

# SHARING THE JOURNEY

Advice for schools on  
sensitivity and awareness  
around faiths & beliefs





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## Foreword

Leeds is a wonderfully diverse city. There is a kaleidoscope of faith communities and it has been estimated that well over 100 languages are spoken in the city. We celebrate the fantastic cultural opportunities that this brings to us all.

It is our ambition that Leeds is a child friendly city and the best city in the country to grow up in. This document is an important step towards fulfilling our ambition. It is a clear and simply expressed review of some of the key beliefs and practices in different faiths of which educationalists need to be aware in the day-to-day life of their setting. It recognises that not all faiths have a homogenous set of beliefs and that school leaders and staff working in schools will be able to add their knowledge of the local context to the information provided here to best meet the needs of the young people they seek to support.

We would like to thank the people involved in the production of this document. We welcome that it has been produced in conjunction with colleagues in the neighbouring authorities of Kirklees and Calderdale. Thanks go to our local SACREs, LA officers and teachers in school who gave up their time to collaborate on this important piece of work.



Interim Director, Children & Families



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## Introduction

The wide range of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds of the children and young people attending our schools can be a great source of strength, learning and resilience. It also requires us all to be informed, sensitive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of all.

To support this work, this document offers practical advice for school leaders and teachers around areas of sensitivity to faiths and beliefs. The title, *Sharing the Journey*, reflects the importance of understanding the diverse cultures, perspectives and beliefs of pupils and staff in schools, while recognising our common human journey.

It is designed to support schools in understanding the needs of pupils from various faith communities. Linked to this, it will be helpful in developing positive and empathetic relationships with those communities too. Recognising and embracing diversity is a key objective for the success of any community. As microcosms of the wider community, schools face both challenges and opportunities to nurture respect and understanding. This advice is offered as practical support for schools in this role.

The guidance is not universal and is advice, rather than instruction. A head teacher, together with the governing body, will be best placed to understand the specific circumstances and personal context of a situation in school. This understanding will be developed through good relationships with parents and the local community. Relationships of trust are always at the heart of good practice and no amount of written advice can be a substitute. In the same way local faith communities and individual believers will vary in their approach, practice and understanding. We hope that this guidance will give some overall background and advice that will be practically helpful in schools.

Schools have daily opportunities to demonstrate a sensitive and positive approach to religious and cultural diversity to pupils, parents and carers. Schools will want to be flexible in catering for religious differences, consulting where possible with local community leaders, with parents/carers and with pupils themselves about details.

The Equality Act (2010) and the Ofsted Framework for School Inspection require all schools to promote equalities and inclusive practices. Schools cannot unlawfully discriminate against pupils because of their disability, gender, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation or gender identity. Ofsted requires all schools to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural education. The embedding of inclusive practices is predicated on the need to raise awareness and understanding amongst all and to meet the needs of all pupils, including those with a religious faith or belief.

## Key Principles

1. **Every individual is the greatest expert about what he or she believes**, and wherever possible should always be consulted first when any clarification is needed.
2. **Keep close to the local community** that is representative and reflective of the school. This helps to create a long-term context of understanding, trust and communication which can promote a more effective and speedy resolution to any issues.
3. In general, **rules should be permissive rather than restrictive**. In other words, don't ban something unless there is an important, clear, rational and practical reason for doing so.
4. **Be proactive, not reactive**, and ensure policies and approaches are in place. For example, it is better to have a school uniform policy that is inclusive and recognises the sensitivities of all faiths, rather than to be faced with an unexpected issue over an aspect of dress. Ongoing dialogue with the local community will promote sensitive handling of any issues.
5. Ensure that **awareness and sensitivity** are hallmarks of the whole school community. Cultural awareness training is an important aspect of professional competence. All staff, whether teaching or non-teaching, need to understand and own the principles of respect and be alert to the practical issues that may arise in their roles.
6. **Be wary of generalisations**. All faith communities include enormous variations in theology attitude and approach. It is very unwise to generalise about the beliefs or way of life of any religious, cultural or ethnic group. For example, not all Christians believe precisely the same; Muslim families vary in their commitment to Islamic practice; not all Hindus celebrate and worship in precisely the same way. All faiths contain different levels of commitment amongst their adherents and these need to be understood. Stereotyping members of particular religious or ethnic groups is not only offensive, but also a great mistake, since there are as many different opinions and ways of life amongst Hindus and Sikhs as among Christians of different ethnicities and religious groups. Similarly, there are as many differences between people whose ethnic origin is African Caribbean as there are between those of Irish, Scottish or English origin.
7. **Always look for advice** if needed. You can ask questions or seek advice through accredited or appropriate local community and professional channels.
8. **Be proud of the part your school plays in building harmony and understanding**. Affirming the place of belief can help to motivate and support education. The model that schools provide can also make a major contribution to the cohesion and harmony of the wider community. It is not work in isolation and is something that should be celebrated. This has been recognised in the part SMSC development plays in the Ofsted framework and the responsibility all public bodies, including schools, have for promoting equality.

# Religious Observance and Festivals

## Dates of festivals and commemorations

A calendar of religious festivals can be accessed from a range of sources including the Interfaith Network at <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/religious-festivals>. The SHAP working group has published a calendar for schools for a number of years; for details see <http://www.shapworkingparty.org.uk/calendar.html>.

Schools will wish to avoid arranging major school events on dates of religious significance so as to ensure that all pupils can participate as fully as possible in school life. It is worth remembering that the date of many religious festivals depends on the phases of the moon, for example Easter or Eid ul Fitr.

