

Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE)

Guidance to schools on Collective Worship 2015

Background

20 years ago, in January 1994, the Department for Education (DfE) published *Circular 1/94*. This set out to explain the practical implications of the law as it applied to religious education and collective worship. The parts of *Circular 1/94* that dealt specifically with religious education were replaced by new guidance published in January 2010. However the parts of *Circular 1/94* covering collective worship stayed unchanged, continuing to represent the DfE's official view. This remained the case until, in effect, the circular was withdrawn.

In October 2012, the National Association of SACREs (NASACRE) and the Association of Religious Education Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC) released the following joint statement explaining the new position:

“The view of NASACRE and AREIAC is that collective worship can and should be an inclusive experience which, when done well, can make a valuable and highly positive contribution to life in general in all schools. All schools and academies should be meeting the legal requirements for collective worship. However, we are aware that in attempting to do so many institutions experience difficulties which stem from statements which appear in *Circular 1/94*. The circular is thus often a barrier to good collective worship. For this reason NASACRE and AREIAC advise that schools and academies should not use *Circular 1/94* but that their provision for collective worship should be guided by the legal requirements as set out in the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) and confirmed in the 1996 Education Act.”

Previous guidance published by North Yorkshire SACRE in 2006 sought to help schools to provide inclusive, meaningful and relevant daily acts of collective worship that met both the letter and spirit of the law as interpreted by *Circular 1/94*. Now that schools are no longer constrained by advice contained in the circular (although they

are still bound by the legal requirements), SACRE is issuing this new guidance with the intention that it will provide practical assistance and help raise the quality of collective worship in schools.

The notion of 'collective worship' was introduced by the 1944 Education Act, which stated that "the school day in every county school and every voluntary school shall begin with collective worship on the part of all the pupils in attendance". This legislation was passed at a time when England was an overtly Christian country where the great majority of the population were regular churchgoers. By 2010, the percentage of UK citizens who attended church regularly had dropped to 6%. Over the past 60 years there has also been a significant decline in Church of England baptisms from approximately 67% of UK babies in 1950 to 19% in 2010. *1

In view of the changes to British society (and schools) that have occurred since 1944, many people hold the view that collective worship is now an outmoded concept. Many prefer the term 'spiritual reflection', which supports the requirement for schools to promote pupils' spiritual development. In providing structured time for daily spiritual reflection, schools will be providing something important for the wellbeing of pupils and other participants; something that is unique and distinctive; something that is different from, but complementary to 'assembly'.

1 Figures obtained from Church Society website

Ofsted: School Inspection Handbook, January 2015

Extracts from 'Inspection of religious education and collective worship' as applies to collective worship. (P8/9)

'Schools with a religious character'

'If a voluntary or foundation school (including an academy) is designated as having a denominational religious character ('a school with a religious character'), then denominational religious education, school ethos and the content of collective worship are inspected under section 48 of the Education Act 2005. Academies designated as having a religious character by the Secretary of State are inspected in an equivalent way by virtue of a provision in the academy's funding agreement. '

'In schools with a religious character, section 5 inspectors may not comment on the content of religious worship or on denominational religious education. However, inspectors may comment on the contribution of assemblies and teaching (in any subject with the exception of RE) to pupils' personal and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, and their behaviour and safety. In the case of other maintained schools and academies, including free schools that are not designated by the Secretary of State as having a religious character, and where RE is being provided in line with the locally agreed syllabus, RE is inspected under section 5 of the Education Act 2005¹

‘Schools without a religious character’

‘Schools, including academies, which are not defined as having a religious character must conform to the legal requirements for non-faith schools:

‘A school can reflect the religious backgrounds represented in its community in its collective worship and RE, as long as the majority of provision is broadly Christian. Alternatively, the family backgrounds of some or all pupils may lead the headteacher and governing body to conclude that broadly Christian collective worship is not appropriate. The headteacher can apply to the local SACRE to have the broadly Christian requirement disapplied and replaced by collective worship distinctive of another faith. The headteacher should consult the governing body before doing so. Academies should apply to the Secretary of State via the Educational Funding Agency (EFA). ‘

Ofsted Jan 2015

Legal requirements

All state schools must provide a daily act of collective worship for all registered pupils up to the age of 18. Whereas for maintained schools this requirement is enshrined within legislation, for academies the requirement forms part of their funding agreement. Faith schools (both maintained and academies) will provide collective worship in accordance with their trust deed, or in accordance with the tenets of their faith.

