

Essex Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE)

Getting Value From Visitors!

Guidance for schools without a religious character on how to make effective use of visitors for assemblies and collective worship



Essex County Council

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SACRE guidance for schools without a religious character on how to make effective use of visitors for assemblies and collective worship¹

Please note that while this guidance was written specifically for assemblies and collective worship, the same principles should be applied when schools (including Voluntary Controlled schools) use visitors to assist with RE lessons.

Visitors can add value!

It is common practice for schools to invite visitors to contribute to their programme of assemblies and collective worship. Some visitors may come in for a 'one off'; others may visit the school on a more regular basis. This can be an effective way of supplementing and varying the daily diet, providing pupils with experiences that are enriching, stimulating and memorable. Various people can be invited to participate: members of Christian and other faith groups; charity workers; parents and governors; members of the local and wider community; storytellers, musicians and dancers; and those who have interesting first hand experiences to share of travel, sport, hobbies, personal interests, jobs, etc. The true value of visitors is that they are able to share things from their own immediate experience, making issues real and relevant and providing personal insights that cannot be gained through books, television or the internet.

But take care!

There are three issues in particular that schools need to consider when inviting visitors to contribute to assemblies and collective worship:

1. Does the person have the appropriate manner and skills for communicating effectively with children and young people?
2. Does the school take suitable measures to protect both pupils and visitors?
3. Does the school take steps to ensure that what the visitor presents is appropriate in the context of a non-religious school?

Issues raised by each of these questions will be considered in turn.

1. Does the person have the appropriate manner and skills for communicating effectively with children and young people?

It is obviously important for the school to try to establish whether the potential visitor has an appropriate manner and is able to relate to and communicate effectively with a young audience. It is easy for teachers to forget how intimidating it can be for someone not used to talking to groups (however young) to be asked to speak during

¹ Guidance for visitors to Voluntary Controlled and Voluntary Aided Church of England schools may be found in *Seedtime*, Diocese of Chelmsford Board of Education, 2000. This document draws on some of the suggestions made in *Seedtime*.

an assembly. It may be more effective for a visitor to speak separately to a number of pupil groups in classrooms rather than to address a large group in the school hall. The use of an interview technique, whereby pupils ask pre-determined questions of the visitor, can also be more effective than asking the visitor to speak for a few minutes on a particular theme.

2. Does the school take suitable measures to protect both pupils and visitors?

Anyone who visits the school for the purposes of contributing to an assembly should be supervised by a responsible adult member of staff at all times. This applies from the moment the visitor enters the school premises to the time when he or she leaves. The visitor should never be left alone and never be left with pupils without a responsible adult member of staff being present. This applies however well a visitor may know the school and the pupils, and includes the time that the assembly is in progress.

Adhering strictly to this advice is important for a number of reasons, including both the protection of the pupils and the protection of the visitor. If teachers are not present during assemblies led by visitors, this is likely to undermine the importance of these occasions in the eyes of the pupils as well as making it difficult for teachers to provide effective follow-up activities. It also leaves the visitor in a potentially vulnerable position.

Provided that the visitor is under constant supervision, it will not be necessary to carry out Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks. However, when in doubt or as a safeguard, schools may wish to ask for such checks to be carried out.

3. Does the school take steps to ensure that what the visitor presents is appropriate in the context of a non-religious school?

It is to be expected that schools with a religious character will provide worship that is characteristic of the faith tradition to which the school is affiliated. Voluntary Aided (VA) and Voluntary Controlled (VC) schools have a statutory duty to ensure that the character and style of the worship conforms to that described in the school's trust deed. VA and VC schools are generally of a denominational religious character and in order to comply with their trust deeds, they use forms of worship that are denominational and confessional in nature. Thus as part of the overtly Christian worship that takes place in Anglican and Roman Catholic VA and VC schools, there may well be a service of Holy Communion or Mass.

Such forms of worship are illegal in non-religious schools. In any one term, most acts of collective worship in non-religious schools must be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character"; but this worship, although broadly Christian, must not be distinctive of any particular Christian denomination. Furthermore, it should be appropriate to the family backgrounds of the pupils, being sensitive to the variety of religious and other life stances that may be held by the pupils and their families. It is important for schools to make clear to visitors contributing to assemblies and acts of collective worship that what might be appropriate in VA and VC schools is not necessarily acceptable in non-religious schools.

