

# Guidance on Collective Worship

from

Lewisham SACRE



**Lewisham Standing Advisory Council on Religious  
Education**

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## **Introduction**

Every Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) has a legal responsibility to advise its Local Authority (LA) on issues regarding collective worship.

There are unfortunately concerns sometimes expressed by parents and teachers about the nature of collective worship. Some are concerned that collective worship promotes Christian values and beliefs and that other faiths and beliefs will not be recognised and celebrated. Others are worried that their child will be expected to 'pretend' to have a faith that is not their own or to say words or perform actions that are contrary to their religious beliefs.

Lewisham SACRE has produced this guidance in order to support community schools as they seek to improve their delivery of collective worship.

SACRE intends this to be a simple, useful document, which gives helpful advice and which particularly, supports schools when they wish to mark festivals celebrated by members of the schools and the local community in an inclusive and positive way.

## **Why must we have Collective Worship?**

It has been a legal requirement to provide collective worship in schools since 1944. The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) affirmed its statutory position, with some of the earlier prescription to do with grouping and timing relaxed, allowing what had become widespread practice in schools. The 1996 Education Act further confirmed the requirements, since when there has been no change to this primary legislation, by which duty schools remain bound.

The basic requirement is that all registered pupils shall take part in an act of collective worship every day. (ERA 6.1) There are only two exceptions to this: parents have the right to withdraw their child from collective worship and pupils in school sixth forms are permitted to decide for themselves whether to attend or not.

Schools have a legal duty as set out in the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) to:

- (a) promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society;
- (b) and prepare such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

Collective Worship can make an important contribution towards discharging this duty.

It is the responsibility governors and the head teacher to ensure that Collective Worship is implemented in schools.

## **What is Collective Worship?**

The law has never provided a precise definition of collective worship but above all else it must

be an educational experience. We know that collective worship is not the same as faith community worship (corporate worship) because:

- A community school is not a faith community
- A community school contains pupils and staff from many different faith backgrounds as well as those who have no religious beliefs or no faith background; and
- A school community contains a wide range of people with different views on what 'worship' might mean and what or whom may be worthy of worship.
- Collective worship is not the same as an Assembly because staff and pupils do not have the right to withdraw from Assembly. Assembly is usually the time when members of the school come together to pass on information and move forward matters of secular school business.

## **The Law on Collective Worship**

Although the law has not given an all-embracing definition of collective worship, it does have something to say on the matter.

In 1994 the Government issued Guidance which dealt with both Religious Education and Collective Worship in the form of Circular 1/94 published from the then Department of Education.

The unequivocal 'advice' contained in Circular 1/94 was controversial from the start, and in 2010 the sections of the Circular dealing with Religious Education were revised. However the sections dealing with collective worship remain the official Government guidance.

The delivery of collective worship is guided by the law and government guidance which states that:

- collective worship must be provided daily (separate arrangements may be made for nurseries and special schools)
- collective worship may take place at any time of the school day
- schools may decide on the age/grouping of pupils and these may vary from day to day
- the time decided for the delivery of collective worship may vary for different groups from day to day
- generally collective worship should take place on school premises (clearly this is not possible when pupils are away on school journeys for example when the venue for the collective worship for those pupils will be changed)
- The content of the majority of acts of collective worship in a term should be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character, reflecting the broad traditions of the Christian belief."

- The content should have regard for the family backgrounds, ages and aptitudes of pupils
- Parents may withdraw their children from collective worship
- Teachers may withdraw from collective worship
- In a community school the responsibility for managing the provision for collective worship lies with the head teacher after consultation with the governing body
- Every maintained school is required to provide information about the collective worship provided by the school and how parents may withdraw their children from it.

### **What does 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character' mean?**

All relevant legislation consistently avoids describing school worship as Christian and this fact has been taken to mean that Collective Worship is not expected to be Christian worship in any conventional sense. The lack of a precise legal definition of collective worship allows freedom of interpretation.

- it can be 'wholly or mainly...', therefore collective worship does not have to be all 'of a broadly Christian character. Indeed, the Act specifies that 'every act of collective worship required by section 6 ... need not comply' with this description;
- collective worship must 'reflect the broad traditions of Christian belief; that is to say, it is broad rather than specific or exclusive, reflecting plurality and focusing, not on doctrine or traditions of worship, but on belief that is broadly but not exclusively, Christian.
- the law does not say 'of a broadly Christian content or style'.
- It does not mean creating pretence of Christian worship.
- It does not need to contain any elements of Christian ritual or liturgy
- It can mean incorporating elements that Christians might recognize from their worship, e.g. songs, music, stories, learning from the good example of others, readings from holy books.
- It does mean promoting values that Christians believe to be important. These may be, and often are, values held to be important by other faiths as well.

