



# **Authorising Pupil Absence for Religious Observance**

**2025-26**

## **SACRE GUIDANCE**



# **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.

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

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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

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;

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

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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

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).

## **SACRE Guidance: Dates ‘set apart’ for Religious Observance September 2025– December 2026**

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.

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 is 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.

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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)

We have taken this opportunity to introduce the new terminology which you may like to use in your schools:

Buddha Dharma (the Buddhist religion)

Christianity

Humanism (the Humanist worldview)

Islam (the Muslim religion)

Jain Dharma (the Jain religion)

Judaism (the Jewish religion)

Sanatana Dharma (the Hindu religion)

Sikh Dharm (the Sikh religion) and

Zoroastrianism (the Zoroastrian religion)

| Religion | Autumn Term 2025   | Spring Term 2026                                 | Summer Term 2026   | Autumn Term 2026  |
|----------|--|--|--|---|
| Baha'i   | Birthday of the Twin Manifestations:<br>Birthday of the Báb<br>Wednesday 22<br>October 2025<br>and Birthday of<br>Bahá'u'lláh<br>Thursday 23<br>October 2025 | Naw-Ruz (New<br>Year): Saturday 21<br>March 2026 | 1st Day of Ridvan:<br>Monday 21 April<br>2026<br>9th Day of Ridvan<br>Wednesday 29th<br>April 2026<br>12th Day of Ridvan<br>Saturday 2nd May<br>2026<br>Declaration of the<br>Bab<br>Sunday 24th May<br>2026<br><br>Martyrdom of the<br>Báb:<br>Friday 10 July 2026<br>(commemoration of<br>this Holy Day<br>should be<br>celebrated at 13:00) | Birthday of the Twin Manifestations:<br>Birthday of the Báb<br>Tuesday 10<br>November 2026<br>and Birthday of<br>Bahá'u'lláh<br>Wednesday 11<br>November 2026 |

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; in 2024 this festival falls on a weekend (2-3 November) but in 2025 it

is mid-week on Wednesday 22 -Thursday 23 October. Each year may have a 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 Friday 10 July 2026; children may require time off school on this occasion.

Naw-Ruz (New Year) falls on Saturday 21 March in 2026 so should not require time off school.

There are extra Holidays added this year related to the celebration of the Festival of Ridvan and the Declaration of the Báb. It will be to the discretion of each family to request time off for their children during these days. Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> of May and Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> of May fall during the weekend so they won't need to take time off school.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is in the UK on 19<sup>th</sup> August 2025 sent a message to all Baha'is in the UK with the following statement:

***“Steps should be taken to have Bahá'í children excused, on religious grounds, from attending school on Baha'I Holy Days whenever possible..***

| Religion      | Autumn Term 2025 | Spring Term 2026  | Summer Term 2026  | Autumn Term 2026 |
|---------------|------------------|---|---|------------------|
| Buddha Dhamma |                  | Lhosar<br>Mid-Feb 2026<br><br>New Year /<br>Songkran<br>14 April 2026 | Vesakha Puja* /<br>Buddha Day<br><br>Friday 1 May 2026<br>(Sri Lankan<br>community)<br><br>Saturday 30 May<br>2026 (Thai &<br>Myanmar<br>communities) |                  |

\*There are 13 full moon days in 2026. Hence, the variation as accepted by the said communities.

Such is the religious, cultural and ethnic diversity within the Buddha Dhamma that different denominations – for example Theravada, Mahayana - follow different religious calendars. The same festival may be celebrated on different dates and different communities will celebrate different festivals. Our local representative writes:

*As there are 13 full moon days next year, some countries celebrate Vesak on separate days. Sri Lankan official document has 1 May 2026 as Vesak Day, whereas Thailand and Myanmar may celebrate it on 30 May 2026.*

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 communities) and Songkran for Thai communities.

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

| Religion     | Autumn Term 2025 | Spring Term 2026   | Summer Term 2026   | Autumn Term 2026 |
|--------------|------------------|--|--|------------------|
| Christianity |                  | Christmas Day in the Russian Orthodox tradition<br>Wednesday 7 January | Holy Friday in the Eastern Orthodox church, 10 April 2026, Easter Sunday, 12 April |                  |

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

Christmas Day: Thursday 25 December 2025, Friday 25 December 2026.

