

Celebrating Diversity!

2019

A briefing paper on Ramadan
by Newham SACRE for schools



SACRE



SACRE briefing papers: an explanation

Newham 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 Newham. It is also aware that head teachers, 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 Muslim members 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.

This paper has been written to support schools especially during the next few years as Ramadan will fall during the time of public and internal school examinations in the summer term, and to support schools in making informed decisions about handling Muslim pupils who might be fasting in these circumstances.

For further information about this or other SACRE matters please do get in contact with claire.clinton@rematters.co.uk

| | |
|--|------|
| Background notes | 4-5 |
| Ramadan and the school | |
| • How should schools regard Ramadan? | 7 |
| • At what age are children expected to start observing the Ramadan fast? | 8 |
| • What is the responsibility of a school if a child becomes ill or suffers as a result of fasting while at school? | 8 |
| • Can a fasting child use an asthma inhaler? | 8 |
| • Is it true that Muslims cannot swallow their saliva (and must therefore spit) during the month of Ramadan? | 8 |
| • What are the implications of Ramadan on public examinations? | 8 |
| • What are the implications of Ramadan on physical education and sporting activities? | 9-10 |
| • Are there any other parts of the curriculum for which Ramadan has implications? | 10 |
| • Should a school make special provision during Ramadan? | 11 |
| • Should special provision be made during the lunch break for those children who are fasting? | 11 |
| • Should the school communicate with parents about arrangements during Ramadan? | 11 |
| Further reading | 12 |
| Further guidance | 12 |
| APPENDIX 1: Example of a letter which might be sent out to Muslim parents by a school prior to Ramadan | 13 |
| Acknowledgments and thanks | 14 |

- 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 (Allah is the Arabic word for 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*.
- In Newham we have two main denominations of Muslims – Sunni and Shi'a. The vast majority of our Muslim pupils in Newham schools are Sunni. Both groups of Muslims use the same Qur'an, but there are differences in the way they practice their faith. In Newham where we have Muslim people from a variety of continents and countries these differences are cultural as well as scriptural, at times. Knowing a Muslim family's heritage can help a school understand differences in the ways in which individuals practice their religion.
- Fasting (*sawm*) during the twenty-nine or thirty days of Ramadan is one of the basic duties of Islam for all Muslim people. These duties for Sunni Muslims are called 'pillars' in that they support and strengthen a Muslim's life as do pillars in a building. The other pillars for Sunni Muslims are: the declaration of faith, prayer/worship five times daily, paying a portion of wealth to charitable causes and making the pilgrimage to Makkah once in your lifetime. Fasting is the fourth pillar and is seen as an act of worship. For Shi'a Muslims fasting is one of the ten obligatory acts they must follow.
- During the daylight hours of Ramadan, Muslims are supposed to refrain from eating, drinking (including water) 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 often 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 through fasting or giving financially to the poor.
- 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 5) and lead 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, 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.
- 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 Gregorian calendar and so gradually moves through all the seasons. This has implications for fasting in that here in the UK, when Ramadan occurs in the summer, for example, fasting is more arduous because there are more daylight hours and it is hotter.

Muslim students who will complete the month of fasting are now faced with longer and hotter days. Schools on the other hand, may now find sports day and end of year trips are scheduled to take place during the month of Ramadan. Eventually, in two or three years time, Ramadan will align with exam times for GCSE and A level students.

(Taken from Advice to schools on fasting and Ramadan during the summer by Shaqib Juneja, a Muslim teacher)

- 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.

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 [one] 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. The information and guidance in this briefing paper is intended to be used as a source of reference for schools when adapting their practices to the needs to Muslim pupils in their schools.

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 Council of Britain says in its publication 'meeting the needs of Muslim pupils in state school':

During Ramadan, Muslims should focus on additional worship and God-consciousness, in order to improve themselves in all aspects of their lives and dealings with others, including their character, respect for others, kindness, forgiveness and avoidance of bad language and poor behaviour. In addition, having empathy with the poor, donating generously for charitable causes, the sharing of food and inviting others to one's home to open the fast are important features of Ramadan. Muslims also focus on reading more of the Qur'an and performing additional prayers in the mosque every evening.

