

Authorising Pupil Absence for Religious Observance 2022-23



Harrow
SACRE



Harrow Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE)

Authorising Pupil Absence for Religious Observance: Guidance for Headteachers and Governing Bodies

This document has the status of advice and provides overarching guidelines which headteachers may use in identifying absences for religious observance for pupils that should be authorised. The advice offered by SACRE relates only to school pupils and not to staff employed in schools.

Parents¹ are responsible for making sure that their children of compulsory school age receive a suitable full-time education. Parents are entitled to withdraw their child from school for religious observance where the day is exclusively set aside by the religious body to which the parents of the child are a member². Schools must regard such absences as authorised as regulations specifically authorise these absences³. Not all religious days will be set aside for religious observance by the religious body and if a day has not exclusively set aside the day for religious observance, children will be expected to attend school on these days. If parents wish to take leave on such days, they will be expected to apply for leave under exceptional circumstances⁴.

If a Headteacher grants a leave request, it will be for the headteacher to determine the length of time that the child can be away from school.

It is the Governing Body of each school that determines the school's attendance policy in light of legislation. On a day to day basis, the headteacher implements that policy and authorises leave for religious observance and considers any requests for leave in other exceptional circumstances.

The Context

In the UK, the pattern of the school year takes account of most of the western Christian festivals and holy days. Important days of religious observance in the calendars of other religious traditions and denominations, however, often fall in term time and specifically on school days. Those parents, who are nurturing children and young people within a faith tradition, understandably want them to be able to engage in those key events which involve corporate worship and celebration, and which affirm their religious beliefs. Schools recognise that a family's religious beliefs and traditions are intrinsic to their sense of identity and contribute to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

¹ The term "parents" includes carers and guardians

² Under regulation 6 Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006

³ See FN1

⁴ Under regulation 7 Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006

Whilst sympathetic to the need of families to remain in contact with relatives and their 'heritage' overseas, headteachers will seldom authorise exceptional leave of absence for extended visits abroad because of the consequences for pupils' attendance and learning.

SACRE publishes an annual list of religious days which includes day that are exclusively set aside by the religious body which should be authorised by schools. Harrow SACRE is aware that headteachers value this guidance so that this local understanding does not diminish robust procedures aimed at improving attendance.

The Education Act 1996

In preparing this guidance, SACRE has taken full account of current legislation in relation to attendance: *“The child shall not be taken to have failed to attend regularly at the school by reason of his absence from the school -*

(c) on any day exclusively set apart for religious observance by the religious body to which his parent belongs”

Education Act 1996, Part VI, Chapter II, Paragraph 444

The relevance of the *“day exclusively set apart for religious observance by the religious body to which his parent belongs”* relates to the statutory defense in the event of a prosecution. This confirms that such absences must be authorised by the school⁵

Local Advice on Authorising Absence for Pupils

Absences from school for religious observance are allowed and should be marked as authorised where school are satisfied that the day has been set aside by the religious body and the parents of the child are members of that religious community. Schools can refer to this guidance or the relevant religious body where there is a query whether the day has been set aside by the religious body and may request parents to confirm in writing that they are members of that particular religious community.

Harrow SACRE advises that:

- headteachers should authorise absence **only** for a date *‘exclusively set apart by the religious body’*
- if a date has not been *‘exclusively set apart’* on the SACRE list or by the relevant religious body, headteachers should consider whether to grant leave under exceptional circumstances⁶ and in doing so consider whether the religious observance can be accommodated outside of school hours
- absence taken on a school day for a festival falling at a weekend, or in a school holiday, would not be authorised
- additional days taken on either side of the day explicitly set aside for observance would not be authorised on the grounds of religious observance

The Needs of Different Religious Groups

Within some religious traditions, observance varies between different denominations and communities. Ashura, for example, is a relatively minor festival for Sunni Muslims but a holy day of major significance for the Shia community.

Whilst headteachers and teachers must ensure that requests are genuine and reasonable, they are recommended not to doubt a request on grounds that other

⁵ Under regulation 6 Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006

⁶ Under regulation 7 Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006

families of the same faith have not requested absence on the same day or at the same time.

It may be the case that:

- the level of observance differs amongst families within the same faith tradition
- a particular denominational or cultural grouping observes different holy days to other groups within the same faith
- some pupils, though growing up within a faith community, may prefer to attend school on festival days

What can Schools do to meet the Needs of Families from Religious Traditions Whilst Promoting High Attendance Rates?