Post-adolescent Muslim boys are obliged to take part in jumu'ah prayers at midday on Friday. Some schools with a significant number of Muslim pupils finish the timetable at midday on a Friday. In this case, a broad, balanced and comprehensive curriculum must not be compromised. Alternatively it may be possible for jumu'ah prayers to take place on school premises with adequate supervision.

## Attendance – pupils

Attendance at school is a statutory requirement. Since September 2013 head teachers and principals have only been permitted to authorise leave of absence in exceptional circumstances. If a head/principal grants leave of absence, it is up to them to determine the length of time that the child can be away; previous attendance may be considered when making decisions.

It is recommended that pupils are permitted up to three days absence per year for religious observance. Where possible, this should be requested from the head teacher well in advance of the dates, though the exact timings of festivals determined by the lunar calendar may not become apparent until near the celebration. The day(s) taken as absence must be exclusively set apart for religious observance by the religious body to which the pupil's parents belong. Further specific guidance on Ramadan and Eid is provided in the section, 'Ramadan'.

## Attendance - staff

As part of the local Teachers Conditions of Service, teachers may take up to three days per year for observance of a religious ceremony. In the interests of fulfilling the academic requirements of the school and limiting unauthorised leave, no more than 2 days are permitted for any individual occasion and no more than 3 days per academic year. There is no time off in lieu for observation that falls on a weekend or a non - working day.

Support staff based in schools may be able to use annual leave, time off in lieu or flexitime to accommodate this. However, where this is not possible, for example for members of staff employed on term time only contracts, the LA advises the head teacher or line manager to grant such a request, subject to the total period of leave not exceeding three days in one school year. Any leave

granted should be on an unpaid basis unless the head teacher or line manager considers it operationally possible for the employee to work these hours at an alternative time.

Employees should provide their manager with as much notice as possible when requesting leave of absence. As some religious festivals are aligned with lunar cycles, dates can change from year to year, therefore the dates for some festivals do not become clear until quite close to the actual day. Headteachers will operate within the appropriate procedures but will feel that they can use appropriate flexibility when considering requests.

## Dress and Religious Symbols

### Uniform

Policies on school uniform are determined by the governors, giving due consideration to all involved. It is good to accommodate reasonable wishes and preferences of pupils and their parents whenever possible. Any uniform policy or dress code should be built on sensitive understanding and positive relationships with the local community.

Schools need to be aware of religious perspectives on dress codes. Modesty is a key tenet of many faith communities. This is particularly important in Islam and Muslims believe that everyone should dress with modesty. The concept of *hijab* is that girls should be covered except for their hands and faces. This can include wearing loose full-length skirts or trousers, a long-sleeved shirt and a headscarf. Schools are advised to allow this form of dress. It may wish to apply specific guidance on colour or style to fit with school uniform policy. Clothing should also conform to health and safety requirements. For example, headscarves should be safely tied in hazardous areas. Similar principles apply to head wear, such as the turban worn by Sikhs. The wearing of the niqab (full face veil) is unlikely to be appropriate in a school setting, not least because it might compromise a duty of care.

It is expected that the uniform policy is applied without discrimination. For example, where there is provision that long sleeved shirts may be allowed, this permission should apply to all pupils, regardless of religious affiliation. Some schools are moving towards gender neutral uniform policies which also avoid a boy/girl binary approach.

Care is needed around symbols used on school uniforms, particularly if these reflect a particular faith or religious perspective. Diligent consultation with parents and other stakeholders will always be appropriate.

### Religious Symbols

Pupils should be permitted to wear recognised religious symbols in a reasonable way. In some cases, these may be required as part of religious observance. For example, baptised Sikhs may wear the '5 K's as part of their religious identity and commitment. In other cases, a pupil may choose to wear a recognised symbol as a way of identifying with their faith. For example, Christians may wear a cross or crucifix. Jewish children might wear a Star of David in the same way as a Christian might wear a cross. Some Hindu children may wear Kanthi, a threaded string necklace made from basil-seed.

Whatever material they comprise, such articles as a cross, kara, amulet or tefillin, are generally regarded as religious symbols rather than as jewellery. Unless there are health and safety risks, these are generally permitted.

There is no reason to prohibit a student from growing a beard or wearing hair in a particular style if this represents commitment to a particular religious faith or tradition. Again, health and safety considerations will apply to long hair or beards in areas which are hazardous.

Sikhs who have undertaken Amrit Pahul are required to wear five symbols of their commitment, commonly called the five Ks. These include the kara (a steel bracelet, symbolising the eternal nature of God) and a kirpan (a symbol of struggle for justice and defence of the vulnerable).

Schools are advised that Sikh pupils should be permitted to wear a kara, but, as with all symbols, due importance should be given to health and safety considerations. For example, during swimming most Sikhs accept that this may be covered with a wristband. In the rare instances this is not acceptable, a practical solution may be to allow a child to swim at arm's length from others during formal swimming lessons. It is also of crucial importance that swimming staff (or other non-school staff) are aware of any issues on school trips.

Similarly, Sikh pupils may be allowed to wear a symbolic kirpan. Again health and safety is paramount, so any religious symbol must be entirely safe. In the case of a kirpan, it must be secured and not present any risk to pupils or staff. The following requirements are advised:

- The wearing of the kirpan is limited to students who have undertaken Amrit Pahul.
- There should be a written request for the child to wear a kirpan from the parents or carers.
- During PE, sport or swimming, the kirpan should be kept under clothing or carried in a secure pocket in shorts or swimming shorts.

