

# London Borough of Waltham Forest

## SACRE

Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education

### Guidance for schools on Ramadan



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## 1. Introduction

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. SACRE recognises that in almost every instance the final decision remains in the hands of school leaders.

According to the 2011 Census almost a quarter of Waltham Forest residents (22%) are Muslims.

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.

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.

The borough has Muslims from two main denominations – Sunni and Shi'a. The vast majority of Muslim pupils in our schools are Sunni. Both groups of Muslims use the same Qur'an, but there are differences in the way they practice their faith. Our Muslim communities originate from a variety of continents and countries and so may practice their faith in different ways, both cultural, as well as scriptural. Knowing a Muslim family's heritage can help a school understand differences in the ways in which individuals practice their religion.

## 2. Ramadan and fasting (sawm)

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is one of the five pillars of the faith and a key observance for most healthy adult Muslims and those maturing towards adulthood.

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. 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.

Muslims believe that fasting has many benefits. For example: it strengthens self-discipline; it creates sympathy for the poor and the destitute; it reminds them that they belong to a larger Muslim community.

There are exemptions to the Ramadan fast. Those who are ill, those who are travelling and pregnant or nursing women need not fast if it would be harmful to their health. Menstruating women should not fast. Such people will be expected to make up for days missed later through fasting or giving financially to the poor.

It is the practice for Muslims to rise before dawn and to share a light meal (**sahur** or **sehri**) with the family. Having stated the intention to do so, fasting then takes place during daylight hours. Just before the end of the fast at dusk, people will

return home in order to share an evening meal (iftar) to which family and friends are often invited.

Some Muslims gather at the mosque and, immediately at the end of the fasting day, share a light snack (sometimes including dates and water) as did the Prophet Muhammad with his companions over 1400 years ago.

**Tarawee** prayers are performed during the month of Ramadan. Many men and some women attend prayers at the mosque (or at home) which last about an hour or 1 ½ hours each evening. Combined with waking up early before dawn to eat breakfast, this may lead to Muslims feeling very tired during the month of Ramadan

Ramadan is also associated with the Qur'an. During the 'Night of Power' (**Laylat ul-Qadr**) which comes on an odd numbered night during the last ten days of Ramadan, Muslims remember the occasion when Muhammad was given the first words of the Qur'an to recite: the title Qur'an means 'recitation'. (Words continued to be revealed to Muhammad for the remainder of his life). Some Muslims spend the last ten days of the month in the mosque (a practice called **itikaf**, 'seclusion') during which they can pray and read the Qur'an in the company of others.

The Islamic calendar is based on the lunar cycle. As this is shorter than the solar year, 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.

The sighting of the new moon at the end of Ramadan marks the start of the tenth month, **Shawwal**, which begins with the festival of **Id ul-Fitr** (the festival of breaking the fast). Coming straight after the austerities of Ramadan, Id ul-Fitr is a joyous occasion (it is forbidden to fast on Id ul-Fitr). After prayers, often held in the open air, people give presents, wear new clothes and visit relatives. The greeting is **Id Mubarak** or **Eid Mubarak**, 'happy id', which is also printed on greetings cards exchanged at this time. Just before Id ul-Fitr, Muslims must give money (**fitrana**) so that those who cannot afford to do so are also able to celebrate the festival.

### **3. How should schools regard Ramadan?**

Schools can encourage the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of all pupils by recognising and building on the essence of the spirit of Ramadan. It is also an opportunity for the whole school to honour spiritual discipline and consider similar examples from other traditions.

SACRE 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 it is the onset of puberty that makes fasting a requirement for healthy observant Muslims but that many younger children will also

want to observe the fast in line with their friends and families, for all or part 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 and therefore SACRE advises School Leaders to support observance of the fast only for pupils in Year 5 and Year 6 and older.
- Obtain signed parental consent forms from the families of all pupils who intend to fast. A sample letter that primary schools will wish to adapt is provided in Appendix 2.
- Make reasonable arrangements to encourage fasting children to conserve energy and remain quiet during breaks and lunchtimes.
- Contact parents and carers as normal if there are concerns about a child's health.

#### **4. What are the implications of Ramadan on Curriculum and other school activities?**

##### **Physical education and sporting activities:**

There is no sporting or physical education activity that is forbidden during the month of Ramadan. The season of the year within which Ramadan falls may have a bearing on any decisions that are made. However, teachers are advised to use their discretion.

