

Waltham Forest Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education

Ramadan Guidance for Schools

Produced February 2015

Revised following consultation March 2018



Introduction

This guidance aims to offer advice and to all schools and academies. However, the first section also contains some specific guidance for Primary Schools and Appendix 2 is largely aimed at Secondary Schools.

Waltham Forest is very proud of its diverse population, and it is in this spirit that this guidance has been produced. It is neither statutory nor a rigid set of prescriptions, and SACRE recognises that in almost every instance the final decision remains in the hands of school leaders. SACRE's aim is to suggest and encourage dialogue between schools, parents and carers and their local Muslim community, at the same time as ensuring the best possible education for all of Waltham Forest's pupils.

According to the 2011 Census, Muslims form the second largest religious group in the UK.¹ Almost a quarter of Waltham Forest residents (22%) are Muslims, having increased from 15% since 2001. Obviously in some wards this percentage is higher, in others lower, but issues relating in particular to the holy month of Ramadan can affect all of Waltham Forest's schools.

Finally, it is important to remember that the Muslim community in Waltham Forest is diverse and that customs and practices may vary between and within different traditions and followers of Islam.

Ramadan and fasting (sawm)

Summary

- Fasting is observed during the month of Ramadan by most Muslims, male and female in good health once they have reached the age when fasting becomes a requirement. However, some families may encourage their children to observe part or all of the fast before they reach puberty.
- Schools should, in dialogue with parents, carers, children and young people ensure that children and young people who may be fasting are well supported to observe Ramadan in a meaningful and happy whilst they are at school.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is one of the five pillars of the faith and a key observance for most healthy adult Muslims those maturing towards adulthood. However, it may be the practice within some families or traditions for children to begin part or all of the fast to become accustomed to observance progressively. School leaders will wish to consult with parents and carers on how best to ensure that all children and young people are well and happy throughout the holy month and able to study, learn and play throughout the school day.

It is impossible to predict the actual moment of the sighting of the new moon that initiates the fast, but the approximate start date can be determined in plenty of time to make appropriate arrangements.

The Arabic word *sawm* means 'to abstain', and during Ramadan most Muslims are expected to abstain completely from both food and liquid—including water—from dawn until sunset. As the Islamic calendar is based on the lunar cycle, the month of Ramadan begins 10 or 11 days earlier each year: In Britain this means that the hours of fasting vary from year to year. Muslims observing the fast, expect to carry on with their daily life and embrace the strictures of fasting as a way of learning how to cope with the challenges of daily life whilst growing in spirituality.

It is not uncommon for children to begin the fast for all or part of the day, week or month in preparation for fuller observance when they are older. This may prove a concern for primary schools in ensuring the health and well-being of children who may be following some or all of the fast for all or part of the school day. Fasting may also sometimes cause a dehydration problem for older children, especially during the summer months and of particular concern during exams.

Most adult Muslims fast for the whole or part of the holy month and most Muslims regard this as a requirement for observant Muslims in good health. Fasting prior to this is usually dependant on family or faith tradition and a child's health and emotional or spiritual maturity. Fasting prior to the age of 8 years is not advised by health professionals. School leaders should advise parents and carers that fasting for all or part of the school day or week should be limited to pupils in Years 5 & 6. It must be remembered that the holy month is an important time in the family life of many Muslim pupils and students and their extended families and faith groups.

It should not be forgotten that it is part of the religious discipline of Ramadan that fasting takes place in the presence of 'everyday life': that it is not intended to take Muslims out of the everyday world, but rather to bring a heightened spiritual awareness into their world. Although it is helpful for schools to make certain allowances and special arrangements (e.g. for prayer) during Ramadan, it is also an opportunity for the whole school to honour spiritual discipline and consider similar examples from other traditions.

