mark Chater, called for religious education to be “inspectable within the normal school inspection system”, albeit with faith schools able to add to the core curriculum.²⁰

RE in faith schools, particularly those able to teach from an openly denominational perspective, diverges significantly from the pluralistic approach expected in community-ethos schools. A faith-based inspection regime pushes faith schools into this approach.

For example, the current Church in Wales’ scheme of work for RE between Nursery and Year 6 requires that 88% of teaching time is dedicated to Christianity. The great majority of units specified are 100% focused on Christianity and even in the

18 Reforming Religious Education: Power and Knowledge in a Worldviews Curriculum, Location 113, Kindle edition 2020

19 <https://www.secularism.org.uk/21st-century-re-for-all/>

20 Reforming Religious Education: Power and Knowledge in a Worldviews Curriculum, Location 1502, Kindle edition 2020

minority of units which cover other faiths, these are still largely framed in reference to Christianity. The religious education directory of the Catholic Education Service (CES) states that “The primary purpose of Catholic Religious Education is to come to know and understand God’s revelation”. A unit by unit breakdown is not available, but at KS4 the CES estimates that 85 to 90% of RE curriculum time is focused on Catholicism.

As we explore in the case studies below, the Church of England has increasingly used their SIAMS regime to promote their preferred, theological approach to religious education, encapsulated in their Understanding Christianity programme. Religiosity inspections and the lack of a clear national framework for religious education encourage denominations to use the subject to pursue their own aims and objectives.

Writing in 2020 on the need to “liberate the subject from the political and economic control of belief communities”, former Ofsted adviser for religious education, Alan Brine, and Mark Chater explored one such example:

“2016 saw the publication of the Church of England’s vision document for education setting out an agenda pressing their schools to adopt a much more distinctively Christian approach to education. The publication played a role in reshaping key aspects of practice in C of E schools, reinforced by their Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) inspection foci. Arguably, these initiatives reflect a greater determination on the part of the Church of England to use their schools to promote the faith.”²¹

A more detailed exploration of how the Church of England’s theological approach to religious education is promoted through the SIAMS regime can be found in Chris Selway’s 2020 report, *Understanding Christianity and the study of religion and worldviews*.²² In there, Selway writes:

“Church schools had the added pressure of SIAMS inspections hanging over them and, with the support of a diocesan adviser, would be assured that using the resource would aid them in showing that they were matching their teaching of the subject to the Statement of Entitlement.”

The Exeter diocesan website stated that:

“The new Understanding Christianity resource for religious education is going to be the benchmark against which schools will be judged in the next SIAMS framework”²³

As a result, Selway argues:

“There is too much reliance on resources that might be used in a church school assembly instead of what could or should be used if the subject is meant to be objective, critical and pluralistic.”

21 Reforming Religious Education: Power and Knowledge in a Worldviews Curriculum, Location 399, Kindle edition 2020

22 <https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/understanding-christianity-and-the-study-of-religion-and-worldviews.pdf>

23 <https://exeter.anglican.org/schools/religious-education-worship/christianity-project/>

6. THEY PLACE AN UNNECESSARY BURDEN ON SCHOOLS

The testimonies highlighted in this report show that religiosity inspections can place a significant stress on teachers and senior leaders in faith schools. In addition to preparing for the usual inspections, they must prepare for an additional regime with often conflicting standards and aims. This undermines leaders' ability to balance the requirements of their faith ethos with the needs of their community. This can discourage those who don't share the faith from applying or getting involved, either as teachers or governors.

7. THEY SUPPORT EFFORTS TO HOLD FAITH SCHOOLS TO DIFFERENT STANDARDS

Cultural literacy and sensitivity are important attributes we would expect in anyone involved in education, including inspectors. In preparing for a visit, Ofsted inspectors familiarise themselves with the context of any school. But inspections of publicly funded schools are fundamentally secular activity, akin to other quality assurance or oversight functions.

Arguments that faith schools need to be inspected by those with an 'understanding' of the ethos can be translated to mean deference to the schools' faith mission.