Harrow schools are aware of the religious communities represented within their school and are advised to take reasonable steps to ensure, whenever possible, that events in the school diary – such as parents’ evenings and school performances - do not clash with days of significant religious importance to pupils and their families.⁷

As part of their written communications with families, some schools send a termly or annual proforma asking for advance information of requests for absence for religious observance. However, some communities may not be able to identify dates for religious observance that far in advance. Parents should be asked to give the school as much notice of a proposed absence as is reasonably possible and be willing to discuss with the school how pupils will catch up with work missed.

For religiously observant children and young people there are expectations of religious prayer and observance throughout the year. Schools can usually make provision for pupils to fulfil these observances without the need for absence during the school day. For example, through consultation with the Muslim communities represented within the school, a prayer room and nearby facilities for washing can enable young Muslims to perform salah on the school site (see SACRE Guidance on offering a place for prayer and reflection).

SACRE Guidance: Dates ‘set apart’ for Religious Observance

September 2022 – December 2023

SACRE has sought to publish an annual list of dates for religious observance. In line with robust government guidance to school leaders on school attendance, representatives of local faith communities have identified those dates which they regard as “*exclusively set apart for religious observance by the religious body to which the parent belongs.*” These dates are recommended to headteachers as those on which they may wish to authorise absence from school.

⁷ Indirect discrimination may occur if provision is applied generally but has the effect of disadvantaging those with a particular ‘characteristic.’ (Equality Act 2010 – DfE Advice for School leaders Sept 2012)

The calendar below is based on the Shap calendar with input from local faith representatives in the Harrow community. Every effort is made to ensure it is as accurate as possible but it a guidance document only. Sometimes there are variations within different denominations or localities, and we respectfully ask headteachers to be sensitive to these, should they occur.

Baha'i

Autumn Term 2022 Birthday of the Twin Manifestations:

- Wednesday 26 October 2022 Birthday of the Báb
- Thursday 27 October 2022 Birthday of Bahá'u'lláh

Spring Term 2023: Naw-Ruz (New Year) Tuesday 21 March 2023

Summer Term 2023:

- Ridvan Friday 21 April 2023
- Martyrdom of the Báb Sunday 9th July 2023 (commemoration of this Holy Day should be celebrated at 13:00)

Autumn Term 2023 Birthday of the Twin Manifestations:

- Monday 16 October 2023 Birthday of the Báb
- Tuesday 17 October 2023 Birthday of Bahá'u'lláh

Naw-Ruz 2015 marked the adoption of a new solar calendar which is used by all Baha'is. Since 21 March 2015 the calendar is no longer linked to the Gregorian calendar and the New Year will start on the day of the vernal equinox at Tehran time. The Birthday of the Twin Manifestations is such an important commemoration for Baha'is that it is likely that the parents of Baha'i children will ask for them to be excused from school. Each year may have different date from the previous year as it is a solar calendar.

In the Baha'i tradition it is recommended that, where possible, work is suspended on these days.

There are a few Baha'i Holy Days that should be celebrated at a specific time, The martyrdom of the Báb is one of them. This celebration takes place at 1.00pm on Sunday 9th July 2023; children may require time off school on this occasion.

Naw-Ruz (New Year) falls on Tuesday 21 March in 2023.

There are a few other Baha'i Holy Days that are not included since the community celebrates them in the evening.

Buddhism

Summer Term 2023: Vesakha Puja / Buddha Day Friday 19 May 2023

Such is the religious, cultural and ethnic diversity within Buddhism that different Buddhist denominations – for example Theravada, Mahayana - follow different religious calendars. The same festival may be celebrated on different dates and different Buddhist communities will celebrate different festivals.

Within those traditions that follow a lunar calendar, New Year Festivals may be religiously significant. These include Lhosar (New Year within the Tibetan and Nepalese Buddhist communities) and Songkran for Thai Buddhists.

Many Buddhist communities celebrate their religious festivals collectively on the nearest Sunday.

