



*Rhagoriaeth i bawb – Excellence for all*

Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg  
a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru

Her Majesty's Inspectorate  
for Education and Training in Wales

# The impact of teacher absence

## September 2013



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## Introduction

This report is published in response to a request for advice from the Welsh Government in the Minister's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2012-2013. The report examines 'the impact on learner progress of schools' strategies to cover the absence of teachers and the effective and efficient employment, training and deployment of supply teachers'. The report includes case studies that highlight common approaches to the management of teacher absence.

This report has been written in collaboration with the Wales Audit Office. The Wales Audit Office report<sup>1</sup> produced is about the efficiency and value for money of human resource arrangements to reduce and cover teacher absence at school and local authority level. This Estyn report focuses on the impact of teacher absence on learners and on classroom provision and on how schools manage the impact of teacher absence.

The report is intended for the Welsh Government, headteachers, school staff and local authority officers and elected members. The report draws on the range of evidence noted in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 includes case studies of approaches adopted by schools and Appendix 3 notes statistical information about supply teachers. The report also includes a glossary to explain terminology.

## Background

There are many reasons why a teacher may be absent from a lesson they would normally teach. For example, teachers may miss a lesson because of illness, training or to attend various meetings. These absences may be short-term or long-term, and may be foreseeable or unforeseen. When a teacher is absent, the school will need to ensure that the missed lessons are 'covered'.

In Wales and England, a new workload agreement<sup>2</sup> for teachers and headteachers was phased in across all maintained schools between 2003 and 2005. One outcome of this national agreement has been an increasing involvement of cover staff and externally-sourced support staff in the delivery of education. The Wales Audit Office estimates that just under 10% of all lessons are now covered in total by staff who are not the usual class teacher.

The workload agreement states that teachers and headteachers in the maintained sector should have:

- a reasonable work life balance (with headteachers responsible for ensuring this for teachers, and governors having the same responsibility for headteachers);
- respite from undertaking administrative tasks that do not require the professional skills of a teacher;

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<sup>1</sup> Covering teachers' absence (Wales Audit Office, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> The National Agreement: Raising Standards and Tackling Workload' (2003)

- a timetable that gives them a reasonable allocation of time to undertake their leadership and management responsibilities;
- an initial 38-hour limit on the amount of cover for absent colleagues they can be required to do in each academic year, with an intention to reduce this further so that teachers will rarely be required to cover (this is known in schools as ‘rarely cover’); and
- a guaranteed 10% of their weekly timetabled teaching time to be used as preparation, planning and assessment (PPA) time during the school day.

In September 2009, ‘rarely cover’ was introduced across schools. Before this, teachers could be asked to cover for absent colleagues if there was a gap in their teaching timetable. However, since September 2009, teachers may cover only rarely and in circumstances that are not foreseeable. ‘Foreseeable circumstances’ include school events that are foreseeable on the basis of historic experience or local experience or that may be expected as part of the evolving pattern of provision. In order to meet this regulation, every school should have in place a clear policy and robust system that does not require teachers or the headteacher to provide cover other than rarely.

The introduction of rarely cover has led to an increased complexity in the provision of supply cover as schools make arrangements for covering teacher absence that no longer involve their own teaching staff. As well as supply teachers, these arrangements now include cover supervisors and other support staff employed in schools who do not have qualified teacher status (QTS). Arrangements also go beyond the local authority and include recruitment agencies that provide supply teachers and cover supervisors directly to schools.

Local authorities across Wales have different arrangements for the procurement and provision of supply teachers to schools. The majority provide schools with a list of supply teachers who are eligible to work in the authority and have been through their own pre-employment checks. Providing this list is sometimes outsourced to recruitment agencies. A minority of other local authorities liaise with supply agencies to provide schools with a list of supply teachers or cover supervisors who are eligible to work within the local authority.

Data from the General Teaching Council for Wales (GTCW) shows that the majority of teachers registered as a supply teacher fall into two main groups in terms of their age and length of experience. Just over a third gained QTS five or less years ago and a similar proportion gained QTS more than 26 years ago. About a quarter of all supply teachers are under 29 years of age and a third are over 55 years of age. See Appendix 3 for statistical information about supply teachers.

There are many reasons why teachers choose to work as supply teachers. For many, it is because they are unable to secure a permanent post. However, a minority choose supply teaching because the pattern of work gives them greater flexibility. For example, they may have retired from full-time working and wish only to work for a few days at a time or combine teaching with another job. A minority choose supply work because it suits their personal or family arrangements and they believe that there is less work to do at the end of the day.