The summary below applies to maintained schools and academies without a religious character. Special schools have to meet the requirements “so far as is practicable”. The requirements fall into two categories: those relating to management and organisation and those relating to style and character.

Requirements relating to management and organisation

- Subject to the right of withdrawal, all registered pupils must “on each school day take part in an act of collective worship”. This applies to all pupils in reception classes, including those below compulsory school age. It also applies to all sixth form students in schools.
- Parents have the right to withdraw their children from collective worship and sixth formers have the right to withdraw themselves. Teachers also have the right not to attend. The right of withdrawal can be exercised for any reason: it does not have to be on grounds of conscience. Teachers should not be disqualified from employment or discriminated against in terms of pay or promotion if they choose not to attend collective worship. However, both pupils and teachers may be required to attend assembly, which is distinct from collective worship.
- Acts of collective worship can take place at any time during the school day. Time spent on collective worship generally lies outside curricular time and cannot count as part of the taught school day.
- For collective worship, pupils can be grouped in various ways: as a whole school or in groups (or a combination of groups) which the school uses at other times (class groups, tutor groups, year groups, house groups, key stage groups, etc). Pupils cannot be put into special groups just for collective worship unless a ‘determination’ has been granted (see last bullet point below).
- Responsibility for ensuring that the legal requirements are met rests with the

headteacher, in consultation with the governors.

Requirements relating to style and character

- **Most acts of collective worship in any one school term must be “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character”**. An act of worship is such if it “reflects the broad traditions of Christian belief without being distinctive of any particular Christian denomination”.
- Acts of worship must be appropriate for the pupils, in that they must take account of pupils’ ages, aptitudes and family backgrounds. If a school feels that the requirement for broadly Christian worship is inappropriate for some or all of the pupils, the headteacher can apply to the local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) for a ‘determination’ to have this requirement lifted or modified for some or all of the pupils.

2. See Appendix 2 for details on determinations

Two imperatives

In order to meet the legal requirements regarding the style and character of daily collective worship, schools will need to comply with the following imperatives:

- 1. Collective worship must always be inclusive.**
- 2. Collective worship must usually be broadly Christian.**

1. Collective worship must always be inclusive

The use of the term ‘collective’ rather than ‘corporate’ to describe the nature of worship in schools is significant. It is a deliberate acknowledgement of the fact that schools comprise a collection of individuals from diverse backgrounds with widely differing beliefs. Corporate worship takes place among a unified ‘corpus’ or body of people with shared beliefs and common forms of worship. It is what takes place in churches on Sundays, synagogues on Saturdays and mosques on Fridays. Collective worship in schools is fundamentally different from this.

The law requires schools to ensure that acts of collective worship are appropriate for all their pupils in that they must take account of their ages, aptitudes and family backgrounds. Christians, adherents of other religions, atheists and agnostics are all to be accommodated in daily collective worship.

Implications

- Collective worship should be appropriate for all pupils (and others present), whatever their religious commitments or lack of religious commitments.
- Collective worship should respect the wishes of religious believers by providing those who want to engage in prayer with the opportunity to do so, while giving others the opportunity to engage in meaningful personal reflection.
- Collective worship should celebrate and affirm difference and diversity.
- Pupils (and others present) should not be placed in positions where they are made to feel uneasy, or less than honest, or where their personal integrity is not respected. It is important to try and avoid the ‘squirm’ factor with regard to collective worship.

- Pupils (and others present) should not be asked to pay lip-service to faith statements which they may not understand or to which they do not themselves adhere.
- Hymns and prayers should be used with care and sensitivity.
- Few (if any) parents, sixth formers or teachers should find it necessary to exercise their right of withdrawal.

2. Collective worship must usually be ‘broadly Christian’

The law requires that most acts of collective worship in any one school term must be “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character”.

