

LDBE Guidance on withdrawal from Collective Worship

This short, two-page guidance note is intended to support school leaders in navigating requests for withdrawal from collective worship with clarity, confidence and care. It reflects recent legal developments following a Supreme Court ruling in Northern Ireland, which may have implications for Church schools more widely. While national policy remains unchanged at this time, this document provides an interim update and will be refreshed as further guidance becomes available.

The importance of collective worship

The Church of England guidance document *Inclusive, Invitational and Inspiring*¹ sets out the expectations for collective worship in Church schools. It aims to ensure that worship remains relevant and an essential component of an education that enables all pupils to flourish and 'live life in all its fullness' (John 10:10). Faithful implementation of this guidance supports the development of meaningful, high-quality relationships across faiths, worldviews, cultures and beliefs, and helps pupils learn to advocate for one another, challenging discrimination and promote equality as required of schools under the Public Sector Equality Duty.²

In a Church school, collective worship should:

- Reflect the Anglican status of the school, through a rich, diverse and lived Christian tradition.
- Provide pupils with a rich experience and understanding of Christianity.
- Offer an encounter with Jesus Christ and with Christian faith and practice in a way that enhances pupils' lives.
- Offer prayer, and opportunities to read and reflect on the Bible, liturgy, sacrament and experience of the musical and other imaginative riches of Christianity.
- Provide space for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, where they can discover different ways of expressing their own spirituality and worship.
- **Be Inclusive:** Worship is collective in that it involves meeting, exploring, questioning, and responding to others and, for some, to God.
- **Be Invitational:** Parents, pupils and adults can expect to encounter worship that is consistently invitational.
- **Be Inspiring:** Pupils and adults can expect the worship they encounter in a Church school to be inspirational.

This form of encounter through worship should be truly welcoming, inclusive and exemplifying the principles of Christian hospitality. This is an approach that seeks to meet the needs of all, wherever they may be on their journey of faith and belief.

In a Church school, it is expected that, where possible, there is a meaningful relationship with the local parish church to maintain the Christian vision of the school and enhance worship and

¹ [Collective Worship in Church of England Schools Inclusive, Invitational, Inspiring Guidance Document](#)

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-sector-equality-duty>

the spiritual life of the school. Through shared leadership, visits and community connection, pupils and staff experience a sense of belonging to the wider Christian community.

The legal framework for collective worship

The responsibility for collective worship lies with the governing board, in consultation with the headteacher, who must ensure provision meets legal requirements. Each Church of England school, whether VA, VC, or academy, must provide collective worship in accordance with the beliefs and practices of the Church of England.^{3 4} It is important to distinguish between the statutory guidance for schools without a religious foundation, which require collective worship to be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character, and the expectation for Church of England schools to provide a daily act of collective worship that is rooted in the beliefs and practices of the Church of England. This reflects the Anglican status of the school, in line with its trust deed. This must be offered to every pupil, every day (except in the case of withdrawal).

As a rule, all acts of collective worship should take place on the school premises. However, schools have the discretion to organise collective worship elsewhere on special occasions.⁵ The school's approach to this should be clearly outlined in their collective worship policy. On these occasions, the principles of being inclusive, invitational and inspiring¹ should be adhered to and monitored just as collective worship in school is. Worship leaders may require training and support in order to understand how collective worship differs from church worship. Their messages, songs and prayers should follow the same guidelines as school worship.

In supporting parents and pupils aged 16 and over to make informed decisions, schools should ensure that families are able to understand the purpose and place of collective worship within a Church of England school, as set out in the Inclusive, Invitational and Inspiring guidance. Clear, consistent articulation of the importance of collective worship grounded in both the school's Christian vision and the legal framework should be established as part of the school's normal communication and practice.

