

# Foreign policies

When it comes to cracking down on holidays in term time, Kevin Harcombe wishes the DfE would take a break...

**H**ave you heard of the phenomenon known as 'The Hum'? Sufferers describe it as a "constant dull drone" that makes their lives a misery. Some say it is caused by power lines, others blame mobile phone masts, wind farms, even low-frequency submarine communications. But if it's a constant dull drone, my money is on the DfE. Take the news I read this morning, for example. The Education Secretary is determined to "crack down" on families taking term-time holidays and intends to remove headteachers' discretionary right to "authorise" up to ten

days' absence in the academic year, which, coincidentally, is what I'm doing right now with a half a dozen forms on my desk.

If a Cornish cottage holiday for a family of four costs £633 in June, £950 in July but only £560 in September, when would you choose to go? Clearly not in July, unless you're a complete pillock. Or a teacher. By going on holiday in term time, a hard-pressed, squeezed-middle family could save three to four hundred pounds.

I receive a steady trickle of holiday applications in which parents have to write down their reasons. "They do not do *The Sun* newspaper holiday deals in school holidays and we cannot afford a proper holiday" declared

one, feistily telling it like it is and sort of blaming *The Sun* into the bargain, which adds some topicality. "To attend my brother-in-law's medal ceremony on his return from Afghanistan," would be churlish as well as unpatriotic to decline. "Short break to celebrate granddad's birthday in the New Forest," cannily and quickly qualified by, "Learning about nature and the great outdoors," to emphasise the educational value. One request for a Monday and Friday off included the basic explanation, "Long weekend in caravan!". It always is. Some fill me with wistful longing, including the request to tag four days onto a half-term to visit "Florida, Kennedy Space Centre, Disney / Universal studios and swim with dolphins." I annotate that one, "Agreed – but only if I can come, too." As a teacher, of course, I'm restricted to peak season when unscrupulous dolphins really ratchet up their prices – hence their permanent smug grins?

Is targeting family breaks the best way for the DfE to improve attendance figures? The absentees we really have to support are those who miss most Mondays caring for younger siblings because their depressed mother is unable to. Or those whose parents keep them off at the first sign of a runny nose and before you know it, over a year, they've clocked up 30 days' absence. Of course, they are more

difficult to target and they make a less interesting headline.

The vast majority of children who head off with bucket and spade for a family break do fine in their assessments. But, what effect does not having a family holiday (because it's unaffordable) have on a child's well-being? Better-off parents can (albeit grudgingly) absorb the higher cost of school-break holidays whilst the worst-off simply cannot manage it at all and can only afford to go in term-time. Without punitive and consistently enforced fines, many parents will take the holiday whether I sign the bloody form or not, because it is more convenient / affordable for them to do so

In any case, if HMCI's newspaper pronouncements (5,000 heads are useless and outstanding schools are not really outstanding anymore) are to be believed, kids are probably better off down the beach. I'm saving my vote for the first politician promising higher standards through longer school holidays. Makes as much sense as any other pronouncements.

Which brings me back to constant, dull droning. How about the 5000 "useless" heads club together to save tabloid holiday vouchers and send education ministers away to a caravan park in, say, Easter Island for a week in term-time? Listen... 'The Hum' ... it's finally stopped!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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