

# Attendance Strategy Guidelines

on Absence for Religious Observance



# Introduction

**Manchester is a vibrant and diverse city that promotes respect for the faiths and values of all its communities. There are many religions celebrated in our schools and it is important that we recognise the diversity of the school population.**

This guidance brings together recommendations and good practice to help schools meet the needs of pupils from different faith groups. It is acknowledged that different schools have different arrangements according to the ages of the children, the type of school and the percentage of pupils from different religious backgrounds. This guidance promotes community cohesion by recognising the diverse needs of all sections of the school community.

## Key recommendations

- The school's policy on religious observance should be communicated to all parents and included in the school prospectus.
- The policy should state the school's position on authorising absence. In Manchester the Local Authority guidance for headteachers and governors is that only one day for each religious festival (no more than three days in any one academic year) should be counted as authorised absence. Additional days off for shopping or for extended celebrations should be treated as unauthorised absence.
- Where the school has a large population (over 40%) of pupils who may be absent to observe a religious day, consideration can be given to closing school on that day. This does not affect the requirement that the school should be open for 380 sessions in the school year. The governing body needs to approve the closure and the Local Authority should be informed.
- Schools may wish to consider taking an INSET day to coincide with days of religious observance when it is expected that many pupils (over 40%) will be absent. Schools will need to consider alternative arrangements for staff who also wish to observe this festival.

# Attendance and religious observance

For many schools in Manchester improving pupil attendance is a significant challenge. Manchester's figures for absence are higher than the national average and higher than in other local authorities that are statistically very similar to Manchester. The issue is one that affects secondary and primary schools alike. Our children also have some of the highest rates of persistent absence in the country. Improving attendance and reducing absence, especially levels of persistent absence, is a priority for Manchester and critical to the city's ambitions to raise standards, narrow the attainment gap and safeguard all children.

It is important for schools to strike the right balance between authorising absence for religious observance and the cumulative effects on children of missing education. Headteachers and governors will need to decide, in the light of each school's different circumstances, how this guidance is used.

The Pupil Registration Regulations 2006 state that absence for religious observance should be treated as authorised (absence) **'on a day exclusively set apart for religious observance by the religious body to which the parent belongs'**. Leave for pupils for religious observance should only be agreed if the dates fall outside normal holiday periods; these absences

should be coded 'R'. Additional days off for shopping or for extended celebrations should be treated as unauthorised absence.

Schools may request to see copies of visas for leave of absence requests for pilgrimages. Dates of return should also be agreed prior to the period of leave. Parents should also be advised about the school's policy and procedures regarding to unavoidable delays in returning or taking extended leave that has not been authorised by the school (Ref: Guidelines on Managing Leave of Absence).

Schools may also receive requests from staff wishing to take leave for religious observance. Headteachers should refer to existing guidance in relation to this and seek further advice from the Management Support Service if required.

Wherever possible, major school events (parents, evenings, open nights, governors, meetings), school tests and internal exams, immunisations, school trips and inter-school sports events should be avoided during important religious festivals.

Manchester Local Authority will seek to minimise any adverse effects of religious observance on pupil attendance by:

- Determining term dates around major religious festivals
- Supporting schools that wish to close on religious festivals, while ensuring they are open for 380 sessions over the year

- Encouraging schools to work with local faith groups to develop guidance and co-ordinate the times taken for religious observance
- Encouraging schools, where appropriate, to consider taking INSET days that coincide with religious festivals.

## School closure for religious observance

Where the school has a large population (over 40%) of pupils who may be absent to observe a religious day, consideration may be given to closing school on that day. This does not affect the requirement that the school should be open for 380 sessions in the school year. The governing body needs to approve the closure and the local authority should be informed.

Schools will also want to consult with and inform all parents in good time so they know what is expected and what provisions have been made, and where possible schools should also consult with local religious leaders.

Alternatively, schools may wish to consider taking an INSET day to coincide with days of religious observance when it is expected that many pupils (over 40%) will be absent. Schools will need to consider alternative arrangements for staff who also wish to observe this festival.

