

Guidance on Parental Concerns to Visits to Places of Worship



**Guidance to Derby City Schools produced by Derby City
Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE)
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Introduction

The issue of requests from parents to withdraw their children from visits to places of worship is a serious matter about which many of us in the world of education, and specifically in religious education, are deeply concerned. It is difficult to know if the incidence of this is increasing but we think it is important to raise it and share some examples of good practice in the hope that we might be able to avert further problems. While objections are raised about visits to a number of places of worship, they are increasingly about visits to mosques, which raises the bigger issue of how Islam is understood and presented in the media and how this can be addressed through education.

This document provides guidance to Head teachers and teachers when handling objections to visiting inner city Derby and places of worship. Parents have the legal right to withdraw their children for all or part of RE. Schools must decide for themselves whether visits to inner city Derby are part of the statutory RE curriculum, Geography, Citizenship, History or part of a wider aspect of school life such as preparing young people for adult life or seeking to discharge the duty on schools to promote community cohesion.

Inevitably much of this guidance focuses on concerns and fears that some parents/carers have regarding agreeing to their child attending a place of worship. SACRE wishes to assert, however, in this introduction that schools should have the confidence to positively support such visits confident that the majority of parents/carers do support such educational experiences and that for the children participating such visits live long in the memory and make a valuable and unique contribution to their education and understanding of the wider community (see appendix 1).

Why do parents object?

The reasons for parental refusal vary greatly and include the cost of the trip as well as religious (and sometimes other) objections. **We would strongly recommend that schools always ask parents to explain their decision,** whilst remembering that parents do have the right to withdraw their children from some or all of religious education, **on grounds of conscience.** This is consistent with guidance issued by the then Department for Education (Circular 1/94, currently under review).

We don't know all the reasons for parental objections - mainly because some schools don't ask and there is no central collection of data. However, the Open Centre has conducted informal investigations and a more formal project is under way. Reasons identified so far include:

Fear of the inner city

Parents are concerned about the physical safety of their children and some of them have a very poor image of the Normanton area. The Open Centre has been organising visits for 30 years and over 150,000 pupils aged between 6 and 16 have taken part. During all this time there has not been a single incident.

Fear of religions other than the parents' own religion

Some deeply religious parents are concerned that their children will be "corrupted" by exposure to beliefs other than those of the parents. The Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education, which all local authority schools must follow, requires pupils to learn about many of the world's religions and beliefs - including non-belief. Visits to places of worship do not involve any worship - they provide an opportunity to find out about what goes on, and why, but not to take part. The religious integrity of the children and adults taking part is never compromised or threatened. Some parents raise concerns about their child having to cover their head or take off their shoes when entering a place of worship. It is helpful to anticipate this concern and make it clear to parents that such actions are signs of respect not a prelude to or part of any act of worship. The school has been invited in to someone else's private space and it is entirely appropriate that children and staff are respectful to their traditions and etiquettes.

Fear of religion in general - and what is done in its name

At least one of the trustees of the Open Centre is an atheist and was the founder of Derbyshire Humanists. Many Humanists and Atheists feel that children should not arrive at a decision about which religion or belief to follow out of ignorance since such a decision would be based on bigotry not information. Atheists and humanists therefore support the work of the Open Centre and the role it plays in promoting good community relations.

Racism/Prejudice

It is clear that some objections are based on prejudices held by parents about people, faiths and cultures different to their own and especially when another race or ethnic group is the focus of the visit or workshop. It is important that schools refer parents to the values and principles outlined in the school prospectus that will almost certainly talk of the school as being inclusive and the education provided within it aiming to break down prejudice, intolerance and ignorance. The school cannot achieve its purpose without such visits and workshops.

A clear distinction should be made between "racism" (prejudice based on skin colour or ethnic origin – over which the individual has not control) and fear of religion (a set of ideas which an individual may choose to believe.) It is quite possible that racism hides behind criticism of religion but it is equally possible that parents who are in no way racist may express concerns about what is done in the name of religion.

