

ABSENCE CODES

GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS USING SIMS

August 2026

ABSENCE CODES: GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS

Note: the descriptions below may be different to that on the SMS. This is to facilitate greater discretion when selecting the correct code.

A3 Summary of Attendance Codes

Attendance and Absence Codes

The attendance codes, a brief explanation of each and some examples can be found in this section. The codes for 'present', 'attendance not required', 'authorised absence' and 'unauthorised absence' have been grouped together for ease of reference.

Present codes:

Codes / \: Present

/ = AM

\ = PM

These codes should be used when a pupil is present during both/either of the registrations at AM or PM. If a pupil leaves the school premises after registration, he/she would still be counted as present for statistical purposes, although schools should have a system in place to identify that a pupil has left during a session.

Please note if a pupil leaves after registration without an appropriate reason their present code may be changed to 'unauthorised absence' using either code D or H.

For health and safety reasons, schools need to be aware of the whereabouts of all pupils, particularly those leaving or arriving on the premises during a session.

Dual Registration

This is when a pupil is registered in one school and attends another school. The two schools are categorised as:

1. Main school – where they are originally enrolled; and
2. Subsidiary school – where they have been referred to and are attending for purposes identified in codes 1 - 8.

The main school is required to record attendance for the sessions when the pupil is attending their school and the subsidiary school using the appropriate code. **The main school should make arrangements with the subsidiary school to inform them if the pupil has or has not attended.** The subsidiary school should also record

the attendance accordingly. Attendance statistics for publication will be taken from the main schools' data in the census returns.

Present / Approved Educational Activity Codes

Code L: Late (before registration closed)

This code should be used when a pupil arrives late to school but before registration is closed. Schools should actively discourage late arrival. Schools should identify in their Attendance Policy how long registers are kept open. In circumstances such as bad weather or public transport difficulties, schools may keep the register open for a longer period.

If a pupil persistently arrives late before registration the school should address this with the parent/carer.

Code P: Approved Activity

This code should only be used in the event of a pupil attending an activity which the school deems has a direct correlation to their ongoing academic or educational progression.

This code may also be used when a pupil is participating in or attending an approved sporting or other activity such as participation as an amateur in a school-organised sport or as a representative at county, provincial or international level.

Code S: Study Leave

This code should be used for study leave as agreed by the school.

Study Leave is unsupervised time out of school and should only be applied to public examination candidates, in **Years 11 to 14**, during the examination period.

This code can also be used in the event of any cancellation of examinations to facilitate study for those pupils in **Years 12 to 14** completing alternative qualification assessments.

Study Leave should not be granted to pupils not involved in public examinations. (Public examinations are those which are authenticated or awarded by an external organisation, and not internally by the school. The main examples of such examinations include GCSEs, A Levels and BTECs).

Supervised study or revision classes provided in school should be coded Present / (am) or \ (pm).

Study leave should not be used in advance of the commencement of the examination timetable.

Decisions on study leave should be made by senior management and should be addressed in the school's Attendance Policy to ensure consistency and provide clarity for parents/carers.

It is considered good practice to provide parents/carers with a **minimum notice of one week** that study leave is being awarded to such pupils.

Code V: Educational Visit / Examination

This code should be used for pupils attending school-organised trips and visits, including residential trips. It may also be used for other trips of a strictly educational nature, which are arranged by external organisations, provided the school deems this has a direct correlation to the pupil's ongoing academic attainment or educational advancement.

Code V can also be used for academic interviews. The school should be satisfied that the interview is linked to future education, such as Further & Higher Education.

This code can also be used in the event of a pupil attending a recognised examination where a correlation can be made between it and ongoing educational attainment / progression.

Code W: Work experience

This code should be used when pupils are on supervised work experience. Work experience should be arranged by, or in conjunction with, the school. Schools must ensure that they check on the attendance of the pupil at the work experience placement and mark the register using the appropriate code.

Code W can also be used for a job interview. The school should be satisfied that the interview is linked to job prospects.

