

Advice to Church of England Schools regarding magic, witchcraft, and Halloween

Occasionally schools receive concerns from Christian groups or individual parents and carers regarding references that may have been made within school to magic and witchcraft. It should be recognised that where the school has a religious foundation this issue can be particularly sensitive.

This guidance has been written to support leaders and governors should such concerns arise. It is hoped you will find it both informative and a useful tool in aiding discussions around the relevant issues as well as support in any decision-making processes.

References to witchcraft and magic in books

Within the Bible witchcraft and magic are viewed as examples of pagan religion and therefore a breach of the commandments to honour God. Some Christians and groups would therefore be opposed to any acknowledgement of witchcraft/magic in any form within texts for children. This would include the reading of children's fiction depicting witches such as 'The Worst Witch' or the 'Harry Potter' series of children's books. This, if held, is a respectable and sincere view and should be treated as such, despite it not being a view held by most members of the Church of England. However, governors and senior leaders should avoid over reaction or an excessive response to such a view being expressed.

Requests to remove all books and materials that contain reference to magic would be impractical and inappropriate and not supported by the Diocesan Board of Education (DBE). Literature and art, which includes reference to witchcraft and magic have been longstanding features in British culture and education. As with all literature, materials used should be appropriate for children's ages and schools should make professional judgements about the appropriateness of any texts mentioning witches or witchcraft on the same basis as they would for any other materials.

Halloween

Halloween celebrations are increasingly becoming part of British secular culture. However, many Christian groups, including churches and individual parents and carers regard any involvement by adults or children in Halloween celebrations as dangerous. They hold the view that such involvement encourages a trivial approach to the occult and occult practices, including violence and abuse. Whilst this is not a view held by all Christians it must be recognised as an increasingly popular and legitimate one. As such, schools need to deal sensitively with the genuine and deeply held views by parents and groups in their local community. Many Christians claim any celebration of Halloween, which is increasingly being claimed as a pagan festival, as unhelpful or inappropriate in a church school context.

The DBE would discourage schools from organising or engaging with Halloween based activities in their communities. Halloween does not reflect All Hallows Eve (31 October), the night before All Saints Day (01 November.) All Saints Day is a major Christian festival within the Anglican tradition and as such the DBE would expect it to be recognised and celebrated in Church of England schools. The emphasis therefore ought to fall on the positive celebration of these two days rather than on the secular recognition of Halloween. This should be done in a way that respects the beliefs of all children and promotes their positive development.

The traditions of Halloween, alongside the recent influence of American practices (in particular 'trick or treating' and the threat these pose to elderly or isolated peoples) as well as the commercial exploitation and manipulation of children's fascination with 'magic' are issues the school should raise in appropriate ways as part of children's social, moral and cultural development.

There is an increasing culture of churches and other Christian groups offering alternative celebration events in place of Halloween activities. Many churches and cathedrals run 'Light' parties for children and families in the community. The DBE would encourage schools to be involved in such positive events in collaboration and partnership with the local church.