Ofsted has often faced unjustified accusations of religious animus for holding faith schools to the same standards as other schools, particularly around equality and inclusion issues. Religiosity inspections where faith schools are held to different standards can create the expectation that secular inspection regimes should do the same.

In 2014, Ofsted withdrew guidance for inspectors visiting faith schools in response to concerns raised by the National Secular Society.²⁴ The guidance told inspectors that in mixed-sex Muslim or Jewish Orthodox faith schools gender segregation "should not be taken as a sign of inequality between different genders." This was in direct contradiction to then DfE guidance and later court rulings on the illegality of the practice. Inspectors were advised that art and music lessons in Muslim schools can be "restricted" and that health and sex education will be taught within Islamic studies. Female inspectors received advice on "etiquette" including being told to wear long trousers, jackets and a headscarf in Islamic schools. They received advice on the skirts and blouses for Jewish faith schools. Male inspectors were told they might need another female person present in order to give feedback to a female teacher.

There has been intense lobbying over the last decade to see such 'sensitivity' advice reinstated and to discourage Ofsted from pointing out failings where a faith school is unwilling to meet expected standards because of their religious ethos.

The situation is even worse in the independent sector where a dangerous expectation of special treatment has led to a blind eye being turned to the undermining of children's fundamental human rights.²⁵

As far back as 2010, the Policy Exchange think tank warned that an over-reliance on faith-based inspection left the UK's schools vulnerable to extremist influences. They warned that "Confessional allegiance is not an appropriate basis upon which to conduct inspections for the totality of the school's activity."²⁶ These concerns were thrown into sharp focus by the spectacular collapse in 2015, amid accusations of extremism, of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate, set up in 2008 to inspect private Muslim and Christian faith schools.²⁷

24 <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2014/06/ofsted-withdraws-discriminatory-guidance-on-inspecting-faith-schools>

25 <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/tags/Independent+schools>

26 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/faith-schools-we-can-believe-in-ensuring-that-tolerant-and-democratic-values-are-upheld-in-every-part-of-britains-education-system/>

27 <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2015/06/nss-welcomes-closure-of-school-inspectorate-with-alleged-extremist-links>



I was chair of governors at a CofE voluntary controlled faith school in June 2018 when we had our SIAMS inspection. The inspector made it clear that he was taking as his guiding document the Church's 2016 Vision for Education. This stated that the Church intends to promote and entrench its role in the provision of education at all levels, and commits itself in particular to offering all pupils "an encounter with Jesus Christ and with Christian faith and practice".

A recurring word throughout the document is "wisdom", and the inspector made it clear that he was looking for examples of "Christian wisdom" within the school, as well as evidence of "Church distinctiveness", another term that is becoming more widespread. Thus one of the areas in which he thought the school needed to improve required it to: "review and redefine the school's Christian vision" to "ensure that the refreshed vision forms the basis for strategic development and underpins all the school's policies and practice to enable provision to be consistently informed by the school's Christian character".

In his more detailed comments, the inspector referred to "the Christian values" of cooperation, courage, friendship, forgiveness, honesty and trust, and "the biblical motivation" for them. He noted disapprovingly that the opportunities for personal prayer were limited during worship time and during the school day. He noted that "school leaders ensure a school vision based on Christian values underpins the daily practice of the school", but felt that "a clear, cohesive and explicit Christian vision for the school is not articulated by all leaders and governors".

During my time as a governor of this school, the overt Christian influence has grown steadily, partly under pressure from the foundational church and partly because the RE leaders have been influenced by the training they have received from the diocese. We now have biblical texts and murals on the walls, prayer spaces in each classroom, and a cross in the entrance hall: even ten years ago we had none of these. And yet, in the inspector's eyes, the Christian way of thinking was still not embedded sufficiently within the school. It seems that the pressure for "Church distinctiveness" and "Christian wisdom" will continue unabated unless it meets with a stronger reaction from parents, communities and organisations such as the NSS.