Code 1: Community Providers / EOTAS (organised by the EA) (Post Primary)

This code should be used for a registered pupil who is attending a Community Provider and/or an EOTAS setting by approval of the Education Authority. This code is for pupils at Key Stage 3 & 4 only. A pupil's placement in either a Community Provider and/or an EOTAS provision must be arranged through the Education Authority.

When a pupil in either Key Stage 3 or Key Stage 4 has been referred to an EOTAS provider, it is the role of the main school to initially record pupils as Code 1.

The Main school should make arrangements with the EOTAS facility to inform them if the pupil has or has not attended. The Main school should then update the attendance record accordingly.

Code 2: Education Teaching Arrangement (ETA) or Hospital tuition (organised by the EA)

This code should be used for a registered pupil who is currently being educated off-site by receiving education by an ETA or in hospital under arrangements approved by the Education Authority. Schools should make every effort to arrange ETA/Hospital tuition for School Aged Mothers during the period of the child's birth.

The Main school should make arrangements with the ETA provider/ hospital

school to inform them if the pupil has or has not attended. The Main school should record the attendance accordingly.

Code 4: Pupil Referral Unit (Primary)

This code should be used for a registered pupil who is currently being educated off-site at a Pupil Referral Unit as organised and approved by the Education Authority.

This includes Primary EOTAS referrals.

The main school should make arrangements with the unit to inform them if the pupil has or has not attended. The Main school should record the attendance accordingly.

Code 5: Another mainstream school (under Entitlement Framework – EF)

This code should be used for a registered pupil who is currently being educated off-site at another mainstream school (under the EF). The pupil may be attending days or sessions at other post primary schools for selected courses through arrangements made under the EF.

The main school should make arrangements with the EF school to inform them if the pupil has or has not attended. The main school should record the attendance accordingly.

Code 6: Training Organisation (under Entitlement Framework – EF)

This code should be used for a registered pupil who is currently being educated off-site at another training organisation (under EF). Pupils attending days or sessions at a training organisation through arrangements made under the EF.

The main school should make arrangements with the EF organisation to inform them if the pupil has or has not attended. The main school should record the attendance accordingly.

Code 7: Further Education (FE) College (under Entitlement Framework – EF)

This code should be used for a registered pupil who is currently being educated off-site at a FE College (under the arrangements of EF).

The main school should make arrangements with the EF organisation to inform them if the pupil has or has not attended. The main school should record the attendance accordingly.

Code 8: Intensive Support Learning Unit

This code should only be used for a registered pupil who is currently being educated off-site at an Intensive Support Learning Unit (ISLU).

The main school should make arrangements with the ISLU to inform them if the pupil has or has not attended. The main school should record the attendance accordingly.

Code 9: CAMHS / Mental Health Support

This code should be used for a registered pupil who is currently either being educated off-site whilst an in-patient, or whilst they are attending sessions, at a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) facility.

Code 9 can also be used for a pupil attending other support systems organised by the Education Authority.

The main school should make arrangements with the CAMHS facility to inform them if the pupil has or has not attended. The main school should record the attendance accordingly.

Attendance not required codes

Code J: Extended Leave

This code should only be used following approval by DE

Extended leave is not to be considered the same as a family holiday and should only be considered in circumstances such as:

- Short-term parental placement/employment outside the UK
- Family required to leave Northern Ireland for a specific complex family need such as:
 - to care for a sick relative;
 - sibling or parent receiving medical treatment outside Northern Ireland;
 - attend to immigration matters.

The school should ensure they are content with the information provided by the parents/carers before they record the absence, and the appropriate template has been completed.

The Department will require the following documentation to be provided in support of applications where appropriate:

- An email or letter from the parent's employer confirming the dates and location of placement/employment outside the UK. In addition, schools should also ask for proof that the pupil is to attend a school for the duration of the parental placement/employment.
- An email or letter from the hospital or clinic confirming appointment details for the individual receiving medical treatment outside Northern Ireland
- An email or letter confirming appointment details at either a passport office or a visa application centre in a country outside Northern Ireland – alternatively a photocopy of the renewed documentation will suffice.
- In addition, schools may also consider asking for proof of flights booked.