**Secondary schools** - Some Muslim pupils, who are fasting, will feel weak or languid and teachers might decide that certain activities (such as those involving climbing, trampolining or distance running) need to be modified for particular pupils.

**Primary schools** might want to advertise to parents before the start of Ramadan the days when the class has PE or swimming, or when, for example, a sports day will take place.

**Swimming** - Some Muslim parents would advise fasting pupils who are going swimming to be particularly careful not to swallow water. Since swimming will almost certainly result in the swallowing of water, other Muslims would say that it is better for fasting pupils not to swim at all during Ramadan or would wish to forbid them from doing so completely.

Accidental swallowing of water in normal circumstances would not invalidate the fast. SACRE would urge schools to talk with their parents about these nuances to find agreed ways of operating.

**Relationships education** - schools might want to move this component to another time so it does not clash with Ramadan. Schools should consider the needs of any Muslim teachers who might be required to teach this element of the curriculum at a time when their religion asks them not to think about such matters. Even if pupils are not fasting they might be uncomfortable with thinking about

sexual matters during Ramadan, or parents may find it difficult to talk through issues with their children if they are fasting.

**Food technology** - It may be considered provocative if a teacher insists that a fasting Muslim pupil tastes and swallows food during Ramadan. (Though, in that it is done under pressure, this does not invalidate the fast. Neither is the fast invalidated if a Muslim forgets that he/she should be fasting and eats or drinks something).

**Examinations (public or internal)** - A school will need to consider how to raise this issue with Muslim families in advance of Ramadan so that the school, staff and pupils as well as the school's wider community can understand the approach towards fasting in relation to the examination period the school has decided to take. The brain's ability to work at its best is affected by lack of hydration, especially in hot weather, and so fasting during the time of examinations could potentially disadvantage pupils.

With good communication from the school a Muslim family may decide for a young person to delay the start of their fast until after the examination period is over, or to not fast on certain days.

Qur'an (2:185). , *"... he who is ill or on a journey shall fast a similar number of days later on. Allah desires your well-being, not your discomfort."*

Some Muslim families would interpret this verse today to say in the same way as it was applied to camel drivers, who didn't have to fast on days of their journeys, Muslims can make up for days when not fasting because of the need for their body to be at its best physically to perform well.

It is important that a school decides on an approach that all staff follow, to ensure advice is coherent for families and respectful. Schools might decide to send a letter home explaining the school's suggestions or policy.

A good example to use with families and pupils is often that of well-known Muslim's from the UK. Mo Farah did not fast during the 2012 London Olympic Games as he was competing on those days. He did his fast at another time after the competition had ended.

**Parents evenings** – it is possible that the timing of evening meetings may be difficult for Muslim parents as it may clash with the time when the family is breaking their fast. Schools may wish to seek ways in which this can be mitigated.

## **5. What is the responsibility of a school if a pupil becomes ill or suffers as a result of fasting while at school?**

The responsibility which a school should exercise towards fasting pupils is no different to that applying to any pupil in the school. A school will obviously want to be sensitive towards pupils who are fasting, but Muslim scriptures are clear that if you are not able to operate normally (at school or work), you are not well enough or old enough to be fasting. Fasting is something that no-one should really know about, you should be able to lead a normal life.

Given that the obligation to fast does not override health considerations, a pupil who faints can be offered water if judged appropriate by a suitably qualified first-aider or if the pupil requests it. If the pupil does not want to take water, the school should consider whether the home should be contacted.

If a person accidentally bleeds or vomits, the fast day will still count, in the sense that the day will count as a day when their intention was to fast all day. A Muslim pupil might need to be reassured that this is the case.

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."*

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 hydration, 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"*.

## **6. Is it true that Muslims cannot swallow their saliva (and must therefore spit) during the month of Ramadan?**

In that it is a necessary bodily function, swallowing saliva does not invalidate the fast during Ramadan. Schools would obviously regard the practice of spitting as contrary to health and safety in the school community and should strongly discourage it.

## **7. Should special provision be made during the lunch break for those children/young people who are fasting?**

This is a matter for a school's discretion and will be affected by a number of factors such as the population makeup of the school, precedent, the governing body, relationships with parents and resource issues.

Schools may consider providing a supervised quiet space with activities for fasting pupils at lunchtime.

