

London Borough of Redbridge

**Standing Advisory Council
on Religious Education
(S.A.C.R.E.)**

Briefing Paper 1

**Ramadan and Its Implications
for Schools**



Spring 2017 (revised)

SACRE briefing papers: an explanation

Redbridge Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) has long been aware that religious and cultural issues can impinge, to a greater or lesser degree, on the life of schools in Redbridge. It is also aware that headteachers, in particular, can find making a response perplexing because of a lack of background knowledge or understanding.

SACRE briefing papers are designed to provide a context of knowledge and understanding within which schools can make appropriate and sensitive responses to cultural and religious issues. They have been written in response to questions posed by schools and carefully discussed by a SACRE sub-group before being tabled at a full SACRE meeting.

In the case of this particular briefing paper, it is important to note that the SACRE sub-group included a Muslim member and that Muslims, both locally and nationally, have been consulted. However, though every attempt has been made to check the accuracy of statements made, they should not be taken as authoritative. In understanding the place of Ramadan within Islam, schools are advised to consult with members of their own local Muslim community.

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Background Notes

- Though it is easy to describe the features of Islam as a world religion, it must not be forgotten that Islam, at root, implies a relationship between human beings and *Allah*, the One God. A 'Muslim' is a person who submits to the will of God, the result of this obedience being 'Islam' ('submission'). It is through this submission that, Muslims believe, a person finds peace: note the similarity between the words *Islam*, *Muslim* and *salam* ('peace'). Fasting during the month of Ramadan is one expression of submission to the will of *Allah*.
- Fasting (*sawm*) during the twenty-nine or thirty days of Ramadan is one of the five basic duties of Islam. These duties are called 'pillars' in that they support and strengthen a Muslim's life as do pillars a building. The other pillars are: the declaration of faith, prayer/worship five times daily, paying an annual tax on disposable wealth and making the pilgrimage to Makkah.
- During the daylight hours of Ramadan, Muslims are supposed to refrain from eating, drinking and sexual activity. It is a time when they try to be even more aware of *Allah* (God). Muslims will also try to live a better life generally during Ramadan – by trying not to use bad language or think ill of others, for example.
- Because of variations in timing due to geographical location, timetables showing when daylight begins and ends during each day of Ramadan are published by Muslim communities and are often printed in local newspapers.
- Fasting during Ramadan binds the Muslim community (*ummah*) together, both locally and world-wide. Even those Muslims who, for whatever reason, do not pray five times daily will try to keep the Ramadan fast.
- 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, however. Those who accidentally break their fast should also fast an equivalent number of days later.
- As well as obeying God's laws (the requirement to fast is stated in the Qur'an which Muslims believe to be God's words – see page 2) and leading to a greater consciousness of God, 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.
- 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, many Muslims will gather at the mosque and, immediately after 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. After prayer, people will return home in order to share an evening meal (*iftar*) to which family and friends are often invited.

- Ramadan is also associated with the holy Qur'an. During the 'Night of Power' (*Laylat ul-Qadr*) which comes on an odd numbered day 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.
- Muslims use a lunar calendar which creates a year eleven days shorter than the solar year more familiar to Westerners. This means that Ramadan begins eleven days earlier each year according to the non-Muslim calendar and so gradually moves back through all the seasons. This has implications for fasting in that, when Ramadan occurs in the summer, for example, fasting is more arduous because there are more daylight hours and it is hotter.
- 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*, '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.

Some Quotations from the Qur'an

"Fasting is prescribed for you as it was for those before you, so that you may be conscious of Allah."

(2:183)

"But 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."

(2:185)

"Ramadan is the month in which the Qur'an was sent down, as a guide to mankind. So any of you who is present (in his home) during that month should spend it in fasting."

(2:185)

"Eat and drink until the white thread of dawn appears to you distinct from the black thread, then complete your fast until the night appears."

(2:187)

Ramadan and the school

In framing answers to the following questions, advice has been sought from both local Muslims and national Muslim organisations.

How should schools regard Ramadan?

The month of Ramadan may well have implications for school life and its ethos. Individual pupils as well as the Muslim community would be affirmed if it were treated positively rather than negatively.