The right of withdrawal

A Church school has a legal duty to provide collective worship in accordance with its trust deed, for every pupil every day. However, no current legislation affects the parents' rights to withdraw their children from collective worship if they wish to do so. This includes withdrawal from attending collective worship in church. If the parent asks that a pupil should be wholly or partly excused from attending collective worship at the school or church, then the school must comply. From age 16, pupils can choose for themselves to opt out of collective worship if they wish to do so. No reason is required to be given for a request of withdrawal.^{5 6}

A school continues to be responsible for the supervision of any child withdrawn by their parent from collective worship. Non-attendance or late arrival to school is not a legitimate alternative to withdrawal and neither the school nor the parent should encourage such practice.

³ [DFE Circular Number 1/94 RE and Collective Worship](#)

⁴ [Religious education \(RE\) and collective worship in academies and free schools](#)

⁵ [DFE Circular Number 1/94 RE and Collective Worship](#)

⁶ [Religious education \(RE\) and collective worship in academies and free schools](#)

Managing the withdrawal process

Each school should ensure it has a clear policy and written procedures for handling a withdrawal request or parental complaint about collective worship which complies with the law. Clear procedures for both should be set out within the school's collective worship policy and made available to parents, e.g. through the school website and induction information. Where multiple languages are spoken, translations of these documents should be made available where possible.

For prospective parents, time should be taken to clearly explain the arrangements for collective worship and how they reflect the school's Christian character. Conversations may reveal misconceptions, especially for those unfamiliar with its role in the education system.

Schools should make collective worship as open and transparent as possible, for example by inviting parents to observe worship to support understanding and address any misconceptions. The use of the right to withdraw should be at the instigation of parents (or pupils themselves if they are aged 16 or over), and it should be made clear whether it is from the whole act of worship or specific parts of it. No reasons need to be given.

On receipt of the withdrawal request, headteachers should grant the request immediately, without imposing any 'undue burden' on either parents or pupils as part of the decision-making process. **Schools should make the ability to withdraw simple and easy to follow without requiring justification or meetings to occur.**

When dealing with a withdrawal, the school should describe to the parents what alternative arrangements will be made for their child. It is important that clear records are kept of the parent(s)' request and the associated actions in case of any challenges at a later date.

While schools should not require discussion, if appropriate, they may offer a conversation for clarity or pastoral support, provided this is optional and not a condition of the withdrawal consent. This may provide an opportunity to explore how the child's withdrawal can be best accommodated. For example, it may be possible for the school to include withdrawn pupils in celebration events, if they can easily be included in the non-religious elements of these events. However, care must be taken not to stigmatise or burden the pupils in any way.

Churches sometimes give leavers of a Church school a gift, often a Bible or Bible story book, reflecting the school's Christian character and the Bible's cultural significance in the UK.

For pupils withdrawn for religious reasons, schools and churches may wish to consider an appropriate alternative, in discussion with parents where helpful, to avoid exclusion or stigma. While not required, this may support the duty to foster good relations.

Alternative arrangements for withdrawn pupils

Careful consideration should be given to how pupils who are withdrawn from collective worship are provided with alternative arrangements. It is important to note that whilst the process of withdrawal must not place an 'undue burden' on the parents, neither should the withdrawal

result in any additional cost or disruption to the school.⁷ Alternative arrangements should not be used as an opportunity for additional curriculum time, but should ideally ensure that the spiritual, moral, social and cultural needs of withdrawn pupils are attended to, which may arise as a result of non-attendance at collective worship. There is not a requirement to provide an alternative 'assembly'. In all circumstances withdrawn pupils must be suitably supervised.

Material can in theory be supplied by parents for this, although if that is the case, these must be checked for suitability by the school to ensure they do not contravene the school's policies or other duties (particularly safeguarding). This is only possible if it can be done without additional cost or disruption to the school.

School leaders should note that this guidance reflects the current national position and will be updated if national policy changes. It does not constitute legal advice; where context-specific guidance is needed, leaders should contact their diocesan education officer.

⁷ [DFE Circular Number 1/94 RE and Collective Worship](#)