There is no definitive rule on the size of a kirpan. For school purposes, it is suggested that a small symbolic kirpan, no more than about 10cm, acknowledges religious sensitivities but also ensures the safety of all.

Inevitably, there are some items that are more 'borderline' between religious symbols and items of important cultural identity. Some pupils from Chinese backgrounds may wear protective charms, for example a piece of jade, and although not religious artefacts these should not be treated as jewellery. In certain cultures, non-religious symbols may be worn. Where safety is an issue, pupils need not be asked to remove the items, but rather asked to tape them to the skin so as to avoid accidents. Some adornments, for example nose studs worn by girls of Asian background, are items of jewellery, in the strictest sense of the term, but wearing them is often steeped in cultural tradition and requests to remove them need to be handled sensitively and with consideration.

Notwithstanding this advice, it is for the governing body to decide the school's policy, recognising both the health and safety imperatives and importance of affirming religious expression. Where an immediate decision is required, the head teacher can use their own discretion.

Some parents and pupils will be happy for symbols to be removed for a particular reason. Where there is a strongly held principle, the key is to talk to parents over any concerns and establish a genuine conversation of respect and understanding.

### **Storage of Religious Texts and Artefacts**

All religious texts/ holy books and artefacts should be treated with respect and kept safe in an appropriate place e.g. the school library or resource area. It is important to ensure that books like the Qur'an and the Bible are not under a pile of other books/ equipment. Many schools find it useful

to place holy books on the top shelf of a display cabinet. When disposing of old books or artefacts e.g. statues then the necessary advice should be obtained. It may be helpful to contact your local place of worship to donate these books/ artefacts for appropriate disposal.

## Food

It is important that schools are sensitive to the relationship between religious beliefs and diet, and do not unintentionally discriminate against some pupils in their school meal arrangements. Schools will recognise that it is very important to ensure that no pupils struggle through the day on an unbalanced or inadequate diet. Several religions have strict restrictions relating to diet. For example, most Muslims will eat only *halal* and most Jews only *kosher* meat.

For some schools, including those with a significant number of pupils belonging to faiths that have particular food requirements, consideration should be given to offering, for example, vegetarian, halal or kosher choices.

For **Muslims**, there should be food available that is *halal*. The Arabic word *halal* means lawful. When applied to food it means that the product is lawful and permitted in Islam. Pork is prohibited and for other meat to be *halal* the animal must be slaughtered according to Islamic rites. Animals such as cows, sheep, goats, deer, moose, chickens, ducks, game birds, etc, are also halal, but they must be *zabihah* (slaughtered according to Islamic rites) in order to be suitable for consumption. During Ramadan, Muslim pupils may be fasting during the day. Pupils entitled to free school meals should be provided with a packed lunch that can be kept and taken home at the end of the day.

For **Jews**, *kosher* food should be available. The Hebrew word *kosher* means fit or proper as it relates to dietary laws, in particular that meat and dairy products should not be prepared together. It means that a given product is permitted and acceptable within Judaism. Pork is prohibited.

Many **Hindus and Sikhs** are vegetarian and may also not eat eggs. Sikhs do not eat halal meat, and where only halal meat is provided Sikh pupils may also take the vegetarian option.

**Hindus** follow a lunar calendar which is different from the Islamic lunar calendar, on special days which are dependent on the phases of the moon. On such days, there may be restrictions on the type of food eaten, whether it is cooked or not or whether it is prepared in a certain way.

Schools now generally provide regular non-meat options intended to cater for the increasing number of pupils who, for religious and non-religious reasons, are **vegetarian or vegan**. Some pupils, for example Jews and Muslims, though not vegetarian, take the vegetarian option in the absence of food that is halal or kosher.

**Rastafarians** eat only *I-tal* food. This is special food never touches chemicals or is natural and not in cans. This food is cooked, but served in the rawest form possible, without salts, preservatives, or condiments. Drinks must be natural, such as tea. Milk, coffee, and soft drinks are seen as unnatural. Pork is forbidden to Rastafarians and vegetarianism is often commended.

**Jehovah's Witnesses**, in harmony with their scriptural beliefs (Acts 15:28,29), are required to abstain from eating blood, ie blood sausage, and from animal meat if the blood has not been properly drained. Apart from this there is no restriction on what is to be eaten, and fasting is not carried out.

**Mormons** are not usually vegetarians but will eat meat sparingly, avoiding products with much blood. There is concern over the effects of stimulants, including caffeine, so Mormons will not drink tea, coffee or soft drinks (such as Cola) which contain it. Some will avoid all hot drinks. In school water, milk or fruit juice will be acceptable.

While it is important not to generalise, in **Hindu Dharma**, vegetarianism is often commended. Practice varies greatly although beef, in particular, is avoided.

All this will have implications for the supply and handling of such foods, and requires great sensitivity, knowledge and understanding. It is important that schools ensure that members of kitchen staff are trained in the preparation of food, that food is served separately, not mixed, and is labelled properly in these circumstances. This also applies to cross over usage of utensils. If colleagues understand why this is so important, they are in a better position to meet students' and families' needs.

Providing facilities for eating packed lunches can meet the needs of the strictly religious who may prefer not to eat any food prepared on the school premises.

