



**Authorising Pupil Absence for Religious Observance  
2019-2020**

**SACRE GUIDANCE**



**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.

Parents<sup>1</sup> 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 member<sup>2</sup>. Schools must regard such absences as authorised as regulations specifically authorise these absences<sup>3</sup>.

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 circumstances<sup>4</sup>. 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.

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.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "parents" includes carers and guardians

<sup>2</sup> Under regulation 6 Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006

<sup>3</sup> See FN1

<sup>4</sup> Under regulation 7 Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006

SACRE has 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 defence in the event of a prosecution. This confirms that such absences must be authorised by the school<sup>5</sup>

## **Local Advice on Authorising Absence for Pupils**

Absence 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 circumstances<sup>6</sup> 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;

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<sup>5</sup> Under regulation 6 Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006

<sup>6</sup> Under regulation 7 Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006

## **The Needs of Different Religious Groups**

Within some religious traditions, observance varies between different denominations and communities. Ashara, 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 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.<sup>7</sup>

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).

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<sup>7</sup> 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)

## **SACRE Guidance: Dates ‘set apart’ for Religious Observance September 2019 – December 2020**

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.

This list can only have advice status because the reference in law to “*the religious body to which the parent belongs*” is not easily defined. Within faith communities there may be a range of religious ‘bodies’, which are invested - locally, nationally and internationally - with the status of determining which festivals require absence from school and the exact date on which a festival should be celebrated.

It is not the responsibility of headteachers to research the specific religious obligations of each faith. The religious body, either directly, through national organisations (such as SHAP) or through local SACREs should provide clarity with respect to these obligations.

### **Days of Religious Observance in the School Year: 2019-2020**

These dates have been provided by the various faith groups, outlining days exclusively set aside for religious observance and information on other religious dates where the faith group has advised that pupils can attend school. This is not an exhaustive list.

	Autumn Term 2019	Spring Term 2020	Summer Term 2020	Autumn Term 2020
<b>Baha'i</b>	Birthday of the Twin Manifestations: Tuesday 29 and Wednesday 30 October 2019	Naw-Ruz (New Year): Friday 20 March 2020	Ridvan: Monday 20 April 2020	Birthday of the Twin Manifestations: Sunday 18 and Monday 19 October 2020
<p>Naw-Ruz 2015 marked the adoption of a new solar calendar which will be 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.</p> <p>In the Baha'i tradition it is recommended that, where possible, work is suspended on these days.</p> <p>Naw-Ruz (New Year) falls on <b>20 March in 2020.</b></p>				

	Autumn Term 2019	Spring Term 2020	Summer Term 2020	Autumn Term 2020
<b>Buddhism</b>			Vesakha Puja / Buddha Day Thursday 7 May 2020	
<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Many Buddhist communities celebrate their religious festivals collectively on the nearest Sunday.</p>				

	Autumn Term 2019	Spring Term 2020	Summer Term 2020	Autumn Term 2020
<b>Christianity</b>		Christmas Day in the Russian orthodox tradition Tuesday 7 January	Holy Friday in the Eastern orthodox church 17 April; Easter Sunday 19 April	
<p>The following Christian holidays in the Western tradition fall at weekends or during the school holidays:</p> <p>Christmas Day: Wednesday 25 December 2019, Friday 25 December 2020.</p> <p>Good Friday: 10 April. Easter Sunday: 12 April.</p> <p>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 2020 Orthodox Easter falls at the end of the Easter holidays on Sunday 19 April but “Bright Monday” following Easter Sunday, falls on the first day of term (20 April). Head Teachers are asked to view sympathetically requests for absence on this day as parents often prefer to take their children to the morning liturgy held on Bright Monday in preference to the midnight liturgy held in the early hours of Easter Sunday morning.</p>				

	Autumn Term 2019	Spring Term 2020	Summer Term 2020	Autumn Term 2020
<b>Hinduism</b>	Hindu New Year: Monday 28 October  Diwali:  Thursday 24 - Tuesday 29 October			Hindu New Year: Sunday 15 November  Diwali: Wednesday 11 November – Monday 16 November  Tamil New Year Tuesday 14 April

	<p>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.</p> <p>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. Our local Hindu faith representative advises: students may only take off time for the New year. Divali can be celebrated in the evenings. For 2020, there is no reason for Hindus apart from Tamils to take any holiday as the new year falls on a Sunday.</p>
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	Autumn Term 2019	Spring Term 2020	Summer Term 2020	Autumn Term 2020
<b>Islam</b>	Ashara* Tuesday 10 September		Ramadan: Friday 24 April-Saturday 23 May  Eid-ul-Fitr: Sunday 24 May	Ashara* Saturday 29 August
	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>In 2020, Hajj and Eid-ul-Adha fall in the summer holidays:  Hajj: Tuesday 28 July – Sunday 2 August 2020  Eid-ul-Adha** Friday 31 July – Tuesday 4 August 2020.</p> <p>* 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.</p> <p>* 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.</p> <p>In 2020 Ashara falls in the summer holidays on Saturday 29 August.</p>			



\*\* 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.