Good Friday: 3 April 2026

Easter Sunday: 5 April 2026

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 2026 Orthodox Easter falls on 12 April, a week later than Western Easter. 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 2026, Bright Monday falls on 13 April which is the first day of the summer term.

| Religion | Autumn Term 2025 | Spring Term 2026  | Summer Term 2026   | Autumn Term 2026 |
|----------|------------------|---|--|------------------|
| Islam    |                  | Ramadan* starts:<br>Wednesday 18 February –<br>Wednesday 18 March 2026<br><br>Eid-ul-Fitr***:<br>Friday 20 March 2026 | Hajj**: Monday 25 May – Friday 29 May 2026<br><br>Arafat Day**: Tuesday 26 May<br><br>Eid-ul-Adha***: Tuesday evening 26 May – Saturday 30 May 2026<br><br>Ashura****: Thursday evening 26 June – Friday 26 June |                  |

All Islamic dates given are tentative. Please also note that these dates are subject to moon sighting and sometimes to variations in religious rulings between different sects; therefore, dates might be a day earlier or a day later.

\*Ramadan: 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. Many Muslim families attend the mosque in the evening to pray and break their fast and therefore may have a change to their home routine during this time.

\*\*Hajj and Arafat Day: there is no religious obligation requiring pupils to be absent from school during the Hajj period unless they are travelling to Saudi Arabia to perform the Hajj Pilgrimage at this time.

Hajj is most likely to take place from Monday 25 May – Friday 29 May 2026

Our local representative advises that many Muslims carry out prayers for the day of Arafah during the Hajj period, even if they are not performing Hajj and may therefore request this as a religious observance. That day is proposed to be Tuesday 26 May 2026.

\*\*\* Eid ul Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha: families may request time off for the observance of Eid ul Fitr and Eid ul Adha celebrations.

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.

\*\*\*\*Ashura: Shia Muslims may request time off for the observance of Ashura and the day preceding Ashura.

| Religion    | Autumn Term 2025  | Spring Term 2026                             | Summer Term 2026 | Autumn Term 2026  |
|-------------|---|--|------------------|---|
| Jain Dharma | <p>Paryushan: Thursday 21- Thursday 28 August 2025</p> <p>Samvatsari (Day of Forgiveness: Sunday 24 August 2025</p> <p>Mahavir Nirvan (Diwali): Tuesday 21 October 2025</p> | <p>Mahavir Jayanti Tuesday 31 March 2026</p> |                  | <p>Paryushan: Tuesday 8 – Tuesday 15 September 2026</p> <p>Samvatsari (Day of Forgiveness: Tuesday 15 September 2026</p> <p>Mahavir Nirvan (Diwali): Monday 9 November 2026</p> |

\*Jains are likely to request absence for one day at Diwali or the following day which is New Year day. In 2025 New Year Day falls on Tuesday 21 October and in 2026 on 9 November which is a Monday.

In 2026 Mahavir Janma Kalyanak (also known as Mahavira Jayanti) falls on Tuesday 31 March, which is during the school holidays. 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. SACRE suggests 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 2025, this falls in the summer holidays but in 2026 it falls on Tuesday 15 September.

Digamber Jains will request leave after that for the Das Lakshan festival which depends on the lunar calendar.

| Religion | Autumn Term 2025   | Spring Term 2026   | Summer Term 2026  | Autumn Term 2026  |
|----------|--|--|---|---|
| Judaism  | <p>Rosh Hashanah:<br/><b><u>Tuesday 23 - Wednesday 24 September 2025</u></b></p> <p>Yom Kippur (day of Atonement):<br/><b><u>Thursday 2 October 2025</u></b></p> <p>Sukkot (Tabernacles) 8-day festival, 4 days of obligation:<br/><b><u>Tuesday 7 and Wednesday 8 October; Tuesday 14 and Wednesday 15 October 2024</u></b></p> <p>Chanukah:<br/>Monday 15 - Monday 22 December</p> | <p>Pesach (Passover) 8-day festival, 4 days of obligation. Thursday 2 and Friday 3 April and Wednesday 8 and Thursday 9 April 2026</p> | <p>Shavuot (Festival of Weeks)<br/><b><u>Friday 22-Saturday 23 May 2026</u></b></p> | <p>Rosh Hashanah: Saturday 12-Sun 13 September</p> <p>Yom Kippur (day of Atonement):<br/><b><u>Monday 21 September 2026</u></b></p> <p>Sukkot (Tabernacles) 8-day festival, 4 days of obligation: Saturday 26-Sunday 27 September; Saturday 3-Sunday 4 October</p> <p>Chanukah Saturday 5-Friday 11 December 2026</p> |

Days needing leave of absence are in bold and underlined. Our local Jewish representatives advise that as Rosh Hashanah and the four days of Sukkot fall on weekdays in 2025, children will need leave of absence. In 2026, these festivals fall on weekends, so leave of absence should not be necessary. The days of obligation for Pesach (2- 3 and 8-9 April in 2026) fall in the school holidays but the first day of obligation for Shavuot falls on a Friday (22 May 2026) in termtime when observant Jews would need to be absent from school.

