

Subject: School Optional Days and Exceptional Closure Days

Circular Number: 2022/14
Date of Issue: 15 November 2022

Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided schools;
- Education Authority;
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education;
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta;
- Teachers' Organisations; and
- Controlled Schools Support Council

Summary of Contents:

The main purpose of this circular is to provide advice and guidance on the use of optional days and exceptional closure days.

November 2022: DE has updated its online application process which schools **must** utilise when requesting an exceptional closure. All schools will need to register for this service irrespective of whether they have already registered to use the previous application. The new application will allow users to set their own password and to see their history of requests for exceptional closure. Prior to applying for an exceptional closure, schools should give consideration to the provision of remote learning as an alternative. Guidance is available in [Circular 2022/16](#).

Enquiries:

Any enquiries about the contents of this Circular should be addressed to:

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Status of Contents:

Advice
Information for Schools

Related Documents:

Circular 2016/04
Circular 2022/16

Superseded Documents:

Circular 1965/7
2005/8
2013/19
2017/14
2018/20
2019/13
2020/09

Expiry Date:

None

DE Website:

<http://www.education-ni.gov.uk>

E-mail:

attendance@education-ni.gov.uk

Tel: 02891 279543

SCHOOL OPTIONAL AND EXCEPTIONAL CLOSURE DAYS

Introduction

1. This circular provides advice on the use of optional days and the circumstances in which the Department will consider a request from a school for an exceptional closure day. Prior to applying for an exceptional closure, schools should give consideration to the provision of remote learning as an alternative. Guidance will be available shortly in Circular 2022/16.

Background in terms of number of required opening / teaching days

- a) Schools are required to be in operation for 200 days;
- b) Teachers are required to be available for work on 195 days;
- c) Schools can take some Optional Days during the year, and these can add up to 5 days in total. The number of Optional Days to be taken in the year is determined by the school authority, as outlined in paragraphs 3 and 4 below.
- d) Of the 195 days that teachers are required to work; no more than 190 days should involve teaching children in the classroom;
- e) The remaining 5 days are designated as professional development days and are known to many in the education system as 'Baker Days' – their use is decided by the school principal, and these are days when staff are in school, but pupils are not;
- f) Pupil attendance can be reduced further as schools can currently also avail of up to 5 School Development Days, when teachers are in school but pupils are not;
- g) Pupils will therefore be taught between 185 and 190 days depending upon the number of School Development Days their school avails of;
- h) In exceptional circumstances, which are entirely outside the control of the school, schools can apply to the Department for a reduction in the number of days they are required to operate – known as an 'exceptional closure day'. These are unexpected or unplanned for events¹. For example, electricity failure, burst pipe or the death of someone working in or attending the school. Although the approval of an exceptional closure day will reduce the number of operational days of a school, it has no impact on the allowances set out for Optional, Baker and School Development Days.
- i) The Department expects schools to have due regard to the impact of exceptional closures on pupils' learning and would encourage schools to do all they can to recover lost teaching time due to exceptional circumstances, particularly where the number of operational days fall below 185. For example, where schools have planned to take their full 5 School Development Days, they could reconsider these days in light of the number of exceptional closures during the year.
- j) The education system relies on Boards of Governors to verify at the end of the year that the pupils in their school have been taught for the requisite 185 days. It is the responsibility of each Board of Governors to provide the necessary assurance

¹ The only exception to an exceptional closure being unexpected is when a school is being used as a polling station for parliamentary/local government elections or a decision to close is made by the Minister of Education.

statements, as requested by EA, to confirm that their school has satisfactorily complied with all aspects of this circular, and relevant aspects of circulars outlined below.