There are many religious individuals and groups, including Christian groups, in Essex offering their services to schools for free for the purposes of providing assemblies and collective worship. Many of these people and groups understand that when they are working in non-religious schools they are subject to certain

constraints, and they are careful to avoid doing anything that might run counter to the ethos of the school or to the demands of the law. Regrettably, there have also been instances where this has not been the case and where schools have found themselves in a difficult position.

Headteachers of non-religious schools, with whom the responsibility for collective worship ultimately lies, should satisfy themselves that visitors are clear about what is and is not appropriate before inviting them to contribute. The following, for instance, are not acceptable:

- attempting to evangelise, convert or persuade to a particular religious life stance;
- presenting statements of faith as statements of fact (for example, saying that "Jesus is the Son of God" is unacceptable; but saying that "Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God" is perfectly acceptable);
- asking or expecting pupils and others present to join in with prayers, hymns and songs that contain statements of faith with which they are not in accord (although those who do share the beliefs that are expressed could be invited to join in);
- making assumptions about the religious beliefs of those present (for example, saying things like "All of us, as Christians, believe that Jesus was raised from the dead");
- failing to be sensitive to the beliefs of adherents to different faiths or none.

So what can visitors do when they take collective worship?

For teachers in non-religious, this may seem a reasonable question after the preceding list of "Thou shalt nots"! There is no problem with visitors doing the following:

- being open and honest about their own particular religious standpoints, while making it clear that these are their personal beliefs and that not everyone shares them;
- inviting pupils and others present to join in with the worship that they are offering, while enabling those who do not wish to take part to feel comfortable with this.

Information for visitors

In order to maximise the benefits that visitors can provide, to ensure that everything runs smoothly and to avoid potential misunderstandings and embarrassment, it is helpful to send out relevant information beforehand. Schools availing themselves of the services of organisations offering to help with assemblies and collective worship need to be alert to the possibility that different people may visit the school on behalf of such organisations. Schools cannot assume that just because one member of an organisation understands what is expected of them, all members of that organisation will be clear about what is and is not appropriate. It may therefore be necessary to send out information to individuals within organisations.

The following could be sent out prior to the visit.

- A letter or email providing details of the specific arrangements that have been agreed for the particular assembly and/or act of collective worship.
- Brief notes of guidance of a general nature for all visitors contributing to assemblies and/or collective worship in the school.
- The school policy statement for assemblies and collective worship (this will not be necessary if the notes of guidance referred to above cover all the relevant issues).
- A reply slip to be returned to the school by the visitor.
- Directions to the school (where necessary).

The **letter or email** could provide information such as the following.

- School address and telephone number.
- Details of the particular assembly and/or act of collective worship to which the visitor will be contributing, including:
 - date and time;
 - where it will take place;
 - number and age range of pupils;
 - theme;
 - what will be taking place at previous/subsequent assemblies.
- The time that the visitor is expected to arrive at the school office.
- The name(s) of the teacher or pupils who will meet and 'look after' the visitor.

The **notes of guidance** could contain information such as the following.

- Details of the weekly format for assemblies:
 - when and where they take place;
 - who leads them;
 - who is present (pupils, teachers and other members of the school community);
 - details of particular individuals and groups to whom sensitivity may need to be shown for religious or other reasons;
 - what type (for example, singing, 'show and tell', pupil-led);
 - what the weekly themes are.
- How collective worship is incorporated into assemblies. This might be done in a number of ways, such as by:
 - singing a song or hymn, introduced in a way that makes the activity appropriate for those who do not adhere to statements of faith contained within the song or hymn;
 - lighting a candle and providing a few moments of stillness and quietness for personal prayer or reflection;
 - saying or reading a prayer and inviting those who wish to make the prayer their own to say 'Amen' at the end;
 - asking those that want to, to join in a prayer such as the Lord's prayer² or the school prayer or responses such as 'Thank you, Lord'.
- Expectations of pupils, for example:
 - whether they usually sit or stand when songs and hymns are sung;

² Many visitors make the assumption that all pupils are used to reciting the Lord's prayer. They need to be informed if this is not the case!