Rationale

It is important to have a very clear rationale available to all parents and others about visits to places of worship. Reasons for arranging such visits include:

- Education is about extending pupils' knowledge, understanding and experience of the world and a visit to a place of worship can help do this
- Religion is a very important factor in society and it is essential that children have opportunities to explore religious practice and belief
- The experience of visiting a place of worship can help children to learn about religions but is NEVER about indoctrination or persuading children and young people to agree with the beliefs of the religion being studied
- Educationists agree that experiential learning is more effective than simply learning from texts and electronic sources
- Pupils enjoy their visits and learning is enhanced and the experience is also shared with parents/carers and other family members
- A visit to a place of worship also provides opportunities for pupils' cultural development by enabling them to experience new or different forms of art, architecture and music
- The atmosphere of many places of worship can provide an opportunity for pupils to consider questions about life, religion and spirituality in ways that are impossible in classrooms
- Visits are usually part of a planned curriculum and are integral to the learning that will take place: to miss out on the visit would seriously impact on pupils' progress and understanding. This is particularly important as the curriculum becomes more flexible and creative
- There are always opportunities for cross-curricular learning and many aspects of the school curriculum can be studied through a religious building including the arts, literacy, history, mathematics and design
- The visit is often led by an experienced guide who is able to answer the children's questions and thus they have the benefits of meeting an adherent of a faith that might be different from their own
- The government is supporting Learning outside the Classroom: see www.lotc.org.uk
- The non-statutory National Framework for RE supports visits to places of worship
- Many syllabuses for religious education require that all pupils should visit places of worship as part of the RE curriculum
- Visits can contribute to community cohesion.

Preventing the problem from arising

There are many ways in which teachers and governors can try to prevent the difficult situation in which a parent refuses to give permission from arising.

These include:

- Having a clear policy on which parents and pupils have been consulted, which has been ratified by the governing body and which is supported by all members of the school community. This can be incorporated in your race equality policy or your RE policy

- Using parents' evenings, assemblies and displays to promote understanding of religious and cultural diversity and of previous visits to places of worship
- Being unequivocal in the school's approach to racism, stereotyping and prejudice
- Working with the local community to raise awareness – the local Christian church supporting the visit to the mosque, for example
- Having a period of preparation for the visit so that pupils' interest and enthusiasm are high
- Inviting a speaker from the relevant religious community to come, perhaps with artefacts or posters, to work with the children and answer their questions in lessons
- Inviting a speaker from a religious community to work with governors, parents or staff prior to arranging a visit
- Arranging a day for parents and /or governors to meet members of faith communities and visit a place of worship (it is a particularly successful strategy to invite concerned parents on to the visit with their child or another group of children. In most cases the parent's anxieties are allayed.
- Stressing the purpose of the visit to parents, some of whom might have a distorted view of what will happen – such as expecting participation in others' worship or being coerced or persuaded into accepting beliefs which differ from their own.

Preparing for the visit

Visits to places of worship will have specific learning linked to the Agreed Syllabus for RE and it is important for teachers to plan carefully the learning that will take place as a consequence of the visit.

Specific links with the statutory core RE Curriculum, 'All Our Worlds' in Derby Schools includes:

Key Stage 1

Pupils should be taught about:

- the importance of a place of worship with a faith tradition
- some of the central features, images, symbols of the building preferably through direct first hand experience
- the role of the building for members of the faith community

Key Stage 2

- two contrasting places of worship, including key features and designs, preferably through direct first hand experience
- an understanding of the importance of places of worship in faith communities
- aspects of congregational worship in Christianity and one other faith tradition

Key Stage 3

- **the variety of human responses to God, through worship, the use and design of special buildings and artefacts**

Key Stage 4 (GCSE long or short course)

- **A study of at least one place of worship and the distinction between individual and congregational worship in world religions and traditions and how personal, social and religious identity is associated with a place of worship**

There are many creative methods of teaching and learning that can be utilised to help prepare children for the visit. These include:

- ☐ using art to explore patterns, buildings, symbols and shapes
- ☐ listening to music
- ☐ exploring artefacts - their use, meaning and design
- ☐ studying photographs, posters or videos of places of worship to devise research questions
- ☐ interviewing members of the community to understand what it means to belong to a religious community.

