

# Guidelines for Bahá'ís visiting schools in England and Wales

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Religious Education Task Force



*"Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of fellowship and love"*

*Bahá'u'lláh*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Bahá'ís have a great opportunity to serve children and young people in the UK by visiting schools and colleges and offering to talk with pupils, to lead assemblies and deliver or assist with RE lessons.

For a number of years, Bahá'ís have been seeking to secure representation on Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) under the auspices of the Local Authority. We now have a network of Bahá'í SACRE reps with experience in this field. The main task they are endeavouring to achieve is inclusion of the Bahá'í Faith in the local syllabus – and many have succeeded. However, whilst there is authorisation at national and local level for teaching the Bahá'í Faith in schools, extra encouragement is usually required to ensure that this takes place.

Several schools in the UK already deliver RE lessons on the Bahá'í Faith – such as Bollin Primary School, Trafford, which undertook an activity and produced wonderful artwork about the Badi calendar (each pupil mapped their birthday from the Gregorian date to the Badi date and these were represented creatively). Many more schools have decided to introduce the Bahá'í Faith into their curriculum and activities because they have been approached by Bahá'ís offering information, resources and encouragement. Sometimes the offer of a Bahá'í school visitor is readily accepted, and sometimes it takes a little time to establish that relationship of trust.

This document is designed to encourage and support Bahá'ís who would like to undertake school visits – those who are involved in the education system as pupils, parents or relatives of pupils, school staff, or SACRE representatives, as well as other Bahá'ís who may simply welcome this opportunity to serve. We offer a structured set of actions that will help to strengthen your relationship with a school, deepen the understanding of school staff with regard to the Bahá'í Faith, and lead on to the delivery of Bahá'í assemblies, classes and activities (including, in some places, Junior Youth Groups) in schools. The suggested approach is equally valuable to Bahá'ís who are seeking a school to contact for the first time, and in cases where a school has already made contact and invited a Bahá'í speaker to come in.

The Bahá'í RE website offers a range of resources for classroom activities, such as lesson plans and Powerpoint presentations, as well as assembly ideas across all age ranges. The website aims to enable teachers to deliver excellent sessions about the Bahá'í Faith even if they have little or no prior knowledge, without the need for a Bahá'í to be present. There is also the facility for teachers to request a School Visitor via the website, giving Bahá'ís the opportunity to visit schools and talk with pupils, to lead assemblies or deliver lessons.

As any Bahá'í who has delivered school visits will tell you, this is a most rewarding activity. Good luck!

## 2. IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

### 2.1 The 2013 Curriculum Framework for RE in England

A Locally Agreed Syllabus for RE is published by the Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education (SACRE) for each Local Authority in England and Wales, and reviewed every five years. All maintained and community schools in any given Local Authority area are required to use this syllabus, and many academies and free schools choose to use it.

“The law requires that local authority RE agreed syllabuses and RE syllabuses used in academies ... ‘must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain’. This means that from the ages of 5 to 19 pupils in schools learn about diverse religions and worldviews including Christianity and the other principal religions... [A]ll types of school need to recognise the diversity of the UK and the importance of learning about its religions and worldviews, including those with a significant local presence.”

(‘[A Curriculum Framework for Religious Education in England](#)’, published by the RE Council of England and Wales, October 2013)

‘Principal religions’ are understood by most SACREs to be Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. Some, but by no means all, syllabuses mention other faiths and traditions, including the Bahá'í, Jain and Zoroastrian faiths. Schools often welcome the opportunity to explore faiths that are not a part of their core syllabus, and to invite visitors into their school.

### 2.2 Bahá'í children – our treasure

Most Locally Agreed Syllabuses in England and Wales set out which religions are to be taught. Many syllabuses are structured around ‘key questions’ and focus on the answers to these questions from a small number of religious traditions that are studied in depth, rather than opening the door wide to a large number of religions. This approach is prompted, at least in part, by the small number of hours in the school week that are generally allocated to RE in the timetable, and the desire to improve ‘religious literacy’ across the nation as a whole. (See the document ‘[Improving religious literacy](#)’ published in July 2016 by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education.)

Key questions often allow for schools to draw in different traditions where they fit the theme and question, and especially where there are representatives of those traditions in the schools and in the local community.

Parents of Bahá'í children have a great opportunity to introduce the Bahá'í Faith in their children’s schools. This may be enthusiastically taken up by the school, especially if the offer is backed up by access to good quality teaching materials (via the [Bahá'í RE website](#)) and to school visitors. Bahá'í children benefit from their

classmates, or indeed their whole school, experiencing positive contact with the Bahá'í Faith, thus reinforcing their Bahá'í identity.

### 2.3 Introducing Baha'í educational programmes

There will sometimes be an opportunity to introduce schools to the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programme and Children's Classes, which appropriately trained members of the Baha'í community and their friends can offer. It is important first to build a relationship with the head teacher, or teacher with whom you are in contact, and assess whether or not this would be appropriate.

