



School Admissions round 2020/21

Guidance for Priests on providing evidence of Catholic Practice on Supplementary Information Forms following the Coronavirus outbreak.

Context:

There have been questions from priests, parents/guardians and schools about how to best process the Supplementary Information Forms (SIF), sometimes referred to as the Priest's Reference Form, after church closures during the Covid 19 lockdown. There may need to be some adaptations to how priests process these forms in the 2020/21 admissions round while continuing to maintain fairness in the admissions procedures. It would be unfair to applicants if a priest in one parish feels unable sign a SIF in this context while priest from a different parish has a process for signing the forms. The admissions process for schools has protections in law to ensure fair access and consistent application of schools' admissions procedures. Where schools are likely to be oversubscribed with Catholic children, and the governors require evidence of practice of the faith, priests have an essential role in providing, to the best of their ability, the evidence required to assist governors apply their oversubscription criteria fairly.

Important reminder: Legislation requires that information provided on the SIF is the only evidence that can be used by governors to rank applications for offering school places. Governors cannot consider information provided in letters or other forms of communication.

Safety Issues:

Quite rightly, priests will want to maintain their own health and well-being. Although aspects of social distancing are being eased the coronavirus is still present in the community. Individual priests will have different concerns because of age &/or existing medical conditions.

The most common approach is for parents/guardians to meet the parish priest to get the SIF signed.

- *'Surgery' system:* In many parishes priests operate a 'surgery' system where they publish a day/time when they will be available for parents to come to the presbytery or parish office to get the SIFs signed. It may be possible to arrange presbyteries/parish offices to comply with social distancing requirements. Similarly, it may be possible arrange socially distanced meetings in the church hall or the in the church.



In such a way the process for signing SIFs will be fairly close to a 'business as usual' approach.

In parishes where the above approach is not practical the alternative options would be:

- *'Delayed paperwork' system:* Some priests have said that they now have a system that papers needing attention are stored for up to 72hrs before handling. In which case it might be appropriate for priests to announce the parish system – for example, that SIFs handed no later than Wednesdays at 6pm will be processed and ready for collection on the following Monday.
- *Delayed paperwork & priest interview:* This would include the process above and then a follow up phone or in person discussion between the priest and parents/guardians. That discussion would help the priest gain knowledge of the family's practice of the faith. Any in person discussion would need to follow social distance guidelines as referred to above.

Should a parish priest/school wish to make other arrangements they must contact the Education Commission patrickharison@rcaos.org.uk for further advice.

Evidence of Practice

The Catholic Bishops of England and Wales suspended the obligation to attend Sunday Mass at the end of March. That suspension remains in place for the time being. Parishes are gradually opening up for public Mass but it will be some time before we see full churches and resumption of the obligation. There is also understandable anxiety about the desirability of attending any building with a gathering of people at this time. Adults and children with underlying medical conditions are being still being advised not to attend Mass. This will impact on the ability/certainty of affirming that families are 'practising'.

Clearly in the current context, practice since February/March 2020 is not available and cannot be considered. However, Priests will be able to access a variety of information to support their judgement of practice over time (eg two or three years):

- Their knowledge of the family and the family's regularity of practice over time.
- An Interview (in person or by phone) with parents/guardians.
- Information from other parish clergy or staff.
- Information from priests who minister to ethnic chaplaincies and Eastern Catholic Churches.
- The 'self-declaration' made by the family on the SIF itself and then determine if that information is sufficient confirmation of regularity of practice.



To provide further clarification, we have recommended that school governors adopt the following position:

On the advice of the Education Commission of the Archdiocese of Southwark the governing body of xxxx school has agreed the following statement in order to clarify how its faith-based oversubscription criteria will be interpreted whilst churches are closed or attendance at church is not possible due to COVID19. This statement has been shared widely with parishes in order to ensure that determinations made by parish priests concerning regular practice of the faith are being made on a consistent basis.

The suspension of the obligation to attend Sunday Mass was announced on 18th March 2020 by Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. If a parent/carer attended Mass at particular parish (or parishes) prior to 18th March 2020 then they will be considered to have attended Mass in that parish (or parishes) regularly since that time. This will remain the case until the Sunday obligation is reintroduced by the Bishops.

Should further guidance be required please email patrickharrison@rcaos.org.uk

**Education Commission
Admissions Guidance – 30th July 2020**