	Autumn Term 2019	Spring Term 2020	Summer Term 2020	Autumn Term 2020
<b>Jainism</b>	<p>Paryushan: Tuesday 27 August – Tuesday 3 September 2019</p> <p>Samvatsari (Day of Forgiveness): Tuesday 3 September 2019</p> <p>Mahavir Nirvan (Diwali): Saturday 27 October 2019</p>	<p>Mahavir Jayanti Monday 6 April 2020</p>		<p>Paryushan: Sunday 16- Sunday 23 August 2020</p> <p>Samvatsari (Day of Forgiveness): Sunday 23 August 2020</p> <p>Mahavir Nirvan (Diwali): Saturday 14 November 2020</p>

\*Jains are likely to request absence for one day at Diwali. In 2019 and 2020 Diwali falls on Saturdays - 27 October and 14 November.

In 2019 Mahavir Janma Kalyanak (also known as Mahavira Jayanti) falls on **Monday 6 April** in the Easter holidays. Paryushan is the main festival for Jains and is celebrated on separate days for Swetamber 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). This falls on Tuesday 3 September in 2019 and in the summer holidays on Sunday 23 August in 2020. Digamber Jains will request leave after that depending on the lunar calendar.
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	Autumn Term 2019	Spring Term 2020	Summer Term 2020	Autumn Term 2020
<b>Judaism</b>	<p>Rosh Hashanah: Monday 30 September – Tuesday 1 October 2019</p> <p>Yom Kippur (day of Atonement): <b><u>Tuesday evening 8/</u></b> Wednesday 9 October 2019</p> <p>Sukkot (Tabernacles) 8 day festival, 4 days of obligation: Monday 14 and Tuesday 15 October; Monday 20 and Tuesday 21 October.</p>		<p>Pesach Thursday 9 – Thursday 16 April: 8 day festival, 4 days of obligation.</p> <p>Shavuot (Feast of Weeks): only one day falls on a weekday: Friday 29- Saturday 30 May 2020</p>	<p>Rosh Hashanah: Saturday 19 – Sunday 20 September 2020</p> <p>Yom Kippur (day of Atonement): <b><u>Monday 28 September 2020</u></b></p> <p>Sukkot (Tabernacles) 8 day festival, 4 days of obligation: Saturday 3 and Sunday 4 October; Saturday 10 and Sunday 11 October 2020</p>

<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
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	Autumn Term 2019	Spring Term 2020	Summer Term 2020	Autumn Term 2020
<b>Sikhism</b>	Freedom Day (Bandi Chhor Divas): Saturday 27 October 2019			Freedom Day (Bandi Chhor Divas): Saturday 14 November 2020
<p>In 2020 dates corresponding to the Nanakshahi calendar are:</p> <p>Birthday of Guru Gobind Singh: <b>Thursday 2 January 2020.</b> Vaisakhi: <b>Tuesday 14 April 2020.</b></p> <p>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:</p> <p>Guru Nanak Jayanti (Birthday of Guru Nanak): <b>Tuesday 12 November 2019 and Wednesday 30 November 2020.</b></p>				

	Autumn Term 2019	Spring Term 2020	Summer Term 2020	Autumn Term 2020
<b>Zoroastrianism</b>		Jamsheedi NoRuz (Zoroastrian New Year): Saturday 21 March  Khordad Sal (Birth anniversary of prophet Zarathushtra): Thursday 26 March		
<p>Observance of Zoroastrian religious festivals should not require a day's absence from school.</p> <p>The following dates fall in the school holidays in 2020:</p> <p>Shahenshai Navroze (Parsee New Year) 16 August 2020.</p> <p>Shahenshai Khordad Sal this year on 21 August 2020.</p>				

For a full calendar of Religious Festivals in 2019 – 2020 please see the Shap Calendar which is available on subscription at [www.shap.org](http://www.shap.org). The SHAP Working Party actually folded in April 2019 after 50 years as its main aim and objective - to ensure that world religions other than Christianity are included on the RE curriculum - has long since been achieved; however, we understand that the calendar will continue to be produced and as it is traditionally the most accurate and the best on the market, so this is good news for us!

This publication will be reviewed and updated in September 2020. Further information regarding the Harrow SACRE and additional advice for schools can be found here:

[www.harrow.gov.uk/SACRE](http://www.harrow.gov.uk/SACRE)