If you consider that the school is receptive to the idea of introducing their young people to the Bahá'í educational programmes, you might ask a junior youth or children's class coordinator, or an experienced animator or children's class teacher, to accompany you on your visit. Even if you don't consider it the right time to offer the Bahá'í educational programmes, experienced children's class teachers and animators will often have valuable experience and good ideas about how to involve young people in the material and activities you are using. Bahá'í youth, in particular, can make a positive impression on the school, and younger children engage naturally with visitors of their own generation.

Schools will differ in their openness to Baha'í educational programmes. Some, yet by no means all, school visits will over time lead to their introduction. Bahá'í visitors should not see this as the main aim of visiting a school, but if you have developed a relationship with a school over time, you may find opportunities to invite young people to participate in programmes of spiritual and intellectual development, and service to their communities.

### 3. STEPS FOR SCHOOL VISITORS

Not everything in this section may apply to the situation in which your local Bahá'í community finds itself, but we recommend that you read and study all the guidance offered, as it may provide useful insights.

Step	Action
Step 1	Planning – consultation and capacity building
Step 2	Research and find your school
Step 3	Approach the school to present the Bahá'í Faith
Step 4	Meet with school staff to discuss the possibility of delivering a school assembly or classroom lesson
Step 5	Prepare
Step 6	Deliver
Step 7	Seek feedback
Step 8	Reflect
Step 9	Go back to the school – next term or next year

#### 3.1 Planning

##### a) Initial consultation

The very first step for Bahá'ís, or Bahá'í communities, contemplating undertaking school visits is to have a full, open and frank consultation with your Local Spiritual Assembly (if there is one), your Bahá'í SACRE representative and possibly other Bahá'ís interested in this field of service. It is important that everyone understands and supports the proposal. Everyone should have a chance to share their thoughts on the benefits, responsibilities and implications of school visits. This can be carried out at a meeting called specifically for the purpose, or at the Feast or a regular meeting of the Local Spiritual Assembly. Such a process of consultation may also help to identify the individual/s with the experience and/or talent to take on the tasks involved. You should seek to answer the following questions:

Question	Action at planning stage
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<b>Does your locality have a Local Spiritual Assembly?</b>	It is a good idea to consult with your Local Spiritual Assembly regarding your endeavours as a school visitor. If there is no Local Spiritual Assembly, consider raising this at your Cluster Reflection Meeting, to see if there are others in your cluster with experience in this area of service.
<b>Is there a Bahá'í representative on your local SACRE?</b>	Some SACREs are more active than others, and many, but by no means all, have a Bahá'í representative. Seek to consult with your local Bahá'í SACRE rep as s/he can provide you with a wealth of information and encouragement.
<b>Is there a Bahá'í child / junior youth / youth in the school?</b>	<p>This is a special situation, because many Local Authority syllabuses in England and Wales 'allow for schools to draw in different traditions where they fit the theme and question, <u>and where there are representatives of those traditions in the schools and in the local community.</u>'</p> <p>This gives you an ideal opportunity to talk to the Bahá'í pupil's teacher, Head of RE, and/or head teacher about the possibility of a Bahá'í school visit.</p>
<b>Do you have prior experience?</b>	<p>If yes – great! If no – it's OK.</p> <p>Seek to link up with other Bahá'ís who have experience as school visitors. You may be able to observe them delivering a school visit, or they may offer to accompany you.</p>

### b) Linking up with other Bahá'í school visitors

It is well worth linking up with other Bahá'ís who have experience in this field, for guidance and support. If possible it is useful to observe a school visit before delivering one yourself – or perhaps take on a supporting role whilst shadowing a more experienced friend. Contact the [Bahá'í RE Task Force](#), who will put you in touch with someone who can help.

### c) Familiarisation with Bahá'í RE resources for schools

A teaching toolkit with classroom resources and assembly ideas can be accessed on the [Bahá'í RE Resources for Schools](#) website. These are organised into:

- Classroom resources for key stages 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5
- Assembly ideas for primary and secondary schools

The topics covered vary by age group, and include:

- Basic introductory material (presentations, worksheets)
- Key Figures (Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, 'Abdu'l-Bahá)
- Bahá'í teachings and beliefs, including progressive revelation, unity, peace, the soul and life after death, character and moral behaviour

- Laws and practices, including Bahá'í community life, Holy Days, pilgrimage, the Fast
- Holy Places: Houses of Worship and the Shrines and places of pilgrimage;
- Global issues such as prejudice and discrimination, gender equality, wealth and poverty, the environment

#### **d) Sharing the load**

Although it is possible for an individual to deliver school visits on their own, it is much better if a group of friends can come together as a team to support this activity. Creative solutions can be found to assign the various tasks – for example, Junior Youth groups may be asked to prepare artwork or presentations, or members of the wider Bahá'í community who prefer not to go into schools themselves may offer to help with childcare or giving lifts to presenters.

### **3.2 Research - find your school**

In many instances it will be easy to identify a school or schools to be approached. There may be a Bahá'í child attending the school, or a Bahá'í who is a teacher or other member of staff. In other instances, the school may have contacted you first – but it is still advisable to research the school.

Your Bahá'í representative on the local SACRE may well have contacts in individual schools in the area.