Governor, Church of England school

CASE STUDY: THE DIOCESES OF CHICHESTER AND GUILDFORD

40 SIAMS reports from two Church of England dioceses were selected for quantitative and qualitative analysis.²⁸

COMMONLY HELD VALUES

82.5% of the reports framed widely held values as uniquely or fundamentally Christian.²⁹

The SIAMS regime appears to start with the assumption that Christian religiosity is *de facto* evidence of good values and vice versa. Schools are encouraged to frame widely accepted values in specifically Christian terms:

“[Pupils] clearly talk about the school’s values and the teachings of Jesus being the basis for how they should live their lives. For example, they speak about the importance of showing care for each other and forgiveness after wrongdoing.” School 01

“Pupils clearly talk about the link between the school’s Christian values and biblical teaching and how the teachings of Jesus are the basis for how they live their lives, for example showing forgiveness.” School 02

Teach that Christianity is the “impetus for charitable giving and service to others” School 03

“The vision is supported by twelve Christian values. The values include: trust, compassion, hope, friendship, justice and forgiveness.” School 04

“Christian values of thankfulness, love, respect, forgiveness, friendship and hope.” School 05

“In 2016 a new school vision ‘learning together, loving others, guided by God’ was introduced, with six core values, love, honesty, respect, fairness, growth and community.” School 06

Inspectors go far beyond simply framing commonly held values as generically Christian: they seek to place them within a specific theological framework.

“The school’s Christian values are closely linked to the Bible through biblical quotes and worship.” School 08

“The school’s core values of Respect, Independence, Caring, Teamwork and Reach for the Stars, are closely linked to the Bible through assemblies and RE.” School 12

“Intrinsic to the vision are our six biblically linked core Christian values of trust, perseverance, wisdom, forgiveness, friendship and compassion.” School 17

²⁸ We decided on a sample of 40 to give sufficient breadth. The Dioceses of Chichester and Guildford’s list of reports came up first in our Google search on 1 November 2019. Between the two, there were 62 reports from 2018/19. From these, the 40 most recently uploaded were selected. 22 were from the Diocese of Chichester and 18 from Guildford. The primary evidence gathering for this report took place in November 2019, with a focus on the 2018/19 academic year. Analysis and publication were delayed and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the 2019/20 academic year makes it unsuitable for comparisons.

²⁹ Researchers found evidence of this in 33 out of 40 reports, no evidence in six reports and only implicit evidence in one report.

This appropriating of commonly held values and forcing them into an exclusively Christian framework encourages a conceptualisation of schools as church communities.

“The school’s vision is also distinctly expressed through a fitting focus on various Christian values, including peace, kindness, hope and forgiveness.” School 10

“The school’s strong Christian values, demonstrated in the inclusive and caring relationships across the school community, enhance pupils’ personal development.” School 11

“A strong Christian ethos, centred on the Christian values of compassion, wisdom, hope and trust provides a nurturing, inclusive and caring family environment which meets the needs of all pupils.” School 22

“There is a strong ethos of nurture which is underpinned by Christian values and results in the school community feeling that they are all valued and part of a family.” – Suggests that the ethos of nurturing is in direct relation to the Christian values. “The school is viewed by stakeholders as providing a holistic education where the Christian values of community, dignity and respect underpin the life of the school. This is evident in the inclusive and positive caring relationships across the school community and the good behaviour seen around the school.” School 23

“The school’s anti-bullying policy is extremely clear about what a Christian community should be like.” School 28

“Under St John the Baptist’s guidance we live out our Christian values of love, hope, resilience, respect and wisdom to flourish as individuals and be the very best we can be.” School 32

“The school community constantly lives out its vision and values which are rooted in biblical teaching.” School 35

Efforts to lay exclusive Christian claim to commonly held values are at times particularly grasping. For example:

“Soft toys are used by the youngest children to represent responsibility and wisdom, two of the Christian values.” School 31

62.5% of the reports urged schools to be more explicit in how they did this or to be more exclusively and/or explicitly Christian in their values.³⁰

³⁰ Researchers found evidence of this in 25 out of 40 reports, no evidence in 14 reports and only partial evidence in one report.