If there is a failure to provide the required documentation, then schools should advise the parent accordingly and should determine which other code would be most appropriate. These can range from:

- a. Code G – Family Holiday Not Agreed;
- b. Code H – Other Absence.

The school should ensure it is content with the information provided by the child's parent(s)/carer(s) before the template is completed (see link: [Extended Leave Form - updated August 2026](#)).

All approved applications along with supporting documentation must be sent to the Department of Education via email at attendance@education-ni.gov.uk before the absence is recorded on SIMS.

Code X: Only staff should attend

This code should be used for days on which teachers are in school; however, there is no requirement for pupils to attend. For example, staff training, or school development days.

Code X can be used for part session, i.e. AM or PM.

Code Y: Exceptional closure – used for unexpected / unplanned for events

This code should be used when the school has been granted permission by the Department of Education for an exceptional closure day. The Department will consider an application for a reduction in the days on which a school is in operation to take account of specific exceptional circumstances where the closing of the school is outside the control of the school authorities. Schools must not use this code unless they have applied and been granted permission to take an exceptional closure day/s by the Department's Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team at attendance@education-ni.gov.uk.

Examples of specific exceptional closures are:

- The death of a member of staff, Board of Governors 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.

Failure to seek permission may result in the exceptional closure being refused.

Partial Closure

Exceptional conditions may mean that part of the school is closed due to an unavoidable cause e.g. a school may operate on 2 sites with only 1 site affected.

If part of a school is closed Code ! – No Attendance Required can be used for those year groups affected **only**. Alternatively, remote learning may be used with a present mark awarded when there is evidence of work completed.

Code #: Holiday for all

This code should be used for school vacations where pupils and staff are not required to attend. Examples are:

- Between terms;
- Half terms;
- Occasional days when the whole school (including staff) are on holiday; or
- Weekends.

Note: Schools may wish to check that this code is applied on the SMS from the 1 August until the first day of the new academic year. If this code is not applied then the period between 1 August and the first day of the new term will otherwise show as missing marks.

Code !*: No attendance required

This code should be used where attendance of a pupil or some pupils may not be required in either the morning or afternoon session. It may also be used for:

- Induction days e.g. Year 8;
- When a pupil needs to attend a visa renewal appointment **in Northern Ireland**.
- A pupil who is unable to attend due to adverse weather or EA provided transport failure;
- When school is closed for partial day due to unforeseen issues such as power failure;
- A pupil is dual registered, and this code should be used by the subsidiary school when they are not required to attend that school. It will be the responsibility of the main school to record the attendance;
- A pupil is ordered to attend court;
- Industrial action; or
- For pupils defined as “Asylum Seekers and Refugees (ASR)” who have had to move place of residence at short notice and are unable to attend school due to circumstances beyond their control. Until such times as the pupil has been formally registered in a new school, schools should continue to support the pupil through online learning and / or hard copy in line with [Circular 2022/16 - Guidance on Remote Learning](#). We would encourage schools to record “ASR” in the notes field of the absence where appropriate. School should review the situation after 4 weeks.

*The use of this code is at the discretion of the school.

Code 3: Elective Home Education

This code should be used for a registered pupil whose parents/carers have elected to educate at home and have advised the school or EA of the position. See additional advice on NI Direct here:

[Educating your child at home | nidirect](#)

This code should be used from the date a parent/carer advises the Principal that they **have** decided to educate their child at home until the Principal provides a certificate of attendance (Form SA1) to the parent/carer, which states the reason for removal as “elective home education”. When Form SA1 is issued, the pupil can be removed from the General Register and there will no longer be a requirement to record their attendance. The original of this form should be held by the school and following consultation with EWS, a copy emailed to the Education Authority at ehe@eani.org.uk, a further copy given to the parents, and a leaving date entered in SMS once all relevant aspects of SA1 have been completed. Copies of the form can be found at: [Form SA1 – Removal of a pupil from registration.](#)

Authorised absence codes

Code A: Artistic Endeavour

This code should be used when a pupil is absent from school to attend an event which relates to a pupil's artistic endeavour which has not been organised through the school as part of normal school activities. However, the school is content that there is a correlation between it and the pupil's ongoing educational attainment / progression.