Christianity

Spring Term 2023: Christmas day in the Russian Orthodox tradition Saturday 7 Jan 2023

Summer Term 2023:

- Holy Friday in the Eastern Orthodox church 14 April 2023
- Easter Sunday 16 April 2023

The following Christian holidays in the Western tradition fall at weekends or during the school holidays:

- Christmas Day: Sunday 25 December 2022, Monday 25 December 2023.
- Good Friday: 7 April 2023
- Easter Sunday: 9 April 2023

In the Orthodox tradition Easter is calculated using the Julian calendar. The beginning of the Lenten fast and the date of Easter will differ every year. In 2023 Orthodox Easter falls on 16 April. Some parents prefer to take their children to the liturgy held on Monday morning (Bright Monday) in preference to the midnight liturgy held in the early hours of Easter Sunday morning. In 2023, Bright Monday falls on 17 April, the first day of the summer term. Parents may ask for this day off school. Head teachers are asked to treat such requests sympathetically.

Hinduism

Autumn Term 2022:

- Hindu New Year: Monday 26 September - Wednesday 5 October 2022
- Divali: Friday 21 October – Wednesday 26 October 2022

Spring Term 2023: Tamil New Year Friday 14 April 2023

Summer Term 2023: *200th Anniversary of Shree Narnarayandev Tuesday 18 April - Wednesday 26 April 2023

Autumn Term 2023:

- Hindu new year (Navarati) - Sunday 15 October – Monday 23 October 2023
- Diwali: Sunday 12 November –Thursday 16 November 2023

*In 2023 there is a big celebration from Tuesday 18 – Wednesday 26 April celebrating 200 years of Shree Narnarayandev; members of the Swaminarayan faith may be planning to attend this once in a lifetime event. Parents may request leave of absence during this time: Our local representatives have asked Head teachers to view such requests sympathetically.

Such is the diversity within Hinduism that almost any working day might be a festival. However, few Hindu festivals require a day off school. In most temples, observances take place in the evenings in recognition of the need to attend work and school. Hindu communities in the UK also tend to celebrate most festivals collectively on the nearest Sunday, either before or after major festivals, for the same reason. Hindu New Year is an exception; on this day most Hindu families make it a point to offer their prayers with all members of the family at their respective temples.

Most observances during the 5 days of Diwali take place in the evening and it is not necessary for pupils to be absent from school on each of those days.

Diwali can be celebrated in the evenings.

Islam

Autumn Term 2022: Ashara* Monday 8 August 2022

Spring Term 2023: Ramadan Wednesday 22 March – Friday 21 April 2023

Summer Term 2023:

- Ramadan ends: Friday 21 April 2023
- Eid-ul-Fitr: Saturday 22 April 2023
- Hajj: Monday 26 June-Saturday 1 July 2023
- Eid-ul-Adha: Wednesday 28 June-Sunday 2 July 2023

Autumn Term 2023: - Ashara* Sunday 27 August 2023

There is no religious obligation requiring pupils to be absent from school during Ramadan. However, Muslim pupils, parents and staff will welcome the provision of a space for prayer and thoughtful arrangements at lunchtime.

The dates for Hajj, Eid-ul-Adha and Ashara are taken from an Islamic calendar and are tentative. Please also note that these dates are subject to moon sighting; therefore dates might be a day early or a day later.

In 2023 Hajj and Eid-ul-Adha fall at the end of the summer term:

- Hajj: Monday 26 June – Saturday 1 July
- Eid-ul-Adha: Wednesday 28 June-Sunday 2 July

* Shia Muslims might request absence on Ashara. They may also request time during lunch breaks to attend specific activities related to Ashara during other days.

* In addition to Ashara, Dawoodi Bohra Muslims may request absence during the 8 days of Muharram, which are the days immediately leading up to Ashara.

In 2023 Ashara falls in the summer holidays on Sundays 27 August 2023.

** A range of methods is used to determine when Eid begins. Muslim families will follow their masjid or community leaders. Therefore parents from different Muslim communities may request absence for Eid on two different dates and some may not be able to calculate the date in advance because they must sight the moon.

Jainism

Autumn Term 2022:

- Paryushan: Tuesday 23 August – Wednesday 31 August 2022
- Samvatsari (Day of Forgiveness) Wednesday 31 August 2022
- Mahavir Nirvan (Diwali): Monday 24 October 2022

Spring Term 2023: Mahavir Jayanti Monday 3 April 2023

Autumn Term 2023:

- Paryushan: Monday 11 September – Monday 18 September 2023
- Samvatsari (Day of Forgiveness) Monday 18 September 2023
- Mahavir Nirvan (Diwali): Sunday 12 November 2023

*Jains are likely to request absence for one day at Diwali or the following day which is New Year day. In 2022 New Year Day falls on Monday 24 October and in 2023 on Sunday 12 November

In 2023 Mahavir Janma Kalyanak (also known as Mahavira Jayanti) falls in the Easter holidays on 3 April. Paryushan is the main festival for Jains and is celebrated on separate days for Svetamber and Digamber Jains.