# Action taken by schools to reduce absence for religious observance

- Communicate the school's policy on religious observance to parents and include it in the prospectus. The policy should be clear about the school's position in regards to authorising absence. In Manchester the Local Authority guidance to headteachers and governors is that only one day for each religious festival (no more than three days in any one academic year) should be counted as authorised absence.
- Write to all parents advising them that leave of absence should not be taken in term – time (Ref: Guidelines on Managing Leave of Absence).
- Write to all parents to express the school's desire to work in partnership and ask parents to inform the school of any special requirements, for example, whether or not they expect their child to fast at any time during the school day.
- Inform parents of any special provision made for pupils during religious festivals, for example, a quiet area to rest during the school lunchtime or a place to take part in prayer and readings.
- Use the SHAP calendar to inform the planning of school events.
- Share the important festivals of all Manchester's major faith communities within assemblies, displays and the curriculum. Schools have improved whole – school attendance during the weeks where major religious festivals occur by holding celebrations in school.

## Statistics on faith communities

The 2001 Census identified the following religions observed in Manchester. We recognise that there are smaller communities representing other faiths. The information

below has been provided by the Office of National Statistics and is subject to Crown Copyright.

Religion	Christian	Muslim	Jewish	Hindu	Buddhist	Sikh	Others
Percentage of the Manchester population	62.4%	9.1%	0.8%	0.7%	0.5%	0.4%	0.3%

# Christian religious festivals

School holidays are planned around the Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter. Where other important festivals take place in term – time they are usually included in a school's celebration of its faith; an example would be Ash Wednesday. Pupils who wish

to celebrate a Christian festival that has been set aside by the parents' religious body can, at the discretion of the school, be granted a day's authorised absence for religious observance.

# Muslim religious festivals

**Hajj** is a pilgrimage to Mecca. It is the largest annual pilgrimage in the world. It is the fifth pillar of Islam, an obligation that must be carried out at least once in their lifetime by every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to do so. It is a demonstration of the solidarity of the Muslim people and their submission to Allah. The pilgrimage occurs from the eighth to the twelfth day of Dhu al-Hijjah, the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. The pilgrimage usually takes a minimum of ten days, so absence requests should reflect this.

**Eid Ul Adha** is a festival that marks the end of the Hajj pilgrimage, taking place on the tenth day of the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar. This festival does not involve fasting.

**Ramadan** is a holy month in which Muslims practise fasting. Fasting is a requirement for all Muslims who have reached puberty and are healthy. Fasting is an important act of worship as it displays self-control and helps to overcome feelings of greed, selfishness and laziness. Schools will wish to make suitable arrangements to support pupils in observing this requirement. It is important to be aware of the effects of fasting from dawn to dusk, for example, sleepiness, possible mood swings and headaches. The time of year is also a factor – fasts are much longer when Ramadan is in the summer. A person who is fasting cannot take any oral or injected medicine; dates of immunisations in school may, for example, have to be changed if they are scheduled to take place during Ramadan.

- Prayer during Ramadan – before praying Muslims are required to wash as a physical preparation, and the washroom should be separate from the room used for prayer.
- Examinations during Ramadan – while it is inevitable that some examinations will take place during Ramadan, schools will need to be aware that some students may find it difficult to prepare for examinations while fasting.
- It is therefore possible to predict the week in which any Muslim festival will fall in any year.
- The precise day is decided by the sighting of the new moon. Since different mosques have different mechanisms for deciding on when the new moon is visible, eg. some mosques have links with Saudi Arabia while others have links with Pakistan or India, the day ‘chosen’ may be different for different mosques.

**Eid Ul Fitr** comes at the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting. Muslims thank Allah for the strength he gave them to practise self-control.

### Timing of Eid

- The Islamic calendar is lunar and important dates such as Eid are decided by sightings of the new moon.
- The Islamic year is approximately ten days shorter than the solar year used in western calendars – this means that Muslim festivals move ‘back’ approximately ten days each year.