Code B: Bereavement

This code should be used when a pupil is absent from school due to the death of a close relative. Death of a close relative would be parent/carer, sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousin, nephew, niece, or other relative who is a member of the household.

Code C: Suspended

This code should be used for a pupil who has been suspended for a fixed period and remains on the school register.

Code I1: Illness (Code I1 has replaced Code I)

This code should be used when parents/carers phone to say that their child is ill or when parents/carers send a letter after the period of illness to explain the child's absence. Parents/carers should be advised to notify the school as soon as possible when a child is ill. If a pupil is present for registration but returns home because of illness, no absence need be recorded for that session. Schools should keep a record of pupils leaving or returning to school in case of an emergency.

Schools can request parents/carers to provide medical evidence to support absence on the grounds of illness, however, they are advised not to request medical certificates unnecessarily (particularly retrospective certificates), especially if the illness was not treated by a doctor at the time. If the authenticity of illness is in doubt, schools can record the absence as 'Other Absence' (Code H) but should advise parents of its intention.

A pupil receiving medical treatment on site should be marked 'present'.

For an absence at registration due to a medical, dental or hospital appointment please see Code M for additional information.

Code I4- Illness (Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance)

The Department has become increasingly aware of cases of absence due to a range of issues which are associated with pupil emotional health and well-being.

Emotionally Based School Non Attendance (EBSNA) refers to reduced attendance or non-attendance at school where the avoidance is driven by emotional distress. The term EBSNA does not constitute a diagnosis in its own right but, it is fair to note that it often co-occurs with diagnosable conditions such as anxiety.

There are other terms for EBSNA, including school refusal, school non-attendance; school withdrawal; and school phobia.

EBSNA can present differently across individuals, but can include one, or a combination of, the following:

- fear and anxiety (including physical symptoms),
- distress,
- complaints of feeling ill without obvious cause,
- reluctance to leave home,
- tantrums, and/or oppositional behaviour,
- reluctance to transition into school / separate from parent / carer.

To allow for more accurate monitoring of the scale of this issue, the Department is introducing Code I4 “Illness (EBSNA)” to be used in cases where pupils are absent when displaying one or more of the behaviours listed above.

This code represents a period of Authorised Absence and will be regarded for monitoring and reporting purposes as an illness.

The Department is also recommending that settings advise their EWO in cases where this code is applied.

More details on the use of this code are available within the [Frequently Asked Questions](#)

Code M: Medical/Dental Appointments

This code should be used when a pupil is absent from registration for a medical or dental appointment. If a pupil is present for registration but has a medical appointment later, no absence need be recorded for that session. Although, for Health and Safety reasons or in case of emergency, a system must be in place to record that a pupil has either arrived at school or left the premises during the session.

If a pupil misses registration for a medical appointment, which has been notified to the school in advance, but returns to school within that session then the registration code should be changed from M to / or \ as applicable (i.e. present).

Schools should also be mindful that in certain cases, pupils will have to travel a considerable distance to an appointment.

This may mean a pupil leaving mid-morning for an afternoon appointment and not returning or in certain cases a full day may be required when return travel times and appointment duration are factored in.

In such circumstances, schools are advised to use discretion when updating the pupil's SMS record.

Code M should be used for the session if the school had not been notified of the appointment in advance.

Code M can be used for part session, i.e. AM or PM. Medical appointments include:

- Attendance at a GP's surgery;
- Attendance at a dentist's surgery; or
- Hospital appointments (not a stay in hospital).

Code O1*: Other exceptional circumstances (Code O1 has replace Code O)

This code should be used for special occasions that have been agreed at the discretion of the school or an exceptional event outside the control of the pupil. Only exceptional occasions warrant leave of absence. Schools should consider each request individually taking the following into account:

- The nature of the event;
- Its frequency (is it a one-off, or likely to become a regular occurrence?);
- Whether or not the parent/carer gave advance notice; or
- The pupil's overall attendance pattern.

Examples might include occasions such as attending the wedding of an immediate family member or as stated below:

Young Carers - In a genuine crisis, a school can approve absence for a child to care for a relative until other arrangements can be made.

