Managing staff absence and cover

Better value for money in schools

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Introduction

1 Maintained schools in England spent over £35 billion in 2009/10, some £5,000 on average per pupil. They have seen a large increase in available funds, with spending increasing by 28 per cent since 2002/03. Schools spend three quarters of this funding on their workforce. As budgets tighten, school leaders are increasingly focusing on how well that money is spent.

2 Schools make decisions about how they design their provision and how they deploy and manage their workforce. These decisions reflect their individual circumstances and constraints and will depend upon their different priorities. But they all face the challenge of tightening budgets. School leadership teams and governing bodies need to understand the costs and benefits of different staffing models in order to achieve value for money. Councils can help assess the relative positions of local schools and consider where they can offer support.

3 This briefing is one of four published by the Audit Commission in March 2011 which aims to identify where schools can achieve greater efficiency. The briefings examine patterns of spending in maintained schools in England. They build on our national report Valuable Lessons, published in 2009 (Ref. 1). We aim to help schools, governing bodies and councils identify where they have scope for greater efficiencies without compromising the effectiveness of their provision. This briefing examines staff absence and cover. The others look at classroom deployment, curriculum breadth and the wider schools' workforce.

4 The main findings on staff absence and cover are as follows.

- Nationally, rates of teacher sickness absence have reduced in recent years, but there is still notable variation between council areas and in some areas rates have been persistently high. Schools have scope to reduce teacher sickness absence and release some £14 million of productive teacher time annually. As the primary employer of teachers, councils can assist them in doing so.

- Numbers of Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) have risen by 38 per cent since 2008, to over 15,000. However, fewer than half of all schools employ any HLTAs. Schools that have invested in support staff have not reduced spend on supply staff, and there is some evidence that the use of qualified support staff for cover may be hindered by cultures in schools.

- Nationally, there has been little change in school spending on supply teachers since 2003. Schools continue to make extensive use of supply teachers, who account for 5 per cent of their spend on teachers, £875 million in total. We found considerable variation in supply teacher spending and nearly one school in five spends over 10 per cent of their teaching budgets on supply teachers. Our analysis suggests that schools could make considerable savings by reviewing these costs. Schools now spend more on agency-sourced and less on directly-contracted supply teachers.
Managing sickness absence

5 Schools look to reduce instances of staff absence to ensure the quality and continuity of teaching and to reduce the need for classroom cover, which can be costly. Our analysis suggests that schools lose significant productive time, to the value of over £500 million yearly through teacher sickness absence.

6 Schools are required to provide classroom cover for absent teachers and doing so can be expensive and contribute to overspends. Teacher sickness absence data is collated for council areas, making school level analysis impossible, but the variation in the sector suggests considerable savings are possible. We do not have data for other school staff. However, several school leaders we spoke to expressed concerns about absence rates of other school staff, with one school reporting the rate of absence for teaching assistants as twice that of teachers.

7 The Department for Education (DfE) recorded that in 2009, teachers were absent for an average of 4.9 days because of sickness.\(^{i}\) This was a fall for the second consecutive year and a decrease of 0.5 per cent since 2001 (Figure 1). The average of 4.9 days does not record absence during summer holidays and contains an adjustment for teachers leaving the profession. Our analysis discounts the latter and finds that teachers in primary, secondary and special schools are absent on average for 5.7 days annually. This is similar to sickness absence rates recorded for the private sector and compares favourably with other areas of the public sector (Ref.2).

8 Analysis of sickness absence between 2003 and 2008 shows an overall downwards trend and there has been a small reduction in the percentage of sick days that are due to long term absence. However, for some council areas, sickness absence rates have been persistently high.

9 There is also considerable variation in sickness absence across council areas (Figure 2). The authority with the highest rate had 10.6 days, while the lowest recorded only 2 days per teacher.\(^{ii}\) Differences between council areas are associated with council type, geography and levels of deprivation, but not enough to explain this variation. Nor is variation explained by differences in the mix of staff working in schools in the respective council areas.

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\(^{i}\) Teacher sickness absence is recorded for the calendar year. 2010 data is not currently available. Figures do not include other categories of staff absence, such as special leave or maternity/paternity leave. The DfE adjusts the count of teachers employed upwards by 12 per cent to account for teachers leaving the profession.

\(^{ii}\) We have used 2008 data for this analysis. DfE has advised that the 2009 data is not of sufficient quality at council level to allow for comparison.
We are not able to identify differences in sickness absence between individual schools, and therefore cannot account for variation within council areas. As a result, any benchmarking between councils should be seen as indicative. We would expect to find variation in sickness absence between schools, and councils can use their data to identify and, where appropriate, target support to individual schools.