## Fasting

Fasting is a feature of many different faiths. For example, some **Christian** pupils may fast at a number of times during a year other than ritual times. For **Hindus**, Sravan is the month of fasting (July/August) and some individuals may choose to fast at different times during this month. Many Hindus will refrain from consuming grain. The **Baha'i** period of fasting is from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> March and occurs at the same time each year. Baha'is may not take food or drink between sunrise and sunset during this period. The **Jewish** religion also follows a lunar calendar which is different from the Muslim lunar calendar. At times Jewish girls over the age of 12 and boys over the age of 13 are obliged to fast. **Muslim** pupils may fast each day between sunrise and sunset during the month of Ramadan (further detail below). African Christian community where Week-long fasting and all night prayer sessions are common in the African Christian community and fasting may also be undertaken throughout the year in African-Caribbean Christian communities.

Health and safety concerns and the school's duty of care for each child are paramount. For this reason, schools are advised to obtain written parental consent before a child is allowed to fast. It is recommended that pupils who are fasting are able to access a prayer room, or a quiet area, away from the dining room to rest if they wish. It is important that members of staff are fully briefed and know what is expected of them and that the health and safety of students is paramount in supervision. Adequate lunchtime supervision should be provided for those children who are fasting.

In PE lessons less strenuous activities may be more appropriate for pupils who are fasting. It is recommended that pupils who are fasting should not be required to attend swimming. In general terms, staff should be sensitive and be careful about activities that involve over exertion.

Where fasting is from dawn to dusk, such as during Ramadan, it means that all food preparation and consumption must take place over a few hours every evening and very early each morning. This can make it difficult for parents to attend meetings or other functions in the evenings. It is advised that schools avoid parents' meetings during this period but continue to provide close and effective home-school contact.

## Ramadan and Eid

The advice about fasting in the previous section applies to all faiths, but there are specific aspects of Ramadan which schools should consider.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the lunar Islamic calendar. It begins after the sighting of the new moon. Ramadan has particular religious importance and involves a range of religious observances, of which fasting is a main obligation. The fast lasts 29 or 30 days, depending on the sighting of the moon at the end of the fasting period. Fasting entails abstinence from food, drink, and sexual relationships between dawn and sunset each day during the month of Ramadan. In the event of illness or frailty the fast can be broken by drinking water, eating food or taking medication. Muslims who have reached puberty are required to fast during the month of Ramadan. However, parents of younger children may also wish them to observe fasting.

Schools should ensure that members of staff (including midday supervisors) are aware of the context and implications of Ramadan.

During Ramadan pupils and adults may require prayer facilities to undertake their prayer commitments during the day. Schools should make appropriately sensitive arrangements if these do not already exist. *See section on Prayer and reflection in school for further detail.* If it is not possible to make the prayers at the appointed times they can be made as soon as possible afterwards. Schools can arrange their own timetable for prayers and a prayer room can be made available at the end of the school day.

### Exams

It is inevitable that some examinations in secondary schools will take place during Ramadan. All members of staff need to be aware that some pupils may find the rigour of preparing for an examination difficult whilst fasting. Schools may wish to consider rescheduling internal examinations. Forward planning is essential and calendars of religious festivals can be accessed. A calendar of religious festivals can be accessed from a range of sources including the Interfaith Network at <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/religious-festivals> and the SHAP working group at <http://www.shapworkingparty.org.uk/calendar.html>. Schools should refer to the Assessment and Reporting Arrangements document for the key stages they teach in order to fulfil statutory requirements on external examinations.

### Celebrating Eid

Eid-ul-Fitr is the festival at the end of Ramadan and celebrates the ending of the month of fasting. This is a significant religious festival for Muslims across the world. Muslims celebrate by dressing in their finest clothes, gathering for a special congregational Eid prayer, and greet each other with the greeting 'Eid Mubarak' ('Eid blessings'). During this time, they will also visit their relatives, share

meals and give gifts. It is a special occasion for children who will be treated with new clothes and gifts.

It is recommended that pupils are permitted to take a day's authorised absence for religious observance at Eid-ul-Fitr and up to another 2 days at Eid-ul-Adha, a total of up to three days per year. Pupil attendance during this week may be unpredictable, as different communities may celebrate Eid on different days.

Where necessary, important school events for pupils, parents or staff, such as career interviews, parents' or open evenings, staff training days, should not be arranged for this week. The days allowed may not be carried over if Eid falls over the weekend.

### **Communication with parents**

It is recommended that schools set out their policy for holidays for religious observance in their school prospectus and arrangements for Ramadan to parents in advance.

## Opportunities for Prayer and Reflection

For many pupils, the opportunity to practice their faith in accordance with certain religious principles is an important aspect of everyday life. For example, many Muslim families may expect their children from the age of puberty to pray at certain times of the day and to wash before doing so. Church schools may lay aside a specific space as a chapel.

If possible, it is highly recommended that a quiet room or area should be set aside for reflection and prayer for all pupils. This can accommodate specific prayer requirements at certain times but generally this space should be open to pupils and staff of all faiths and none. There are no specific requirements, but it needs to be clean, practical and simple.

Schools will need to arrange effective but light-touch supervision, in the form of a responsible adult, but not necessarily a teacher. The provision of a quiet room will provide space for general reflection and contribute to the opportunities for SMSC development if it is used proactively and imaginatively. It is recognised that finding space and arranging supervision may present practical challenges to a school, but it is important to see this as a providing for pupil and staff wellbeing.

Some faiths have particular requirements for prayer. For Muslims, five daily times of prayer are considered as obligatory as one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Children are encouraged to perform these from the age of 7. During summer only two of these prayer times concern the school day; during the shortest days there will be three. Zuhr prayer will occur between midday and afternoon and will normally fall within the school lunch hour. Asr is prayer between mid-afternoon and sunset. During wintertime this may fall during the afternoon. During the shortest days there may be a third time of prayer, at sunset.

