

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Northumberland Church of England Academy	
Academy Road, Ashington NE63 9FZ	
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Diocese	Newcastle
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Date of academy conversion	2009
Name of multi-academy trust / federation	N/A
Date/s of inspection	19 & 20 September 2017
Date of last inspection	July 2012
Type of school and unique reference number	Academy 135886
Executive director	Andrew Day
Inspectors' names and numbers	Jo Fageant 104 Lyn Field 151

School context

Established in 2009, The Northumberland Church of England Academy (NCEA) is sponsored by the Diocese of Newcastle Diocesan Board of Education and the Duke of Northumberland's Charity. The NCEA provides for over 2,500 pupils from 2-19 years of age in seven campuses but operates as a single academy.

The campuses are located on five sites, some of which serve areas that are among the most deprived in the country. The Josephine Butler primary and secondary campuses share a site in Ashington with The Centre, an all age school for pupils with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties (SLD and PMLD). Four further primary campuses are located in Ashington (Thomas Bewick and James Knott), in Lynemouth (William Leech) and in Newbiggin-by-the-Sea (Grace Darling).

The vast majority of pupils are of White British heritage and around half are eligible for free school meals. In the mainstream campuses, a significant proportion enter school with lower prior attainment than is expected.

The NCEA is led by an executive director and a team of three principal directors for primary, secondary and The Centre. In addition, there is a leader for each primary campus, a vice principal for the sixth form, a director of Early Years and a chaplain.

The academy is located in three ecclesiastical parishes. Two of these are currently without a vicar and in the third the vicar is shortly due to retire.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of the Northumberland Church of England Academy as a Church of England school are good

- Constant application of the biblically inspired vision of life in all its fulness and everyone letting their light shine has a transformational impact on pupils, staff and local communities.
- A distinctively Christian understanding of the LIGHT values (love, inclusivity, goodness, hope and truth) is deeply embedded and shapes policy and practice.
- Pupils enter the primary campuses with skills well below what are typical for their age. The academy makes highly effective use of its Christian ethos to nurture pupils and attend to their wellbeing so that they attend school regularly and learn well. As a result, pupils make good progress in line with schools nationally and are now entering the secondary phase better equipped to tackle the demands of the curriculum. However, this had not been the case long enough to raise pupils' achievement at GCSE in 2017 and this continued to be well below schools nationally. Current data indicates that pupils in Key Stage 4 are making better progress as they approach GCSE examinations.
- The benefit of being an all-age academy is multifaceted, particularly in the development of Christian leadership exemplified throughout the academy and in the wider community and in the coherence of Christian vision and worship supported by the chaplain.
- The presence of The Centre at the heart of the academy richly demonstrates and develops the values of inclusivity and hope.
- The impressive range of opportunities offered to pupils beyond their lessons, for example music, sport and the Combined Cadet Force (CCF), is life-changing and fulfils the original Christian vision of the academy in serving this community and unlocking the potential of young people.

Areas to improve

- Improve the precision of the milestones and intended outcomes of action planning so that these provide a robust tool for governors in holding leaders to account for the rate of progress as a church school.
- In the secondary phase, develop a stable model of staffing, curriculum and assessment in religious education (RE), guided by effective leadership, to ensure pupils continue the good progress they make in their learning in the primary phase into and throughout the secondary years.
- Develop the skills of staff and students in leading worship as a natural progression of their current roles in planning and evaluation.
- Develop pupils' skills in personal reflection and use of silence so that they can independently make full and consistent use of the time in worship and in the reflection spaces throughout the academy.

The school, through its distinctive Christian character, is good at meeting the needs of all learners