If your community is involved in local interfaith activities, you may find that there are other people in your interfaith group who have a connection to a school or schools, or have been involved in school-led events.

You could try approaching the school or schools attended by children in your community children's class or Junior Youth group.

It is worthwhile listing a number of schools and then consulting on how many, and which ones, to approach.

### **3.3 Approach**

This will depend on the nature of your contact with the school. A Bahá'í parent with a child at the school could start by presenting the teacher or head teacher with a copy of the Pastoral Care leaflet, which gives basic information about the Bahá'í Faith. If there are no Bahá'í children in the school, you might offer a school visitor right from the outset.

### **3.4 Meet the teacher or headteacher**

Once you have made the initial contact, or when a school has contacted you, you should try to meet with them to discuss in more detail what you intend to offer.

Teachers are busy people and, especially if they have made the first approach or if they have already met you, they may ask you to communicate your plans by phone or e-mail, rather than meeting in person. This is fine, provided that you prepare properly – see next step.

### 3.5 Prepare

Several parameters will influence what you are able to deliver to the school. In particular, make sure you know the answers to the following questions:

- are you delivering an assembly, lesson, part lesson or informal chat?
- age group of the children
- size of the class or assembly group
- length of the lesson
- will there be speakers from other faiths?

If the school has invited you, they will probably have very definite and fixed parameters for the format of the event (e.g. a five-minute assembly for 200 pupils aged between 11 and 14; a 'speed-dating' exercise with small groups of pupils setting prepared questions to members of different faiths successively; a whole 'off-timetable' morning with a Year 6 class). If you have approached the school, you may decide to offer a specific type of activity.

Think about how the teacher might follow through on your lesson. Are there activities and/or materials that you can leave with the teacher, to complete with the class at a later time? This is particularly important if you will only have a short time with the class.

Prepare your material well in advance, and offer to share it with the teacher beforehand. If you are giving a talk or assembly, practise it and time your delivery.

Decide what materials you need to have available, and agree with the teacher beforehand which of these materials the school can provide (e.g. paper and pens – what sort, what size?, scissors, glue...).

If you are using technology, find out what is available in school (projector, speakers, computer, internet access) and what you need to bring. It is often advisable to bring all your materials on a datastick and not rely on being able to get access to the internet in school, as the school's network may block certain sites. It is also often preferable to use the school's computer, rather than trying to get your laptop working with their projector.

### 3.6 Deliver

For many Bahá'ís, this may be the first time they have set foot inside a school since their own schooldays! People are often nervous, but find it well worthwhile and very satisfying.



Speak slowly and clearly, try to stand when presenting, and don't forget to breathe. Be confident, trust in the power of Divine confirmation, and above all – be yourself!

### 3.7 Seek (and provide) feedback

Depending on the age of the children, you could give them a feedback form to complete, or ask them to write their comments on sticky notes.

Don't forget to give feedback to the school, by thanking them for inviting you and giving praise to the staff and pupils. Tell them that you hope to be invited again.

Let the [RE Task Force](#) know of your successes. If the school has allowed you to take photographs of your visit, request permission to share them. Ask if the school is happy for you to share their feedback or outputs from the lessons with the wider RE community via the [Bahá'í RE website](#).

### 3.8 Reflect

It is important to reflect on how things went and make a note of what you might do differently next time. If you have managed to get feedback from the children or the teacher, you will want to reflect on this as well. Involve your Local Spiritual Assembly and wider community in your reflection. Share your experiences at the cluster reflection meeting and invite people in other parts of your cluster to approach their local schools, or to accompany you next time to learn more about this service activity.

### 3.9 Repeat

Once contact with a school has been established, it is most important to keep the relationship alive. There are many ways of doing this. You might invite the teacher or headteacher to a Holy Day or other Bahá'í event.

Diary a date to contact the school again. For instance, if the school invited you to participate in a 'world religions' event in the summer term, contact them towards the end of the next spring term to see whether they plan to do it again.

Keep seeking new schools to visit, but bear in mind that you need to build capacity in the Bahá'í community to support the requirements of an increasing number of schools.

Most Local Authorities maintain a list of speakers willing to visit schools in the context of RE. You can ask your SACRE rep to check if this is the case, and ensure that your local list has details of a Bahá'í contact.

## 4. FINAL COMMENTS

For Bahá'ís, service as a school visitor presents an exciting challenge and a great opportunity to make the Faith available to thousands of school children and their teachers, in a way that also serves the community as a whole.

At a time when many in the UK are turning away from any kind of organised or community-based religion, the Bahá'ís can make a very positive contribution in reinforcing the importance of religion in the modern age.

***'O true companions! All humankind are as children in a school, and the Dawning-Points of Light, the Sources of divine revelation, are the teachers, wondrous and without peer. In the school of realities they educate these sons and daughters, according to teachings from God, and foster them in the bosom of grace, so that they may develop along every line, show forth the excellent gifts and blessings of the Lord, and combine human perfections; that they may advance in all aspects of human endeavour, whether outward or inward, hidden or visible, material or spiritual, until they make of this mortal world a widespread mirror, to reflect that other world which dieth not.'***

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*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*