Some secondary schools allow Muslim pupils to go home at lunchtime during Ramadan with consent from parents. Schools should not and cannot be expected to incur any extra costs resulting from pupils fasting.

## **8. Pupils entitled to free school meals**

Free school meals is an entitlement for all eligible pupils.

Schools should consider ways of ensuring this is honoured by putting a bag together for fasting pupils to take home, or recognising this entitlement in some other way.

# Appendix 1

## Islamic Holidays, 2021-2029 (A.H. 1431-1452)

Here are the dates of the most important Islamic holidays through to 2029.

These holidays move in the Western (Gregorian) calendar year since the Islamic (or Hijri) calendar is a lunar calendar, instead of a solar calendar. The Hijri year is usually ten days shorter than the Gregorian year.

Year	Start of Muharram <sup>1</sup>	Mawlid al-Nabi <sup>2</sup>	Start of Ramadan <sup>3</sup>	Eid al-Fitr <sup>4</sup>	Eid al-Adha <sup>5</sup>
2021	Aug. 9 <sup>th</sup>	Oct. 19 <sup>th</sup>	April 13 <sup>th</sup>	May 13 <sup>th</sup>	July 20 <sup>th</sup>
2022	July 30 <sup>th</sup>	Oct. 8 <sup>th</sup>	April 3 <sup>rd</sup>	May 3 <sup>rd</sup>	July 10 <sup>th</sup>
2023	July 19 <sup>th</sup>	Sep. 27 <sup>th</sup>	Mar. 23 <sup>rd</sup>	April 22 <sup>nd</sup>	June 29 <sup>th</sup>
2024	July 7 <sup>th</sup>	Sep. 16 <sup>th</sup>	Mar. 11 <sup>th</sup>	April 10 <sup>th</sup>	June 17 <sup>th</sup>
2025	June 26 <sup>th</sup>	Sep. 5 <sup>th</sup>	Mar. 1 <sup>st</sup>	Mar. 31 <sup>st</sup>	June 7 <sup>th</sup>
2026	June 16 <sup>th</sup>	Aug. 26 <sup>th</sup>	Feb. 18 <sup>th</sup>	Mar. 20 <sup>th</sup>	May 27 <sup>th</sup>
2027	June 6 <sup>th</sup>	Aug. 15 <sup>th</sup>	Feb. 8 <sup>th</sup>	Mar. 10 <sup>th</sup>	May 17 <sup>th</sup>
2028	May 25 <sup>th</sup>	Aug. 3 <sup>rd</sup>	Jan. 28 <sup>th</sup>	Feb. 27 <sup>th</sup>	May 5 <sup>th</sup>
2029	May 14 <sup>th</sup>	July 24 <sup>th</sup>	Jan. 16 <sup>th</sup>	Feb. 15 <sup>th</sup>	April 24 <sup>th</sup>

NOTE: All holidays begin at sundown on the evening before the date given.

1. Islamic New Year (Muharram is the first month of the Hijra calendar)
2. Muhammad's Birthday. (**Dates for Shia Muslims** are five days later than the Sunni date given here.)
3. The ninth month of the Hijri calendar, in which Muslims fast daily.
4. Feast marking the end of Ramadan.
5. The Feast of the Sacrifice.



**Appendix 2** Sample letter that primary schools may wish to adapt as necessary

To parents and carers, **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.

I also understand that some children in Year 5 and Year 6 may be joining their friends and family in observing all or some of the fast for some or all of the school day or week.

Therefore, 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:

- The school will support pupils in Years 5 and 6 who, with their parents and carers' consent, wish to observe the fast for all or part of the school day or week.
- Children will only be allowed to fast with their parents and carers' consent.
- If we have concerns about your child's health, we will need to be able to contact you during the school day so please ensure that the contact details on the letter are current and correct.

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 your consent for your child to fast at school, we will assume that he or she is not taking part.

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

Yours sincerely,

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**Name of child** ..... **Class**.....

<b>PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ON EACH LINE</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
My child will fast for all of the school day, every school day during Ramadan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My child will fast in school on the following days during Ramadan (Please note which here):	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My child will fast for part of the school day. (Please note which part of the day)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Additional Information		

Signed .....Parent/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 Name** ..... **Phone no.** .....

**Parent /Carer 2** ..... **Phone no.** .....