

**AUDIT TITLE: Review of Schools' arrangements for covering teacher absence**

**Background**

1. In response to a request from the Audit Committee, a review has been undertaken of the arrangements in place for the engagement by schools of supply teachers. The Headteachers and finance staff of 6 randomly selected schools were interviewed - 3 high schools, 2 primary schools and 1 special school.
2. The scope of the review included teaching cover provided by agencies, short term contracts and cover supervisors.

**Findings**

**Reasons for engaging supply teaching cover**

3. Supply cover in schools was the subject of a 2013 Wales Audit Office (WAO) report, 'Covering Teachers Absence', commissioned by Welsh Government (WG). The report recognised that one reason for teacher absence from the classroom - and a driver of the need for cover - is to enable teacher participation in events linked to government policies and initiatives. According to the report 'The Welsh Government pays grants for supply cover to encourage schools to release teachers to attend relevant training, meetings and conferences, and for non-teaching time' and (WG) 'policies and initiatives for education in schools are one of the significant drivers of classes requiring cover'.
4. Cover may be required for classes where the teacher is absent for a day or couple of days, due to sickness absence or attendance on a training course, or for longer periods due to long term sickness, maternity leave, or as a result of an unfilled vacancy. High schools may employ 'cover supervisors' – school officers who are not necessarily qualified teachers, whose role is to maintain the 'non contact' periods of teaching staff, and provide supply cover when required. In schools which do not employ cover supervisors – generally Primary schools – or when the cover supervisor cannot cover all the classes required - a supply teacher is normally engaged via an agency. When cover is required for the longer term, it is usual to employ a teacher on a short term contract.
5. Most of the Headteachers interviewed demonstrated innovative approaches to training teachers including the provision of 'twilight' (out of hours) training, and the restriction of externally provided courses in favour of 'in house' courses and mentoring style arrangements with other schools, which do not require supply cover. Currently, qualifying schools are able to provide the 'Newly Qualified Teacher' qualification course themselves, although it will soon be compulsory for teachers to attend the Welsh Government (WG) provided course.
6. One school in the sample used supply cover to manage a situation where 8 experienced teachers left in a short period and, instead of filling all the vacant posts at once, potentially with 8 newly qualified teachers, the Headteacher engaged supply teachers in the interim. A perceived benefit of engaging supply staff is that, in the event of a vacancy, it provides a trial period for both the School and teacher. Most schools quoted examples of former supply teachers who had gone onto become permanent members of staff.

## **Monitoring of supply costs**

7. Supply teachers may be funded by various sources: an allocation in the School annual budget, the 'Mutual Supply Fund' e.g. for cover of maternity leave, or by a specific grant used to employ a teacher on a short term contract for the duration of the grant period.
8. Arrangements for checking, authorising and paying invoices were found to be robust, based on the samples selected and interviews with the Headteacher and finance staff. Monitoring of expenditure on supply is undertaken as part of overall financial monitoring by the Headteacher and Governing Body. The Headteachers interviewed were aware of the budget allocated to them and their latest expenditure position against the budget.

## **Monitoring of supply teachers**

9. Supply teachers are usually interviewed by the school, unless they are engaged at short notice or have worked there before. Efficient arrangements were found to be in place to welcome supply teachers including 'meet and greet' on arrival, timesheets for signing in and out and welcome packs which included child protection guidance, the behaviour policy and marking sheets. Details of the lessons to be undertaken were provided by the head of department when the cover was at short notice, or prepared by the teacher where the absence and, therefore, the supply requirement was known in advance.
10. For long term supply, formal monitoring is the same as for permanent teachers and includes classroom observation and reviewing children's books without notice. For short term supply cover, feedback is more informal, via other teachers, and teaching assistants. All schools reported giving feedback to agencies on the supply teachers provided.
11. Supply teachers are normally required to undertake training which is held on site or after hours, and are generally keen to take advantage of the opportunity to receive training as it improves their employment prospects.

## **Safeguarding - DBS checks**

12. The schools sampled demonstrated their awareness of the need for a 'Disclosure and Barring service' (DBS) check to be undertaken and the results received and reviewed prior to employment. They were aware that they should not retain possession of the DBS but annotate the reference number.

## **Process for arranging supply**

13. Clear processes and arrangements were found to be in place for notifying the Headteacher or Deputy Headteacher of teacher absence, deciding how to cover the staff absence and contacting the agency where relevant. Officers were aware of their roles and responsibilities for making arrangements and record keeping.

## **Agencies used – reasons**

14. There is little material difference in cost between agencies and the market is very competitive, therefore, cost does not usually drive the decision to use a particular agency. It can be difficult to obtain a supply teacher for some subjects e.g. maths and science and, therefore the availability of a teacher in these subjects can be a deciding factor in using a certain agency. Also, a school may request a teacher who has successfully worked at the school previously. For short term cover, availability of a suitable teacher was a deciding factor e.g. when a maths or physics teacher is required, as these were found to be difficult subjects to get supply cover for. However, the biggest factor overall was that the agency understood the school and its particular characteristics, and managed to match an appropriate teacher to the school or acknowledged that they could not meet the demand as an appropriate teacher was not

available. The special school in the sample had forged a relationship with their agency with the result that potential supply teachers spent a few hours working at the school (at no charge to the school) in order to determine their suitability for the role.

