

Church schools: Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS), the locally agreed syllabus and Understanding Christianity

The diocese of Lichfield have received several requests for clarification on a number of issues around Religious Education (RE) in Church schools and the requirements of SIAMS. This paper seeks to clarify the situation.

Religious Education in any Church school should be non-confessional and delivered in a critical, objective and pluralistic manner. Above all it should be characterised by high quality learning and should be taught by teachers who are supported by access to professional development (CPD) and high quality resources. It should help pupils know and understand about Christianity as a living world faith, it should explore the core theological concepts of Christianity in a way that critically engages with biblical text. It should help pupils develop their knowledge and understanding of a range of religions and world views. It should provide a safe space to critically reflect on their own religious, spiritual and/or philosophical convictions.

What RE syllabus should Church schools be following?

All Church schools are strongly advised to take note of the Church of England Education Office [RE Statement of Entitlement](#)

Voluntary Controlled (VC) schools are required to follow the locally agreed syllabus that will have been drawn up by their local Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE). It is important to be clear of the difference between the syllabus and any advisory programmes of study or schemes of work that have been developed, purchased or recommended to support the syllabus. These resources are often useful, but it is the syllabus that must be followed not the schemes of work which are optional.

In Voluntary Aided (VA) schools it is for the governors to decide the RE curriculum, but this should be in accordance with the school's trust deed and diocesan guidance should be sought. In some cases, the diocesan team may recommend a diocesan syllabus but in recent years some have advocated the use of the relevant locally agreed syllabus plus additional teaching on Christianity (additionality).

Church academies

In the last decade the school landscape has changed dramatically with many schools becoming academies. This can result in the status of RE being misunderstood. Academies and free schools are independent of local authority control and are not required to follow the national curriculum or the local authority RE syllabus. They can set their own curriculum or embrace a syllabus with a different approach if they wish. This means they can adopt any RE curriculum they deem appropriate, but it must reflect *'that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teachings and practices of the other principal religious traditions present in Great Britain'*¹. In practice many continue to use the locally agreed syllabus.

¹ *Education Reform Act 1988* Available at www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/contents

When a Church school becomes an academy the provision for RE in schools will be determined by the academy's funding agreement. In most cases the 'as is' principle will apply particularly for inspection purposes. So, if the academy was a VA school it will be treated as a VA school for SIAMS and if it was a VC school previously it will be formally inspected as a VC school. Very occasionally a school might seek to change its status prior to academisation. For new start Church academies, their status will have been decided in their funding agreement.

This means that for VA schools that are now academies the situation remains much the same, but VC schools now enjoy the same curriculum freedoms as non-church academies so are free to follow diocesan guidance on RE. It is important to note that if a Church school has joined a non-Church school led multi-academy trust (MAT) these provisions still apply.

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS)

Under the statutory process sometimes known as denominational or Section 48 inspection all Church of England schools receive a SIAMS inspection roughly every five years. In all Church schools SIAMS will make a judgement about '*How effective is the school's distinctive Christian vision, established and promoted by leadership at all levels, in enabling pupils and adults to flourish?*' This is explored through seven strands of which RE is one.

In all Church schools SIAMS will expect that RE is non-confessional, is considered an academic study and that it reflects the Church of England RE Statement of Entitlement. In VC schools' inspectors will consider the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus but will also be looking at the way the school is ensuring effective provision and CPD and so expressing the commitment to RE in the school's Christian vision. In VA schools an extra and separate judgement is given for '*How effective is RE teaching and learning in the school?*' In VC schools, however judgements about teaching and learning in RE remain the remit of Ofsted. Ofsted don't, however, make judgements about individual subjects and so teaching and learning in RE will contribute to the overall inspection findings.

Understanding Christianity SIAMS and the locally agreed syllabus.

Understanding Christianity is a resource not a curriculum. It explores the core concepts of the Christian narrative through an enquiry approach called Text-Impact-Connections. It is compatible with any agreed syllabus that is reflecting '*that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teachings and practices of the other principal religious traditions present in Great Britain*'. Estimates suggest it is being used in over 4000 Church schools to support teaching about Christianity. Using Understanding Christianity can help ensure that the RE requirements of SIAMS are met but the use of Understanding Christianity or any other particular resource is not a requirement of SIAMS.

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