Before praying Muslims are required to wash as a physical preparation. The washroom should be separate from the room used for prayer. It is not necessary for shower rooms to be provided as Wudu (ablution) applies only to prescribed parts of the body, including the feet. Running water must be available.

For many Hindus, praying five times daily is a requirement, however, these can be done mentally during lunch or break time.

## Collective Worship

The law says that all pupils must attend a daily act of collective worship. This statutory requirement goes back to 1944 and is the joint responsibility of the governors and head. Parents have a right to withdraw their children from collective worship. However, it is always good practice to discuss this with parents if a request emerges. There may be particular sensitivities about Christmas and Easter. The tone and language used will very often allay uneasiness. It is always wise to have good communication with, and information available to, the local community.

The 1988 Act required collective worship to be **wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character**. This allows schools to focus on some broad, universal and important themes, common to world faiths and non-religious perspectives: compassion, forgiveness, generosity. It also allows schools to remember specific festivals or stories from Christianity and all world faiths, as well as secular insights. Whatever the religious backgrounds of members of the school community, assemblies can also introduce and explain some of the religious beliefs, practices and festivals of the range of faiths present in society. A theme chosen for an assembly that is illustrated with examples from several faiths can help pupils develop a comparative view. Assemblies can also consider the moral dimension of inter-cultural relationships and can counter prejudice and discrimination. Some headteachers of schools with significant numbers of pupils from diverse religious backgrounds find assemblies based on a variety of faiths particularly appropriate, and often involve local religious and community leaders, who are often very willing to advise and assist.

Schools with a faith-based foundation may adopt a more specific focus but they should still ensure this is comprehensive, sensitive and inclusive. In the case of church schools, diocesan and other authorities may also provide advice and guidance.

Heads should always be alert to the duty to ensure full safeguarding procedures are in place.

### Prayer in assemblies

Collective worship should include opportunity for reflection and may include prayer. Sensitivity should be used in prayers, so these are as inclusive as possible. Assumptions or assertions about specific doctrinal beliefs may create unnecessary obstacles. Prayer or reflection may be introduced with a phrase that recognises pupils will use the words in different ways. Some may reflect the prayer in their own thoughts. Others, with no specific religious faith, will be able to reflect on the theme and aspiration. The word 'God' or 'Almighty' may be generally more inclusive than 'Lord' which can imply specifically Christological belief. The language that is used will reflect both the foundation of the school and the composition of pupils.

Each local authority must convene and support a Standing Advisory Council on RE (SACRE) which has responsibility for monitoring and supporting both religious education and collective worship. SACRE's duty covers all maintained schools. Free schools and academies are governed by their trust deed but are still required to provide daily collective worship.

## **Right of withdrawal**

Parents have a statutory right to withdraw their children from collective worship. They do not have to state a reason, but it is always good practice to arrange to discuss this if a request emerges. There may be anxieties about a particular aspect of the programme which may be allayed after discussion. If the parent still feels they wish to withdraw their child, the request should be made in writing to the head teacher. Withdrawal may be whole or partial. A request from parents must be allowed by the school, which also needs to provide alternative activity and supervision for this pupil. However, this should not be at additional expense to the school or local authority, including SACRE. In general terms, it is always wise to have good communication with, and information available to, parents. Staff also have the right to withdraw from acts of worship on grounds of conscience.

## **Determinations from largely Christian worship**

Collective Worship and assemblies should reflect the needs and context of the school. In most cases there is sufficient flexibility and generality in the law to meet the needs of schools with a diverse religious population. Schools which feel that their local circumstances cannot be accommodated within this broad interpretation of the law may apply for a 'determination' from SACRE. This does not remove the duty to provide collective worship, but it allows the requirement that it should be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character' to be lifted in respect of some or all of the pupils in the school. In maintained schools, applications for a 'determination' should be made to the Standing Advisory Council on RE (SACRE) which will decide whether or not a determination should be granted. This should be done by the head after full consultation with parents and the school's governing body. Care must also be taken to safeguard the interests of children for whom broadly Christian worship is still appropriate. A form should be provided by SACRE, which will monitor the provision of collective worship that is varied in this way at least annually. A determination must be renewed every five years.

## **Curriculum**

The curriculum comprises all learning and other experiences that each school plans for its students. The National Curriculum, which dates back to the 1988 Education Reform Act, along with its subsequent revisions, is a key element of the overall school curriculum, setting down an entitlement for all pupils. Respect for religious traditions should not undermine the law or the requirement for all pupils to have a broad and balanced curriculum. Schools are bound by the requirements of equality legislation and segregation should not be allowed, unless for a very specific and relevant reason. Sensitivities regarding the teaching of particular subjects, and aspects within these, differ from individual to individual and family to family for a variety of reasons. For instance, for some Muslim parents, sensitivities may exist in connection with the teaching of aspects of art, dance, drama, music, physical education, religious education and RSHE.

Whilst parents have the legal right to withdraw their children from RE and aspects of RSHE, in all cases it is good practice for schools to engage parents, students and the local community in dialogue about the value of participation and of making the most of the breadth of entitlement, including in these subjects. At the same time, it is important to ensure that members of staff understand any concerns and issues, and that emphasis is placed upon listening and responding to individual needs and requests in an inclusive, reflective manner, which is based upon sound educational principles and sensitivity.