Birth of a Child - Code O1 should only be used when the provision of home tuition (Code 2) is not available. Schools should provide direct support to assist pupils remaining in school wherever possible, and to return them to full-time education as soon as possible after the birth. Further information about School Age Mothers can be obtained at:

[School Age Mothers Programme](#)

*The use of this code is at the discretion of the school.

Code O2 – Temporary Exceptions to the Curriculum

This code is to be used in very specific cases where a pupil has been excepted from the statutory curriculum and assessment requirements on a temporary basis (as outlined in [DE Circular 1990/45: Temporary Exemptions from the Statutory Curriculum and Assessment Provisions for Individual Pupils](#)).

Using this code will reflect a period of Authorised Absence.

Examples where this code may be used include:

- Pupils who arrive from such a different educational system that they require a period of adjustment to the curricular requirements;
- Pupils who have had spells in hospital, been educated at home or been excluded from school and need time to adjust;
- Pupils who temporarily have severe emotional problems (perhaps

because of a family crisis) and need special arrangements.

Settings are requested to email requests for use of this code to the Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team at: attendance@education-ni.gov.uk

More details on the use of this code are available within the [Frequently Asked Questions](#)

Code R*: Religious observance

This code should be used when a pupil is absent to take part in or to attend any event deemed exclusively for religious observance by the religious body to which the parent/carer belong, including religious festivals. Parent/carer should be encouraged to give advance notice.

*The use of this code is at the discretion of the school.

Unauthorised absence codes

Code D: No reason provided for absence

This code should be used when no reason has been provided for a pupil's absence 5 school days after the pupil returns to school. Every effort should be made to establish the reason for a pupil's absence from school. During the absence and in the initial five school day period after the pupil's return, Code N (no reason yet provided for absence) may be used as a temporary code.

Code D should only be used in exceptional cases as a reason for absence should always be established.

Schools should be minded that unexplained absence could be deemed as a child protection issue.

(Note: In the SMS Attendance Module this is displayed as – Did not provide a reason for absence.)

Code G: Family Holiday (NOT agreed)

This code should be used for a family holiday that is not agreed by the school. Examples of reasons a school would not agree a holiday would be as follows:

- A holiday that coincides with any element of term time;
- Where a school's prior agreement is not sought and the pupil goes on holiday; or
- If a parent/carer keeps a child away for longer than was approved through the Code J application for extended leave, any extra time taken should be recorded as Code G or Code D as appropriate.

Code H: Other Absence

This code should be used for other absences which are not covered by any other code and where the reason is not acceptable to the school. Some examples might include: False claims of illness; Pupil's/parent's/carer's/sibling's birthday; Shopping; haircut. Please note that unexplained absences should be recorded under code N (initially) and then Code D.

Code N: No reason yet provided for absence (temporary code)

This code is a temporary code and should be only used during a pupil's absence and in the initial five school day period following the pupils' return to school.

This code should be used to cover an unexplained absence on a temporary basis until the pupil returns with an explanation of their reason for absence. After five school days following the pupil's return to school, if no explanation for the absence has been provided, the code should be changed to Code D and every effort should be made to ascertain an explanation for absence from the parents/carers.

Schools should be minded that unexplained absence could be deemed as

a child protection issue.

Code U*: Late (after registration closed)

This code should be used when a pupil arrives late to school after registration is closed with no relevant reason to code it otherwise.

For example, if a pupil arrives late (after registers have been closed) for reasons such as they couldn't find their shoes; their school uniform was drying in the tumble dryer; their younger sibling was misbehaving etc., then code U should be used.

Although, if a pupil arrives late (after registers have been closed) due to a doctor or dentist appointment, then code M would be used for the session if the school had not been notified of the appointment in advance.

Schools should actively discourage late arrival. Schools identify how long registers are kept open in their Attendance Policy. In circumstances such as bad weather or public transport difficulties, schools may keep the register open for a longer period.

*The use of this code is at the discretion of the school.

Frequently Asked Questions

A list of frequently asked questions is available to download from the DE website here:

[Circular 2026/15 - Attendance Guidance & Absence Recording By Schools](#)