## Main findings

- 1 Teachers should cover the absence of colleagues only under unforeseeable circumstances. One outcome of this 'rarely cover' agreement has been an increasing involvement of support and cover staff in the delivery of pupils' education. It is estimated that just under 10% of all lessons are now covered by staff who are not the usual class teacher.
- 2 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. Teacher absence impacts on pupils across the ability range. Less able pupils are less likely to receive the support they need, and middle ability and more able pupils make less progress than they should because the work set is not challenging enough.
- 3 In most schools visited, the teaching by supply staff not employed by the school is often ineffective, mainly because they do not know enough about the needs of the pupils they teach. It is difficult for these staff to match the work and the level of support to the individual needs and abilities of pupils. Even when cover supervisors are employed directly by the school, the pace of lessons is often too slow and expectations are too low. Much of the work can be time filling activity that is not marked or included in normal work books.
- 4 In most primary schools, the adverse effects of short-term teacher absence on pupils' learning are reduced mainly through providing cover by staff who are employed at the school and are familiar with the learners and with school processes. Pupils in primary schools normally see only one 'cover' staff member in a day, because the staff member is covering for a class teacher who would normally spend their time with the class, which also limits the disruption to their learning. Primary pupils are generally positive about the progress they make in 'covered' lessons.
- 5 The greatest negative impact of teacher absence on pupils' learning occurs in secondary schools. Supply staff who do not normally work at the school do not know the needs of the learners as well as their usual classroom teachers and the work set is often too undemanding and does not engage learners. This is particularly the case in key stage 3, as schools often make an effort to secure better arrangements for examination classes. Secondary schools often do not cover sixth form lessons for short-term absences, but make up missed work later. They may also re-deploy subject teachers from key stage 3 classes to cover key stage 4, leaving supply staff to cover a disproportionate number of key stage 3 lessons.
- 6 Due to the short-term nature of their work, it is difficult for supply staff to establish effective working relationships with learners. Learners often do not have the same regard for supply staff as they do for their usual teachers. Most learners in secondary schools feel that they make little progress when they do not know the person who is covering lessons. Learners in secondary schools tend to misbehave or engage in low-level disruption when taught by supply staff. In the majority of schools, supply staff receive information from the school about behaviour management and get assistance to deal with challenging behaviour when it occurs.

However, in the majority of instances, classroom misbehaviour or low-level disruption remains an issue.

- 7 In primary schools where there are two or more classes in each year group, joint planning helps to reduce the impact of teacher absence further. Staff covering for teacher absence normally work well alongside the other staff from the year group and benefit from their support and guidance. However, progress in learning is slow, because cover staff do not have enough time to take account of information about pupils when covering lessons or do not pay sufficient attention to this information.
- 8 The greatest disruption in primary schools occurs as a result of not having a strategy to minimise the impact of unplanned, but potentially long-term, teacher absences. In complex situations, such as those arising from staff suspensions or frequent but non-continuous staff illness, schools do not manage or evaluate the impact of having multiple staff cover for the same year group. Too often, this affects pupils' behaviour as well as their learning.
- 9 Most schools have suitable arrangements to provide cover for absent teachers by using internal cover staff (higher-level teaching assistants (HLTAs) or cover supervisors employed by the school) or by sourcing external supply teachers.
- 10 Many primary and secondary schools have appropriate administrative arrangements to support cover staff. The majority of schools provide supply staff new to the school with a guidance handbook or document. However, supply staff do not always receive the necessary information regarding health and safety or safeguarding, including contact details for the named child protection officer at the school.
- 11 A few schools, particularly Welsh-medium schools and those located in rural or economically deprived areas, have difficulty finding suitable supply teachers. The majority of secondary schools have difficulty sourcing teachers of shortage subjects, such as mathematics and physics.
- 12 Most schools do not give enough priority to managing the effect of teacher absences or to evaluating its impact on the quality of learners' experiences. Only a few schools analyse teacher absence or compare patterns of absence with other schools. Many schools monitor the work of supply staff informally, but few formally observe lessons, scrutinise the work learners have produced, or ask learners' opinions, to evaluate the impact of cover arrangements.
- 13 Most schools and teaching agencies provide limited feedback to supply staff about their performance and little information is recorded. Feedback is more detailed when there are concerns about teaching or classroom management. Nearly all schools have on occasion raised concerns about the quality of a few supply teachers. A few agencies ask for feedback on placements, although in many instances the collection of this information is not robust. Local authorities who provide lists of supply teachers do not usually request feedback on performance.
- 14 In the majority of schools, headteachers and other senior leaders now spend more time covering classes than previously. This is because they sometimes nominate themselves as cover, as they have difficulty sourcing supply staff. This is an

inefficient use of their time, although there was the benefit that pupils tend not to misbehave in these circumstances. This arrangement also conflicts with 'rarely cover' provisions which should also apply to headteachers and senior staff.

- 15 Generally, morale among supply staff working through recruitment agencies is low. They work in challenging circumstances and in many cases are not paid in line with the teachers' main pay scale. A minority of schools say that cost is the most important factor when covering for teacher absence. They compare prices between recruitment agencies and negotiate a price where the supply teacher may earn less than half the equivalent teachers' daily rate. In a few secondary schools, cover supervisors are recruited to cover short-term absence rather than supply teachers, as this is cheaper.
- 16 Most cover supervisors and HLTAs employed permanently by schools have access to appropriate training as part of their school's in-service training programme. But other supply staff do not have access to a wide range of professional development opportunities. In most cases, arranging their own training or accessing courses offered by private companies would result in losing a day's pay. Supply staff seeking a permanent post are badly affected by the lack of appropriate professional development. Their knowledge and understanding of national policies and priorities can decline over time, making it harder for them to secure a permanent post.



## Recommendations

### **Schools should:**

- R1 manage teacher absence more efficiently;
- R2 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;
- R3 support supply and cover staff to improve their classroom behaviour management techniques;
- R4 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;
- R5 ensure that supply staff are included in performance management arrangements;
- R6 provide more professional development opportunities for supply staff; and
- R7 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.

### **Local authorities and supply agencies should:**

- R8 provide schools with comparative data on teacher absence rates; and
- R9 seek feedback on and record the quality of supply staff they register and use the information for quality control.

### **The Welsh Government should:**

- R10 provide better access for supply staff to those national training programmes that are available to permanently-employed teachers.

## 1 The impact of teacher absence on learners

- 17 The introduction of “rarely cover” in 2009 has meant that many teachers only cover lessons during emergencies. As a result, more lessons are taught by supply staff or cover supervisors and HLTAs than in the past.
- 18 Overall, in both primary and secondary schools, when the usual class teacher is absent, pupils make less progress in developing their skills, knowledge and understanding and behaviour in class is worse.