The SIAMS regime acts as an instrument in the CofE's agenda to promote a biblically focused theological approach to education which conceptualises 'their' schools as religious communities. Throughout the examined reports, schools are implicitly and explicitly criticised where they fail to instil this theological world view in pupils. For example, schools are urged to:

“Deepen the understanding of the Christian vision by ensuring that pupils can articulate their understanding of how the values which are rooted in biblical teaching impact on their own choices and opinions.” School 03

“Develop the confidence of the whole community to articulate the specific Christian teachings underpinning the vision and values and ensure these links are overt in all school documentation.” School 04

“Make the core Christian values more explicit in the life of the school... Although there are displays such as thanking God for spring and a painting of the Trinity, these do not frame reflection in a Christian context.” School 07

“Develop the school motto into a Christian vision that is rooted in distinctively Christian theology.” School 08

“Review the school vision to ensure it is explicitly rooted in biblical teaching.” School 09

“Ground the school’s vision and associated values in a clear theology so that improvements and developments have a Christian narrative.” School 18

“... ensure a clear biblical underpinning for the school values...Pupils confidently name their current class value, these are underpinned by a relevant Bible verse chosen by the pupils at the start of the year. However, the understanding of this biblical foundation is not securely embedded.” School 21

“Review the school’s vision and values against the Church of England’s Vision for Education, ‘Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good’ to ensure that the school’s unique values are both compatible and supported by the national statement.” School 24

“...ensure that the theological underpinning of the school’s distinctively Christian vision is as well-known and celebrated as are its biblical-based values... The vision is seen in practice, but its theological basis and impact is not clearly understood and expressed by all stakeholders.” School 33

The reports also state:

“Parents state that although their children talk about the values outside of school they do not talk about the links between the values and the Bible.” School 12

“However, the Christian ethos is currently not explicitly expressed through the school’s vision, which is child centred but is not rooted in biblical teachings. Members of the school community are not able to confidently articulate the vision within a Christian context.” School 16

“However, they are less secure when relating biblical material to their own lives.” School 23

“This, in turn, means that pupils are not as adept as they should be at linking them to the Christian and biblical narrative.” School 25

“Pupils have limited understanding of the trinitarian nature of Christianity. As a result, they do not used (sic) language associated with the Holy Trinity.” School 26

“The one reflection area is not distinctively Christian and therefore many pupils are unsure of its purpose.” School 36

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

57.5% of the reports conflated successful RE with promoting or eliciting Christian viewpoints.³¹

The SIAMS regime undermines modern pluralistic and critical RE by framing the subject explicitly in terms of faith formation and a religious ethos. For example:

“Lessons skilfully infuse the Christian vision and effectively reinforce the school’s values. As a result, RE is loved by all pupils.” School 26

“Lessons successfully reinforce and develop pupils’ and adults’ understanding of the Christian vision.” School 34

“RE has a significant impact in the school and fully supports the school’s vision and values, inspiring pupils to be great learners and thinkers. They gain a good understanding of Bible stories and how these are still relevant to their lives today.” School 35

Inspectors’ narrow theological conception of good RE is reflected in their exclusive use of Christian-centric responses as evidence of good practice.

“When you celebrate God it helps you to love the people around you.” School 23

“One Year 2 child wrote (of RE) that she ‘liked being quiet, praying, thinking about God and Jesus, my family and the world’. School 29

“Lessons skilfully infuse the Christian vision and weave the values throughout. During an inspirational RE lesson, a motivated Year 1 pupil said, ‘God’s plan for me is to be a police officer, as I will help people make the right choices.’” School 31

“RE lessons are significant in developing pupils’ spirituality... Pupils’ comments within lessons demonstrate a high level of spiritual development and understanding of religious concepts.” School 38

Schools are explicitly criticised where pupils do not follow specific theological views.