During the visit

To help pupils to realise that the building is about people in the present, as well as the past, they will have an opportunity to meet and talk to people who worship in the building.

They will spend some time sitting in silence to appreciate the atmosphere, the splendour or simplicity of the building.

The children will be encouraged to consider key questions in order to encourage respect, empathy and understanding for example:

- ☐ What interests you?
- ☐ What puzzles you?
- ☐ What questions do you want to ask?
- ☐ How does it feel to sit here?
- ☐ What helps to give it this atmosphere?
- ☐ How might this building help people worship?
- ☐ What clues are there about how people worship?
- ☐ What is similar here to other places of worship?
- ☐ What is different here?

Children may be asked to observe design, symbols, colours and objects and to consider their importance:

- ☐ Where are objects situated? Why?

- ☐ What is this for? Who uses it?
- ☐ What books are used? Why? When?
- ☐ Who uses this building? Why?
- ☐ What posters and notices are there?
- ☐ What do they tell us about this worshipping community?

They may: listen to music; listen to a speaker from the faith community; take photographs or video footage – if permission has been granted; draw things that interests them; follow a religious objects trail and make notes and sketch things of interest to them.

After the visit

Follow-up activities will often be cross curricular and may involve work in English, Art, History and Geography, for example, as well as RE.

Children may discuss key questions about the place that they visited and their experiences on the visit for example:

- ☐ What are the essential features of the place of worship?
- ☐ Why are places of worship different - even those belonging to the same religion or denomination?
- ☐ What do you think it means to the people who come here as worshippers?
- ☐ What surprised you?
- ☐ What did you find interesting?
- ☐ Did you learn anything that links to your own life and experiences?
- ☐ If the place were to be demolished and you could take one thing from it, what would it be?

Pupils could:

- ☐ Write letters of thanks to their host highlighting the aspects of the visit that interested them – this is an excellent opportunity to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development
- ☐ Use books or other resources to compare with what they experienced
- ☐ Use their notes, drawings and photographs to create a display, web site or an illustrated guidebook to the building showing its importance to the worshipping community
- ☐ Place such a display in the school, in the place of worship visited or in a local library
- ☐ Use the display as the basis for assemblies with parents and other children present
- ☐ Recap the words used to describe the atmosphere inside the place of worship and write creatively or poetically about it, how they felt and what they saw
- ☐ Produce art or music to convey their thoughts and responses to the visit
- ☐ Pupils could produce models or drawings of religious objects and symbols
- ☐ Pupils could be set a design task that includes solving a problem – how to make a building accessible for the disabled, or a building to encourage use by the wider community, for example.

The Derby Context

Schools in Derby are in a unique position. We are fortunate that our schools can draw upon the local expertise and services of The Open Centre, an independent charity partly grant funded by Derby City Council. The Open Centre will organise, escort and inform school visits to a variety of places of worship in Derby and can also provide workshops and speakers.

In addition, Open Centre staff and trustees are available to assist schools in any way they can. This can range from a simple phone call for advice, to talking to individual parents, to addressing a parents' evening or PTA meeting. The Open Centre trustees would be very happy to talk informally to any parents who object on the grounds that they don't want their children to learn about any religions. Please contact the Open Centre via its web site:

www.DerbyOpenCentre.org, by email at opencentre@hotmail.com or Tel 01332 360737

Cost.

The Open Centre has a small charge for each visit to a place of worship (2010/11). Other costs eg transport etc, are determined by the school.

Additional support and guidance to schools can be found from Derby City's Religious Education Adviser, Graham Falgate at graham.falgate@derby.gov.uk or Tel 01332 25632

Additional resources:

1. A leaflet produced by the REC "Right now, everyone has something to say about religion. Religious Education helps make sense of it." It is available to either download or hard copies from www.religiouseducationcouncil.org
2. The short films produced by the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE)
 - a. What is RE? (Primary)
 - b. What do you know about RE? (Secondary)
 - c. RE in the curriculum
 - d. Opting for RS (Secondary)all four can be downloaded from www.natre.org.uk/explore/video.php There is also support material on this site for staff, governors and parents.