



Revised Guidance on Religious Observance in Schools
Response from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland. SCoJeC advances public understanding about the Jewish religion, culture and community, by providing information and assistance to educational, health, and welfare organisations, representing the Jewish community in Scotland to Government and other statutory and official bodies, and liaising with Ministers, MSPs, Churches, Trades Unions, and others on matters affecting the Jewish community. SCoJeC also provides a support network for the smaller communities and for individuals and families who live outwith any Jewish community or are not connected with any Jewish communities, and assists organisations within the Scottish Jewish community to comply with various regulatory requirements. SCoJeC also promotes dialogue and understanding between the Jewish community and other communities in Scotland, and works in partnership with other organisations and stakeholders to promote equality, good relations, and understanding among community groups.

In preparing this response we have consulted widely among members of the Scottish Jewish community.

Proposed revision 1

Resources signposted by the Guidance should be up-to-date and relevant. However, not only is the link provided to the CfE Briefing on Religious Observance incorrect,¹ but all except two of the links to resources on the final page of the Briefing are no longer active – in particular, the “Journey to Excellence” website, which originally hosted five of the resources, states that “The site was removed”. We therefore urge that the “resources” page of the Briefing should be updated before the new Guidance is issued, and Education Scotland should be charged with ensuring that it is kept up to date for the entire life of this Guidance by ensuring that superseded links are forwarded rather than abandoned.

Proposed revision 2

i) Terminology: Defining “religious observance”

“Religious Observance” is an activity that is mandated by a religious faith. It is therefore incorrect to state that Religious Observance consists of “*community acts*”

¹ The Briefing is now available at <https://education.gov.scot/Documents/cfe-briefing-16.pdf>

which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school's community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community."²

Examples of activities mandated by a religious faith include when Jewish pupils eat kosher food (and say a short grace (a *brachah* or "blessing") before eating); when Sikh boys wear a turban; when Muslim girls cover their hair with a scarf; when Jewish pupils say specific prayers in Hebrew (the language of Jewish prayer); when Muslim pupils fast during Ramadan; and when Christian pupils sing Christmas and Easter hymns. Each of these examples is specific to a particular faith and would not be practised by any other. Nor should it be forced on any other. In addition, there may be other practices that reflect a particular religious perspective, as when Jewish pupils write "BCE" ("Before the Common Era") instead of "BC" ("Before Christ") to denote a historical period, or refer to the "Hebrew Bible" rather than the "Old Testament" (which implies the Christian belief that it has been superseded by the New).

For the avoidance of doubt, we do not object to "*community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school's community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community.*" only to their inaccurate representation as "Religious Observance". We therefore regret that the opportunity is not being taken to amend the 1980 Act to replace "Religious Observance" with a more neutral term such as "Time for Reflection" – as the consultation paper and the CfE Briefing both suggest that many schools may wish to do.

ii) Diversity and the 'whole school experience'

We welcome the acknowledgement that "*Scotland has for many generations also been home to other faith and belief traditions, never more so than at present ... and we can expect Scotland to become increasingly diverse in the range of faith and belief traditions*" as well as the commitment that "*RO in schools needs to be developed in a way which reflects and understands this diversity.*"³ However, we regret that this aspiration is not always achieved in reality at grass-roots level, a failing that this guidance is likely to perpetuate by its description of Religious Observance as a "*whole-school activity*", by which we mean that all or any members of the school community would normally take part, including staff, pupils, parents"⁴.

Our inquiries into *Being Jewish in Scotland* (2012)⁵ and *What's Changed About Being Jewish in Scotland* (2015)⁶, which were funded by the Scottish Government, found that many teachers and even head teachers did not understand or accept that it is not appropriate for pupils to participate in the religious observance of other faith communities although it is appropriate for them to learn about other religions and beliefs in religious education.

² Consultation paper, paragraph 5

³ Consultation paper, paragraph 8

⁴ Consultation paper, paragraph 6

⁵ http://www.scojec.org/bjis_findings.html

⁶ http://www.scojec.org/bjis2_findings.html

One parent, for example, told us:

"[I had] tensions with my children's schools because I was not content for them to engage in Christian worship – the reaction combined incomprehension and annoyance at the inconvenience. "We all worship the same god really". No, we don't; that's part of the point."

This view was echoed by another parent who commented:

"The Scottish Government needs to understand that some of us are not Christian. ... The schools may think that assemblies in church unite the school; they don't."

We are, therefore, concerned by the statement that *"In recognition of Scotland's Christian heritage, non-denominational schools are also encouraged to draw upon the rich resources of this tradition when planning RO."*⁷ On the contrary, the Guidance should provide parents with reassurance that whole-school assemblies will relate to issues and values that are shared by people of all faiths and none, and that where there is a response to a world, national or local event, that the whole school will respond together in assemblies of a non-denominational nature. We have been told that many Christians share this concern because the effect of conducting whole-school events in this way is to water down genuine Christianity. There is a perfectly simple model that should satisfy everyone, and which has been adopted by some schools and universities for prize-givings and graduations – the ceremony itself is non-denominational, and there are separate religious services beforehand for those who wish to attend them.