Other useful Circulars

2. The following circulars provide further information in respect of:
 - [DE Circular 2016/04](#) 2nd Addendum - School Development Days
 - [DE Circular 2016/04](#) - School Development Days
 - [DE Circular 2013/09](#) - Teaching Days and Hours of Attendance
 - [DE Circular 2022/16](#) – Provision of Remote Learning

Optional days

3. School authorities have discretion to close a school for up to 5 days, provided these days are other than the 195 days on which teachers are required to work. The school authority is the Education Authority in the case of controlled schools, CCMS in the case of Catholic Maintained Schools, and the Board of Governors in the case of other grant-aided schools.
4. The 1973 Primary Schools: General Regulations and the Secondary Schools (Grant Conditions) Regulations, require schools to be in operation for 200 days which is likely to include a small number of administrative days. Regulation 4(a) of Schedule 3 to the Teachers' (Terms and Conditions of Employment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1987 requires a full time teacher to be available for work on 195 days in any year of which not more than 190 days should involve teaching children in a classroom situation. One of the effects of the 1987 Regulations is that schools can take a maximum of 5 optional closure days each year. The number of optional closure days to be taken in the year is determined by EA, in consultation with other managing authorities and sectoral bodies taking account of the year's calendar events / patterns.
5. Optional days are intended to cover closures throughout the year in circumstances such as when a school will have planned for a specific event, for example, the need to move premises, undergoing building work, a Church holiday etc.
6. School authorities are therefore expected to hold a number of optional days in reserve for such purposes. In determining the dates on which optional closures will occur, and taking into account the number of training days (referred to below), schools will need to consider suitable dates in the school calendar for a minimum of 185 days on which pupils will be taught in school; all of which must comply with the DE Circular on Teaching Days and Hours of Attendance, DE 2013/09.
7. Circumstances prevalent in individual schools will have a bearing on the number of days to be held in reserve and on the question of using them later in the school year. At

any time, the 5 optional days may be taken as occasional closures during the school year, or as an extension to the Easter, Christmas, Bank Holiday, mid-term or summer holiday periods, according to the circumstances of individual schools.

8. EA is responsible for approving the Easter, Christmas, Bank Holiday, mid-term and summer holiday closures for schools, and for approving the number of closures for optional days in all schools, in consultation with other managing authorities and sectoral bodies. In fulfilling these responsibilities, EA is expected to ensure that all schools are able to meet the statutory requirements in relation to days of operation. However, it remains the responsibility of the board of governors of each school to develop its calendar in accordance with all information issued by EA regarding such closures, and to provide the necessary assurance statements requested by EA to confirm that their school has satisfactorily complied with all aspects of this circular, and relevant aspects of circulars outlined above.

Summary Reference Table

200 days	Number of days which schools are required to be in operation for each year.
Less 5 Optional days	Schools can take some Optional Days during the year, and these can add up to 5 days in any given year (paragraphs 3-8 above refer).
195 days	Number of days teachers are required to be available for work.
Less 5 Professional days	Professional Development Days, often referred to as 'Baker Days', when pupils are not in attendance at school.
190 days	Maximum number of days that teachers' work should involve teaching pupils in a classroom situation.
Up to 5 days*	Schools can choose to avail of up to five School Development Days
185 days	Minimum number of days on which pupils will be taught

**Where the school opts to avail of fewer than the maximum of 5 School Development Days available, pupils must be taught in the school on each of the remainder of the 5 days.*

Exceptional closures (Unexpected or unplanned for events)

9. The Department will consider an application for a reduction in the days on which a school must be in operation to take account of exceptional circumstances or where the closing of the school is outside the control of the school authorities, for example, due to:

- The death of a teacher or pupil at the school;
- Flooding or burst pipes at the school;
- Electricity failure;
- Damage to school;

- Severe weather conditions e.g. heavy snowfall; or
- The only exception to an exceptional closure being unexpected is when a school is being used as a polling station for parliamentary/local government elections or the decision to close is made by the Minister of Education.

10. Exceptional Closures are for full day closure only where the school is closed to both pupils and staff and should only be applied for after due consideration of DE [Circular No 2022/16](#) which refers to the provision of remote learning.

Special Schools closure in event of Nurses Industrial Action

11. In light of unprecedented industrial action by nursing staff which took place in December 2019 and January 2020 which led to a decision by some Special Schools to close, the following additional guidance is provided to support school principals and Boards of Governors in their decision making process regarding closure of Special Schools.