Figure 1: **Teacher sickness absence has reduced since 2001**
Sick days per teacher 2001 to 2009, full and part-time teachers

*Source: DfE school workforce census*
There is considerable variation in sickness absence rates

Figure 2: There is considerable variation in sickness absence rates
Teacher sickness absence rates by local authority, 2008

Source: Audit Commission analysis of DfE workforce census data. National average here refers to average days per teacher at 5.7

Our analysis suggests that although national rates are falling, many schools can still do more to boost efficiency by reducing absence rates. School business managers share this view; 60 per cent of respondents to our survey said there was scope for schools to make savings through better absence management, among the highest of any of the options offered. Our analysis shows that 37 councils have sickness absence rates above the upper quartile level. If schools in these areas reduced sickness absence to the level of the rest, they could release productive teacher time worth £14 million annually.

There is established guidance on how to better manage sickness absence. Steps schools can take include:

- ensuring they find time to conduct return to work interviews;
- reviewing their historical patterns of absence and examining the causes of absence;
- checking absence rates and benchmarking with similar schools;
- reviewing absence policies, including eligibility for leave and the terms and conditions on which it is offered, and compliance with them; and
- setting up employee wellbeing, stress management and rehabilitation programmes.

In calculating this figure we have used median expenditure per teacher in 2008/09 of £42,187

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School leaders highlighted that councils play a key role in reducing rates of sickness absence in schools. In council areas we visited council-led initiatives have been successful in reducing sickness absence in local schools, or keeping it at low levels. School leaders also told us that head teachers do not always have the time or skills to manage absence effectively. This is an area where school business managers can take the lead in checking patterns of absence and causes of sickness, and where governing bodies should be challenging school leadership teams.

### Questions for school leaders, governing bodies and councils

- How do you know that the school’s strategy for managing staff absence is clear, fit for purpose, and widely understood?
- What does your review of current and historical patterns of absence and your benchmarking against others tell you?
- Who has named responsibility for absence management? How does the senior leadership team manage the issue?
- Have you considered working collaboratively with other local schools to cover sickness absences?
- How can you make sure you get the best support from your local council to apply best practice in absence management?

### Ensuring cost-effective cover arrangements

Schools are obliged to cover not only teacher absence but also staff shortages resulting from resignations or delays in recruitment. In addition, since 2005 there has been a statutory requirement for schools to provide planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time for teachers outside the classroom, of at least 10 per cent of their timetabled teaching time. Where this time cannot be found from existing non-contact time, cover will be required. Where these requirements are predictable, schools should aim to set up cover arrangements that minimise disruption for pupils and staff and mitigate the risk of unexpected overspends.

Schools have three main options for staff cover. They can require other available teachers to cover for colleagues, use qualified support staff to cover lessons within limits discussed below, or employ supply teachers from outside the school to cover temporarily. In deciding between these options schools should ensure the best possible value for money; balancing the costs of cover with the quality and continuity of teaching and learning. In doing so they need to consider the size and stream of the class and, at secondary level, whether a subject match is needed.
Legal requirements, particularly those set out in the School Teachers’ Pay and Conditions Document and the Specified Work Regulations also restrict schools’ options (Ref. 3, 4). Critically, options will depend on whether schools require covering staff to deliver curriculum content or to supervise the completion of pre-set classroom work and whether they are required to cover longer term absence. This restricts the extent to which they can use other school staff to provide cover. We explore these considerations in more detail below.

Is there scope for other teachers to provide cover?

Where they are available, existing contracted teachers can provide cover as part of their non-contact time. The 2003 National Agreement on workload aimed to reduce the burden on teachers of providing cover for absent colleagues. In part this was by stating that teachers should rarely cover for absent colleagues. The ‘rarely cover’ provisions of the agreement became law in September 2009, stipulating that teachers should only be required to cover in circumstances that are not foreseeable.

Teachers report they now spend very little of their time covering for absent colleagues. On average primary and secondary teachers spend less than an hour a week on non-regular teaching and even less (the equivalent of 3.9 hours per year) supervising pre-set work. In the 2010 Teacher Workload Survey, fewer than 10 per cent of teachers recorded any pre-set classroom cover over the recorded week (Ref. 5). Our analysis of the utilisation of teachers, set out in our Briefing on Classroom Deployment, suggests that teachers, particularly those in primary schools, have little flexibility within the teaching day to provide cover.