The commitment of the academy to the biblically inspired ideals of life in all its fullness and encouraging everyone to let their light shine is evident everywhere. Pupils of all ages are familiar with the belief that they can 'shine'. The Christian values summarised in the acronym LIGHT, together with the visual image of a lighthouse, can be seen everywhere as a constant reminder of this defining ethos. It creates a sense of positivity demonstrated in the often quoted, 'I can't do it yet'. Pupils access and enjoy a wide range of curricular and extra-curricular opportunities that broaden their horizons. The values help them understand what they can achieve, enabling them to shine in different ways. The academy's investment in music is one noteworthy example. Through learning to play the recorder and another instrument in Key Stage 2, all pupils develop the discipline of playing in groups. They learn the skills of listening, patience, performing and concentration through this provision, even those who choose not to continue with instrumental playing in later years. Pupils who from Year 8 on choose to join the academy's CCF also develop skills such as self-discipline and leadership that serve them well in their academic learning and beyond the demands of the academy. Some have shown their determination and perseverance in working towards Duke of Edinburgh and prestigious first aid awards. Others have demonstrated their reliability playing in the pipe band and/or performing as buglers servicing local remembrance and other celebrations at home and abroad. The investment in sports provision throughout the age ranges also develops qualities and skills, for example self-confidence and cooperation that serve pupils well in other contexts. Their understanding of the value of these opportunities is clear when pupils talk of 'time to show a different side to yourself', 'gain the confidence to tackle new experiences', 'manage your own anger' and 'feel part of something bigger and special'.

The ideals of 'inspiring achievement' and encouraging the 'light' of each individual are all pervasive, for individual pupils, members of staff and campuses within the context of the whole 'family'. Careful tracking of each pupil's wellbeing and academic progress through centralised records and regular meetings enables the academy to celebrate, challenge and support appropriately. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in The Centre. Here learning is personalised so all pupils make progress in relation to their particular learning and social challenges. A powerful example is seen in the way a small number of these pupils are included in some mainstream lessons. This enables their particular interests and talents to be developed in ways that excite them. In addition, their inclusion in lessons releases new and different levels of kindness in their peers. In order to provide children with a good start, the academy has provision for two year olds. Achievement across the primary phase, including Early Years, shows year on year improvement apart from a dip in performance in 2016. In all key areas national expectations are at least achieved and in many instances exceeded. Gaps in the progress of different groups are successfully being closed. Staff are fully aware of areas, for example writing, that need special attention going forward. Academic and vocational results in the sixth form are good, enabling pupils to access university places, in almost all cases their first choice, and good apprenticeships. GCSE results in Key Stage 4 represent a more varied picture. Results for 2017, that at the time of the inspection had not been validated, showed that in some key subjects pupils' attainment and progress fell significantly short both of what the academy expected and of national averages. This has prompted a thorough review of examination preparation, marking and the tracking of progress.

The importance given to the values of inclusivity, love and hope is seen in the academy's approach to attendance and exclusion. Alternative provision is devised for pupils who might otherwise be excluded. They remain within the academy family whilst their education continues separate from other pupils. Provision in an outside area at the Josephine Butler campus is also available for primary pupils who, for a variety of reasons at different times, benefit from alternative activities. Tireless efforts to build relationships with individuals and communities result in good levels of attendance. Specially designed spaces and adults with specialist skills enable pupils to seek and find, throughout the academy, support to overcome emotional, social and learning difficulties. This is an illustration of the good awareness which exists about the importance of mental health issues. In all these, and other contexts, the academy's values and ideals give rise to bespoke support for each individual. Pupils appreciate the lessons they learn from them about the treatment of others and the importance of second chances. They give rise to behaviour which is generally good and problems are dealt with in the spirit of restorative justice. The impact of this understanding is seen in the reduced figures for youth crime in the area. Pupils express their gratitude for what the academy gives them in many generous examples of charitable fundraising and social action. Raising money for the homeless, in response to a book they were reading, by pupils in the alternative provision is just one example.

Pupils are keen to accept leadership responsibilities that equip them to make a difference in society. A powerful illustration of this is the initiative taken by the secondary Anne Frank ambassadors. The resources they created about homophobic bullying were acknowledged to be eye-opening and language-challenging by

other pupils. Reminiscent of the parable of the talents, primary pupils take on enterprise challenges to make and sell items at the annual Christmas fayre. They then enjoy helping to decide how profits will be spent.

Against a backdrop of significant deprivation and unemployment, pupils' aspirations are raised through encounters and funding made possible by the academy. Senior students have inspiring opportunities to learn about unexpected employment opportunities in the local area. They also hear motivational presentations from people who are simply enthusiastic about their jobs to illustrate the belief that whatever people do for a living can be fulfilling for them and enrich their communities. Subsidised trips to Kenya, South Africa, Botswana and a partner school in Korea, to name just a few, help participating pupils gain an understanding of the world's diversity and different ways of living. Pupils understand the value of learning about religious diversity in RE and through encounters such as with the 'Pearl of Africa' choir. Through all these, and many other experiences, pupils' moral, social and cultural awareness is enriched. They grow in their understanding of the many different ways in which individuals everywhere can let their light shine.