12. The Department would encourage all Special School Principals to consider the risks associated with closing a school entirely and the impact on the teaching and learning of those children who do not require critical specialist nursing support.

13. Where the proportion of pupils requiring critical specialist nursing support is small, exceptional closures may not be appropriate. There are absence codes available to exempt these pupils from attendance and remote learning may be an option in certain circumstances or for specific pupils. This would enable the teaching and learning of other pupils who do not require critical specialist nursing support to continue unaffected.

14. Decisions regarding exceptional closures are made at the discretion of the school principal in conjunction with the Board of Governors (BoG). We would ask school principals / BoGs to consider the above when considering exceptional closures in these specific circumstances.

15. Where the school principal / BoG of a special school believes that an exceptional closure in such circumstances is appropriate, the procedure as outlined below should be followed. In such circumstances, the reason "Other" should be used and the Department will then consider the request in light of the evidence provided.

Failure to meet all the protocols may result in the exceptional closure being refused.

16. The Department has launched a revised online application for schools to apply for an exceptional closure which should help to expedite the process. The new application can be found at the following link: <http://apps.education-ni.gov.uk/appExclos/default.aspx>.

17. Schools must register to use the latest version of the application. This includes schools who have already registered to use the previous application as new passwords will be required. A step-by-step guide is included at Annex A. Should you have any

difficulties in accessing this application, please contact the Department by email at attendance@education-ni.gov.uk or by telephone at 02891 279328.

18. School Principals are required to have in place an agreed communications method for informing parents/guardians, school staff, school authorities and the Department of Education about school closures. All contact details need to be up to date and parents and staff should be made aware of the agreed communication method.

19. The Department expects schools to have due regard to the impact of exceptional closures on pupils' learning and would encourage schools to do all they can to recover lost teaching time due to exceptional circumstances, particularly where the number of operational days fall below 185. For example, where schools have planned to take their full 5 School Development Days, they could reconsider these days in light of the number of exceptional closures during the year. The potential for remote learning should be considered before closing the school to both pupils and staff. The Department is continuing to keep the applications and reasons for exceptional closure under close scrutiny.

For guidance on adding an exceptional closure in SIMS please refer to the Attendance Help Sheet on C2KExchange. [Attendance Helpsheet.pdf \(C2k Exchange.net\)](#).

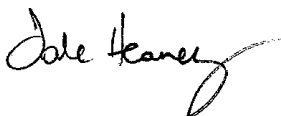
20. Exceptional Closures are assessed and monitored by DE. Once schools receive approval of an exceptional closure from DE and enter this into SIMS the relevant NIDirect webpage containing a list of schools closed will be updated (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/school-closures>).

School Development Days

21. Schools may avail of School Development Days during the school year, which provide additional non-contact time to devote to school improvement and school development matters. Specific guidance is available at:

[School Development Days | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#).

22. Any related enquiries should be directed to the Department's School Improvement Team at DEsit@education-ni.gov.uk.



DALE HEANEY
Head of Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team

Annex A - Automated Application for applying for an Exceptional Closure

Exceptional Closures are for **full day** closure only where the school is **closed to both pupils and staff.**

Step 1- Register

<https://exceptionalclosures.education-ni.gov.uk/>

Please click on Register New User:

Log in

Email

Password

☐

Remember me?

Log in

[I have forgotten my password](#)

[Register new user](#)



Please complete the required information - email address, DENI reference number and the telephone number of the person who would normally apply to DE for an exceptional closure. There can be more than one registered user per setting.

Register new user

Create a new account. Only authorised school staff should use this service

Email

School reference

Phone number

Phone number is needed in urgent circumstances

Password

Your password must:

- be at least 8 characters long
- contain at least one non alphanumeric character (- . _ @ +)
- contain at least one number (0-9)
- contain at least one uppercase letter (A - Z)

Confirm password

Continue

When you click on submit, you should receive a response, asking you to check your email to confirm your account.

