



# Celebrating Diversity!

## 2024

A briefing paper on Ramadan

by Newham SACRE for schools



## SACRE briefing papers: an explanation

Newham Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) celebrates the diversity between and among the Borough's faith communities. It is also aware that religious and cultural differences can provide challenges, to a greater or lesser degree, to the life of schools in Newham. Head teachers, in particular, have often found it helpful to draw upon the background knowledge and understanding of Newham SACRE.

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 worked on by relevant members of Newham SACREs membership.

In the case of this particular briefing paper, it is important to note that the SACRE has consulted 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.

For further information about this or other SACRE matters please do get in contact with [claire.clinton@rematters.co.uk](mailto:claire.clinton@rematters.co.uk)



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- 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, but we also have Ismaili and Ahmadiyya communities present in the borough. The vast majority of our Muslim pupils in Newham schools are Sunni. All 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.
- There are variations in the starting date of Ramadan due to the sighting of the new moon which indicates the start of the month. In Newham Muslim people may follow local moon sighting or that of another country (e.g. Saudi Arabia). Timetables showing when daylight begins and ends during each day of Ramadan are published by Muslim communities and can be found on-line.
- 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 at another time 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.
- Taraweeh 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. Schools will have different considerations to think through depending on when this fasting is taking place.
- 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 Eid ul-Fitr (the festival of breaking the fast). Coming straight after the austerities of Ramadan, Eid ul-Fitr is a joyous occasion (it is forbidden to fast on Eid 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 Eid', which is also printed on greetings cards exchanged at this time. Just before Eid 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)



### ***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. The competitive spirit is encouraged at home between siblings but not against other pupils in schools so not to demean others who are not fasting. The level of observance among children, of course, will depend upon the particular individual, family or community. **Muslim parents are very mindful about the impact of fasting on younger children and would normally encourage weekend fasting at home, when they can rest and perform prayers with their wider family.**

Schools should always enquire what a child (below the age of puberty) means when they say they are fasting. Plenty of young children will think they are fasting in between their regular 3 meals a day, as this is how home talks about what they are doing for the month of Ramadan.

### ***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 – it should not affect your normal daily 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. In the same way if a pupil cannot concentrate or becomes listless at school, a drink and food should be given. Before any fasting starts the school should ask parents to take responsibility to inform school if the child is fasting and school can use that opportunity to inform parent that they will take actions if child is unwell, lethargic etc

### ***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 Ramadan<sup>1</sup>. 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 act to save the life of the child. The life of a person is more important in Islam than the fast.

### ***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.

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





Schools would obviously regard the practice of spitting as contrary to health and safety in the school community and should strongly discourage it.

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

At present we have passed this as a general issue for schools, but exams can happen in the spring term. A school will need to consider how to raise any examinations taking places during Ramadan 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 over the last 5 years. ***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 if there is any clash around important examinations. 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. Although we also know there are athletes who did fast during these games and compete.

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.

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.

Throughout the school year schools may have lessons within PSHE on relationships education and schools might want to consider when these lessons take place, and see if they can be moved to a time when it is not 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 relationship 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](http://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 PPT and 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](http://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 (This is a 116 page, paperback, £2.75 (including postage & packing) available from: The Islamic Foundation, Ratby Lane, Markfield, Leicester LE67 9RN (Tel: 01530 244944/5)

- Meet My Muslim Neighbour: Ramadan Guide for schools [www.mymn.org.uk](http://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](mailto:info@mymn.org.uk) , [www.mymn.org.uk](http://www.mymn.org.uk)
- **Iqra Trust**  
24 Culross Street, London WIY 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](mailto:admin@mcb.org.uk), [www.mcb.org.uk](http://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](http://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](http://www.muslim-ed-trust.org.uk)
- **The Muslim College**  
Creefield 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](http://www.myh.org.uk)



# Appendix 1

## Example of a letter which might be sent out to parents/carers by a school prior to Ramadan

Dear Parent/Carer

### 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 ... (internal 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... (not fast on those days when they need to write their internal 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 or whatever you want to highlight).

(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). Pupils are often very ready to share their positive experiences of their community at this time with the wider school.

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 when we get to this festival.

Yours sincerely

Headteacher



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Newham Muslim Forum [salaam@newhammuslims.com](mailto:salaam@newhammuslims.com)  
Meet my Muslim Neighbour Association  
Minhaj Ul Quran  
Quwwat-ul-Islam Society  
Ranelagh Primary School  
Elmhurst Primary School  
Brampton Primary School  
Plashtet Secondary School  
East London University

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 over a decade ago now.

January 2024