“Pupils are aware of Jesus as a special person in the Bible, showing us how to be kind. They know some familiar Bible stories, linked to their Christian value of kindness, but not always their meaning. For example, pupils

³¹ Researchers found evidence of this in 23 out of 40 reports, no evidence in 14 reports and only partial evidence in three reports.

talk about the feeding of the 5000 as an act of kindness but do not understand that it is a miracle. Pupils are not confident when relating biblical stories to their lives today.” School 16

References to other faiths in the context of RE, let alone to non-religious beliefs, are extremely rare and in keeping with the Church’s theological approach, are framed in relation to an assumed Christian default. For example:

“Pupils have rich opportunities to focus on Christianity and other major world religions through the wide range of activities in RE lessons, with the school’s Christian values stranded strongly throughout... The Bible is seen as a helpful guide to aid their learning, by pupils with faith and no faith alike.” School 06

“Pupils learn about a number of cultures and faiths in RE and are interested to explore how different faiths see the person Jesus Christ.” School 09

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

50% of the reports promote the Church of England’s evangelical resource.³²

Examples highlighted by researchers include:

“Senior leaders and governors identified RE as an area for improvement and prioritised the training of all staff in the ‘Understanding Christianity’ resource.” School 03

“In the light of [the RE and collective worship leader’s] attendance at the course ‘Understanding Christianity’ the school is reviewing its RE provision.” School 07

“The parish church supports the school in a range of ways, including by unpacking themes from the ‘Understanding Christianity’ resource every Monday.” School 21

In schools that follow the locally agreed RE syllabus, the subject should be inspected by Ofsted. But by promoting the Understanding Christianity resource through SIAMS, the Church of England is able to extend its theological approach to RE well beyond those faith schools that can teach the subject from an openly denominational perspective. For example:

“The school has recently invested in training for an approach to teaching called ‘Understanding Christianity’... there is already a clear plan in place for implementation, including rightly linking it with the East Sussex Locally Agreed Syllabus.” School 10

“Across the school RE is taught by a team of experienced RE teachers who plan together using the West Sussex Agreed Syllabus with the ‘Understanding Christianity’ project integrated into it.” School 12

“The RE curriculum recognises the requirements of the local West Sussex Agreed Syllabus as well as the implementation of the Understanding Christianity resource.” School 14

³² See above for more detailed criticism on how Understanding Christianity promotes the Church’s approach to RE.

OTHER FINDINGS

Researchers were also asked to note other examples which raised specific concern.

Collective worship

The focus of researchers in this case study was the promotion of a Christian values narrative and religious education. Quantitative data was not recorded on collective worship. However, the role of the SIAMS regime in enforcing collective worship was clearly documented through related comments. One researcher commented “All but one of the reports drew no distinction between RE and worship.”

Reports regularly praise schools for having clergy lead or host assemblies or encourage them to do so. For example, these are under “areas for development”:

“[B]ecause assemblies are not always securely Christian and because pupils do not have the opportunity to worship in church, pupils’ experiences of Christian worship are limited.” School 18

“Improve the opportunities for pupils to experience Anglican worship in the parish church so that they develop a greater understanding of the ways in which Christians worship... Currently the school does not worship in the church of St John the Baptist so pupils do not experience the Anglican tradition in their local church.” School 30

Schools are also praised for external visits by evangelical organisations:

“Regular use is made of the Bible, and especially so during the frequent visits from the Open the Book group.” School 25

“The Open the Book team leads worship once a week which pupils value saying, ‘it brings the Bible to life’.” School 30

Inspectors make clear that collective worship should promote the Church’s theological vision. For example:

“The lack of a theological basis for the school’s vision limits the distinctiveness of worship. Collective worship is called ‘Assembly’ and is only broadly rather than distinctly Christian.” School 20

“Collective worship is a daily opportunity to better understand the Christian faith, other people and inclusivity. One pupil said, ‘If you let God into your life, then it is going to be lit up’.” School 21

“Pupils know that worship can teach them ‘the right thing to do’.” School 23

As with religious education, and whether driven by conscious or unconscious bias, they appear to look for evidence only of Christian-centric responses from pupils and almost exclusively use these as evidence of good practice.