### **Positive Purposes of Collective Worship**

SACRE members believe that collective worship can be provided in accordance with the law to the benefit of the whole school community. It can add value to the education process, for example by providing an opportunity to:

- contribute strongly to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils. It also is a place to promote inclusivity, values and Fundamental British Values;
- encourage pupils to develop awareness of the universal moral principles of right and wrong, justice and fairness and concern for the fate of others and the world;
- affirm and celebrate the values and ethos of the school;
- add to the pupils' development of an awareness of, and a sense of belonging to, the many different dimensions of the schools' community;
- gather for a special purpose;
- share an experience which promotes thought and reflection;
- consider their own beliefs and values, both religious and secular;
- promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development;
- consider and reflect upon a variety of situations and issues and make a personal response
- reflect quietly and make an internal response in the light of personal beliefs and background: this may include worship of God within each participant's own faith understanding.

To ensure that a quality experience is provided, we believe that collective worship has to be well planned and effectively led, resourced and managed.

The integrity of all those present should be recognised and safeguarded throughout all collective worship experiences.

### **What is the relationship between Collective Worship and religious education?**

- Collective worship is a means whereby the school community comes together in order to celebrate and reflect upon those values that it considers important to promote; it is not assembly.
- Whilst collective worship should be a quality experience and pupils should learn from it, an act of collective worship is not a lesson;
- religious education is a subject of the curriculum and as such cannot be taught through collective worship;
- religious education could not be delivered in a broad, balanced and differentiated way to all pupils through collective worship;

- it would not be possible to allocate sufficient time to religious education in order to teach it appropriately through collective worship;
- Collective worship provides opportunities to reflect on how many of the beliefs that pupils learn about through planned educational experiences in religious education, have influenced people's life choices or actions.

## **Festivals and Celebrations in school and their link to collective worship**

Belonging to a community involves sharing good and bad times experienced by members of that community. This includes in schools marking the celebration of festivals that are important to members of the school and local community. This often takes place in the school's collective worship programme as collective worship is a community experience.

It is important to be aware of the cultures and faiths represented within the school and to help pupils to develop an awareness of, and respect for, holy days and times of reflection from faiths and beliefs different from their own.

In schools it is important for pupils to feel free to share the place of religious or spiritual experience in their lives. In order that this can happen effectively it is necessary to foster an environment where pupils can appreciate that everyone is of equal importance, where diversity is celebrated and where pupils can develop an understanding that the needs of everyone should be treated fairly and equally. Within such a learning environment, cultural and religious diversity is regarded as positive and pupils can express their viewpoints and beliefs in safety.

Schools are multicultural and multi faith communities where a number of religious and secular festivals will be of importance to different members of the community during the year. Whilst it is important to mark these times, it is also important to appreciate that the level of involvement of non-believers in any festival must not compromise the beliefs of that individual, e.g. by acting a part in a drama that they find conflicts with their own religious beliefs.

Festivals celebrated by members of the school community or the class will provide many opportunities to help pupils to begin to develop connections between faiths, festivals, key figures, places, stories and symbols. As they talk about the story associated with a festival and the way in which the festival is celebrated, pupils connect festivals to their faith context and begin to understand each other better. For example it is important that pupils learn that Christmas is a Christian festival celebrated by Christians and begin to appreciate what the festival means to those children in the community who will be celebrating it.

Here are some principles which should be considered when selecting festivals to include in the school's planning calendar:

- Plan festival focuses at the appropriate time of year to help pupils to make sense of their *experiences*.
- Help pupils to be clear about the faith to which each festival belongs.
- Introduce the story attached to the festival at an appropriate level for the pupils.
- Enable pupils to appreciate that a festival is a celebration whilst ensuring that you do not give them or their carers the impression that they are being asked to participate at the level of a member of a faith community.
- If you intend inviting pupils to share foods related to festivals take the opportunity to talk about those food restrictions and laws which relate to the faith concerned and ensure that you are aware of the food laws adhered to by members of the group so that you do not offend or confuse. For example, eating apples dipped into honey to mark Jewish New Year, is not worship and pupils can gain greater appreciation of the symbolism of wishing for a sweet new year ahead.
- The ways in which people celebrate the festival should be clearly referenced to the faith and cultural tradition - e.g. examining Diwali cards could also be an opportunity to discuss Indian or Hindu art and symbol.
- Be alert to the need to avoid racial, cultural and gender stereotyping.
- Where possible involve members of the relevant community so that pupils realise the festival is really celebrated by real people. For example members of the school community can visit your collective worship to tell the pupils how they prepare and celebrate in their home.

Practitioners and faith community representatives should be careful that they are clear about the level at which they should approach these areas with young pupils. They should appreciate that their involvement is not an opportunity to convert or engage pupils in activities more appropriate to members of their faith community. It is also important to not use language that implies that everyone celebrates the festival in the same way or that implies that the school has a religious character.

