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**SACRE**  
Enhancing collective worship and RE

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## Fasting during the month of Ramadan

Guidance for school  
leaders 2016

## Hertfordshire SACRE advice about Ramadan

The Hertfordshire SACRE is issuing this guidance to schools to support students, families and staff and to prepare to meet their needs during the month of Ramadan. This year some public examinations will coincide with the month of Ramadan. Young Muslims, therefore, may need to include the preparation for examinations into everyday activities during Ramadan. The Hertfordshire SACRE does not wish to advise students how they should address the question of fasting during Ramadan. That is a matter for parents, carers and faith leaders. This guidance is intended to be a useful to support school students of any age who are fasting.

In 2016, the month of Ramadan begins on the 6th or 7th of June, which is in high summer when days are the longest. The Islamic calendar is lunar and has 354 or 355 days. Therefore precise dates cannot be forecast as they depend on the sighting of the moon. In 2016 Id-ul-Fitr (the festival marking the end of Ramadan) will fall on July 7th (plus or minus 1 day). Prayer times for June and July will be found on many mosque websites.

In Islam, fasting becomes obligatory during Ramadan, when an able Muslim reaches the age of puberty. No meal or drink is allowed during the fasting period, from dawn to dusk. It is very important for many Muslim families that their children should begin participating in the practice of fasting at an early age. Most children of secondary school age, as they are considered adult members of their communities, will be expected to fast and many primary school children will be fasting as well with younger pupils fasting possibly for part of Ramadan, or only on certain days of each week. Not every student fasts. In Islam, fasting is not obligatory for children.

The routine of an observant Muslim family changes during the month of Ramadan, when fasting falls during the summer months the longer daylight hours mean that the family will wake up early, will have 'sehr' (a meal), then, will start fasting at about 3 am. The fast ends just after the sunset at about 9.15 pm, making an 18 hour fasting day.

In some families, children may not fast for the full month, or for full days. Some children fast only on weekends. Schools should be aware that younger children who are not fasting will still be experiencing very different family routines and may well become more tired or excitable in school during this time. Those students who are fasting may become very tired and thirsty during the school day.

Many Muslim students will be observing this fast and will also take their public and internal exams and tests this summer. Schools will be aware that pupils observing the fast will have consumed their last food and drink before dawn, which could mean as early as 3am. Given the importance of hydration for maintaining concentration, it would not be surprising if exam performance was to suffer. Clearly, exam candidates who are fasting will be at an unfair disadvantage going into their exams having consumed no food or water for some hours, this could mean not only lower grades for individual pupils but also poorer performance for their schools in league tables.

Having to take examinations on top of long hours of fasting over the summer period will be a challenge for students. Schools may therefore wish to point students and families to guidance on the best way to avoid dehydration, eating nutritious food, getting appropriate rest periods and organising revision. Schools are encouraged to liaise with parents and students in advance of Ramadan to ensure those fasting are well prepared and able to achieve their best during this month of religious observance.

Families will make their own decision on such issues affecting their children. Those who have a medical condition, physical or mental, or who are traveling are exempt from fasting. If fasting is causing hardship to the child, the child or the child's parent may decide themselves to end the fast.

### **Advice from Hertfordshire's Muslim community**

SACRE has sought the advice of Muslim leaders and the local Muslim community. Some community members were of the opinion that the whole object of fasting is to learn self-control and patience. Fasting is a part of training. Though the first few days may be difficult, but students will get used to it. They have advised that:

- a) In the month of Ramadan, schools should identify students who will be fasting, communicate with their parents and ask them:  
How should school support them?  
Do they need extra rest? - *Some suggested that the best a school could do is to provide a quiet room, for those needing rest during the lunch break.*  
Do they require any special conditions during exams?  
*The families will appreciate this. Every family will be different.*
- b) There is no dispensation from fasting for young Muslims who are taking public examinations and all Muslims who are physically mature and healthy and for whom it is not unsafe must fast during the daylight hours.
- c) if a child does not feel well or becomes anxious due to fasting, they should stop fasting, as the child's health takes precedence. Individuals will differ in the extent to which they do, or do not, experience difficulties in relation to fasting and examinations. In addition, the children, who are physically weak, will need extra consideration, when doing physical exercise
- d) Fasting in Ramadan and praying five times a day cannot be done at a later time. Therefore, the students should fast the month of Ramadan in the prescribed time, except if there is an acceptable reason, as stated above.

*Local mosques may be able to provide further local advice to parents about deferring some days of the fast to after exams, so that students are able to achieve the best possible outcomes.*

It is not always practicable for exam boards to rearrange exam timetables to avoid

daylight hours during Ramadan.

For other year groups, it may be that internal school exam schedules could be retimed to ensure that students do not have too many exams on the same day, or that special arrangements are made to allow some students to sit certain exams at different times. School plans for other exam arrangements, such as revision sessions and the location of rooms could be reviewed to minimise the impact on those who are fasting.

If pupils are normally allowed to take food and drink into an exam room, it would be considerate where possible to allocate a separate exam room for fasting pupils so they are not distracted by others who might have water bottles or snacks on their desks.