Schools can develop the spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects of their children and school life by recognising and building upon the essence and spirit of Ramadan. Whilst the discipline and the challenge of fasting is to continue with the normality of everyday life, staff should exercise a degree of understanding, by encouraging pupils to avoid excessive exertion in physical education to prevent dehydration. By the same token they may praise pupils who are clearly making a special effort regarding their attitudes and behaviour.

The *Muslim Guide* published by The Islamic Foundation (see 'Further Reading', p11) 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)

The last time Ramadan took place in the summer term in the UK was in 1982.

When Ramadan coincides with the winter and spring academic terms there is less of an impact on Muslim students. However, a range of impacts may arise when Ramadan coincides with the summer term as exams, deadlines, sports days and end of year celebrations may all be scheduled within the month. The greatest impact will inevitably be a combination of fasting longer hours during summer days and having to take part in activities that require physical or mental endurance, like exams or sports days.

(Taken from Advice to schools on fasting and Ramadan during the summer by Shaqib Juneja, in 2013 a Muslim Newham teacher)

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

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 during Ramadan. 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 with others, and this is something that elders will educate them against. The level of observance among children, of course, will depend upon the particular individual, family or community. **But most Muslim parents would not wish their children at primary school to be fasting on school days, but rather make this an activity that they do at the weekends at home, when they can rest or sleep in the afternoons of the fasting days and have the experience of community as they fast as a family together.**

What is the responsibility of a school if a child 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.

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 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 day will still count, in the sense that the day will count as a day when they fasted. A Muslim pupil 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 pupil has an inhaler to use in school, it can be assumed that the family has sanctioned the use of this during the month of Ramadan¹. If, however, a pupil 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?

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.

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.

What are the implications of Ramadan on internal and public examinations?

For the next few years Ramadan will fall earlier, gradually missing the exam period for secondary schools, however, it will clash with National Curriculum exams for primary school pupils. A school will need to consider how to raise this 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.

As stated earlier in this document the Qur'an, "... 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). 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. So a Muslim family may decide for a young person to delay the start of their fast until after their public examination period is over, or to not fast on certain days. This approach is a pragmatic one taken by many UK Muslim families in 2017 and 2018. 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. Therefore, many Muslim pupils will delay doing their fast until after the exam period is over. Others will decide not to fast on certain days, and make up these days at a later point. ***It is the advice of Newham SACRE that schools have a discussion with parents and pupils to raise this matter with them well in advance of the month of Ramadan. It is important that a school decides on an approach that all staff take, so advice is coherent for families and respectful. Schools might decide to send a letter home (an example template is in appendix 1) 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.

The Muslim Council of Britain states in its publication 'Meeting the needs of Muslim pupils in state schools'

Examinations during Ramadan

It is inevitable that certain statutory and internal school examinations may fall during Ramadan. Schools should give appropriate consideration when scheduling internal examinations, since the combination of preparing for exams and fasting may prove challenging for some pupils.

Exemption from fasting

There are certain circumstances and conditions in which Muslims are exempt from fasting. These include menstruating women, those for whom fasting is likely to have a seriously detrimental effect on health and physical well-being and those who cannot survive without taking medication or nourishment, for example diabetics. Those travelling on long and difficult journeys may not fast if it is likely to cause serious hardship. Any missed fasting days have to be made up at a later date or in some circumstances compensated for, by feeding the poor.

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 in different categories.

Teachers are advised to use their discretion regarding physical education during Ramadan for those pupils at 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. 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.

Primary schools might want to advertise early to parents when, for example, sports day will take place, as for the next few years it might well take place during Ramadan. There is no reason for primary school pupils to choose to fast on such a day or for parents to want them to do so; there is no requirement for children under the age of puberty to fast. Schools might find it to be helpful to highlight with parents some of the comments found in this publication from national and local Muslim leaders so they know children under the age of puberty not fasting is fine. Some schools will choose to move the date of their sports day to a date that falls outside Ramadan (in 2019 it falls mainly in May). The vast majority of primary school pupils of course will not be fasting, but schools should consider whether parents (who will be fasting) can participate and support events in school at this time.

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 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. Again, SACRE would urge schools to talk with their parents about these nuances to find agreed ways of operating.

Schools may wish to consider the location of Ramadan in the school calendar a year in advance 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.

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.

The summer term is often a time when Relationships education might be covered in Year 5 & 6 or in KS3, and 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.

It may be considered provocative if, in food technology at secondary school for example, 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).