- whether younger children put their hands together and close their eyes for prayer;
- no calling out;
- putting a hand up and waiting to be invited to respond to questions;
- for those who are withdrawn from collective worship by their parents, quietly leaving before the act of worship starts.
- Resources and equipment that are available for the assembly, for example:
 - CD player;
 - DVD player;
 - flipchart;
 - laptop and projector.
- What would constitute inappropriate approaches and actions on the part of visitors (see 3. in the section entitled 'But take care!' above).
- Successful strategies adopted by previous visitors:
 - speaking clearly rather than loudly;
 - using language and terminology appropriate to the age and experience of the pupils;
 - being interviewed by pupils;
 - providing pupils with a time to ask questions;
 - being honest and unpatronising when responding to pupils;
 - keeping it personal and using anecdotes;
 - undermining stereotypes;
 - keeping it short and pithy;
 - using jokes, even poor ones;
 - reinforcing points by repeating them in different ways;
 - using pictures, objects and other visual resources;
 - using cuddly toys and puppets with young children;
 - using pupils as helpers, actors, role players and demonstrators;
 - never displaying annoyance, irritation, impatience or frustration if pupils do not respond as anticipated.

The **reply slip** would enable the visitor to do the following.

- Confirm that he or she has read the information sent by the school and will comply with the school's guidance.
- Confirm that he or she will be contributing to an assembly and/or act of collective worship on the agreed date at the agreed time.
- Jot down one or two initial thoughts as to what he or she will be doing.
- Request particular pieces of music; hymns or songs; items of equipment and other resources.
- Indicate whether he or she would be happy to answer questions.
- Request a prior visit to the school, possibly including the opportunity to sit in on an assembly.

Before, during and after the visit

Before

It is helpful if the **teacher**:

- establishes whether the person being considered for a visit has the appropriate manner and communication skills to engage with a young audience;
- satisfies himself or herself that the person being considered for a visit understands what is and is not appropriate for collective worship in a non-religious school and will comply with the school's guidance;
- sends out relevant information as described in the previous section of this document;
- arranges for the visitor to come into the school beforehand and sit in on an assembly;
- talks through the practicalities and principles of assemblies and collective worship;
- has plans in place in case the visitor fails to turn up!

It is helpful if the **visitor**:

- reads the information sent out by the school and confirms that he or she will comply with the school's guidance;
- completes and returns the reply slip;
- discusses with the school anything about which he or she is unclear;
- checks out with the school that what he or she intends to do during the assembly/act of collective worship is appropriate.

It is helpful if **pupils**:

- are actively involved in preparation for the visit, possibly through the school council;
- are given the role of acting as hosts/hostesses for the visitor, although whenever they are with the visitor, a member of staff should always be present too;
- are informed about the visitor, especially about anything to do with the visitor (appearance, dress, form of greeting used, etc) that is likely to fall outside the pupils' usual experience;
- prepare questions for the visitor.

During

It is helpful if the **teacher**:

- checks that everything is ready for the visitor, including particular pieces of music; hymns or songs; items of equipment and other resources that have been requested;
- makes sure that a glass of water is available for the visitor when providing his or her input;
- is on hand to look after and support the visitor from his/her arrival to departure;
- offers the visitor tea or coffee and indicates the location of toilets;
- acts as the guardian of the relationship between visitor and pupils, and is ready

to interpret or intervene if necessary.

It is helpful if the **visitor**:

- adheres closely to the agreed brief and timings;
- is ready to turn to the teacher for assistance if unsure about anything;
- is sensitive to the fact that his/her input is just one element in a crowded school day and that all members of the school community are working under great pressure and have many different demands placed upon them.

It is helpful if **pupils**:

- act as hosts/hostesses for the visitor, although whenever they are with the visitor a member of staff should always be present too;
- are polite, well-behaved and attentive;
- show respect, consideration and appreciation.

After

It is helpful if the **teacher**:

- consolidates the value of the visit by providing the opportunity for follow-up discussion in the classroom;
- enables the pupils to provide feedback on the usefulness of the visit;
- offers feedback to the visitor on positive aspects of the visit, and possibly provides tips as to how future visits might be made even more effective;
- where appropriate, writes to thank the visitor.

It is helpful if the **visitor**:

- seeks feedback as to the effectiveness of his or her contribution, and how it might have been made even more effective.

It is helpful if **pupils**:

- reflect on the value of the visit and what they have learned through it;
- where appropriate, write to thank the visitor.