Discrimination against teachers

By virtue of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, faith schools can apply a religious test in appointing, remunerating, retaining or promoting teaching staff.³³ Though schools vary widely in how far they make use of these discriminatory powers, the reports appear to encourage this. For example, in identical language included in at least two reports:

“During interviews candidates are questioned about their commitment to the school’s Christian distinctiveness to ensure that the school appoints staff committed to promoting a Christian ethos.” School 05 & School 23

Creationism

Though there is no evidence of creationism being explicitly promoted as a valid scientific understanding of the world, inspectors encourage schools to frame ecological issues and the natural world in terms of the Christian creation narrative. For example:

“Pupils talk passionately about caring for God’s creation, ‘God made this planet full of potential for us. We must care for his world’.” School 26

“In Year R, children were learning about the wonderful world that God had created, using the richness of the school grounds. They answered searching questions on the creation story such as ‘I wonder why God said good at the end of each day’.” School 29

Relationships and sex education

The introduction of statutory relationships and sex education (RSE) in England and Wales³⁴ has led to religiosity inspection frameworks being updated to explicitly cover the subject, which was previously only addressed in passing. We expect that in the next few years this will be a growing area of concern.

The researchers were not asked to look at this specifically, but still raised concerns. For example:

“Christian teaching is prominent in the personal, social and health education policy.” School 04

“Arrangements for Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) are appropriate to the context. This allows pupils to explore healthy relationships within a Christian framework.” School 40

The efforts of many faith schools to teach comprehensive inclusive RSE are at odds with the beliefs and policies of sponsoring bodies. In future, religiosity inspections could criticise faith schools for covering LGBT issues at a point the religious body does not consider ‘age appropriate’, or even failing to give sufficient weight to the religion’s discriminatory or shame-based teachings on human sexuality. Such approaches are often cloaked in euphemistic language.

33 Up to 20% in voluntary controlled school and up to 100% in voluntary aided schools.
<https://www.secularism.org.uk/faith-schools/end-employment-discrimination.html>

34 Relationships and Sexuality Education in Wales

Previous research by the NSS has extensively demonstrated the harms caused by faith schools teaching RSE through a faith ethos, including the risk of incomplete, inaccurate or discriminatory teaching. See *Unsafe Sex Education: The risk of letting religious schools teach within the tenets of their faith*, 2018.³⁵

Instrument of government

Chichester Diocese requires that all its schools have the following statement in their instrument of government:

“Recognising its historic foundation, the school will preserve and develop its religious character in accordance with the principles of the Church of England and in partnership with the Church at parish and diocesan level.

The school aims to serve its community by providing an education of the highest quality within the context of Christian belief and practice. It encourages an understanding of the meaning and significance of faith and promotes Christian values through the experience it offers all of its pupils.” Chichester Diocese

35 <https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/unsafe-sex-report-april-2018.pdf>

INSPECTION GUIDANCE FRAMEWORKS

CHURCH OF ENGLAND

SEPTEMBER 2019 HANDBOOK

The Church's Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) evaluations explicitly include assessments of RE teaching in current and former voluntary controlled (VC) schools.³⁶ Along with the Statement of Entitlement, this promotes a theological approach to RE teaching.³⁷

CATHOLIC EDUCATION SERVICE

The Catholic Education Service does not publish an inspections framework in the same way. To understand their approach to inspecting RE and religiosity, we examined a current diocesan handbook and the CES's national statement on the purpose of RE in schools.

STATEMENT

The "primary aim" of Catholic schools "with RE at their core" is to "help parents, priests and teachers to hand on the Deposit of Faith in its fullness to a new generation of young people so that they may come to understand the richness of the Catholic faith, and thereby be drawn into a deeper communion with Christ in his Church."³⁸

It sets out eight aims for religious education, which support a theological approach to the subject with the assumption of "the truth of the Catholic faith". While there are references to learning about other religions, areas, there is no reference to the possibility of being non-religious or to considering non-religious worldviews.

HANDBOOK

We examined the current Section 48 inspection handbook for the Diocese of Brentwood.³⁹ The guidance is very extensive. It covers schools' "Catholic life", religious education and collective worship and what is expected from pupils, teachers and school leaders in all these areas. The guidance conceives of Catholic schools as homogenous religious communities contiguous with the religious community of the church.