What then is meant by worship that is ‘broadly Christian’? The law provides a partial explanation: an act of worship is considered to be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character if it (a) reflects the broad traditions of Christian belief and (b) is not distinctive of any particular Christian denomination.

With regard to (a), the law does not define the broad traditions of Christian belief nor does it explain how these traditions can, at the same time, be applied to collective worship that is to be inclusive of those of others faiths or none. Two observations might be made here.

- 1) Most religious or non-religious philosophies are concerned with the same ultimate questions and share many common values.
- 2) Each of these philosophies (or theologies) offers their own distinctive answer to the questions and place their values within a different framework.

Shared values usually embrace environmental concerns (ecology, pollution, stewardship of the earth’s resources), a concern to address the human capacity for prejudice, cruelty, war and alienation and a recognition of the value of every individual (irrespective of disability, age, gender, race, economic status, etc). Also shared are concerns to promote justice, peace and harmony and explore human yearnings for the ‘better’ and the ‘spiritual’. Collective worship offers a context in which these values (and their various philosophies and theologies) can be affirmed and explored.

Collective worship in non-faith schools is not permitted to be distinctive of any particular Christian denomination. This reinforces the point made earlier: that collective worship in schools is not intended to replicate denominational worship in church. It is completely legitimate for, say, Anglican or Roman Catholic schools to celebrate Eucharist or Mass; but denominational practices such as these are not appropriate in non-faith schools.

Implications

- Collective worship that is ‘broadly Christian’ is inclusive in that it deals with universal human values and issues that concern us all, Christians and non-Christians.
- What happens in non-faith schools during collective worship should not replicate denominational church worship.

- The law allows considerable flexibility and freedom in respect of the requirement that most acts of collective worship must be broadly Christian. However, in order to show they are meeting the legal requirements, schools will need to document their daily acts of collective worship in sufficient detail to be able to demonstrate that the majority of these reflect broad Christian values and beliefs.
- By interpreting 'broadly Christian' in an inclusive way, few (if any) schools should find it necessary to apply to SACRE for a 'determination' for the requirement for 'broadly Christian' worship to be lifted or modified.

Six principles

North YORKSHIRE SACRE believes that acts of collective worship or spiritual reflection should be meaningful and relevant to all those present. In order for this to be the case, SACRE has identified six principles which schools should apply with regard to daily collective worship.

Collective worship should:

- 1. promote a sense of community;**
- 2. be educational;**
- 3. promote spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development;**
- 4. be a special time;**
- 5. enable participants to be actively involved;**
- 6. be of high quality.**

Principle 1.

Collective worship should promote a sense of community

It has been said that collective worship is the time when the school becomes aware of itself. It is the time when members of the school community gather together to affirm who the school is and what it stands for. For many, the most valuable feature of collective worship is that it promotes this sense of community. Regardless of the legal requirement for daily collective worship, most schools would wish to hold regular 'assemblies' to enable pupils and staff to develop a sense of belonging to a community with a shared sense of purpose. Any formal collective activity which makes explicit and which honours and celebrates the things that the school considers to be important or of worth could be legitimately termed collective worship.

Implications

- Collective worship can be used as a time to make explicit the values and assumptions which underpin the day to day life of the school. Notions of justice, fairness, equality of opportunity, the value and worth of each individual, mutual respect, respect for the environment, co-operation, etc can be explored and affirmed as part of collective worship.
- Collective worship can be used as a time to celebrate individual and group achievements.
- The law permits pupils to be grouped for collective worship in various ways, but if it is to develop a sense of itself as a community, on regular occasions the school

should endeavour to come together as a whole school, with all pupils, teachers and other staff present. In many secondary schools this will not be possible because of restrictions imposed by the size of the school hall. However, for special occasions such as Christmas, some secondary schools hold acts of collective worship for the whole school in larger venues such as the local parish church.

Principle 2.

Collective worship should be educational

Schools are first and foremost educational establishments. The core business of schools is teaching and learning. SACRE believe that collective worship should be regarded as an educational activity, a learning experience for the pupils.