The *Muslim Guide* published by The Islamic Foundation (see 'Further Reading', p8) advises that:

'Teachers should avoid giving the impression that fasting is "a nuisance, disruptive to school routine and work", but should view it as something positive.' (p49)

At what age are children expected to start observing the Ramadan fast?

In most schools of Shari'ah (Islamic law, based on the Qur'an and the practice of the Prophet) states that fasting during Ramadan is only obligatory from the age of puberty.

It is natural, however, that Muslim children will wish to emulate their elders and so, from an early age, Muslim children will often fast for one, two or more days. They will be proud of this and their elders will express pleasure. A competitive spirit will often develop between children in that they will compare the number of days on which they have fasted. The level of observance among children, of course, will depend upon the particular individual, family or community.

What is the responsibility of a school if a child becomes ill or suffers adversely as a result of fasting while at school?

The responsibility which a school should exercise towards those children who are fasting is no different to that applying to any child in the school. A school will obviously want to be sensitive towards children who are fasting.

Given that the obligation to fast does not override health considerations (see pages 2 and 3), a child who faints can be offered water if judged appropriate by a suitably qualified first-aider or if the child requests it. If the child 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 is not broken unless, according to most schools of law, it is more than one mouthful in which case the person would be classed as ill and the fast is broken. A Muslim child might need to be reassured that this is the case.

Can a fasting child use an asthma inhaler?

This is probably not an issue for the school to concern itself over in that, if a Muslim child has an inhaler to use in school, it can be assumed that the family has sanctioned the use of this during the month of Ramadan. (Using an inhaler does not break the fast¹). If, however, a child does not possess an inhaler which he/she clearly needs – or refuses to use the inhaler stored in school – the school should treat it as with any other medical emergency and consider contacting the home.

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

Though this might be a practice followed in some parts of the Muslim world, it is not a requirement of *shari'ah* (Islamic law). 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 within the school community and should strongly discourage it.

What are the implications of Ramadan on National Curriculum physical education and sporting activities?

There is no sporting or physical education activity that is forbidden during the month of Ramadan.

However, it must be remembered that *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) places actions in five categories:

- those which are forbidden;
- those which are not forbidden but which it is better not to do;
- those which are neutral;
- those which are not obligatory but which it is better to do;
- those which are obligatory.

Different Muslim groups might place a particular action within different categories.

Teachers are advised to use their discretion regarding physical education during Ramadan. Some Muslim pupils who are fasting, for example, 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 children. This has, of course, to be weighed against the educational value of these activities and the requirements of the National Curriculum. The season of the year within which Ramadan falls may have a bearing on any decisions that are made.

Accidental swallowing of water in normal circumstances would not invalidate the fast. Concerning whether fasting children should swim during Ramadan, some Muslim parents would advise fasting children who are going swimming to be particularly careful not to

¹ There would appear to be some differences of opinion about whether an inhaler breaks the fast. It is therefore advisable to check with parents.

swallow water. Since swimming will almost certainly result in the swallowing of water, other Muslims would say that it is better for fasting children not to swim at all during Ramadan or would wish to forbid them from doing so completely.

Schools may wish to consider the location of Ramadan in the school calendar when responding to enquiries regarding the allocation of intensive swimming time. Any request for withdrawal from swimming should be considered carefully by schools. The schools should inform parents of National Curriculum requirements and of the effect of withdrawal on the whole school community but, in the final analysis, discretion should be used.

Are there any other parts of the curriculum for which Ramadan has implications?

As well as the month of Ramadan being a time of fasting, it is also a period when Muslims try to be even more conscious of God and to lead better lives (see page 2).

Undoubtedly, the Muslim community would appreciate and respect a sympathetic and understanding stance by schools during the month of Ramadan. In turn, most schools would have as one of their underlying values – whether implicit or actually stated – respect for the family backgrounds from which children come.

It may be considered provocative if, in food technology for example, a teacher insists that a fasting Muslim child 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).

Should a school make special provision during Ramadan?