Staff acknowledge that opportunities for spiritual development are not always explicitly evident in planning. However, as a consequence of training, their shared understanding together with the deeply embedded ideals and LIGHT values mean they can readily identify numberless examples of relevant high quality provision. For example, in secondary science pupils are surrounded by stimulating displays that constantly draw out spiritual, moral and ethical threads in topics that motivate pupils to see the subject in a broader context. The provision for personal, social, health and careers education (PSHCE) throughout the academy is well planned and led, ensuring its positive contribution to personal wellbeing and spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

The development of distinctively Christian worship has played a key role in shaping the ethos of each campus. It has brought a completely new purpose to coming together each day and a real sense of 'collective' worship as a community event at the heart of academy life. As it has evolved, leaders and the chaplain in particular have constantly emphasised the inclusive nature of worship by inviting those present to engage in prayer or reflection. This invitational approach has proved an important strategy in making the transition from non-church schools to a single church academy. In the last two years the pace of development has increased achieving greater cohesion across the seven campuses. The reasons for this improvement lie in the greater sharing of expertise among staff, the quality of strategic planning at primary level and the initiatives to involve pupils in planning and evaluation. Priority is given to the time allocated for worship, including in the secondary phase where examinations and administrative matters are not allowed to interrupt the daily rhythm of worship. In the primary phase, adults are equal worshippers alongside pupils and provide excellent role models creating a real sense of joy and enthusiasm for the occasion. At secondary level, a few staff are present but are less engaged. However, projected images, worship tables, Christian art, the use of Anglican responses and the orderly, respectful entry to worship are common features that define this time as a distinctive and spiritual element in the academy day.

Under the close eye of the chaplain, her regular presence and step by step guidance, a tangible confidence and belief in the importance of worship have emerged. Each campus draws on the expertise and richness that has developed on other sites. In particular, exemplary and creative practice in The Centre uses music and visual images to 'signpost' worship. This enables pupils with multiple and profound needs to access and enjoy spiritual activities in a way that is totally appropriate to their skills and needs.

Pupils and staff see time spent in worship as worthwhile because it prompts them to 'reflect on life as well as seek an inner peace'. It deepens their understanding of the academy's LIGHT values by consistently exploring them from a biblical perspective. Themes are made relevant to all ages because pupils have a say in their selection when LIGHT ambassadors and worship mentors meet with senior leaders and the chaplain to review and determine the topics. On the Thomas Bewick campus, for example, the review of worship revealed a certain amount of repetition as different worship leaders addressed the same agreed theme. In response to this, each week now begins with a discovery act of worship where the theme is revealed and pupils share their thoughts and questions. In the secondary campus, themes are given a contemporary context with frequent links to current affairs and social justice that regularly prompt pupils to volunteer for charity work and support community events. The delivery is well matched to pupils' different stages of maturity, especially through the material for follow-up in tutor time. This is properly understood by staff because of the support provided by the head of RE and weekly briefings by the chaplain. The termly Eucharist for staff is well attended by those confident in their own faith and of no faith because of the loyalty and respect that has grown for the chaplain and the Christian character of the academy.

Pupils are not all familiar with the term Trinity but have some measure of understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit appropriate to their ages. This is because they draw on their secure knowledge of the titles given to Jesus and the key Christian beliefs concerning the festivals of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. The skills of enquiry they learn in RE enable pupils to raise their own questions about the person of Jesus as seen during the inspection at the William Leech campus.