**Exceptional
Closures**

[Register](#) [Login](#)

Register confirmation

Please check your email to confirm your account.

Step 2 – Authenticate

To authenticate your account, please check your email and click on the link provided:



Thank you for registering to complete exceptional closure returns for your school. This email contains further information to enable you to complete the process.

Clicking on the following link will enable you to confirm your email address authenticate your registration:

<https://de-exceptional-closures-staging.london.cloudapps.digital/Identity/Account/ConfirmEmail?userId=63bb5748-ecce-4cc8-a20a-4a11c1858b34&code=Q2ZESjhQkFOYnV0aHhaTWdHaXVBMGI3bU9jK0tQcmFDU0ZGaWZURk51SDFMekUrWHZmcWtaMytPNDNoVFFoYmQ5M1dlN2I3Zmg0YmRZU0ZxeFkzNXRDGTM3Sml2QhDdk8rOXVYbU9zNHdqOE9xemkrMlhpOHcrOWRoSkRhVFFSUUZzcUFsMVNFVEVqM2VqSkZ4OGVTSHdZTzFkWEExGc0R5cHc3UDMvMDJmWFoyRUNWQXNSUHJ6Qzc2K1pnYkpqZ2lPMjNTTrcWpnZXVHdmhPN3VGc1Uwd05JUT09&returnUrl=%2F>

When you have authenticated your account, you can log in to complete an exceptional closure return for your school.

You should log in using your email address and password.

Regards,

Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team
Department of Education NI



Once you click on the link your account is activated and you are now able to log on to the system and enter an exceptional closure:

**Exceptional
Closures**

[Register](#) [Login](#)

Confirm email address

Thank you for confirming your account with DE Exceptional closures. Please login to use the system.

Step 3 – Enter an Exceptional Closure Date and select a reason for closure

In order to register an exceptional closure, please log in using your email address and password.

Exceptional Closures
[Register](#)
[Login](#)

Log in

Email

Password

☐ Remember me?

[Log in](#)

[I have forgotten my password](#)

[Register new user](#)

Click on create closure and select if closure is for either a single day or continuous days and complete the dates.

Exceptional Closures
[My closures](#)
[Manage account](#)
[Log out](#)

My closures

[Create closure](#)

Show entries

School ↕	Date from ↕	Date to ▼	Reason ↕	Approval status ↕	Decision date ↕	Approval type ↕	Action
No data available in table							

Showing 0 to 0 of 0 entries

[Previous](#)
[Next](#)

Is the closure for a single day or continuous days?

- ☐ Single day
- ☐ Continuous days

Reason for closure

Select one option.

- ☐ Adverse weather
- ☐ Use as a polling station
- ☐ Utilities failure (e.g. water, electricity)
- ☐ Death of a member of staff, pupil or another person working at the school
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Covid

Submit

If the reason for closure is anything other than “Other” or “Covid”, you will receive an email back, confirming that your request has been approved.

**Exceptional
Closures**

[My closures](#) [Manage account](#) [Log out](#)

**Exceptional closure
approved**

We have sent you a confirmation email.

What happens next

Thank you for the below request for an exceptional closure. Your request has been approved. Your request has been forwarded to the Tackling Educational Disadvantage team in the Department of Education.

[Go to my closures](#)

If you select “Other”, you must provide more details as to the reason for the school closure.

Reason for closure

Select one option.

- ☐ Adverse weather
- ☐ Use as a polling station
- ☐ Utilities failure (e.g. water, electricity)
- ☐ Death of a member of staff, pupil or another person working at the school

[Named School]



Other

Can you provide more detail?



Covid

In such cases, the Department will consider this request and respond as soon as possible.

If the reason is **Covid-19 related** please complete the details as requested:

☒ Covid

How many cases have been recorded?

Why did the whole school need to be closed?

Was an alternative considered in line with any contingency plans?

Did PHA advise that the school needed to close for deep clean?

Provide details of the closure

In such cases, the Department will consider this request and respond as soon as possible.