### **What happens during Ramadan?**

Fasting in Ramadan is an important event in the Islamic calendar and an integral part of the Muslim faith. For Muslims, the month of Ramadan changes the daily routine significantly. Physically, this means that from the very start of dawn until the sun has set, secondary age students must abstain, amongst other things, from eating, drinking and chewing. Muslims in Britain, although fasting, will still carry on with life in as normal a way as possible. Students involved in the fast will neither eat nor drink from dawn to sunset. They may also wish to say their midday prayers at lunchtime in school.

### **Supporting students and their families**

Students who are fasting must not be treated differently from other students, unless it is clear that there is an objective and reasonable justification for different treatment. Students who are fasting should not be excluded from clubs or activities or be sent home or out of school at lunchtime.

Where possible, every effort should be made to provide students who are fasting with access to rooms set aside for prayers or a quiet area away from the dining room to rest if they wish.

Fasting is difficult for both adults and young people and the time of the fast, from dawn to dusk, means that all food preparation and consumption must take place over a few hours every evening and very early each morning. This makes it difficult for parents to attend meetings or other functions in the evenings during Ramadan. Schools should consequently seek to avoid parents' meetings during Ramadan, but continue to provide close and effective contact between the school and home. School staff will also need to be aware that some students may find the rigour of preparing for an examination difficult whilst fasting, and be sensitive to the fact that other students sitting exams and studying will be able to eat and drink during this time.

Students who are observing the fast may be made aware of the importance of healthy eating and good hydration during Ramadan so that they function as well as they can.

## Swimming

Swimming is not forbidden during Ramadan but some parents and young people may be concerned about breaking the fast through swallowing water. If swimming lessons are scheduled and cannot be avoided, it would be a good idea to speak to Muslim parents of primary children to find out if their children are fasting. If they are fasting, parents and carers may seek permission for the children not to swim.

### Some approaches to support good practice in schools

#### A) Before Ramadan begins

- Consult with parents and carers in a positive and supportive manner before the start of Ramadan.
- Invite parents and carers and local community representatives to discuss preparing for this important time.
- Ensure that governors and staff are conscious of the implications of fasting for young people at this time.
- Ensure that the wider school community understands that some children may be fasting and this may affect what activities they are able to do.
- Identify and discuss with staff and or parents and carers the possible effects of fasting on young students. Ensure that members of staff know the implications and where advice can be sought. The links in this guidance may be helpful.

#### B) During Ramadan

- Students in **Key Stages 3, 4 and 5** should be encouraged to inform the school when they are fasting. This will avoid making assumptions about who may be observing the fast.
- Students who are fasting may benefit from a personalised revision timetable to take account of the requirements of each day.
- Parents and carers may be asked to inform the school if their child will be fasting and taking no school lunch.
- Provide support/supervision for students withdrawn from activities.
- Ensure that catering services are aware of the numbers of students who will not require their usual school lunch. For students on free school meals check if students would prefer to take a sandwich home.
- If students are fasting, provide opportunities for them to stay in school and, where appropriate, offer activities to engage their interests.
- Be supportive if a student has to break the fast and exercise the normal duty of care towards him/her.

## Eid-ul-Fitr

The end of Ramadan is marked by the celebration of Eid-ul-Fitr. Traditionally this is a family orientated day, when people visit their relatives and friends. Muslims go to

special Eid prayers at the mosque in the morning to worship and give thanks. Muslims who can afford it give a special Eid day alms that go to the poor, and may also give to other charitable causes. The yearly alms, known as Zakat, is often given in the month of Ramadan.

### **Extenuating circumstances**

The event of Ramadan is not generally counted as an extenuating circumstance or reason for claiming mitigating circumstances for examinations unless fasting significantly affects a young person's health and/or they have a medical condition which may impair performance or prevent attendance at an examination. In such cases a young person will need to provide documentary evidence to support a claim for extenuating circumstances to be accepted.

### **Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ)**

The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) confirmed that it takes religious festivals and periods of observance into account when constructing the exam timetable. They continue to work with other parties to consider how best the timetable can be constructed to reduce any negative impact of fasting during examinations. Ramadan will continue to fall largely during peak periods in the exam season for the next two years, being forecast to begin on 27 May in 2017 and 16 May in 2018.

### **Available guidance on health and fasting during Ramadan**

A number of guidance documents have been developed in order to assist Muslim students and their families who are fasting during Ramadan to stay healthy during this period. Headteachers may wish to draw the following links to the attention of parents and carers and their students.

#### **Healthy Ramadan – NHS Choices**

This site provides comprehensive advice on Ramadan and healthy living.

<http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/healthyramadan/Pages/healthyramadanhome.aspx>

#### **NHS Advice on Ramadan and Specific Health Matters**

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Healthyramadan/Pages/faqs.aspx>

#### **NHS Ramadan Health Guide**

<http://www.communitiesinaction.org/Ramadan%20Health%20and%20Spirituality%20Guide.pdf>

#### **BBC: Ramadan and the Muslim Faith**

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/ramadan\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/ramadan_1.shtml)

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