### Primary schools

- 19 In primary schools, the impact of teacher absence varies from school to school, but is often less significant than in secondary schools. This is because the majority of primary schools have suitable arrangements to cover short-term teacher absence through the use of staff already employed by the school, for example as PPA teachers or HLTAs. As pupils are often more familiar with these members of staff and see them regularly working alongside the usual classroom teacher, they do not notice the change in the classroom environment to the same extent as in secondary schools. However, a minority of primary pupils note that class behaviour is worse when there is a supply teacher who is not known to them. Pupils’ progress in learning is slow when ‘cover’ staff do not take enough account of information about the needs of individual pupils when covering for absent colleagues.
- 20 Long term teacher absence tends to be more of an issue than short-term absence in rural Welsh medium or very small primary schools. This is because it is these schools that find most difficulty in recruiting supply teachers or teachers who are willing to undertake work on a termly or half-termly basis. As a result, learners’ experiences are disrupted and there is a lack of continuity in their learning. This disruption impacts on their behaviour as well as their learning.

### Secondary schools

- 21 The greatest negative impact of teacher absence is on learners in secondary schools and on learners in key stage 3 in particular. A minority of schools often move subject specialists to cover key stage 4 classes, leaving the supply teacher or cover supervisor to cover key stage 3 classes.
- 22 Teacher absence impacts on pupils across the ability range. It often means that less able pupils do not receive the tailored support and guidance that they require so make less progress, and middle ability and more able pupils also make less progress because the activities set and the teachers’ expectations are not high enough.
- 23 Most secondary schools do not cover sixth form classes when the teacher is absent for a relatively short period, normally up to a fortnight. It is then the responsibility of the teacher in liaison with learners to arrange a convenient time to ‘catch up’. As most sixth form subjects have two or more teachers delivering the curriculum and by this stage learners are more independent, this short-term absence has less of an impact than in key stage 3 and key stage 4. After a fortnight, nearly all schools will employ supply teachers to cover these absences and arrangements in the sixth form

would be in line with those across the rest of the school. Teacher absence can have a significant impact on sixth form pupils and pupils in key stage 4 when staff are absent for long periods of time and the school is unable to secure subject specific supply cover.

- 24 Most learners in secondary schools do not feel that they make enough progress in lessons when their usual teacher is absent. Often this is because the cover lessons do not engage all learners well enough, or the supply teacher does not know the needs of the group as well as the usual teacher. Often, the work that is left by the teacher or that is organised at short notice by the head of department is undemanding and, in a minority of instances, includes activities such as watching a video, completing wordsearches or crosswords, and producing posters.
- 25 The negative impact of teacher absence is often greater in some subjects, such as modern foreign languages, Welsh second language, physical education and design and technology. This is because non-specialists often cover the lessons and learners are not able to undertake practical activities. The teachers or cover supervisors who are covering the Welsh second language lesson will not have the subject-specific language skills to support and develop their learning. Often learners will be moved to other classrooms when their teacher is absent and consequently they will not have access to the resources that would normally be available to them. Moving from class to class also gives the impression that the lesson is less important to the teacher and the pupil. In the majority of instances, learners note that supply teachers or cover supervisors tend to ask them to write on sheets of paper rather than in their normal workbooks and, in most instances, it does not get marked or followed up. This is time-filling activity rather than real learning.
- 26 As a result of this undemanding work, learners demonstrate behaviour that is more challenging. They are more likely to engage in low-level disruption and this has a further negative impact on their achievement and progress in lessons. Nearly all pupils who took part in our survey indicate that they do not behave as well in a class with a supply teacher or cover supervisor when compared with their usual teacher. Secondary school learners across the ability range often demonstrate negative attitudes towards supply teachers and cover supervisors who are not employed by the school. This often means that pupils make less progress in these lessons and their learning is more limited. Their attitudes are more positive towards full-time teachers who undertake cover or cover supervisors who are employed directly by the school.
- 27 Learners in key stage 4 and in the sixth form have fewer lessons covered by supply teachers or cover supervisors. With the exception of incidences of long-term cover, these pupils are able to make productive use of their time with supply teachers and cover supervisors and complete revision or coursework tasks. This is because when making the decision on deploying supply teachers or cover supervisors, schools place more emphasis on progress and preparation for examinations than they do on progress and learning in key stage 3.

### **Special schools**

- 28 The impact of any staff absence can be particularly significant in a special school because of the complex needs of the pupils who attend these schools and the

knowledge of those needs that class teachers have built up over time. Generally, special schools have a structured approach to covering teacher absence because they have to meet the needs of learners as well as statutory regulations for pupil-to-staff ratios. Leaders and managers work well to reduce the impact of staff absence on learners to make sure that they access their full range of learning experiences and activities. To do so, HLTAs will sometimes take the lead in the classroom with the supply teacher, who does not know the pupils as well, acting as support. In the short-term, these arrangements are generally suitable.