SACRE therefore offers the following advice to School Leaders:

- Recognise the importance of fasting during Ramadan for many Muslim families and seek to accommodate this.
- Understand that fasting only becomes a requirement for healthy observant Muslims once they begin to mature to adulthood. However some younger children will observe some or all of the fast in line with their friends and families and that may mean fasting during part or all of the school day or week.
- Be aware that it is the accepted view of health professionals, that fasting prior to the age of eight years is not advisable.
- Parents or carers must inform the school if they wish their child or children to fast for any part of the holy month.. A sample letter that schools will wish to adapt is provided at the end of this section.
- Make reasonable arrangements to encourage fasting children to conserve energy and remain quiet during breaks and lunchtimes.
- Contact parents and carers in line with school's policy on medical reporting if there are concerns about a child's health.

- Contact parents and carer if there is an emergency and a child need to have water: follow school's health or medical reporting procedures and ensure that the child's health and well-being is the key decision-maker.

Governors

Governors should liaise school leaders to ensure that the school is in dialogue with parents and carers and taking the steps necessary to keep all children well and healthy whilst at school during Ramadan.

Governors may wish to draw the advice in this document to the attention of school leaders as a source of guidance. Governors may also wish to assure school leaders that parents and carers must inform the school if they wish their child to fast for all or part of the school day or week and that school leaders therefore should support parents and or carers to give them that information before Ramadan begins.

Governors may find it useful to assure themselves that the school policy on medical recording and reporting is up to date and relevant.

Appendix 1

Sample letter that schools should adapt as necessary

To parents and carers of children in Years 5&6 (schools may wish to individualise to each class)

Ramadan

I understand that you and your family are preparing to observe the holy month of Ramadan, which this year falls wholly during the school term.

If your child is in Year 5 or Year 6, and you wish her or him to observe all or some of the fast then please complete the attached letter and return to school by **(Date)**

Please bear in mind the following:

- Pupils in Years 5 and 6 will be supported to observe some or all of the fast if a parent or carer has informed the school by returning the completed and signed form to school by (date).
- Please ensure that the contact details on the letter are current and correct in case the school needs to contact you during school hours.

If your child wishes to fast at school and you agree with this, please complete and return the form below to your child's class teacher before **[date]**. Please note that, unless we receive information about your wish for your child to fast we will assume that he or she is not fasting whilst at school.

Our Eid assembly will be on **[date]** at **[time]**. We do hope you will be able to join us.

Yours sincerely,

Name of child

Class.....

PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ON EACH LINE	Yes	No
My child will fast for all of the school day, every school day during Ramadan		
My child will fast in school on the following days during Ramadan (Please note which days here):		
My child will fast for part of the school day. (Please note which part of the day)		
Year 6 Pupils Only		
My child will not fast on test days during SATs week (May 14th-17th inclusive) but will fast on Friday 18th May		
My child will not fast on test days during SATs week (May 14th-17th inclusive) until the tests have been completed.		

Please try to ensure that all children (fasting or not) whose family are observing Ramadan come to school having enjoyed sufficient sleep and rest to take the full benefit of their day at school.

SignedParent/guardian

Date

To be returned to the class teacher by [date].

School must have the names and current contact details of two parents or carers.

Contact Details

Parent /Carer 1 Name:.....

Phone Number:.....

Parent /Carer 2 Name.....

Phone Number.....

Ramadan and the 2018 Exam Season

An overview

This year, 2018, Ramadan – a month-long period of Islamic prayer, fasting, self-control and goodwill to others – and the exam season will coincide; this pattern of coincidence is likely to continue for one more year at least.

Ramadan and its relevance for (mainly, but not exclusively, Secondary Schools).

Whilst bringing many benefits, Ramadan has the potential for causing particular hardship through strict fasting which is likely to impact on pupils' well-being and cognitive performance.

It's important for all school staff to recognise that unless there are genuine safeguarding concerns, they should not interfere with how young Muslims observe Ramadan. This said, Islamic law does offer students and young people the opportunity to delay or exempt themselves from fasting and late-night prayers if they believe their performance in exams could be adversely affected.