In some schools access to some aspects of the curriculum are difficult for pupils from minority faiths because they consist of Christian Religious Observances (properly so called). This can take place in Music, Choirs, Drama, and Art. For example, not all pupils will wish to take part in Nativity plays, or sing Christmas carols, or even attend prize-givings held in a church, so non-Christian pupils and their families may well feel excluded or alienated at certain times of the year. We are aware that there can be much tension and embarrassment felt by pupils

A school-age participant in our Inquiry told us:

"I always have a bit of a dilemma because I'm quite musical. Most of the year I'm in the choir and in the orchestra, and then it gets to Christmas and I have to think, do I sing and just miss out the key words, do I sing and say beforehand to myself "this doesn't count"? Our school is very big on diversity. Our motto is 'we value the diversity that exists', but the diversity doesn't seem to have quite reached the music department. It doesn't occur, when they're thinking of songs, to think of songs that everyone can sing happily. They don't even think about it."

We would, therefore, urge that the Guidance should include clear direction on how to cater for all pupils at major Christian festivals, and that schools should be required to draw up a policy that allows all pupils to have access to these subjects without a particular religious bias. This is even more true of events such as graduations and awards ceremonies. As a member of the Jewish Community who has very wide experience in education told us:

⁷ Consultation paper, paragraph 11

“Since Primary 1, I have always felt very uncomfortable attending school prize-givings, university graduations, and other ceremonies, whether to receive a prize, present an award, or in any other official capacity, when these have taken the form of a church service. This is an entirely foreign experience, and I know many students who have chosen to graduate in absentia as a result. School pupils, however, probably feel less able to exercise that kind of autonomy, and should not be put in the position of having to choose. These are events that are supposed to honour individuals for their achievements, but instead they often alienate the very people they are purporting to honour.”

Proposed revision 3

We are satisfied with the proposals for consulting and informing parents about the curriculum and Religious Observance, and advising them of their right to withdraw their children from Religious Observance. However, we are concerned that the *School Handbook Guidance*⁸, following the Regulations⁹, refers to “religious instruction and observance” in the singular, stating that

“The School Handbook ... should set out how religious instruction and observance is covered ...”

rather than recognising that “instruction” (presumably what is now known as RME) and “observance” are two quite distinct activities. In addition, the linking of the two suggests that the phrase “religious observance” is here being used literally, rather than as the statutory term for what is now being re-imagined as “time for reflection”. This example from the Guidance itself should be sufficient to demonstrate the need for linguistic precision, and so for the Act to be amended to say what we are now told it means.

As we have already stated, while it is appropriate for pupils to learn about faith traditions other than their own, it is not appropriate for pupils to be expected, or worse, forced, to participate in the religious observance of other faith communities.

Proposed revision 4

We agree that the wishes of young people should be taken into account in an age-appropriate manner when considering withdrawal from Religious Observance. We emphasise, however, that any such agreement to withdrawal from Religious Observance should be on the basis of the pupil’s considered and principled objections, and not simply to gain a free period or because they are “not interested”. Furthermore, any conflict between the wishes of a young person and his or her parents should be dealt with in a sensitive manner, and, where possible, schools should assist in facilitating a joint decision.

⁸ <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0040/00401568.pdf>

⁹ http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2012/130/pdfs/ssi_20120130_en.pdf

“Approach”

We are pleased to note that “*The Scottish Government welcomes the tradition that, in Roman Catholic denominational schools, Catholic Liturgy will largely shape the nature and frequency of RO activities in the classroom and in the wider school community.*”¹⁰ and we suggest that it would be appropriate also to mention and welcome the fact that in Scotland’s only Jewish school, Calderwood Lodge Primary, in Glasgow, Jewish tradition similarly shapes the nature and frequency of Religious Observance activities in the classroom and wider school community.

“Support”

We note that the Guidance signposts “*Education Scotland’s ... exemplar materials to support schools in developing high quality activities for education about faith and belief*”, as well as materials and learning opportunities provided by the Scottish Catholic Education Service, Glasgow University, Scripture Union Scotland, and the Church of Scotland,¹¹ and we suggest that it would also be appropriate to draw attention to materials provided by the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities with support from Education Scotland¹².

¹⁰ Consultation paper, paragraph 10

¹¹ Consultation paper, paragraphs 26-28

¹² Our educational resources are available at <http://www.scojec.org/resources/education.html>, and, in particular, include:

“JOES Boxes – Jewish Objects for Education in Scotland” (SCoJeC, 2016)
http://www.scojec.org/resources/joes_boxes/joes_boxes.html

Career-long Professional Learning : Judaism (SCoJeC , 2016)
http://www.scojec.org/resources/files/rme_clpl.pdf