## **2 The impact of teacher absence on provision**

- 29 In most schools, teaching by supply staff not employed by the school is often ineffective, mainly because they do not know enough about the pupils they teach. It is difficult for these staff to match activities and the level of support to the individual needs and abilities of pupils. Even when cover supervisors are employed directly by the school, the pace in 'cover' lessons is often too slow and pupils make limited progress in developing their knowledge, understanding and skills.
- 30 Due to the short-term nature of supply work, it can be more difficult for supply staff to establish effective working relationships with learners. Learners generally have less regard for supply staff compared with their usual teacher. In many schools, supply staff feel appropriately supported, get suitable assistance when dealing with challenging behaviour and receive useful information about the school's behaviour management policy. However, in the majority of instances, classroom misbehaviour or low-level disruption remains an issue.
- 31 In a few schools, when large numbers of teachers are absent at short notice, often because of illness, senior leaders or cover supervisors have to supervise more than one teaching group at the same time. This has a significant negative impact on the type of activities that learners can undertake and limits their progress overall.
- 32 In many schools, supply teachers employed on a day-to-day contract for a short period of time, often less than a fortnight, are not required to carry out any formal planning or preparation. In a minority of primary schools, supply teachers working from day to day may be required to mark pupils' work or to provide some feedback to the class teacher or senior leaders. A minority of primary schools also require supply teachers to undertake supervision at break times and to plan some activities.
- 33 In many secondary schools, the work of the cover supervisor is to deliver the work that has been left by the usual class teacher or work that is given to them by the subject leader or other senior leaders. However, when cover supervisors are qualified to teach but employed by the school to work both as a cover supervisor and as a supply teacher, they often take time to amend the plans in those lessons where they are working as a cover supervisor rather than a qualified teacher even though there is no requirement for them to do so. Many cover supervisors state that they undertake tasks that are outside of their agreed roles and responsibilities in order to facilitate better teaching and learning.

- 34 Although work is usually set by the class teacher for the supply teacher to deliver, this work often is not challenging enough and does not meet the needs of all pupils well enough. Often this work does not fill the time available, especially for able learners. A minority of schools have policies outlining the type of work that teachers should leave when they are absent, but there is limited monitoring by senior staff to see whether the policy is applied routinely and consistently. Cover supervisors employed directly by the school often have a bank of resources they have collected over the years, which they use to supplement the work left by the class teacher.
- 35 In larger primary schools with two or more form entry, teachers generally collaborate on planning and this often supports stronger curriculum continuity in the work undertaken by supply staff. There is less isolation from other classes in most primary classrooms, with more regular interaction with other teachers or support staff. As a result, supply teachers covering for long-term absence and HLTAs covering for short-term absence tend to work well alongside full-time, more experienced teachers or support staff who are familiar with the school's policies, processes and schemes of work. Supply staff benefit from their support and guidance and this leads to less disruption in the classroom. However, in primary schools there is still too much variation in the amount of time HLTAs or cover supervisors are allowed to cover before a qualified teacher is brought in. This varies from one day in one school to up to 10 days in another.
- 36 In a minority of primary schools, HLTAs undertake a role similar to that of a cover supervisor or supply teacher. In most instances, HLTAs are required to cover for teachers when they have planning, preparation and assessment time and/or to cover for short-term staff absence, for example when a teacher is ill, attending a meeting or involved in a school visit with other staff and pupils. Many HLTAs comment that the most challenging aspect of their role is managing other support assistants who are also working with pupils in the same class. A few also feel that, although they complete some tasks that are similar to those that a teacher would undertake, they do not command the same respect from teachers in their schools.

### **3 The management of teacher absence**

#### **Arrangements for covering teacher absence**

- 37 Overall, most schools have suitable arrangements to provide cover for absent teachers. However, arrangements for covering teacher absence in primary, secondary and special schools vary too much, and usually there is not enough focus on the impact of cover arrangements on the quality of learning and the progress made by learners. In many schools, the work of supply staff sits outside the normal self-evaluation procedures. As a result, most schools do not fully evaluate the impact of their cover arrangements.
- 38 Only a few schools monitor the impact of teacher absence on pupils' learning closely enough. In these schools, senior staff or business managers:
- keep a detailed record of teacher absence, track patterns of staff absence and

initiate follow-up activity where necessary;

- record how many and how often specific classes are affected by staff absence;
- collect first-hand evidence about the quality of work that is set; and
- meet learners to gather their views about the effectiveness of supply cover arrangements.

- 39 Many schools amend cover arrangements annually and most schools have adopted new arrangements since the introduction of rarely cover. However, in a majority of instances, while these arrangements ensure that classes of an absent teacher are covered, they generally do not meet the needs of learners, particularly in key stage 3.

### **Reducing teacher absence**

- 40 Most schools are aware of their local authority's policy for managing staff absence, although schools are inconsistent in the way they have adopted these policies. This is the main mechanism that schools have to manage teacher absence. However, only a minority of schools apply the policy robustly and record all absence in detail. As a result, in the majority of schools, these policies are not having as much impact as was originally intended. Senior leaders or line managers should conduct return-to-work interviews and identify and follow up patterns of absence. However, in a minority of schools, records of absence are not fully completed or not completed at all and return-to-work interviews are not conducted routinely. There is also inconsistency in the application of criteria that trigger the next stage of support.
- 41 Most schools do not analyse the data they collect about absence to examine and identify patterns. Even though they report absence information to the local authority, in many instances they do not receive comparative data and cannot compare their staff absence rates with similar schools. Only in a few local authorities do schools receive information that enables them to compare their staff absence with rates in other schools.

### **Managing cover for teacher absence**

- 42 Schools often need to arrange cover for a wide range of reasons and they may have to make arrangements at short notice. Arrangements for covering teacher absence vary depending on the length and nature of the absence. However, when schools have to make arrangements for supply cover they broadly use one of two main strategies:
- they cover internally to the school, using staff already available in the school; or
  - they obtain supply cover externally, from supply agencies, the local authority or elsewhere.
- 43 Overall, about a third of lessons are covered by internal staff and the remaining two-thirds require the school to obtain external supply cover.