Fasting, Prayer and Safeguarding

During Ramadan, those who are fasting are recommended to have one meal just before sunrise and another just after sunset. Whilst fasting may bring about a number of benefits, the practice of fasting may also bring about greater levels of tiredness, lower energy, dehydration, reduced focus, memory and concentration. This is of particular concern to school leaders and for Muslim pupils who are scheduled to sit examinations.

Young Muslims may also take part in prayer events, often held in mosques and that often finish late at night. To avoid tiredness and exhaustion, students and their parents should be advised to keep prayer sessions short on school nights or preferably held at weekends when the impact of late nights or long prayer sessions can be better managed.

If there are safeguarding concerns about a student, schools have an overriding safeguarding duty and should apply professional judgement and common sense in each case.

Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is defined in the DfE's statutory guidance Keeping Children Safe in Education as:

"...protecting children from maltreatment; preventing impairment of children's health or development; ensuring that children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care; and taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes."

Find the guidance Keeping Children Safe in Education.

So, with its overriding duty in mind, if a school notices signs of dehydration or exhaustion in a pupil, the pupil should be asked if they are fasting and, if so, encouraged to drink some water and be reassured, that in this situation, Islamic practice allows them to break their fast and make it up later. Muslim scholars usually agree that if there is risk to a pupil's health, pupils can break their fast and, indeed, they should do so immediately.

The NHS has produced a Healthy Ramadan guide to healthy fasting during Ramadan.

The guide says *"If you produce very little or no urine, feel disorientated or confused or faint due to dehydration, you must stop fasting and have a drink of water or other fluid. Islam doesn't require you to harm yourself in fulfilling the fast"*.

A Sensitive Approach

A thoughtful approach is needed especially if you are asking pupils whether they are fasting. For example, making such requests might be especially embarrassing for female pupils during their menstrual cycle. It's recommended that schools simply ask parents and carers to let them know if their child is fasting. If the pupil presenting with poor health, it is also entirely appropriate to ask the parents and carers if their son or daughter is fasting.

Practical tips for schools

SCARE would strongly advise that a member of a school's leadership team is delegated with the task of ensuring that their school has appropriate arrangements in place to balance the school's statutory safeguarding duty with its wider moral obligations.

Observing Ramadan is, of course, a particularly effective way of engaging pupils (Muslim or otherwise), staff and parents and carers, especially when it is noted that Ramadan and the exam season may overlap for at least another year

It is advisable for schools to produce some information (e.g. say a leaflet or a flyer) for everyone that helps to cover all the issues outlined in this advice note and that it will become a useful template for subsequent years. The information may also be used for communication with all stakeholder groups, for raising awareness amongst non-Muslims, for creating a resource for the school, as a topic for a school assembly, as a topic for an INSET day and so on...

1. Inform fasting pupils of the allowances Islam gives them for breaking their fast – making it up later if fasting jeopardises their performance;
2. Provide a supervised quiet space with activities for fasting pupils, especially during the lunch period;
3. Check room temperatures to ensure they are no higher or lower than they need to be;
4. Check whether revision lessons would be best held in the mornings or afternoons;
5. Note that those fasting pupils on free school meals are still entitled to a meal; schools should consider putting a bag together for fasting pupils to take home;
6. Make allowances for fasting pupils who may need to reduce their overall levels of physical activity, say during PE lessons, so schools should consider alternative activities on such occasions;
7. Schools may want to consider the impact of Ramadan on the setting of dates for other school activities such as sports days, trips and end-of-year celebrations;

8. Staff should only intervene to provide care for a pupil where they have a genuine belief that there is a risk to a pupil's health, welfare or safety;
9. Good examination room management will benefit all pupils – ensure rooms are shaded, well-ventilated and that all pupils have access to water;
10. Provide an additional room or space where fasting students .

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