For example, to demonstrate outstanding Catholic life, pupils must "appreciate, value and actively participate in the Catholic Life and mission of the school". They must see "themselves and others as made in the image and likeness of God". They must receive RSE (relationships and sex education) which promotes a "Christian understanding of the purpose of sexual love". And they must "deeply value and respect the Catholic tradition of the school". There are similar requirements for

36 https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/siams_handbook_september_2019.pdf

37 <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/RE%20Statement%20of%20Entitlement%20for%20Church%20Schools.pdf>

38 <https://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/schools/religious-education/item/1002967-about-religious-education-in-catholic-schools>

39 http://www.dioceseofbrentwood.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/S48-Inspection-Handbook-Sept_2018.pdf

teachers and school leaders. All staff should “enthusiastically participate in school activities which reflect the Catholic Life and mission of the school” such as staff prayer. “Pastoral programmes, PSHE and RSE” are required to “celebrate Catholic teachings and principles”.

In religious education, pupils are required to think “theologically”, while leaders are required to ensure any “additional requirements and policies of the Bishop regarding the Religious Education are embraced and fully implemented”.

In collective worship pupils are required to demonstrate a “depth of reverent participation in communal prayer”. This is intended to ensure that pupils experience “living and working in a faithful, praying community”. Teachers are expected to ensure that “Collective worship is central to the life of the school for all pupils, whatever their own particular faith background, and forms the heart of every school celebration. Praying together is part of the daily experience for all pupils and staff.”

OFSTED

There is no secular comparison to religiosity inspections. Routine Ofsted inspections look across the whole school curriculum and do not necessary comments on individual subjects like religious education. Ofsted does consider cross-curricular duties such as promoting spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC).⁴⁰ The relevant section of the handbook is explicit, affirming that such development need not be religious in nature.⁴¹

In November 2019, NATRE (National Association of Teachers of Religious Education) published a report analysing 101 Ofsted inspections of primary and secondary schools which had mentioned RE that term.⁴² These demonstrated markedly different approaches to the inspection of religious education and SMSC development. None of the reports conflate good education or basic values with religiosity. However, the ‘religious by default’ mindset present in some areas of the RE community is in evidence. None of the 101 reports made reference to pupils learning about non-religious perspectives or pupils being non-religious themselves.

40 <https://www.smscqualitymark.org.uk/what-is-smsc/>

41 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/843108/School_inspection_handbook_-_section_5.pdf

42 <http://www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Ofsted%20Primary%20and%20Secondary%20Reports%20Autumn%202019%20221119%20final%20final.pdf>



It was only when I became a headteacher myself, that I realised the influence that the Diocese and their Education Office exerted. The church was strongly represented on the School's Governing Body, but it is through the SIAMS schedule that the Church of England is able to maintain its power, as leaders of church schools are constantly told, a poor SIAMS can trigger an Ofsted inspection.

It is also a way in which the church makes schools adopt a much more overtly Christian nature and curriculum. Schools are expected to hold a distinctively Christian vision and have to prove how well they work with the local church and diocese which can mean that it's very difficult to say no to the latest evangelical programme the church are running.

To do well in a SIAMS inspection, a headteacher must prove that both pupils and adults in the school are, 'the person God created you to be'. The inspection schedule talks about 'God's children' and I had to prove that all pupils and adults had 'grown spiritually through experiences of prayer'. To accommodate this in a way which was appropriate for the varied demographic of the children in my school, I aligned personal reflection and prayer, but this was challenged by the inspector. The assumption is that the headteacher believes in and worships an Anglican God.

The inspector also asked a group of children to explain how important prayer was and if they engaged with the Eucharist in creative ways. The children didn't really understand what he was asking, and this was marked as an area for improvement.

As a nationally designated Specialist Leader of Education, I visited many church schools in a consultant role. The SIAMS inspection pushes many headteachers to implement more visibly Christian characteristics. The run up to an inspection often begins over a year before the date, and as the year progresses, the school becomes more and more overtly Christian in nature as the headteacher tries to prepare the ground and impress the church inspector.

While SIAMS inspections are still happening, headteachers will continue to play the game, as they feel their careers are dependent on a positive outcome. Pressure from Governing Bodies, Diocesan education departments and the local church will exacerbate this, and the Church's sway over schools and their children's learning will remain.