### **Internal strategies**

- 44 In the majority of schools, particularly secondary schools, due to the requirements of rarely cover and difficulties sourcing external supply cover at short notice,

headteachers and other senior leaders now spend more of their time covering classes than in the past. This is sometimes because they nominate themselves as they have difficulty sourcing supply teachers. In these circumstances, incidents of misbehaviour are rare but it is an inefficient use of the time of headteachers and senior staff.

- 45 Most secondary schools directly employ at least one cover supervisor. The exact role of the cover supervisor varies from school to school but the role is generally limited to supervision of work set by teachers. A minority of secondary schools employ teachers on a part-time contract to cover for absent colleagues.
- 46 In a few schools, teachers still cover for absent colleagues or colleagues that have been granted leave to attend appointments or family events. This is done on a voluntary basis and, in most instances, is agreed between staff in advance.
- 47 Many primary schools employ HLTAs as cover supervisors to provide cover when teachers receive statutory PPA time or cover when the teacher is absent for other reasons. The roles and responsibilities of cover supervisors, HLTAs and supply teachers vary too much both within and between schools. Most HLTAs are included in schools' performance management arrangements and have suitable performance management objectives, but the nature of their work and job descriptions varies significantly within and between schools and this has an impact on learners and the amount of progress that they make when their usual teacher is absent.

### **External strategies**

- 48 Schools may:
- approach the local authority or consult a local authority list of supply staff (although not all local authorities have a support staff list);
  - use a supply teacher agency; or
  - contact a teacher that they know and use regularly who is registered with the local authority or a supply agency.
- 49 A few schools have fixed contracts with one or more supply agencies to provide a fixed amount of cover a year. Most schools have a preferred supply teacher agency and use the lowest price as the determining factor rather than quality. A few schools prefer not to use supply agencies and a very few have been advised by their local authority not to use supply agencies. Eighteen local authorities and five further education colleges and other public bodies have signed a 'Value Wales' agreement for supply cover. New Directions Education, a private limited company, won the contract for north and south Wales. However, schools are not compelled to use the contract to procure supply cover.
- 50 A few schools, particularly those who use supply agencies located in England, have discovered, when the supply teacher has arrived at the school, that they are not registered with the General Teaching Council for Wales (GTCW) and cannot teach in Wales. This has become apparent when staff have checked GTCW registration documents. In these instances, the supply teacher or cover supervisor has not been able to undertake the supply work at the school.

### **Long-term cover**

- 51 Where teachers are absent for a significant period of time (longer than two or three days), many schools make considerable efforts to find teachers with the relevant subject or phase-specific skills. Secondary schools often have great difficulty finding teachers of shortage subjects, such as mathematics and science. When secondary schools are unable to find subject specialist supply teachers, a few subject leaders re-arrange teaching groups so that specialist teachers teach examination classes. This problem is made worse when departments already lack a full complement of specialist teachers. Welsh-medium schools and those located in rural or economically deprived areas have the greatest difficulty finding suitable supply teachers, particularly when they also require teachers with expertise in shortage subjects.
- 52 In a minority of schools, long-term supply teachers are not required to sign a contract. As a result, a minority do not complete their contract in full because they find a permanent post elsewhere.

### **Feedback and monitoring the work of supply staff**

- 53 Many schools monitor the work of a supply staff informally, for example by visiting classes as part of a learning walk or by holding informal discussions with the member of staff who has responsibility for managing cover arrangements. Many schools consider good classroom management to be the most important factor when evaluating the impact and success of cover strategies rather than the impact of strategies on learners' achievement and progress. Formal observations of supply teachers only take place when they work at a school for a long period of time, normally a half term or more, or if the supply teacher specifically requests an observation.
- 54 A minority of schools ask supply staff for feedback about the type of work left for the pupils, although only a few schools regularly use this information to improve their procedures.
- 55 Most schools do not discuss the impact of teacher absence formally with learners during school council meetings or other forums. They do not canvas the views of learners in order to evaluate the effectiveness of cover strategies and their impact on learners.
- 56 Most schools do not provide enough feedback to supply teachers. Schools sometimes share feedback with the supply agency but the quality of this feedback is too variable and often not robust enough. A few agencies contact schools at the end of each week to discuss the performance of supply staff although very little information is recorded formally by the school. This feedback is more detailed when there are concerns about teaching or classroom management and so feedback to supply teachers tends to focus on the negative aspects of their work. Local authorities who provide lists of supply teachers do not request feedback on performance.



- 57 Nearly all schools have at one time or another raised concerns about the quality of a few supply teachers. Many schools have had to ask a supply teacher or cover supervisor to leave the school before their contract deadline because of unsatisfactory performance. There are no arrangements for supply agencies to share this information with Welsh Government or the GTCW unless performance gives significant cause for concern.

### **Support for supply staff**

- 58 Many schools have appropriate administrative arrangements for covering teacher absence. The majority of schools provide some sort of guidance handbook or document for supply staff new to the school. However, the quality and content of the guidance vary and in a minority of cases are inadequate. Around a quarter of supply teachers and cover supervisors who took part in our survey said that they do not receive important information, such as registration instructions, fire drill information or codes for doors and other security information. A quarter said that they do not receive information about safeguarding arrangements or information about the named child protection officer at the school.
- 59 Many schools have a staff handbook that includes guidance on the type of activities and work that should be left when absent. The work left in instances of sickness cover is arranged by the teacher who is ill or by a subject leader. As these arrangements are often put in place at the last minute, the quality of the work left is often inadequate. In a few primary schools, the headteacher is responsible for planning work when teachers are absent. However, these arrangements are often not sustainable in the long term and are not an efficient use of headteachers' time.

