

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

### Introduction

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 supporting decision-making processes. Church schools should make decisions about curriculum content, enrichment activities and celebrations in the light of their Christian vision and values. Leaders should be able to articulate how any activity contributes to the flourishing of pupils and reflects the school's foundation as a church school.

Schools should also recognise that pupils and families may hold differing beliefs and practices regarding Halloween and related celebrations. Any approach adopted by the school should be sensitive, inclusive and respectful of the diversity of views represented within the school community.

### 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 or 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 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 overreaction or an excessive response to such a view being expressed.

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

Teaching about beliefs, traditions, myths, legends, literature or cultural practices that include references to magic, witchcraft or the supernatural does not constitute endorsement of those beliefs or practices. Church schools have a responsibility to provide pupils with opportunities to engage critically and thoughtfully with a wide range of literature, cultures and worldviews. Where concerns are raised by parents or carers, schools should seek to listen carefully, explain the educational rationale for their decisions and maintain respectful dialogue. Schools should avoid unnecessary conflict whilst exercising their professional responsibility for curriculum design and delivery.

### 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 inappropriate. They may believe that such involvement encourages a trivial approach to the occult, themes of fear and aspects of the supernatural. Whilst this is not a view held by all Christians; it should be recognised as a genuinely held and legitimate perspective. As such, schools need to deal sensitively with the views of parents,

carers and groups within their local community. Many Christians consider the celebration of Halloween to be unhelpful or inappropriate within a church school context.

Derby DBE would generally discourage schools from organising or promoting Halloween-themed activities. Halloween does not reflect the Christian significance of All Hallows' Eve (31 October), the eve of All Saints' Day (01 November). All Saints' Day is a major Christian festival within the Anglican tradition and, as such, Derby DBE would expect it to be recognised and celebrated in Church of England schools. The emphasis should therefore fall on the positive celebration of these 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. Schools may wish to explore educational opportunities arising from All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day through collective worship, Religious Education and reflective activities. Themes might include remembrance, courage, faithfulness, service, hope, community and the example of Christians past and present.

The traditions of Halloween, together with the influence of commercialised Halloween activities and themes of fear, horror and the supernatural, provide opportunities for discussion as part of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Schools should encourage pupils to think critically about cultural traditions, commercial influences and the messages conveyed by contemporary celebrations. Schools should consider the age-appropriateness of activities, costumes, imagery and themes. Leaders should exercise professional judgement to ensure that activities do not cause unnecessary anxiety, fear or distress for pupils.

There is an increasing culture of churches and other Christian organisations offering alternative celebration events in place of Halloween activities. Many churches and cathedrals run "Light Parties" or similar events for children and families in the community. Derby DBE would encourage schools, where appropriate, to support and engage with such positive opportunities in collaboration and partnership with their local church.

### **The Role of Governors**

Governors should ensure that decisions regarding celebrations, events, curriculum materials and school traditions are consistent with the school's Christian foundation, vision and values, whilst meeting statutory requirements and respecting the diversity of the school community. Governors should provide appropriate challenge and support to school leaders, ensuring that decisions in these areas contribute to the flourishing of all pupils and uphold the distinctive Christian character of the school.

### **Conclusion**

Derby Diocesan Board of Education encourages church schools to approach this area with wisdom, sensitivity and confidence. Schools should be rooted in their Christian vision, respectful of differing views and focused on promoting the flourishing of all pupils. Where alternative celebrations or learning opportunities are offered, these should emphasise hope, light, community, remembrance and the values at the heart of the Christian faith.