Implications

- Collective worship is to do with opening up rather than closing down. It is to do with the exploration of a range of possibilities. It does not seek to bring pupils to a particular point of view; rather it seeks to enable each participant to come to a more mature stance in respect of her or his own developing viewpoint.
- Collective worship should be used as a time to inform, to develop and deepen understanding and to promote the acquisition of skills. The knowledge and understanding that is developed will be dependent on the content of the act of worship. Among the many skills that collective worship helps to develop are included a range of interpersonal and social skills, listening skills and importantly the ability to be still, to be quiet and to reflect inwardly.
- The contribution of collective worship to pupils' personal development merits separate consideration, and this is explored in Principle 3 below.
- Collective worship also provides an obvious but often overlooked forum for learning about the nature of worship:
 - learning about religious worship: why people worship, how people worship and who or what is being worshipped
 - learning that many Christians and adherents of other faiths find fulfilment, meaning and purpose in worship
 - learning that many people do not feel the need to worship
 - learning about the inclusive way in which collective worship at the school is conducted, why those present are explicitly invited either to reflect or pray, why the particular forms of words that are used to introduce hymns and prayers are deployed.

Principle 3.

Collective worship should promote spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development

Collective worship or spiritual reflection has much to contribute to the SMSC development of children and young people. OFSTED has always recognised this and in forming judgements about SMSC development in schools, inspectors take account of collective worship. SACRE believe that collective worship has an important and distinctive contribution to make to the spiritual development of children and young people. Worship is

by definition a spiritual activity: the response of human beings to what is perceived as holy, sacred or divine. Collective worship also has much to contribute to moral, social and cultural development. It provides opportunities for pupils to reflect on issues of morality and ethics, justice and fairness, good and evil, right and wrong. 'Collective' worship is by definition an inclusive, social activity: one that promotes a sense of community. Collective worship can help to develop pupils' awareness of beauty and heighten aesthetic and intercultural awareness.

Implications

- Collective worship should sensitise pupils to the spiritual dimension of existence: to feelings of awe and wonder, to the fact that life is ultimately mysterious and that there is perhaps more to it than the day-to-day, the here and now, the immediately apparent.
- Collective worship should 'feed the spirit' by enabling pupils to reflect in an appropriate atmosphere upon the beauty, intricacy and grandeur of the natural world and upon a range of inspirational writings, music and works of art drawn from a variety of cultures. Many of these will be derived from the world's great religious traditions.
- Collective worship should enable pupils to explore moral issues and questions about meaning and purpose. It should help pupils to develop their own beliefs, values, attitudes and moral codes. It should enable pupils to appreciate and respect the beliefs, life-stances and religious practices of others.
- Schools should be aware of the need to help pupils where issues have been raised that are sensitive and provide a safety net for any pupil that may be adversely affected.

Principle 4.

Collective worship should be a special time

Collective worship should be a special time with its own distinctive atmosphere, one that is conducive to spiritual activities such as contemplation, quiet reflection and, for those for whom it is appropriate, prayer. Collective worship should be seen as providing an oasis of calm, a breathing space in the busy whirl of school activity. It is a time to gather, to be still and to reflect in an atmosphere of peacefulness and quietness.

Implications

- Schools should give consideration to using a simple ritual to mark the transition from assembly or other activity to collective worship. There should be a change in mood and atmosphere. Playing quiet, calming background music and lighting a candle helps to create a suitable ambience.
- The setting should be made as attractive as possible: a vase of flowers can make a tremendous difference. It helps if there is a visual focus, either an image projected onto a screen or a real object related to the theme of the act of worship: a loaf of bread, a glass of water, a lump of rock, a piece of wood, a mobile phone, a teddy bear, etc.
- The pupils should be seated comfortably, even if this means going through the effort of putting out chairs for older pupils. Seating can be used in a variety of creative and

imaginative ways. The seating arrangements should be flexible: different seating arrangements are appropriate for different styles of collective worship. Some primary schools have experimented with allowing pupils to sit where they want: friends, brothers and sisters from different classes are able to sit side-by-side during this special time.

- The distinctive atmosphere of collective worship should not be disturbed by distractions such as the giving out of notices or reprimands, or the clatter from the kitchens.

Principle 5.