### **Costs**

- 60 The majority of schools have insurance to pay the costs of supply cover. In the majority of instances, the local authority administers these arrangements. The terms and conditions of the arrangements vary considerably. A few schools recruit cover supervisors from recruitment agencies rather than supply teachers to cover short-term absence as it is cheaper for them.
- 61 Most primary schools opt into the local-authority-administered "mutual pool for absence" cover. In the eight local authorities that do not provide a mutual fund for absence finance, primary schools often purchase insurance from a private provider who is named as the local authority's preferred supplier. In secondary schools, the situation is more variable, with larger secondary schools opting to bear the full cost of absence cover. There is considerable variation in the level of cover available. This ranges from payment for absences of 20 days or more to first-day cover. Primary schools are able to access first-day cover for learning support assistants in the Foundation Phase, and special schools are also able to access first-day cover for teachers and learning support assistants.
- 62 The employment status and contractual arrangements for HLTAs, cover supervisors and supply teachers vary considerably. Most HLTAs and cover supervisors employed directly by the school do not receive holiday pay as they have term-time contracts only.

- 63 Morale among supply teachers and cover supervisors working through recruitment agencies is low. They often work in challenging circumstances and, in many instances, supply teachers are no longer paid in line with the teachers' main pay scale. A minority of schools noted that cost was the most important factor when covering for absent teachers. This means that in a minority of instances schools are comparing prices between recruitment agencies and will negotiate for lower supply cover prices even if this means that the supply teacher may earn less than half the teachers' pay scale daily rate. In a few local authorities, supply teachers are also paid by the hour. This can also make it uneconomic for them to undertake work as they are employed for only a few hours at a time.

### **Administration**

- 64 In most secondary schools, the school business manager, bursar or administrative assistant is responsible for the day-to-day organisation of supply cover. A member of the senior leadership team has an overview of this work and liaises with support staff to make sure that arrangements are suitable and meet the needs of the school. Senior leaders also provide additional support in more challenging circumstances, for example when an increasing number of staff are ill or during periods of bad weather when some staff have more difficulty getting to work. The administrative assistant is responsible for placing a supply teacher or cover supervisor with a specific group.
- 65 In most larger primary schools, an administrative assistant also has day-to-day responsibility for organising supply cover, or contacting supply teachers or supply agencies. In small primary schools, this is normally the responsibility of the headteacher, even when they have significant teaching responsibilities and little time to undertake this administrative task at short notice.
- 66 Most cover supervisors and HLTAs have a line manager who is a member of the support staff, the business manager or the special needs co-ordinator in the school, although these arrangements are flexible and in many instances do not include formal line-management meetings.
- 67 In most schools, the headteacher receives brief information relating to supply cover, such as the names of the teachers who are absent and an outline of the arrangements to cover their classes. Headteachers become more involved when staff are absent for longer periods of time as, in a minority of instances, this involves appointing temporary staff.
- 68 Most schools rely on the local authority or supply agency to carry out pre-employment checks to make sure that staff are qualified and that they meet safeguarding requirements. A minority of schools ask for photographic identification documents from the supply agency and a minority of schools ask for written confirmation from supply agencies that teachers or cover supervisors have undertaken the necessary child protection checks. When schools source supply teachers from the local authority list, they do not carry out any further checks but rely on the local authority's CRB checks.

#### **4 The training and professional development of supply and cover staff**

- 69 Overall, supply staff do not receive enough training and development. The majority of supply teachers and cover supervisors access some training, although this has a relatively narrow focus and does not meet all their needs. This training is usually focused particularly on dealing with challenging behaviour and on general teaching skills, but there is little about national priorities or initiatives.
- 70 Nearly all supply teachers and cover supervisors state that they would like better access to a wider range of professional development activities. Unlike most teachers, the professional development of supply teachers is not supported well by their employer even if they have signed a contract and are employed by a supply agency. Most are able to arrange their own training or access courses offered by private companies, although this would mean losing a day's pay. They feel that they are missing out on opportunities offered to colleagues with permanent contracts.
- 71 Supply teachers who have recently joined the profession feel particularly disadvantaged because they are not always able to complete their NQT induction period. If they are employed for at least 0.4 for a whole term, they can join the recently introduced masters in education programme (MEP). Even so, their knowledge and understanding of national policies and priorities may decline over time, and make it harder for them to secure a permanent post. These newly-qualified teachers feel that they will become less competitive in the market for full-time teaching posts.
- 72 Most cover supervisors and HLTAs employed directly by schools have access to training as part of their school's annual in-service training programme. This training focuses on a range of topics relevant to classroom teachers and other support staff. A majority of cover supervisors and HLTAs in primary schools also have access to additional training as part of the school's performance management arrangements. However, the majority of cover supervisors in secondary schools do not take part in formal performance management arrangements, even though most say they would welcome it.

## Appendix 1 – Evidence base

This report draws on:

- visits by Estyn to a sample of 23 schools, including 10 secondary schools, 12 primary schools and one special school in autumn 2012;
- interviews with senior leaders, cover supervisors, school bursars, business managers, HLTAs and learners;
- scrutiny of documentation;
- financial information from local authorities and analysis of sickness absence data;
- questionnaires completed by 13 schools in addition to those visited;
- questionnaires completed by 36 supply teachers, HLTAs or cover supervisors;
- meetings with supply agencies;
- meeting with GTCW;
- feedback from unions representing headteachers and teachers; and
- a review of relevant literature.