This will be especially important where non-specialist, temporary or supply staff are asked to teach in areas of the curriculum where sensitivity and awareness are required. Senior and middle leaders have a particular duty to ensure staff are fully briefed as required, and the teachers themselves have a duty to ensure they raise any areas of uncertainty before they plan and deliver lessons.

Of particular concern will be the use of ready-made resources, including off-the-peg PowerPoints, trawled from the internet. Although this can be a source of many useful activities and information, the quality and appropriateness of the content varies greatly. Schools should have robust procedures to ensure that staff are supported in using appropriate resources, reflecting the education needs and cultural situation of their students.

### **The Expressive Arts**

Although none of the expressive arts are proscribed by any faith, there are aspects that will need to be considered. As in other areas of school life, it is important to promote communication, nurture goodwill and encourage understanding on all parts. There is no right of withdrawal from the expressive arts within the school curriculum and sensitivity to religious beliefs does not remove the duty on schools to provide a full curriculum for every pupil.

#### **Art**

Islamic culture and civilization include a rich artistic tradition, particularly in relation to order and pattern, geometry, calligraphy and the natural world. However, three-dimensional figurative

imagery of humans is considered idolatrous by some Muslims. It is very important that the school understands this and is also careful not to ask its students to reproduce images of Jesus, Prophet Mohammed or other figures considered to be prophets in Islam. Some Muslim pupils may not wish to draw the human figure.

## **Music**

Music is used in many faiths as an integral part of religious practice. Examples are: shabad kirtan, the hymns from the holy scriptures of the Guru Granth Sahib in Sikhism; Hindustani music, based on the sacred Vedic texts; nasheeds, devotional praises popular throughout the Islamic world. In Islam, music is traditionally limited to the human voice and non-tuneable percussion instruments as in the days of the Prophet, when they were only used in marriage ceremonies and on the battlefield. However, there is a diversity of opinion regarding music amongst Muslims. Schools should listen to any concerns, discuss the place of music in the curriculum and ensure that students are not asked to join in songs that conflict with their religious beliefs. However, music cannot be excluded entirely from the curriculum or the experience of pupils.

## **Dance and Drama**

Dance and drama play a valuable part in many religious practices and are encouraged for educational purposes. As with other areas of the curriculum, it is important that the school is careful to ensure that activities do not needlessly conflict with religious beliefs, for example by expecting students to play parts that may seem to compromise their faith. Parents may have reservations regarding participation involving physical contact between males and females or performing in a manner that might encourage immodesty or sexual feelings. Schools are advised to consult with parents and seek positive, workable solutions.

## **Physical Education and Swimming**

Physical Education, including swimming, is an important aspect of school life. Parents do not have a legal right to withdraw children from this entitlement. However, it is important that some basic requirements of modesty should be considered, so reducing barriers to participation. Sensitive thought should be given to changing arrangements and to mixed gender activities. This may include separate changing and swimming arrangements where this is possible. Solutions may be reached through cooperation between local schools.

Islamic expectations about modesty will be respected by, for example, the use of a tracksuit. A head covering or hijab can be tied back to ensure safety, or sports hijabs can be worn. Full-length lycra swimsuits are available as swimwear. Expectations of modesty will be common in most religious traditions. For example, it is important in African Caribbean Christian traditions.

Communal showering is problematic for many students for a range of reasons, not just religious ones. In the absence of individual shower cubicles, it is considered good practice to permit those students to either shower in their swimming costume or to be allowed to delay showering until

they go home. Although changing facilities are almost always gender specific at secondary school, they are often communal and can compromise modesty requirements. A practical solution, where possible, would be to find a way that students can change in greater privacy. Regardless of religious requirements, many pupils find showers and changing rooms uneasy and difficult places. Sensitivity is also needed on pastoral grounds.

As some sporting activities involve physical contact many Muslim and other parents may object if boys and girls are organised in mixed groups. Contact sports can be carried out in single sex groups. Similarly, where it is possible, swimming could be arranged in single sex groups.

There are also implications for clothes worn for PE. For example, some Muslim girls may want to wear leggings and a long t-shirt for swimming and showering, whereas some Muslim boys may wish to wear knee-length swimming trunks. A sensitive school policy signals respect for different customs and beliefs. In PE, schools will need to give due consideration to the provision of single sex lessons, separate changing facilities and individual showering arrangements where practicable.

## **Religious Education (RE)**

Religious Education is obligatory in all maintained schools in accordance with the requirements of the Local Agreed Syllabus or a legal alternative. One reason for this is to ensure that the curriculum is reflective of and relevant to the local population. Having a positive approach to understanding the world's major faiths and beliefs is an important aspect of living in a diverse and multi-faith society.

A school in which there are students of different faiths and beliefs provides an ideal place to learn about, understand and learn from those with different religions and cultures. The RE curriculum is educational, not instructional, and it is important for the school to address any fears of parents and students by engaging in dialogue and conversation about this.

In the UK, parents have the right to withdraw their children from RE on the grounds that they wish to make their own provision. This alternative will be the parents' responsibility. This right of withdrawal exists for all pupils in all types of school, including schools with and without a religious designation. Students aged 18 or over have the right to withdraw themselves from RE. Parents also have the right to withdraw their child from part of RE and can do so without giving any explanation.

Unless there are good reasons otherwise, a request should be made in writing so there is a clear record. Opportunity should be given to discuss the request, so this can be properly understood. However, this cannot be made a legal condition nor does a parent have to explain their reasons if they choose not to do so. Once known, there should be a conversation about the practical implications of withdrawal and the circumstances in which it may be reasonable to accommodate their wishes.

