**Briefing note: Sikhism**

**Beliefs**
Sikhism originated in the state of Punjab in India about 500 years ago. The main religions of the area at the time were Hinduism and Islam. The Sikh faith began when Guru Nanak started teaching a faith that was quite different from Hinduism and Islam. Sikhs believe there is only one God, God is without form or gender, everyone has direct access to God, and everyone is equal before God, a good life is lived as part of a community, empty religious rituals and superstitions have no value.

Sikhs believe that human beings spend their time in a cycle of birth, life, and rebirth. The quality of each particular life depends on the law of Karma. Karma sets the quality of a life according to how well or badly a person behaved in their previous life.

Guru Nanak was succeeded in his mission by nine other Gurus’ (Angad Dev, Amar Das, Ram Das, Arjan, Hargobind, Har Rai, Har Krishan, Teg Bahadur and Gobind Singh). These Gurus sought to develop and nurture the faith. The Sikh faith was consolidated by Guru Arjan (under whose leadership the Golden Temple at Amritsar was built). The final Guru Gobind Singh decreed that the holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, would become the teacher of the people and the last Guru.

There are approximately 25 million Sikhs in the world today.

**Texts**
Guru Granth Sahib is the holy book of the Sikh faith. For Sikhs the Granth Sahib is the focal point of a Sikh temple (Gurdwara) and the ultimate source of religious authority.

**Places of worship**

**Gurdwara** - is the place where Sikhs come together for congregational worship. A Gurdwara is any building for public worship that has a complete copy of the Guru Granth Sahib inside. It is a place for divine knowledge, bliss and tranquillity. The focal point is the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh holy book) which is placed on a platform under a canopy and is treated with the respect that would be given to a human Guru. Dwara means 'door' or 'gate', there are four doors into a Gurdwara, known as the Door of Peace, the Door of Livelihood, the Door of Learning and the Door of Grace. These doors are a symbol that people from all four points of the compass are welcome, and that members of all four castes are equally welcome. There's always a light on in a Gurdwara, to show that the Guru's Light is always visible and is accessible to everyone at any time. Sikh public worship can be led by any Sikh, male or female, who is competent to do so.

The Langar or community kitchen is an important part of the Gurdwara. Food is donated and prepared by volunteers who then serve the vegetarian food to everyone who visits.
The 5 K’s

The five K’s were introduced during the time of Guru Gobind Singh to identify and bond together members of the Khalsa (the pure ones) all initiated or ‘baptised’ Sikhs; vow to wear five items of dress, which all begin with the letter ‘K’.

The five K’s are:

- **Kesh** – the practice of keeping the hair uncut which is the distinctive sign of Sikh identity. Cutting or removing hair is seen as going against God’s will.
- **Kara** – this is a steel or iron bangle, worn on the right wrist. Kara is seen as a reminder of the universality of God and a symbol of allegiance to the brotherhood and the Guru.
- **Kanga** – a small comb, which is worn in the hair at all times. It is used to keep the hair organised and clean, and symbolises orderliness.
- **Kachhera** – a special type of underwear garment (shorts made from cotton) which are knee length. It is a symbol of readiness, modesty and moral restraint.
- **Kirpan** – A short sword which symbolises the readiness to protect the weak and oppressed.

Festivals and days of worship

**Vaisakhi** - is one of the most important dates in the Sikh calendar. It is the Sikh New Year festival and is celebrated on April 13 or 14. It also commemorates 1699, the year Sikhism was born as a collective faith. Parades, dancing and singing happen throughout the day. Many Sikhs choose to be baptised into the Khalsa brotherhood on this day.

**Diwali for Sikhs** - Diwali is particularly important because it celebrates the release from prison of the sixth guru, Guru Hargobind, and 52 other princes with him, in 1619. Sikhs celebrated the return of Guru Hargobind by lighting the **Golden Temple** and this tradition continues today. Diwali is known as the ‘festival of lights’ because houses, shops and public places are decorated with small earthenware oil lamps called Diyas. Diwali is very much a time for buying and exchanging gifts.

**Hola Mahalla** – Sikhs also celebrate Hola Mahalla. This is a festival initiated by Guru Gobind Singh. Sikhs often compete in the Sikh martial arts, Gatka and other sports followed by poetry readings and music.

**Gurpurbs** - are festivals that are associated with the lives of the Gurus. They are happy occasions which are celebrated most enthusiastically by Sikhs. The most important Gurpurbs are:

- The birthday of **Guru Nanak**, founder of Sikhism (April or November)
- The birthday of **Guru Gobind Singh**, founder of the Khalsa (January)
- The martyrdom of **Guru Arjan** (June)
- The martyrdom of **Guru Tegh Bahadur** (November/December)

Sikhs celebrate Gurpurbs with an **akhand path**. This is a complete and continuous reading of Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, which takes 48 hours and finishes on the day of the festival.

For further information on faith dates and religious festivals follow this link: [http://www.equality.leeds.ac.uk/for-staff/good-practice-guidance/faith-calendar-and-dates-of-religious-festivals/](http://www.equality.leeds.ac.uk/for-staff/good-practice-guidance/faith-calendar-and-dates-of-religious-festivals/)

★This briefing note was produced using information found in the ‘Faith Communities Navigator’ published in 2007 by the Faith Regen Foundation. Further information
about the Foundation is available by following this link http://www.thefrf.org/work/archive.

We have also used information taken from the BBC Religion website; follow the link for further information http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/