The schools visited as part of this remit were:

- Birchgrove Comprehensive School, Swansea
- Bryn Awel Primary Caerphilly
- Brynmawr Foundation School, Blaenau Gwent
- Builth Wells High School, Powys
- Caldicot School, Monmouthshire
- Comins Coch CP School, Ceredigion
- Croesyceiliog Primary School, Torfaen
- Holywell High School, Flintshire
- Llanwern High School, Newport
- New Inn Primary School, Torfaen
- Ninian Park Primary School, Cardiff
- Overmonnow CP School, Monmouthshire
- Pentre's Graig Primary School, Swansea
- Pen-y-Bryn Primary School, Cardiff
- Rhyl High School, Denbighshire
- St Christopher's School, Wrexham
- Ysgol Bryn Coch, Flintshire
- Ysgol David Hughes, Anglesey
- Ysgol Dewi Sant, Denbighshire
- Ysgol Gyfun Cymer Rhondda, Rhondda Cynon Taf
- Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Tirdeunaw, Swansea
- Ysgol Gynradd Tanygrisiau, Gwynedd
- Ysgol Maes Garmon, Flintshire

## Appendix 2 – Case studies

Examples of approaches taken by schools to respond to teacher absence

### Case study 1

#### Birchgrove Comprehensive, Swansea

#### Monitoring and evaluation of supply cover

##### Context

Birchgrove Comprehensive School is an 11-16 community school with just under 700 pupils. The school serves a suburban area on the eastern side of Swansea, close to Neath. The intake of pupils contains the full range of ability. Around 26% of pupils are entitled to free school meals. This figure is higher than the national average.

##### Strategy

Three years ago, the school was facing a significant deficit budget. It agreed a three-year deficit reduction plan with the local authority. Historically, the school has had relatively high levels of teacher absence, including a significant number of long-term absences. The cost of providing supply cover for these staff alone was around £100k a year. In response, the school decided to establish improved arrangements for managing staff absence and the provision of supply cover.

##### Action

The school bases its cover arrangements on teachers at the school who have fractional cover contracts (part of their time is spent teaching and part of their time covering for absent colleagues). The school also has two cover supervisors. One has a literacy background and tends to cover English and humanities lessons and the other is a physical education specialist who is developing a second specialism in science.

The school uses cover supervisors for short-term absences and supply teachers for long-term cover.

Subject leaders have responsibility to monitor the quality of work set during teacher absence. They also conduct return-to-work interviews with the teachers they manage. They discuss attendance as part of the school's performance management arrangements.

The school has reviewed the impact of absence on departments, classes and individual learners for six months.

The school adheres to the local authority absence management policy. The school compares staff absence figures with other schools to help benchmark absence.

## **Outcomes**

The above arrangements have been in place for two years, but it is too early to see the full impact.

However, improved management of staff absence alongside other improvements in the school has led to improved performance at key stage 4. Performance in indicators at key stage 4 has increased since 2009 and the school achieved its best ever results in 2012.

## **Case study 2**

### **Rhyl High School, Denbighshire – The procurement of supply cover**

#### **Context**

Rhyl High School is an 11-16 mixed comprehensive school in Rhyl, Denbighshire. There are 781 pupils on roll. The school serves an area that is relatively disadvantaged socially and economically. The school's catchment area contains one of the most deprived wards in Wales, although, in contrast, there are also areas where there is relative affluence and little unemployment. Thirty-two per cent of pupils are entitled to free school meals. This figure is above the national average. The attainment of pupils on entry reflects the full range of ability. In 2008, Rhyl High School was judged to be in need of special measures. By July 2010, it was judged to have made sufficient progress and was removed from this category.

When the headteacher took up her post in January 2010, the school had a deficit budget of around £450k. The school needed to reduce spending significantly and to introduce more cost-effective procurement and staffing arrangements. Around this time, the school still had a relatively high rate of staff absence.

#### **Strategy**

The school appointed a finance manager, with a background in accountancy, to work at Rhyl High School and across its cluster of partner primary schools to ensure that they achieved better value for money in their procurement of services, including supply cover.

#### **Action**

The cluster currently employs a full-time cover supervisor. This is a trial arrangement and the cluster will assess the effectiveness of the strategy over time. Currently, the cover supervisor is based at a partner primary school, but works across all the schools in the cluster. She is paid as a teacher and was appointed to promote consistency and to improve the quality of provision when teachers are absent.

Due to the work of the finance manager, the school is able to evaluate fully the effectiveness of its sickness and maternity cover insurance schemes, to adopt the

most cost-effective arrangements. It is currently part of an insurance scheme with local partner primary schools. The school also buys in to the local authority schemes for invigilation, sickness and maternity cover. The school gets very good value for money from these schemes. In 2010-2011, the school paid £68k into these insurance policies but received a level of supply cover equivalent to £88k. The decision to remain in the scheme is made annually with governors at the school.

### **Outcomes**

This joint working between the school and its partner primary schools has had a significant impact on the cluster's ability to work collaboratively. This structure has been rolled out across the local authority.

The school has successfully reduced its deficit budget from £450k to £160k. Next year the school expects to balance its budget or to have a small surplus. During the same period, the school reduced its spending on cover by around £45k. Overall, the school's average spend on cover is now around £140k per year. This covers the cost of all insurance schemes, the salaries of cover supervisors and planned absence cover.

There is a strong link between the school's financial planning and other school policies relating to cover. For example, the head and finance manager liaise with each other about return-to-work interviews and absence monitoring. In doing so, the school has reduced the number of 'casual absences'.