### **Some ideas for ways to mark religious festivals**

- Members of faith communities spend time preparing for festivals. You could have a large festival calendar in school and leading up to a festival, attention could be paid to how members of the relevant community and preparing both practically and spiritually.

- Taking inspiration from Christian Advent calendars, you could, if local communities feel it is appropriate, produce calendars relevant to some of the festivals you intend to mark. For example you could produce an Eid Calendar, a Diwali calendar, a Guru Nanak's Birthday Calendar or a Hannukah calendar. Include within them images, facts and quotations appropriate to the faith concerned.
- Within faith and belief communities, festivals are celebrated in different ways according to family or cultural traditions. You could ask a member of the school or wider community to come into school to share their particular way of marking a festival, taking time to explore what is held in common with others, particularly the inner meaning of the festival, and what is different or personal to their family.

## Music

Make links with the school's music programme by selecting music for collective worship that comes from relevant faiths or cultural backgrounds.

Music is integral to Christian, Hindu, Sikh and Jewish worship and in collective worship pupils can be introduced to recordings of some of these in appropriate contexts. However, members of some Christian groups consider music to be indulgent and sensual unless forming part of their worship experiences.

The legality of music and singing in the Shariah (Islamic Law) is a topic hotly debated amongst individuals and Muslim scholars of the present day. Much has been written both for and against the religious legality of music and singing, clouding the issue, and creating confusion.

The sources of Islam, the Qur'an and Sunnah, as well as the rulings of the Sahaba (Companions of the Prophet (saws)), and Imams Abu Hanifa, Malik, Shafi'i, and Ibn Hanbal are unanimous in their verdicts, that music and singing, with certain limited exceptions, is haraam (forbidden). Some Muslims do not agree with this and there are many Muslim religious and secular forms of music available in the world today. What this clearly demonstrates is that schools in Lewisham could contain a range of pupils whose families are somewhere on the continuum between being comfortable with music or being vehemently opposed to it.

As pupils may not be withdrawn from the music element of the curriculum, schools need to accommodate this range of beliefs with great care, particularly being sensitive to pupils' concerns or distress in being required to sing songs which contain words opposed to their religious beliefs or values. There is however no requirement for them to be withdrawn from being the space where others are singing. They may be withdrawn from this element of collective worship and parents do have the right to do this.



## **Collective Worship and Special Schools**

Circular 1/94 Annex B expresses the law in relation to the involvement of special school pupils in collective worship.

The law is often misunderstood to mean that special schools do not have to provide collective worship. In fact the possible disapplication of special school pupils from collective worship was included referring to a narrow interpretation of their needs and was aimed at reducing the difficulty for gathering together large numbers of non ambulant pupils.

In terms of equality of opportunity for pupils in special schools, unless there are reasons relating to space or equipment that cannot be overcome, then special schools should follow the law in the same way as mainstream schools.

### **What happens if you feel that you cannot provide Collective Worship in accordance with the law?**

If a school feels that the provision of collective worship within the broadest interpretation of the law is still not suitable for their particular context then the Head teacher needs to investigate whether it might be appropriate to ask the SACRE to grant a "Determination" in accordance with the law. (See Circular 1/94).

If this is the case then please contact the SACRE for a copy of the local Determinations paperwork.

## Appendix

### Sample / example letter to visitors invited to take part in Collective Worship

Dear.....

Thank you for agreeing to come to our school on \_\_\_ to talk to \_\_\_ class /years in assembly/collective worship about\_\_

Assembly/collective worship begins at \_\_\_\_\_ and generally lasts for minutes. It will take place in (location) and approximately....(number of) children will be present from years.... (aged....)

Please arrive by (time) and report to the school's Visitor Reception, where you will be required to sign our visitors' book. For the duration of your stay at our school you will be required to wear a visitor's badge; this ensures that everyone understands that you are in the building on school business.

Our school community is not a faith community and collective worship is provided for all pupils. Therefore your input should be planned to be comfortable, inclusive and sensitive to the needs of all. As part of your presentation you may wish to share your beliefs with the children. This is perfectly acceptable as long as these are put into context. For example you might say 'as I am... I believe.... But please remember it is not the place of a school to provide opportunities to convert or indoctrinate pupils. The pupils and their families need to be reassured that all of their faith or culture backgrounds are of equal status and validity.

In our school we do not expect or invite children to pray as though they were all members of the same faith. As part of collective worship our pupils are used to having a quiet thinking/reflection time when they can consider the meaning of what they have heard and seen to their own lives. We hope that those who are religious believers use this time to relate the focus or theme to their personal religious beliefs and some may indeed pray or worship internally.