Prayer is established in the daily life of the academy and at its core is Morning Prayer in the chapel. This is attended by a few staff but known to all as a time when the community and individuals are held before God. Staff are offered prayer responsibilities and one teacher said she prays every day for the primary phase since being given a card suggesting that as her focus. All pupils are familiar with the academy prayer that is widely used on a daily basis. Primary pupils make regular use of prayer trees to express their own thoughts but, overall, the opportunities for pupils to lead prayer publicly or to pursue prayer privately are less well developed. Although time for silent reflection is suggested in worship, too little time is then allocated so pupils' skills in making use of stillness and meditation are not developed. Classroom reflection areas are still evolving and vary in how well they directly engage pupils in personal reflection. However, some shining examples exist of areas that work well and excite pupils' curiosity and exploration of SMSC issues. The reflection area in Year 6 at William Leech is exceptionally well used because it is given a regular and high profile within classroom routines with both global and personal topics running concurrently.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good

This is because RE leaders use a combination of syllabuses to create enquiry-focused learning through which pupils gain a secure understanding of Bible narratives and aspects of Christianity and other world faiths. They develop skills of interpretation, evaluation and reflection. Pupils engage well with the themes studied, understanding their relevance to the world in which they live. A good example of this is the Year 8 exploration of Islam through a questioning consideration of how it is portrayed in the media. Portfolios of photographs and other records show that pupils in The Centre engage well through rich multi-sensory experiences and the good use of stories. Similar approaches also help to familiarise even the two year olds and Early Years children across the academy with key stories and festivals. For all learners, exploring the chosen themes and being challenged to develop and express their own ideas enriches their SMSC development.

A particularly effective contribution to the academy's efforts to improve teaching and learning in RE has been the analysis of the confidence and subject expertise of teachers in the primary phase. With an accurate understanding of this context, and the support of senior leaders across the phase, the lead teacher provides highly valued support. Working alongside colleagues in lessons and modelling outstanding planning and teaching ensures that all teachers are able to provide high quality learning experiences for their pupils. The excellent simulated Passover meal observed during the inspection was just one example. Teachers' understanding of the well-organised programme of study ensures that they can draw on pupils' prior learning as they move through individual units. A recently established new system to track pupils' progress means there is a consistent approach and understanding throughout the primary phase. Moderation and record keeping are of the highest standard. Pupils make good progress in their RE learning, attaining at least expected standards in the primary phase.

Learners benefit when the lead teachers in the primary and secondary phases work together on some shared initiatives, for example, the gradual introduction of units from the innovative 'Understanding Christianity' resource. Both have made good use of external training available from the diocese, 'Barnabas' and The National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE). As a consequence, they are well informed about local and national developments relating to the subject. However, best use is not made of the school's all-through context, either in terms of course content or assessment records, to provide a coherent RE learning journey through the age groups.

Highly valued planning, resources and individualised support are provided by the RE specialist teacher in the secondary phase to others who teach the subject throughout Years 7-11. However, its impact on the quality of RE teaching across the team is not monitored. In addition, the makeup of the team changes year on year so no lasting benefit is derived from the expertise these teachers are able to develop. However, pupils retain their interest in RE throughout the secondary phase and they have the opportunity to study for GCSE and A level examinations. However, changes in course arrangements mean very few pupils are currently studying for an externally accredited examination. The core RE course in Key Stage 4 engages pupils with topics which stimulate their interest. They enjoy wrestling with big religious and ethical questions which they see as relevant to their lives. Year 9 pupils benefit from working towards the Archbishop of York's Young Leader's Award. They identify the links between the skills they develop and the school's LIGHT values with ease. Initiatives they take on this course not only demonstrate their teamwork, leadership abilities and sense of

service but also enrich their communities. Sixth form conference days which address RE related topics develop pupils' understanding about intriguing questions and important aspects of modern life. However, there is no systematic assessment of the progress pupils make in their learning from Year 9 onwards. As a result, it is impossible to ensure that planning leads to lessons that are appropriately challenging for all groups.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the school as a church school is good

The original vision of the sponsors was for the academy to be a catalyst for change by showing Christianity in action both within the academy and in the communities it serves. This vision remains unchanged because of the deep commitment of governors representing the sponsors. They rigorously scrutinise any proposals for change and question whether plans are morally defensible and adhere to the original vision. This balance of conviction and compassion in governance has been expertly modelled by the outgoing chair and the calibre of her work. The formation of a standards committee and a formal agreement with the diocese to provide specialist support in improving academic performance indicate a sharper focus on pupils' achievement. Overall, leaders have an accurate knowledge of this area but in 2017 predictions underestimated the demands of the new examination format and GCSE results continued to fall short of expectations. Results in Early Years, primary and sixth form were strong. It demonstrates that when pupils have started their education in a context where the Christian vision shapes their whole experience, they flourish.

