

ADVICE & GUIDANCE

Guidance on authorised term-time pupil absence

A little background to term-time pupil absences

On matters relating to term-time pupil absences, the Education (pupil registration) (England) (amendment) Regulations 2013, which came into force on 1 September 2013, removed all references to ‘family holidays’ and ‘extended leave’ as well as the ‘notional threshold of ten school days’.

The 2013 amendments made it clear that head teachers may not grant any leave of absence during term-time unless ‘exceptional circumstances’ prevail. The regulations also state that head teachers should determine the number of school days a pupil can be away from school in the event that leave is granted for ‘exceptional circumstances’.

We believe the guidelines in this document are compatible with the amendments and help to clarify the meaning of ‘exceptional circumstances’; they do not change it.

It’s generally held that head teachers can authorise a pupil’s absence during term-time but the merits of such a request are now required to be exceptional.

NAHT’s approach and advice to managing term-time pupil absence requests

There continues to be some debate about what ‘exceptional circumstances’ mean when deciding whether to grant absence for pupils during term-time. We think we can help in this respect.

The NAHT believes it is valuable to have some guiding principles to back schools in their decisions to grant term-time pupil absences and to provide some consistency.

These guiding principles have no statutory authority; schools are at liberty to adopt them nonetheless as part of their overall approach to granting pupil term-time absence.

The fundamental principles for defining ‘exceptional circumstances’ are that they are ‘rare, significant, unavoidable and short’.

Guiding principles

1. Term times are for education. This is the priority. Children and families have 175 days off school to spend time together, including weekends and school holidays. Head teachers will rightly prioritise attendance. The default school policy should be that absences will not be granted during term-time and will only be authorised in exceptional circumstances.
2. The decision to authorise a pupil's absence is wholly at the head teacher's discretion based on their assessment and merits of each request.
3. If an event can be reasonably scheduled outside of term-time then it would not be normal to authorise absence for such an event – holidays are therefore not considered 'exceptional circumstances'.
4. Absences to visit seriously-ill relatives or for a bereavement of a close family member are usually considered to amount to 'exceptional circumstances', but for the funeral service only, not for extended leave.
5. Absences for important religious observances are often taken into account but only for the ceremony and travelling time, again, not for extended leave. This is intended for one-off situations rather than regular or recurring events.
6. Schools may wish to take the needs of the families of service personnel into account if they are returning from long operational tours that prevent contact during scheduled holiday time.
7. Schools have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities.
8. Families may need time together to recover from a trauma or a crisis.
9. It is acceptable to take a pupil's record of attendance into account when making absence-related decisions.
10. It is important to note that head teachers can determine the length of the authorised absence as well as whether a particular absence is authorised.

Where schools serve communities whose patterns of work create a regular barrier to attendance and family life, schools could consider changes to term times; we strongly recommend this approach is co-ordinated across schools in a designated area or region.