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 and informing teachers of the approach taken in school towards matters related to Ramadan;
- including a statement in the staff handbook (which might refer to the existence and whereabouts of this briefing paper);
- dedicating specific assemblies to Ramadan so that the whole school community can learn about its place in Muslim life; as well as considering fasting in different religions;
- arranging a meeting with Muslim parents prior to Ramadan to discuss issues such as lunchtime arrangements, examinations or sporting activities; and
- writing a letter to Muslim parents prior to the month of Ramadan. 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 for the Muslim community, to make special arrangements known to parents and to offer Muslim parents the opportunity of contacting the school should the need arise. (see page 12).

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.

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.

Extra support

There is a webinar at www.interfaithexplorers.com on Ramadan with the chair of the Muslim teachers association and our RE advisor Claire Clinton which can be viewed by staff, along with accompanying PP notes. Schools may find extracts played at a staff meeting will support all staff in feeling knowledgeable and confident in dealing with issues around fasting in schools.

Further reading

- *Meeting the needs to Muslim pupils in State schools*, booklet published by the Muslim Council of Britain available on-line as a pdf from www.mcb.org.uk
- *Fasting in Islam*, a small pamphlet available from Iqra Trust (see below)
- *The Muslim Guide: For teachers, employees, community workers & social administrators in Britain* by M Y McDermott & M M Ahsan
116 pages, paperback, £2.75 (including postage & packing) available from:
The Islamic Foundation, Ratby Lane, Markfield, Leicester LE67 9RN
(Tel: 01530 244944/5 Fax: 01530 244946)
- Meet My Muslim Neighbour: Ramadan Guide for schools www.mymn.org.uk

Further guidance

The following organisations can be consulted on issues relating to Ramadan in particular and on matters relating to Islam in general:

- **Meet My Muslim Neighbour**
info@mymn.org.uk , www.mymn.org.uk
- **Iqra Trust**
24 Culross Street, London W1Y 3HE (Tel: 020 7491 1572 Fax: 020 7493 7899)
- **Muslim Council of Britain**
PO Box 57330, London. E1 2WJ (Tel: 0845 2626766) admin@mcb.org.uk, www.mcb.org.uk
- **Islamic Cultural Centre**
146 Park Road, London NW8 7RG (Tel: 020 7724 3363 Fax: 020 7724 0493)
- **The Islamic Foundation**
See 'Further reading' above www.islamic-foundation.com
- **The Muslim Educational Trust**
130 Stroud Green Road, London N4 3RZ (Tel: 020 7272 8502) www.muslim-ed-trust.org.uk
- **The Muslim College**
Creffield Road, Ealing, London W5 3RP (Tel: 020 8992 6636 Fax: 020 8993 3946)
- **Muslim Youth Helpline**
Is a confidential and reputable helpline for young Muslims. www.myh.org.uk

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

Dear Parents

Concerning Ramadan

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

We wanted to make you aware that we have spoken to your child this week about ... (public examinations/fasting during Ramadan). Having been given advice from Muslim leaders in Newham, as well as reading advice from National Muslim groups like the Muslim Council of Britain we are suggesting to pupils at this school consider... (delaying when they fast until after their public examinations, or to not fast on those days when they need to write their examinations, or ensure that they rest and sleep as much as possible if they decide to fast during their public examinations, or the stance of many Muslims is that mature children who will be fasting start preparation for exam revision much earlier, or if at primary school they do their fasting at weekends with their family not in school time as fasting is not obligatory for them).

(For secondary) After all the hard work the pupils have put into getting ready for these examinations across the last two years we do not want anything to prevent them from being able to perform at their best in their exams.

(For secondary and primary) As a school we hope to support the Muslim community during the month of Ramadan by (might mention focus of assemblies or daily reflections/ Iftar celebration all families are invited to/lunchtime arrangements)

If you would like to discuss further with us anything to do with matter then please do get in contact with (name and contact number of member of staff).

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

Yours sincerely

Headteacher

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Minhaj Ul Quran
Quwwat-ul-Islam Society
Elmhurst School
Brampton Primary School
Plasht Secondary School

We would like to make clear the final guidance given in this booklet is that of the LA to schools, it is not necessarily in all places the view of individual Muslim people or mosques who have kindly given us their time and advice.

We would also like to acknowledge the help of other SACRE briefing papers that have been shared nationally, especially that of Redbridge's SACRE paper on Ramadan which became our starting place in writing this advice.

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