



Arolygiaeth Ei Fawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru  
His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

Mark Isherwood MS  
Chair of the Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee  
Senedd Cymru  
Cardiff Bay  
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**Sent by email only**

28 March 2024

Dear Mark

### **Covering Teachers' Absence**

Thank you for your letter dated 22 February 2024 in relation to evidence about teacher absence. We agree that this is an important area of work which has implications for the recruitment and retention of staff in schools across Wales.

During inspection and monitoring activity we discuss teacher absence and its impact on pupils, but we don't collect information about the use of supply teachers. Feedback from discussions with headteachers suggests that finding appropriately qualified staff, particularly at short notice, is very challenging. To support us with our response to your query we have also spoken to current headteachers who are on secondment with Estyn.

### **Supply teachers**

During our work we tend not to observe staff on short-term contracts although we will observe supply teachers who are more established in a school on a long-term contract. We often hear senior leaders talk about the challenges faced in securing good quality supply staff, especially to cover subject specialist and Welsh medium teaching in the secondary sector. During our meetings with pupils they will often reference where they have supply teachers and the impact this has on their continuity of learning.

### **Supply teacher availability**

In some parts of Wales, schools rarely have a problem with booking supply teachers and agencies ring daily to check if they need someone. In other areas, there are challenges in finding supply staff, especially at short notice and in shortage subjects/Welsh medium contexts. If absences are known about in advance, it is usually sufficient to book a week ahead, although occasionally supply staff will cancel arrangements on the day. The lack of available supply staff at short notice means that schools feel the agencies have the 'upper hand' and do not always provide someone with the right expertise or skills. As a result, many schools tend to cover unforeseen absences internally whenever possible. This is a cheaper option but can put pressure on senior staff. Some schools have appointed full-time or part-time teachers or unqualified

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Mae Estyn yn croesawu gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg a Saesneg. Bydd gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn y naill iaith neu'r llall yn cael yr un flaenoriaeth. | Estyn welcomes correspondence in both English and Welsh. Correspondence received in either language will be given equal priority.

teachers (cover supervisors) who only teach cover lessons and support other teachers or run interventions with pupils when not required to cover lessons.

### **Recruitment and retention incentives for supply teachers**

Schools generally don't provide any recruitment or retention incentives for supply staff.

### **The previous and new agency framework**

Often senior leaders are unaware that the framework has changed or don't feel it is any different from before.

### **Agency fees**

There is a big difference in cost between qualified teachers and cover supervisors sourced from agencies. Some schools tend to opt for cover supervisors because they are much cheaper and for short term supply, their perception is that the pupil experience is not hugely different. Costs for qualified supply teachers have risen but are generally in line with increases in teacher salaries. If the quality of the supply teacher is poor, the cost inevitably seems too high. In a few local authorities, schools use an insurance scheme to pay for supply staff but this doesn't cover the full cost.

### **The suitability and quality of agency staff**

There is considerable variation in the quality of agency staff and their expectations when deployed. As noted previously, in some areas of Wales, quality isn't a significant problem, although headteachers report that only a few agency staff come into school expecting to teach. In other areas, senior leaders feel that supply staff are often of poor quality and unreliable.

### **The new booking platform and its impact**

Senior leaders are often unaware of new booking platform or have not made much use of it because of the lack of availability of supply teachers in some areas.

### **The professional development of supply staff**

In general, senior leaders are not aware that agency staff receive any professional learning and feel that it's not evident in the quality of their work. If there is a long-term supply (four weeks or more), schools may provide aspects of professional learning e.g. completing part of the induction process with an NQT or inviting supply staff to attend professional learning sessions with school staff. Senior leaders feel that supply agencies provide very little support for supply teachers, including NQTs, and so they feel a responsibility to do this themselves.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Owen Evans', written over a horizontal line.

**Owen Evans**  
His Majesty's Chief Inspector of  
Education and Training in Wales