The executive director holds a strong Christian faith and this ensures the integrity with which the academy is led. He has overseen the embedding of the Christian vision in all campuses since his appointment. Central to this has been the appointment of the chaplain who has been instrumental in this vision. Her role extends well beyond sustaining the prayer life of the academy to inducting new staff and living a life of service in the community. For all these things she is held in the highest regard. Her regular presence in all campuses aids transition for staff, students and parents. This is one example of how everyone benefits from belonging to an all-age community. It affords opportunities for staff to move easily between campuses to gain experience of different leadership roles and this underpins the highly effective succession planning for Christian leadership in the primary phase. The unbroken transition through their education for pupils in The Centre is of huge value to parents and for particular pupils it offers the chance to learn and join activities alongside their mainstream peers.

The re-launch of a reduced number of LIGHT values in 2015 proved to be a rejuvenation of the Christian ethos. Campuses operate in different ways but the LIGHT values 'drew a mark in the sand' and provided a common language by which leaders promote and live out the vision. It is, therefore, understood and regularly spoken about across the whole academy community and this is a feature of exemplary practice as a church school. 'Inclusivity' is deeply important and from its inception enabled Jehovah's Witness pupils at the James Knott campus to wear a modified uniform badge in keeping with their beliefs. Pupils' unequivocal view of their peers in The Centre is, 'You can't leave people out in society and it certainly doesn't happen here; we just treat them as one of us.' Similarly, the endless attention of staff in The Centre to the needs of their pupils is commonly perceived as the living embodiment of God's love.

The arrangements for RE and collective worship meet statutory requirements. The academy has addressed the issues raised by the last SIAS inspection with the result that both areas have a high profile from nursery to sixth form. Key departments are now entirely staffed with specialists in the secondary phase but this does not yet apply to all subjects and particularly not to RE. However, the expansion of middle leadership is beginning to improve the depth at which the academy is addressing specific aspects of its provision. The RE leaders at primary and secondary levels have both been supported through a leadership pathway qualification. The primary lead has then been deployed across the primary campuses. This investment in her inspirational support for other teachers has grown confidence and consistency in primary RE, resulting in standards that compare well with the expectations of the syllabuses the academy uses.

Strategic planning by the skilled team of principal directors shows a clear understanding of where action is needed to sustain the pace of development as a church academy. The new mapping structure is helpful to leaders at all levels to see their role in overall improvement. Campus leaders are very positive about being part of a larger body whilst having considerable and appropriate autonomy. Sharing the ideas that each has for their context enriches the whole academy whilst allowing each campus to retain its identity. Improvements to action planning have strengthened the cycle of self-evaluation. It is more systematic and pays better attention to identifying milestones as an important tool for governors in monitoring and holding leaders to account for the pace of progress. However, not all plans are sharp enough in identifying the desired impact of actions through precise success criteria at the planning and review stages.

This is an outward looking academy led by an executive headteacher who constantly forges partnerships at local, diocesan and national level. These underpin the curriculum initiatives that change pupils' lives. Academy

leaders pay serious attention to Church of England initiatives and take advantage of diocesan training and national conferences to keep abreast of developments. The Academy serves communities with deep-seated generational traditions many of which have found it hard to accept the Christian status of the academy. However, relationships established between clergy and campus leaders have enabled them to stand together in serving families at the point of need and through the 'Christian practice that is how we are with everyone'. One clear impact of this is the vast improvement in parental engagement and the degree of trust that now exists. Grace Darling at Newbiggin is an excellent example of a productive partnership with the church. It has set up a toddler group where members of the church (Church Mice), who already have an active mentoring role in school, are also working with specialist staff to improve the pace at which two year olds develop their speech and language in preparation for nursery. Parishes are now in a period with no clergy in post. There is no overall plan for how the church might support schools although Grace Darling campus (where the Methodist church already leads Christmas and Easter 'journeys') is in contact with the new Methodist minister to maintain a church presence in the school. The academy, therefore, continues to be the catalyst for change in local communities inspired by the Christian commitment of its leaders and the presence and guidance of the chaplain.

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