Dates for Ramadan and Eid are readily available so that when schools are preparing their schedule of events for future years they know which weeks to avoid. A calendar for the next two years is shown below. The following dates are approximate, as the actual dates are decided by sightings of the new moon. Pupils who wish to celebrate a Muslim festival that has been set aside by the parents’ religious body can, at the discretion of the school, be granted a day’s authorised absence for religious observance.

	Ramadan starts	Eid Ul Fitr	Eid Ul Adha
2009	22 August	20 September	27 November
2010		10 September	16 November

# Jewish religious festivals

There are many Jewish festivals that fall throughout the year, either celebrating a time of year or a major event in Jewish history. The main Jewish festivals are listed below:

Yom Kippur is the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar. Jews fast for 25 hours from sundown on the previous night until sundown the next night. Children who are below batmitzvah age are discouraged from fasting. Nothing should detract the children from their prayers on that day.

Pupils who wish to celebrate a Jewish festival that has been set apart by the parents' religious body can, at the discretion of the school, be granted a day's authorised absence for religious observance.

Festival	Description	Date
Purim	Festival of Lots	Four weeks before Passover, usually in February/March
Pesach	Passover	March/April
Shavuot	Pentecost	May/June
Rosh Hashanah	Jewish New Year	September/October
Yom Kippur	Day of Atonement	Ten days after Rosh Hashanah
Hanukkah	The Festival of Lights	December



# Hindu religious festivals

Hinduism is made up of a variety of different religious beliefs and festivals that vary between regions. The main Hindu festivals and when they take place are listed below. However, there are many others. The festivals celebrated by individual children should be clarified during admission into a school and confirmed through strong communication with parents before festivals are due to take place. Pupils who wish to celebrate a Hindu festival that has been set aside by the parents' religious body can, at the discretion of the school, be granted a day's authorised absence for religious observance.

Festival	Description	Date
Diwali	The Festival of Lights	October/November
Holi	The Coloured-water Spring Festival	March
Raksha Bandhan	Celebrating the bond between brother and sister	August
Navaratri	The Festival of Nine Nights	September/October
Janmashtami	Lord Krishna's birthday	August/September

# Buddhist religious festivals

Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who became known as 'Buddah', meaning the Awakened One. The primary day of observance is Buddah Day, when Buddhists celebrate the birthday of Buddah. The main Buddhist festivals are listed below. Pupils who wish to celebrate a Buddhist festival that has been set aside by the parents' religious body can, at the discretion of the school, be granted a day's authorised absence for religious observance.

Festival	Description	Date
Mahayana New Year	New Year (Southeast Asia)	Three days during January
Nirvana Day	Observance of the death of Buddah	February
Theravadin New Year	New Year (East Asia)	April
Buddah Day	Celebration of the birthday of Buddah	May
Asalha Puja Day	Proclamation to five ascetics	July
Ulambana (Obon)	Honour deceased ancestors	July
Bodhi Day (Rohatsu)	Prince Gautama took his place under the Bodhi tree and vowed to stay there until he attained supreme enlightenment	December

# Sikh religious festivals

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak. The religion is based on the teachings of Guru Nanak and the nine Sikh gurus who followed him. The main Sikh festivals are listed below. Pupils who wish to celebrate a Sikh festival that has been set aside by the parents' religious body can, at the discretion of the school, be granted a day's authorised absence for religious observance.

Festival	Description	Date
Guru Gobind Singh Birthday	Celebration of Guru Gobind Singh's birthday	January
Hola Mahalla	Mock battles are fought and martial arts displayed	March
Baisakhi	The founding of the Khalsa	April
Guru Arjan Dev Martyrdom	Remembering those who have suffered for their faith	June
Diwali	Festival of Lights	October/November
Guru Nanak Dev Sahib Birthday	Celebration of Guru Nanak Dev Sahib's birthday	November
Guru Tegh Bahadur Martyrdom	Remembering those who have suffered for their faith	November