Matthew, from Southampton

RECOMMENDATIONS: THE WAY FORWARD

Ultimately, holding all state schools to the same standards would mean moving beyond faith schools to a comprehensive community ethos system. An end to state schools promoting a particular religious ethos, teaching denominational religion education, or directing religious worship would negate any 'need' for religiosity inspections.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In the short term however, the following steps would effectively achieve an equal inspections regime in all schools. The short-term achievability of these recommendations is strengthened because they can be supported by those with a variety of views on faith schools.

1. REPEAL SECTIONS 48 AND 50

The earliest possible legislative opportunities should be taken to repeal Sections 48, 49 and 50 of the Education Act 2005.^{43,44} In England, Section 48 applies to academies through their funding agreement with the Secretary of State. While in theory, such agreements can be changed without legislation, from the standpoint of democratic legitimacy it would be preferable to make this change alongside the legislative repeal of Section 48.

2. OFSTED OR ESTYN TO INSPECT RE IN ALL SCHOOLS

Even while religiosity inspections continue, ensuring that religion education in all schools is inspected to secular standards would strengthen its academic legitimacy and separate the subject from faith formation. The UK and Welsh governments should extend Ofsted and Estyn's responsibilities to include religious education in all state schools.

3. STOP GRANTS

As noted above, the Department for Education can save in the region of three quarters of a million pounds a year by ending grants for religiosity inspections. While such inspections continue, it would then be up to the religious bodies to decide the extent to which they wish to subsidise them.

4. GUIDANCE ON THIRD PARTY INSPECTIONS

Freed from a legal duty to carry out religiosity inspections, the governing bodies of schools may continue to engage with a variety of third-party inspection and accreditation regimes. Ideally such inspections should be required to be aligned with a legitimate educational function. Guidance should ensure that best practices follow and that such inspections or accreditations do not conflict with schools' educational function.⁴⁵

5. STRENGTHEN OFSTED AND ESTYN INSPECTIONS

Mainstream inspections can be strengthened to ensure that schools are promoting an appropriate and inclusive community ethos and that religious education is not being used for faith formation or promotion.

⁴³ Section 49 deals with procedure for inspections under section 48 and would therefore be redundant.

⁴⁴ The Welsh Senedd has this power with relation to Section 50 through Section 62 of the same act.

⁴⁵ While the governing bodies of schools should be given considerable leeway in determining this, we would not consider the promotion of a religious ethos to be a legitimate educational purpose.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

For more information on the issues raised in this report and to help bring about these policy recommendations, please visit <http://www.secularism.org.uk/religiosity-inspections>. There you will find information on how you can:

1. Bring this report to the attention of your MS or MP

The website has template letters for you to write to your MP or MS about Section 48 and 50 inspections and to share a copy of this report.

2. Speak to your governing body

If you are part of a school (a parent, teacher, pupil or governor) which has religiosity inspections, speak to your governing body about what policy they have, or might have, in place to ensure that these inspections do not undermine the school's inclusion or educational aims. You might wish to discuss how the school responds to any recommendations from such assessments which might be inappropriate.

3. Speak to your professional organisation

If you work in education then ask your professional organisation to support an end to religiosity inspections.

4. Share your experience

If you are part of a school (a parent, teacher, pupil or governor) which has religious inspections, particularly where there has been a pressure to promote a more rigorous religious ethos, please share your story to help our campaign and others in a similar situation.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY


The National Secular Society promotes an inclusive model of secularism with the separation of religion and state and equal respect for everyone's human rights, so that no one is either advantaged or disadvantaged on account of their beliefs. We are a non-party-political organisation with members and supporters from a broad spectrum of beliefs and backgrounds.


This report was made possible by supporters of the National Secular Society and with help from members of the Secular Education Forum (SEF). The SEF provides expert advice and opinion to the NSS on issues related to education and serves as a network for supporters with expertise in the intersection of education and secularism.


Published by National Secular Society
Dutch House, 307–308 High
Holborn, London WC1V 7LL


Company limited by guarantee.
Registered in England No. 1418145


November 2020

 www.secularism.org.uk

 admin@secularism.org.uk

 [@NatSecSoc](https://twitter.com/NatSecSoc)

 facebook.com/NationalSecularSociety

 020 7404 3126