Jewish festivals start the night before and end at sunset so Chanuka starts on the evening of Sunday 14 December in 2025 and Thursday 4 December 2026 and Yom Kippur starts at sunset on Wednesday 1 October in 2025 and Sunday 20 September 2026 and ends at sunset on 2 October 2025 and 21 September 2026.

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.

| Religion                         | Autumn Term 2025   | Spring Term 2026  | Summer Term 2026  | Autumn Term 2026  |
|----------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| Sanatana Dharma (Hindu Religion) | Navratri):<br>Monday 22 September – Thursday 2 October 2025<br><br><u>Hindu New Year: Tuesday 21 October 2025</u><br><br>Diwali:<br>Saturday 18 October – Thursday 23 October 2025 | Maha Shivratri<br>Sunday 15 February 2026<br><br>Shree Ramnavmi /Shree Swaminarayan Jayanti: Friday 27 March 2026<br><br>Shree Hanuman Jayanti: Thursday 2 April 2026 | *Rath Yatra (Street procession)<br>Thursday 16 July 2026<br>Celebrated in the streets of Harrow and Brent on Sunday 19 <sup>th</sup> July | Shree Krishna Janmastmi<br>Friday Friday 4 September 2026<br><br>Shree Ganesh Chaturthi<br>Monday 14 September 2026<br><br>(Navratri):<br>Sunday 11- Tuesday 20 October 2026<br><br><u>Hindu New Year Tuesday 10 November 2026</u><br><br>Diwali:<br>Friday 6 Wednesday 11 Tuesday 12 November 2026 |

Such is the diversity within Sanatana Dharma (the Hindu religion) that almost any working day might be a festival, especially in India. However, few of these 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. Sanatana Dharma communities in the UK also tend to celebrate most festivals collectively on the nearest weekend, either before or after major festivals. However, some celebrations take place during the day like Shree Ramnavmi (Birth of Lord Ram). In 2026 this takes place at the very end of the spring term (26 March). The New Year is another exception; on this day almost all Sanatana Dharma families make it a point to offer their prayers with all members of the family at their respective temple and other temples within the local community. This is a full day event. This festival is also underlined for 2025 and 2026 as it takes place on Tuesdays (21 October 2025 and 10 November 2026). 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 and Diwali poojan (prayers) can be celebrated from the late afternoon till late evening.

| Religion   | Autumn Term 2025   | Spring Term 2026 | Summer Term 2026 | Autumn Term 2026  |
|------------|--|------------------|------------------|---|
| Sikh Dharm | Freedom Day (Bandi Chhor Divas): Tuesday 21 October 2025 |                  |                  | Freedom Day (Bandi Chhor Divas): Sunday 8 November 2026 |

In 2026 dates corresponding to the Nanakshahi calendar are:

Birthday of Guru Gobind Singh: Tuesday 6 January 2026.

Vaisakhi: Tuesday 14 April 2026.

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): Wednesday 5 November 2025 and Tuesday 24 November 2026.

|                | Autumn Term 2025 | Spring Term 2026  | Summer Term 2026  | Autumn Term 2026 |
|----------------|------------------|---|---|------------------|
| Zoroastrianism |                  | Jamsheedi NoRuz (Zoroastrian New Year): Saturday 21 March 2026 [IZ]<br><br>Khordad Sal (Birth anniversary of prophet Zarathushtra): Thursday 26 March 2026 [IZ] | Navroze: Thursday 16 July 2026 [K]<br><br>Navroze: Saturday 15 August 2026 [S]<br><br>Kordad Sal: Thursday 20 August 2026 [S] |                  |

\*IZ, K and S denote the three Zoroastrian calendars: Iranian Zoroastrianism, Kadmi and Shahenshai.

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

For a full calendar of Religious Festivals in 2025-26 please see the Shap Calendar which is available on subscription at [The Shap Calendar Group](#)

This publication will be reviewed and updated in October 2025. Further information regarding the Harrow SACRE and additional advice for schools can be found here:

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