A parent may be reassured through things such as: an offer to observe a lesson; discussing curriculum documents; and discussing the aims of RE in your school, maybe referring to the Purpose of RE outlined above.

If a pupil is withdrawn, the school has a duty of care to look after them, but not to provide alternative education. There are different ways of handling this, but any arrangements made must not incur extra cost for the school or local authority. This time should not be used for other curriculum subject areas, such as extra maths or other lessons. It is good practice to review withdrawals from RE each year with parents.

Practical suggestions on managing withdrawals have been compiled by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE). These are summarised here:

- Include a short statement about RE being inclusive in your prospectus and on your website. You may find the Purpose of RE section above helpful in preparing this.
- Use parents' evenings, assemblies and displays to showcase what goes on in RE lessons and to promote religious literacy, cultural diversity and visits to places of worship.
- Give information about withdrawal on your website after positive explanations about RE in your school.
- Parents have a right of withdrawal from all or part of RE. Some schools choose to state that they are not supportive of selective withdrawal from part of RE. This does not override a parental right to withdraw from part of RE – if requested, this partial withdrawal must be granted. It is important to remember the contribution RE makes to the SMSC development of children and the promotion of Fundamental British Values.
- Ask parents considering withdrawal to contact the head teacher to arrange a discussion. Ensure that parents who wish to withdraw their children are met with quickly.
- Discuss the religious issues the parents would object to their child being taught about.
- Show parents the kinds of things you do in RE by showing the locally agreed syllabus, aims of RE, learning objectives and examples of lessons.
- If a parent has withdrawn their child from RE it is good practice to review this with the parent every year.
- Parents can only withdraw their child from RE, not other curriculum areas. For example, pupils can't be withdrawn from a study of religious art in an art lesson or the study of evolution in science.

Guidance has been produced by the NAHT and can be found here (log in required):

<https://www.naht.org.uk/Advice-Support/Topics/Curriculum-and-assessment/ArtMID/550/ArticleID/85/Dealing-with-requests-to-withdraw-from-religious-education>

The numbers of withdrawals across the country and in different local authorities has dropped significantly over the last few years, with the increasing popularity of the subject amongst students and because of the positive messages that have been communicated about RE's function and purpose.

## **Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE)**

RSHE is about the development of positive and caring relationships, and about feelings and sexual relationships within this context. It is important that the school is open and clear with parents about the approach that is taken, what is taught and how it is taught. Schools will be aware of their own local communities and the sensitivities necessary in this area. At the same time heads and governors also need to be mindful of the statutory requirements of a broad and balanced curriculum and the specific obligations around RSHE.

Since September 2020 RSHE has been part of the statutory curriculum for all pupils. Primary pupils must be taught Relationships and Health Education. Relationships Education includes: what a relationship is; what friendship is; what family means and who can support them; how to treat others with kindness, consideration and respect. Health Education includes: mental wellbeing; internet safety and harms; physical health and fitness; healthy eating; facts and risks associated with drugs, alcohol and tobacco; health and prevention; basic first aid; changing adolescent body.

Secondary students must be taught Relationships, Sex and Health Education. Relationships and Sex Education includes what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like and what makes a good friend, colleague and successful marriage or committed relationship. At the appropriate time, the focus will move to developing intimate relationships, to equip students with knowledge they need to make safe, informed and healthy choices as they progress through adult life. Schools must consult parents when developing and renewing policies on Relationships, Sex and Health Education. These policies must be published online and be available to anybody free of charge.

Parents and carers have a right to withdraw their child from some or all lessons on Sex Education. At primary level, this request must be granted by the head teacher at primary level. In secondary schools the head teacher will consider the request and discuss it with parents. It should be granted in all but exceptional circumstances. However, three school terms before the student turns 16, they can independently choose to receive Sex Education if they would like to. In this case the school should arrange for this to be covered in one of those three terms unless there are exceptional circumstances.

Parents and carers cannot withdraw a child from Health or Relationships Education. The science curriculum in all maintained schools also includes content on human development, including reproduction, from which there is no right of withdrawal.

RSHE should always be delivered in an age-appropriate, sensitive and informed way. Further guidance is available from the PSHE Association, the Department for Education and the local authority.

Schools should have a robust approach to any form of prejudice or bullying. This includes matters related to health, relationships, gender, gender identity or sexual orientation. Much of this is a statutory responsibility under the Equality Act 2010.

Staff should be aware of the issues raised by the teachings and approaches of some faith communities around sexual orientation, gender roles and gender identity. Seek advice and understanding when this is necessary. As well as equality, this may be a matter of safeguarding and impact the duty of care for students' wellbeing. Staff will want to be sensitive to the emotional support that may be required for some students. The booklet 'Voices and Viewpoints', outlined on the next page, also includes links to some helpful organisations.

This is a summary of the salient points of law in 2022, applying to England.

### **Marriage**

You can get married or form a civil partnership in England or Wales if you are:

- 16 or over (with permission from parents or guardians if you are under 18)
- not already married or in a civil partnership
- not closely related

This applies to opposite sex and same sex couples.

### **Forced Marriage**

Forcing someone to marry or marrying someone who lacks the mental capacity to consent, is a crime. This applies if it happens in the UK or if someone is taken abroad for the purpose of forcing them to marry. It is different to arranged marriage, which involves adults who freely consent to marry each other and have the capacity to make that decision.

### **Domestic Abuse**

The Domestic Abuse Bill defines this as: 'physical or sexual abuse; violent or threatening behaviour; controlling or coercive behaviour; economic abuse; psychological, emotional or other abuse'. This behaviour is considered criminal regardless of whether it is a single incident or a pattern. An abuser can be a partner, former partner or relative.