## Conclusion

15. Many scholarly articles have concluded that teachers are the largest contributing factor to pupil success and attainment. A report produced by the Economic and Social Research Council stated that 'Schools where spending on supply teachers is high are damaging the progress of all their pupils'. An Estyn report found that 'in primary and secondary schools, learners make less progress in developing their skills, knowledge and understanding when the usual class teacher is absent, and learners' behaviour is often worse, particularly in secondary schools.'
16. Whilst schools were found to monitor the supply teachers engaged, and record the reasons for each teacher absence, the Council does not monitor and report on the reasons for teachers' absence across all schools, so the reasons for teaching supply requirements is not fully quantified or understood. This information could be used to monitor the reasons for teacher absence, in order to identify trends and determine actions that could be taken.
17. The WAO report made recommendations - set out at Appendix A - for Welsh Government, Schools and Local Authorities. These recommendations, however, are generic for all Local Authorities and in Cardiff the division of responsibilities for supply cover are different to many of the other Welsh Local Authorities due to the greater level of delegation from Cardiff LA to its schools.
18. Whilst the Council could consider the recommendations which relate to Schools and Local Authorities, this would have to be done within the parameters of the local delegation rate.

## Recommendations

That the above report is referred to School Budget Forum for consideration

## Recommendations included in the WAO report 'Covering Teachers Absence'

## Appendix A

*N.B. the recommendations are set out below to show the organisation/area of the Council responsible for implementation*

### Schools should:

REF	RECOMMENDATIONS
1	Manage teacher absence more efficiently.
2	Improve the quality of teaching and learning in covered lessons by making sure that the work set is at an appropriate level and staff receive enough information on the individual needs of learners.
3	Support supply and cover staff to improve their classroom behaviour management techniques.
4	Evaluate the impact of teacher absence on learners, especially more able pupils and those in key stage 3, and monitor the quality of teaching and learning when teachers are absent.
5	Ensure that supply staff are included in performance management arrangements.
6	Provide more professional development opportunities for supply staff.
7	Make sure that supply staff receive essential information on health and safety and safeguarding, including the contact details of the named child-protection officer at the school.
8	Apply their attendance management policies rigorously, particularly in the management of long term absence
9	Ensure that they provide sufficient information and support to supply teachers (for example daily timetable, lessons plans and material, school policies such as approach to behaviour management and access to ICT) so that they can work effectively.
10	Include supply teachers who have either regular or long-term involvement with a school in their in-service training and performance management arrangements and include the requirement to participate

### Local Authorities should:

REF	RECOMMENDATIONS
11	Provide schools with comparative data on teacher absence rates (same recommendation for Supply Agencies)
12	Seek feedback on and record the quality of supply staff they register and use the information for quality control. (same recommendation for Supply Agencies)
13	Collect and analyse absence-related data for all the schools in their area, and disseminate information that would enable its schools to compare absence levels with those of other schools in the local authority or within their family of schools

### Schools and Local Authorities should:

REF	RECOMMENDATIONS
14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Routinely monitor trends in cover expenditure and compare with others to highlight areas of inconsistency for further investigation and action</li><li>- Evaluate whether arrangements for managing supply cover budgets (such as opting into the local authority's mutual fund or purchasing private absence in insurance) provide value for money for the school and across the authority.</li><li>- Regularly review the cost effectiveness of the skill mix of the staff employed in schools to provide cover, including an assessment of the relative costs of employing cover supervisors, HLTAs, floating teachers, temporary staff recruited through an agency and temporary staff recruited from the local authority list.</li><li>- Review that arrangements with supply agencies where these exist, continue to provide good value for money</li><li>- Explore opportunities to achieve savings and/or an improved service by collaborating with local schools</li></ul>

### Local Authorities and Welsh Government should:

REF	RECOMMENDATIONS
15	Encourage schools to develop policies on managing cover that focus on ensuring that learners progress is maintained and resources are used effectively.
16	Should monitor the extent to which their school improvement programmes and training initiatives contribute to the need for cover
17	Agree guidance for schools on the procurement of supply teachers. This guidance should set out the different arrangements available or otherwise possible, including the two framework contracts for supply teachers, the legal and human resource implications of different arrangements, and the potential for collaboration to result in better value for money. (joint rec for WG and LA)
18	Ensure that appropriate quality standards and the Welsh Government's policies are reflected in any future framework agreements for supply agencies (joint rec for WG and LA)

**Schools, Local Authorities, Welsh Government and the General Teaching Council for Wales should:**

REF	RECOMMENDATIONS
19	Develop clearer mechanisms for reporting concerns about unsatisfactory performance in addition to the reporting of any child protection concerns.

**Welsh Government should:**

REF	RECOMMENDATIONS
20	Provide better access for supply staff to those national training programmes that are available to permanently employed teachers.
21	Take greater account of the impact of cover in its policies and strategies including setting out clearly in grant and other guidance that it expects schools, local authorities and regional consortia to seek to minimise the need for covered lessons.
22	Monitor the impact on supply teachers of their developing arrangements for induction and access to the Masters in Educational Practice; to ensure that teachers who work as supply teachers on a long term basis are not disadvantaged
23	Issue clear guidance to schools to ensure that they are clear about the appropriate pre-employment and safeguarding checks required for teachers and other school staff, understand that the checks need to be completed before a supply teacher commences work in a school, and retain records of the pre-employment checks that have been undertaken for all supply teachers and other staff employed with the school