This is a matter for a school's discretion but the following may be considered:

- being aware of the impact of Ramadan on meetings for parents (in that Muslim parents may find attendance at such meetings difficult because of involvement in customs associated with Ramadan);
- making sure that all staff are aware that it is Ramadan and its possible implications for school;
- including a statement in the staff handbook (which might refer to the existence and whereabouts of this briefing paper);
- allocating to a teacher special responsibility for Muslim pupils during Ramadan (this may be a Muslim teacher);
- maintaining a list of Muslim pupils who, they are advised, will be fasting during Ramadan and informing form/class teachers;

- dedicating specific assemblies to Ramadan so that the whole school community can learn about its place in Muslim life;
- informing teachers of the approach taken in school towards matters related to Ramadan;
- arranging a meeting with Muslim parents prior to Ramadan to discuss issues such as lunchtime arrangements;
- resources permitting, making a supervised quiet room available for Muslim pupils during Ramadan (see following question);
- writing a letter to Muslim parents prior to the month of Ramadan (see page 9).

How should schools help students who are sitting examinations during Ramadan?

From 2015 onwards the month of Ramadan coincides with the period of public examinations (GCSEs and A levels etc). Some Muslim parents may advise their children not to fast when they have public examinations but those children who normally fast are quite likely to fast whether they have examinations or not.

Schools will wish to support families of fasting pupils by reinforcing messages about staying fit and healthy during Ramadan.

The following advice might be included in these messages:

- 1) Drink plenty of fluids between iftar (the meal that breaks the fast) and sehri (the meal before fasting) but nothing too sugary or caffeinated
- 2) Organise your schedule to ensure you get plenty of sleep between the final prayers of the day and rising for sehri
- 3) Get up in time for sehri but do not over eat. It is vital to eat and drink sensibly to maintain energy levels during the fasting hours
- 4) Pay particular attention to maintaining a healthy diet during Ramadan – think about slow release energy foods to sustain you during the day – the NHS offers advice here.
<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Healthylramadan/Pages/healthyfasting.aspx>
- 5) Do not waste energy. Rest between examinations, rather than play energetic sports, leave home early to avoid rushing and becoming stressed, do not run for buses and trains
- 6) Avoid eating too much when you break your fast at sunset. Sip water throughout the evening.
- 7) Pack your bag for school on the night before and check your examination timetable in case you are sleepy and become confused in the morning
- 8) During the hottest part of the day, stay in cool areas, indoors or out of the sun to avoid becoming dehydrated
- 9) If you feel lethargic or irritable, refresh your 'wudu' – ritual wash before prayer

Should special provision be made during the lunch break for those children 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.

Some schools allow Muslim children to go home at lunchtime during Ramadan with consent from parents. Schools (primary and secondary) with Muslim children who are fasting have sometimes made a supervised 'quiet room' available for children during the lunch breaks. This is greatly appreciated by the Muslim community. Some schools have employed extra midday assistants during the Ramadan period to help with supervisory duties.

Should the school communicate with parents about arrangements during Ramadan?

This is a matter for a school's discretion and will depend on a number of factors (see previous question).

A good argument can be made for writing a letter to Muslim parents some time before Ramadan: in order to acknowledge the importance of Ramadan within the Muslim community, to make special arrangements known to parents, to offer Muslim parents the opportunity of contacting the school should the need arise.

An example of a letter which might be sent to schools is given as an appendix to this document.

Example of a letter which might be sent to Muslim parents by a school prior to Ramadan

Dear Parents

Ramadan

The school is aware that Muslim families will be preparing for the month of Ramadan.

So that we can be as sensitive as possible to those children who are fasting, will you please complete the following information for each child in your family who will be fasting this year.

Name of child Form

- Will he/she be fasting? Yes No

- If yes For the whole month
 Only for some days in the month

- If your child becomes ill, who should the school contact?

Name

Telephone

- Is there anything else that you would like the school to know?
.....
.....
.....

If you do wish to discuss this matter further, please contact (name of teacher) on (telephone number).

The school wishes you and your family a peaceful and blessed month and a very happy Id ul-Fitr.

Yours sincerely

Headteacher