Collective worship should enable participants to be actively involved

The law requires that all pupils should 'take part' in collective worship rather than simply attend. This should not be taken as meaning that all pupils, regardless of their own beliefs, should join in with the singing of hymns and saying of prayers. If the requirement were to be interpreted in this way, it would be counter to the spirit of statements made earlier in this document such as the following:

- Pupils (and others present) should not be placed in positions where they are made to feel uneasy, or less than honest, or where their personal integrity is not respected. It is important to try and avoid the 'squirm' factor with regard to collective worship.
- Pupils (and others present) should not be asked to pay lip-service to faith statements which they may not understand or to which they do not themselves adhere.

This is not to say that hymns and prayers should not be used in collective worship; rather that they should only be used with care and sensitivity.

What then is meant by 'taking part'? SACRE believe that taking part implies active involvement. Pupils should not be passive recipients of an accepted wisdom or orthodoxy; rather they should be encouraged to use collective worship as a time during which they can reflect upon, question, weigh up, accept or reject the beliefs and spiritual and moral issues that are being raised.

Implications

- Built into the structure of each act of collective worship, there needs to be the opportunity for the pupils to respond to whatever is presented. Providing a time of silence during which pupils can respond in ways that are appropriate to each individual (through prayer or reflection) is one way that this might be achieved. Depending on practicalities, pupils can also be given the opportunity to respond through answering questions, discussion, writing or drawing.
- Pupils themselves should be given opportunities to participate in the planning, delivery and evaluation of collective worship.

Principle 6.

Collective worship should be of high quality

If the aspirations identified earlier in this document are to be met and if collective worship is to be a high quality experience for pupils, then time, effort and resources will need to be devoted to it. There should be a whole-hearted commitment to providing the same high standards that mark other such events as concerts, open evenings, etc.

Implications

- Every school should have an agreed policy for collective worship, showing how it intends to provide high quality daily collective worship that meets the legal requirements and the principles identified in this document. This policy should be reviewed regularly. A sample policy is available for schools to adapt (Appendix 1)
- Each act of collective worship should be carefully planned and, in order to avoid duplication and repetition, briefly documented. A further reason for keeping a short written record of each act of worship is to be able to demonstrate that most acts of worship in any one term are “broadly Christian in character”.
- High quality acts of worship require appropriate resources. The school will need to build up a suitable collection of readings, inspirational and thought provoking quotations, poems, prayers, songs, sound recordings, film extracts, images, etc.
- Collective worship can often be enhanced by inviting visitors to contribute. Many schools in North Yorkshire make excellent use of a variety of visitors in order to enrich their provision. Appropriate people from the community can be involved in collective worship, and invited by the headteacher, in consultation with the co-ordinator, to attend or lead acts of worship. Pupils may also help lead acts of worship.
- Visitors leading assemblies and collective need to remember that schools are essentially inclusive places of education rather than places of worship associated with a particular religion.
- The quality of collective worship ultimately depends on the people who are responsible for its co-ordination and delivery. All schools should have a designated co-ordinator of collective worship. The planning, delivery, evaluation and documentation of daily collective worship should be rigorously carried out and it should be recognised that whoever is responsible for its coordination has a demanding and time-consuming task to perform.
- It is helpful to keep brief records of Collective Worship so that a school can demonstrate it has provided a variety of good experiences and opportunities for pupils, more easily evaluate its own provision and quality, check that the majority of acts are of a broadly Christian character, more easily report to the governing body and avoid repetition for pupils.
- In order to ensure that acts of collective worship are meeting the needs of pupils, children and young people should be key participants in the evaluation of collective worship.
- Through observation the Headteacher, and governing body should monitor, evaluate and review the implementation and delivery of the school’s collective worship policy.

In conclusion, collective worship makes an important contribution to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils. It prepares pupils for the challenge, opportunities and responsibilities of adult life in a multi-faith and multi-cultural society.

Supporting documents:

Appendix 1: Model policy

Appendix 2: Applying for a determination

Appendix 3: Resources and themes to support collective worship

Appendix 4: Collective worship self-evaluation

Training or Advice available:

North Yorkshire SACRE is pleased to give advice on collective worship when asked. SACRE will also make known any training events through the usual channels.

This document has been adapted from Essex SACRE's Collective Worship Guidance with their permission.

Any enquiries or communication in respect of this guidance should be addressed to

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