

Visits, visitors and faith communities



Some tips to help with doubts or objections

This advice has been produced as supporting material for the Local Agreed RE syllabus. It can be read in conjunction with Flourishing Together (guidance to schools about faith) and Guidance on Collective Worship. These and other documents are listed below. It is not mandatory but it does include reference to statutory requirements and expectations.

The benefits of visits

Diversity is multi-faceted and does not only apply to ethnicity or faith. Nevertheless, engagement with people of different faiths is a critical element of this. This can take the form of a visit to a faith community or receiving a visitor in an assembly, class or special event. Many schools find it invaluable to arrange such engagement to help students to broaden their understanding and experience of our communities and world. These occasions can:

- Contribute to our obligation to promote fundamental values of respect and tolerance;
- Broaden pupils' experience and perspectives and develop their critical thinking skills;
- Build bridges in our local communities;
- Enrich the provision for religious education and fulfil requirements of the syllabus.

Doubts and reluctance

Sometimes parents or carers are reluctant to allow their child to participate on a specific visit. All school visits require parental consent and as a concomitant, parents have a legal right to withhold such consent. While schools must always respect (and be seen to respect) parents' statutory rights, teachers can try to encourage full participation as part of every child's right to a broad and balanced education.

Be aware that parental reluctance may stem from a number of reasons and should not be automatically dismissed as ignorance or prejudice. Although these may be a factor for some, there can also be genuine fears and doubts and it is always good to encourage a parent or carer to articulate their questions.

Schools have found some of the ideas below useful in dealing with doubts or in building a culture where visits and visitors are part of the yearly routine and welcomed by all.

- It is good practice to ask to discuss such an issue face to face. There may be specific reasons why a parent is reluctant to allow consent. A meeting gives the opportunity to reassure and for the parent to think through what is best;
- Be very clear about the facts – communicate the nature, purpose and content of the visit at an early stage and continue to do so;

- Be clear about the value of the visit – how and why it will be helpful for pupils and how it links to the curriculum;
- Celebrate the event through displays and information on newsletters, website or parents' evenings. Use last year's pictures to help promote this year's event;
- Link it into a wider school context, for example as part of a sequence of visits or events that engage with diversity or as a contribution to a wider antibullying or tolerance agenda;
- Communicate the enjoyment and participation involved. It's a shame if a child misses out on the experience shared by others in the class;
- Involve parents – as helpers or through sharing what is happening.

Visitors to school

Schools often use visitors as well as, or instead of, arranging an external visit. Unless such an occasion is specifically part of the RE curriculum or an act of collective worship, there is no statutory right to withdraw. It can still enable pupils to understand about different people and cultures.

The Faith Visits Contacts list may help with ideas but there will also be local and personal contacts within the school community. If their contribution is supported appropriately, they do not have to have extensive teaching skills or public speaking experience. An interview or prepared questions can be a very effective way of helping pupils to learn about a visitor's faith, culture or experience.

There are some key things to consider in planning the visit:

- What are the aims? Have these been discussed and shared with the visitor?
- Ensure the school is managing the event throughout. This will help the visitor as well as you.
- Follow normal safeguarding procedures, while also offering appropriate welcome and hospitality.
- Prepare the pupils, staff and parents; celebrate the occasion and links with the wider community.

It is good to remember that staff (not just teaching staff) and parents may be a source of diverse experience that can be celebrated in school and learnt from by pupils. Sensitivity is needed, and such contributions need to be appropriate to the willingness, confidence and experience of the person concerned. At the same time this participation can affirm and enrich the participant.

Further support or information

Further advice or support is available from

alastair.ross@leeds.gov.uk, ian.ross@kirklees.gov.uk or enquiries@penninelearning.com.

Template letter

You may find the following template useful if you have a parent who is reluctant to allow their child to attend a visit to faith community or similar event. Although this includes most relevant points, you will need to select the relevant parts and adapt the style as appropriate to your school situation or the individual case.

Dear [Parent's name]

As you know we need the agreement of parents to their children going on school trips and we respect your right to withhold this consent. However, before you make a final decision we very much hope you may think how valuable the event will be for [n] and will be able to allow them to share in the experience with their class.

You may have some very specific concerns about your child coming. If so, please let us know as we want to do all we can to help.

I am sure you realise that this visit, like all events and trips, has been carefully risk assessed. We make sure that the safety and wellbeing of all children is paramount. It has also been carefully planned to ensure the content is appropriate and of a high quality. It is directly relevant to their education. [Include more detail about the specific curriculum links of this visit].

During the visit pupils will...[include a basic summary of what will happen on the visit]. Visits are completely educational. No pupil is asked to participate in worship or to assent to any religious practice. It will not undermine their own beliefs or tradition in any way.

As you will know, we live in a fast changing and diverse world. It is very important that our children learn about different cultures and faiths so they can get along, and work with, people from all kinds of different backgrounds. This helps them to be confident and articulate. It is also part of our duty as a school to give them the widest possible opportunities to do so.

So we think it would be a shame if [n] was to miss out on the experiences and fun that his/her classmates will enjoy on this day. We very much hope you will be able to give your consent and support. As you know any cost should not prevent any child from being part of a class trip, and we are able to offer a free or subsidised place if this helpful.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like to discuss this further.

Other useful guidance

The documents below offer further guidance and advice for schools. They are available in Kirklees on One Hub and most local documents can also be downloaded from www.penninelearning.com.

- Faith Visit Contacts (list of possible visits, updated regularly)
- Flourishing Together: Guidance on the needs of pupils from Faith communities (Kirklees, 2015)
- One Community, Many Beliefs (Calderdale, 2014)
- Religious Guidance in Schools (Leeds, 2016)
- Advice and Guidance on Collective Worship (available for Calderdale, Kirklees and Leeds, 2016)
- Religious Believers visiting schools: a code of conduct (National Association of Teachers of RE, 2007)
- Using visitors in the classroom to support PSHE (PSHE Association, 2016)
- Kirklees and Calderdale RE Syllabus (2014)
- Leeds RE syllabus (2015)