Improved management of staff absence alongside other improvements in the school has led to improved performance at key stage 4. Although there has been a nine percentage point increase in the proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals, performance at key stage 4 has improved significantly since the headteacher took up her post in 2010.

In 2012, performance in the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics was third highest in the family and placed the school in the top 25% of schools with similar levels of free school meals.

## Appendix 3 – Statistical information about supply teachers

The tables below provide further statistical information about the make-up and background of supply teachers.

**Figure 1: Number of teachers registered with GTCW by gender**

|              | Supply teachers<br>October 2012 |             | All teachers October 2012 |             |
|--------------|---------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|
|              | Number<br>of<br>teachers        | %           | Number of<br>teachers     | %           |
| Female       | 3,868                           | 78.2%       | 28,251                    | 75.3%       |
| Male         | 1,077                           | 21.8%       | 9,291                     | 24.7%       |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>4,945</b>                    | <b>100%</b> | <b>37,542</b>             | <b>100%</b> |

**Figure 2: Number of teachers registered with GTCW by age**

|              | Supply teachers<br>October 2012 |             | All teachers October 2012 |             |
|--------------|---------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|
|              | Number<br>of<br>teachers        | %           | Number of<br>teachers     | %           |
| Under 25     | 513                             | 10.4%       | 1,990                     | 5.3%        |
| 25 to 29     | 726                             | 14.7%       | 4,971                     | 13.2%       |
| 30 to 34     | 463                             | 9.4%        | 5,507                     | 14.7%       |
| 35 to 39     | 415                             | 8.4%        | 5,339                     | 14.2%       |
| 40 to 44     | 447                             | 9.0%        | 4,985                     | 13.3%       |
| 45 to 49     | 406                             | 8.2%        | 4,029                     | 10.7%       |
| 50 to 54     | 379                             | 7.7%        | 3,832                     | 10.2%       |
| 55 to 59     | 599                             | 12.1%       | 4,248                     | 11.3%       |
| 60 to 64     | 688                             | 13.9%       | 2,104                     | 5.6%        |
| 65 +         | 309                             | 6.2%        | 537                       | 1.4%        |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>4,945</b>                    | <b>100%</b> | <b>37,542</b>             | <b>100%</b> |



**Figure 3: Number of teachers registered with GTC Wales by number of years since QTS**

|              | Supply teachers October 2012 |             | All teachers October 2012 |             |
|--------------|------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|
|              | Number of teachers           | %           | Number of teachers        | %           |
| 0 to 5       | 1,694                        | 34.3%       | 8,043                     | 21.4%       |
| 6 to 10      | 476                          | 9.6%        | 6,564                     | 17.5%       |
| 11 to 15     | 426                          | 8.6%        | 5,904                     | 15.7%       |
| 16 to 20     | 445                          | 9.0%        | 5,166                     | 13.8%       |
| 21 to 25     | 256                          | 5.2%        | 2,889                     | 7.7%        |
| 26 +         | 1648                         | 33.3%       | 8,976                     | 23.9%       |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>4,945</b>                 | <b>100%</b> | <b>37,542</b>             | <b>100%</b> |

**Figure 4: Number of teachers registered with GTCW by induction status**

|   | Supply teachers October 2012 |             | All teachers October 2012 |             |
|---|------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|
|   | Number of teachers           | %           | Number of teachers        | %           |
| Pass  | 720                          | 14.6%       | 10184                     | 27.1%       |
| Exempt                                      | 2,567                        | 51.9%       | 19,610                    | 52.2%       |
| Exempt in Wales                             | 282                          | 5.7%        | 4,202                     | 11.2%       |
| Not yet completed                           | 1,375                        | 27.8%       | 3,528                     | 9.4%        |
| Induction extended                          | 1                            | 0%          | 12                        | 0%          |
| Exempt – Induction completed in Guernsey    | 0                            | 0%          | 2                         | 0%          |
| Exempt – Induction completed in SCE Schools | 0                            | 0%          | 2                         | 0%          |
| 1 Year Extension (LA)                       | 0                            | 0%          | 1                         | 0%          |
| Fail but appeal                             | 0                            | 0%          | 1                         | 0%          |
| <b>Total</b>                                | <b>4,945</b>                 | <b>100%</b> | <b>37,542</b>             | <b>100%</b> |

Source: GTCW

## Glossary

### **Cover supervisor**

A cover supervisor supervises pupils in a class when their normal teacher is not available. They undertake exercises and activities already prepared by a class teacher. Cover supervisors may also have responsibility to arrange supply cover via a local authority or supply teacher agency. Practitioners employed in a cover supervisor role may also hold qualified teacher status or HLTA status.

### **Teaching assistant**

A teaching assistant is a person who supports a teacher in the classroom. Their specific duties can differ greatly from school to school. Teaching assistants are not generally deployed to cover the lessons of absent teachers.

### **Higher level teaching assistant (HLTA)**

A higher level teaching assistant (HLTA) is similar to a teaching assistant but they have been awarded HLTA status having been assessed against the HLTA Professional Standards. They are able to deliver elements of 'specified work' – planning, preparing and delivering lessons to pupils and assessing and reporting progress of pupils. This enables them to maintain continuity of teaching and learning for pupils during periods of short-term absence.

### **Supply teacher**

A supply teacher is a qualified teacher who covers a class when the regular teacher is absent, for example due to illness, personal leave, or other reasons. As they have qualified teacher status (QTS), they are qualified to plan and to prepare lesson activities and to assess pupils' progress and attainment. This enables them to provide short and long-term absence cover.

## The remit author and survey team

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