### **Consent to sex**

The legal age of consent for sex is 16 for everyone. In UK Law, consent is given if a person 'agrees by choice and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice'.

### **Contraception**

Contraception is legal and available in a wide range of forms, most of which are free of charge through the NHS. Contraception services are confidential, including for people under 16. Confidentiality can be broken only if there is a safeguarding concern.

### **Abortion**

Abortion is legal throughout the UK and is available through the NHS. After 24 weeks, abortion is allowed only if the woman's life or her physical or mental health is in serious danger, or there is a severe foetal abnormality.

### **Gay 'conversion therapy'**

The UK government has said that it intends to outlaw 'gay conversion therapy', the attempt to change sexual or gender orientation to become heterosexual or cisgender. However, the outcome of this intention is still disputed and controversial.

It is good practice for schools to provide opportunities for parents and community groups to view schemes of work and resources used in the teaching of RSHE. Schools will want to develop a secure understanding of faith sensitivities through engagement with the local community and parents.

Other local SACREs have produced a booklet *Voices and Viewpoints*. This outlines relevant information and provides a comprehensive and varied anthology of approaches to RSHE from a range of faith communities. The aims of the resource are to: offer a range of viewpoints from people of faith about the specific areas covered in the RSHE curriculum; support teachers with background information, so building knowledge, sensitivity and confidence; reassure parents that faith perspectives are recognised; and signpost appropriate sources of guidance. This can be downloaded at

[https://www.penninelearning.com/media/1014/26\\_3\\_voicesplusandplusviewpoints-1.pdf](https://www.penninelearning.com/media/1014/26_3_voicesplusandplusviewpoints-1.pdf)

### **Extra-curricular activities**

Schools need to be aware that extra-curricular activities and homework clubs after the school day or at weekends may clash with attendance at classes held within the community, for example Chinese, Bengali or Arabic classes arranged at the supplementary school, local mosque or gurdwara. Some parents/carers may be reluctant to allow their children to take part in after-school activities and out-of-school visits unless they are reassured about details regarding safety and dietary arrangements. In addition, parents/carers may not wish their children to take part in social activities where girls mix freely with boys. Careful thought to timetabling and consultation with parents/carers, via an interpreter where necessary, will help ensure the fullest participation of all pupils in educational and extra-curricular opportunities.

### **Educational Visits**

Educational visits can play a vital role in enriching the school curriculum and, if carefully planned, should not pose problems for students with a religious belief. The quality of dialogue between school and home is vital in communicating the clear educational objectives, the purpose and content of visits and how they will contribute to students' learning. When planning a visit, schools are advised to consider religious sensitivities, such as avoiding a Friday visit for Muslims. All students and parents should understand that a visit to a place of worship is purely educational. For instance, no one will be asked to participate in worship or encouraged to eat food that has been blessed.

It is good practice to invite any parents who may have concerns to participate on a visit. Again, schools are encouraged to engage in dialogue and seek positive, workable solutions. While organising trips, schools should also ensure that any specific dietary needs are met, and that provision is made for any religious observance.

Parents and carers have to consent to visits out of school. Some schools ask for comprehensive agreement at the beginning of the year.

### **Visits to faith communities and inviting visitors to school**

Dialogue between students and people of faith enriches religious education, nurtures tolerance and builds bridges of understanding within our local communities. Engagement can take the form of a visit to a faith community or receiving a visitor in an assembly, class or special event. Other opportunities can be taken on-line.

Many schools find it invaluable to arrange such dialogue to help students to broaden their understanding and experience of our communities and world. The benefits include:

- enriching religious education and fulfilling requirements of the local agreed syllabus;
- promoting fundamental human values of respect and tolerance;
- broadening pupils' experience and perspectives;
- developing critical thinking;
- building bridges within our local communities.

Schemes to encourage visits exist in many local authority areas. In Leeds the *Schools Welcome* programme trains members of faith communities, provides a directory of people and locations and arranges interfaith conferences for schools. Directories and further detailed guidance can be downloaded via Leeds for Learning.

## **Home-School Relationships**

Schools need to take account of different religious, cultural, linguistic and educational needs when meeting with families. For example, a Muslim father may not wish to shake hands with a female teacher or a Muslim mother with a male teacher, but some Muslims have no objection to doing so. The important point is to establish with individuals their cultural and religious preferences rather than to make assumptions.

When parents and carers are not fluent in English, schools may be able to provide interpretation or translations of key communications. Schools and PTAs may also wish to think about the propriety of certain social events. A wine and cheese evening, or fashion show, may inadvertently exclude some from minority ethnic groups. Within a number of faiths, alcohol is prohibited and its presence at a function may make attendance impossible.

## **Conclusion**

While this booklet is intended to help schools identify and celebrate the wide variety of customs, faiths and beliefs within our multi-ethnic and multi-lingual communities. It also demonstrates that people of all backgrounds are individuals and ought never to be stereotyped. Within faith, ethnic or linguistic groups the diversity among individuals are of equal significance as the differences between groups. It is hoped that this booklet will contribute further to the work being done in schools to develop respect for everyone and support a culture of learning which values diversity and the experiences of all.



Great care has gone into the writing and compilation of this resource. However, advice can always be improved, and we are happy to hear of comments, experience and suggestions. If you have any feedback, please contact [enquiries@penninelearning.com](mailto:enquiries@penninelearning.com)



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# SHARING THE JOURNEY

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