On other festival days, observance can be fulfilled in after school hours unless a family has pledged to partake in a special puja, aarti, mangal diva, or shanti kalash.

Sometimes extended families plan a special pilgrimage. The Jain representative on SACRE urges that schools make decisions about authorising student absence for

these rare pilgrimages that are consistent with decisions about authorisation of absence for Hajj.

Jains of the Svetambara tradition may request absence on Samvatsari (Bhadarva vad choth). In 2022, this falls in the summer holidays on Wednesday 31 August. In 2023 it falls on Monday 18 September. Digamber Jains will request leave after that for the Das Lakshan festival which depends on the lunar calendar.

Judaism

Autumn Term 2022:

- Rosh Hashanah: Monday 26 September – Tuesday 27 September 2022
- Yom Kippur (day of Atonement): Wednesday 5 October 2022
- Sukkot (Tabernacles) 8 day festival, 4 days of obligation: Monday 10, Tuesday 11, Saturday 15 and Sunday 16 October 2022
- Chanukah Monday 19 December - Monday 26 December 2022

Spring Term 2023:

- Pesach (Passover) 8 day festival, 4 days of obligation.
- Thursday 6, Friday 7, Wednesday 12 and Thursday 13 April 2023

Summer Term 2023: Shavuot (Festival of Weeks) Friday 26 May – Saturday 27 May 2023.

Autumn Term 2023:

- Rosh Hashanah: Saturday 16 September – Sunday 17 September 2023
- Yom Kippur (day of Atonement): Monday 25 September 2023
- Sukkot (Tabernacles) 8 day festival, 4 days of obligation: Saturday 30 September, Sunday 1 October, Saturday 7 and Sunday 8 October 2023
- Chanukah Friday 8 December – Friday 15 December 2023

Days needing leave of absence are in bold and underlined. Our local Jewish representatives advise that as Rosh Hashanah and the first two days of Sukkot fall on weekdays in 2022, children will need leave of absence. The days of obligation for Pesach (6-7 and 12-13 April 2022) fall in the Easter holidays but the first day of obligation for Shavuot (26 May 2023) falls on a Friday when observant Jews would need to be absent from school.

Jewish law prohibits work on the Sabbath and certain festivals. The traditional Jewish interpretation of work includes any kind of creative activity, such as writing, operating equipment, such as computers and telephones, and traveling, other than on foot. Attending classes and taking examinations are classified as work. There is no provision in Jewish law for a dispensation to be given from these religious obligations. However, levels of observance vary between families.

The Board of Deputies of British Jews publishes a Jewish Holiday Calendar indicating those days on which obligations and restrictions similar to Shabbat apply.

In some years of the Jewish calendar, this will amount to more than 3 days on which Jews are obliged to be absent from school, because work is forbidden.

Sikhism

Autumn Term 2022: Freedom Day (Bandi Chhor Divas) - Thursday 24 November 2022

Autumn Term 2023: Freedom Day (Bandi Chhor Divas) - Tuesday 24 November 2023

In 2023 dates corresponding to the Nanakshahi calendar are:

- Birthday of Guru Gobind Singh - Thursday 5 January 2023
- Vaisakhi - Friday 14 April 2023 (Easter holidays)

Other key Sikh festivals, although falling on school days, would not require pupils to be absent for a whole school day, because they can perform their religious observance before or after school. Guru Nanak Jayanti (Birthday of Guru Nanak) - Tuesday 8 November 2022 and Wednesday 8 November 2023.

Zoroastrianism

Spring Term 2023:

- Jamsheedi NoRuz (Zoroastrian New Year) - Tuesday 21 March 2023
- Khordad Sal (Birth anniversary of prophet Zarathushtra) - Sunday 26 March 2023

Observance of Zoroastrian religious festivals should not require a day's absence from school.

The following dates fall in the school holidays in 2023:

- Shahenshai Navroze (Parsee New Year) - 16 August 2023
- Shahenshai Khordad Sal - 21 August 2023

For a full calendar of Religious Festivals in 2022-23 please see the Shap Calendar which is available on subscription at www.shap.org.

This publication will be reviewed and updated in September 2023. Further information regarding the Harrow SACRE and additional advice for schools can be found here:

[Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education – Harrow Council](#)