However, schools can still schedule cover into teachers’ timetabled duties, or employ ‘floating’ teachers where it is cost-effective to do so. This may be a desirable option for some schools, where they have more predictable staff absence patterns, but there are less obvious cost benefits for those facing sporadic absence. It will also be less relevant where secondary schools require covering staff to have the relevant subject expertise.

Current agreements on teachers’ pay and conditions limit the use of teachers to cover colleagues and data on the utilisation of teachers suggests that for many schools, this will be an unlikely source for cover. However school leaders we spoke to indicated that they continue to use teachers’ non-contact and directed time for cover and, where it is financially viable, employ floating teachers. Several schools also used members of the management team, including head teachers, to cover, thereby using time otherwise set aside for management duties.
Is there scope for support staff to provide cover?

21 The 2003 National Agreement on workload aimed to reduce the burden on teachers of providing cover for absent colleagues, in part by creating the role of HLTA. As well as undertaking typical duties of a teaching assistant, HLTAs can, in certain limited circumstances, take classes, delivering subject content in the place of absent teachers. Average costs for these roles are substantially lower than those of floating or supply teachers. So schools that recruit to these roles and manage deployment successfully can achieve substantial savings in supply cover costs.

22 Schools also use designated cover supervisors to cover for teachers. Cover supervisors, typically teaching assistants, can be less costly than HLTAs. However, their responsibilities do not extend beyond supervising pre-set activities or covering for short periods to release teachers for PPA time. Cover supervisors are not identified in the schools’ workforce survey, so we are unable to say how many are working in schools or in which phase they are most prevalent. However, school leaders we spoke to suggested that they make extensive use of this role, particularly in primary schools.

23 In 2010, schools employed the equivalent of 15,610 full-time equivalent HLTAs. This was 2.9 per cent of all classroom staff, (here defined as all teachers and teaching assistants), although this figure is higher for special schools and smaller primary schools. Numbers of HLTAs have increased by 38 per cent since 2008 (the first year their numbers were recorded), but 57 per cent of schools do not employ any HLTAs. Large primary schools are more likely than other types of schools to employ HLTAs; half of all primary schools with more than 350 pupils employ HLTAs. HLTAs, where they are employed, make up 10 per cent or more of classroom staff in the smallest primary schools and in special schools, compared to less than 3 per cent of teaching staff in the largest secondary schools.

24 Nationally the growth in teaching assistants (both regular and HLTA) has not been accompanied by reduced spend on supply teachers, which has remained steady since 2003. We looked at expenditure over the past three years in schools employing HLTAs and found no evidence of changes in the pattern of their spending on supply teachers. School leaders told us that they are often reluctant to make extensive use of HLTAs to cover due to resistance from teachers and unions to non-teachers taking classes.
Without data on the numbers of cover supervisors it is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion on the effect support staff have had on the costs of cover. However, the availability of this option has not been accompanied by a fall in spending on supply teachers. Schools that make good use of HLTAs can maintain continuity in teaching and reduce the costs of cover, yet their use, although growing, is not widespread. School leaders told us that using HLTAs can have clear benefits, particularly as they are known to pupils and can better address specific needs or discipline issues. However, even those schools employing HLTAs may be reluctant to use them to cover for cultural reasons, for example the resistance of teachers to their deployment or HLTA’s own views of the requirements of their role.

Questions for school leaders, governing bodies and councils

- What scope does the school have to make use of existing teachers to cover? What are the financial and educational implications of employing a floating teacher to cover absence?
- What use is the school making of qualified support staff to cover short-term absence? Do you support training for these designated roles?
- What options have you explored (for example revised timetabling or collaboration with other schools) for ensuring you have in-house cover?

Assessing the cost of supply teachers

Supply teachers are brought into schools to cover the lessons of regular contracted teachers. They play an important role in most schools, even where absence is well-managed and there are in-house cover options. In-house cover supervisors and HLTAs should only cover for three consecutive days, and so schools will need to use supply teachers to cover longer-term absence. Research published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in 2006 estimated that on average, primary schools use 82 supply teacher days per year and secondary schools 295 (Ref.6).

Data from the General Teaching Council (GTC) shows that at 31 March 2010 there were nearly 46,000 supply teachers in service in England, 9.2 per cent of all teachers (Ref.7). This is a rise from 7.9 per cent in 2006 and includes supply teachers working in all phases, including further education and the independent sector. DfE records 12,400 teachers as being in ‘occasional service’ in maintained schools, effectively supply teachers who have been working in their current school for less than a term. This is a rise on 2009, but in the context of an overall fall since 2003.
In 2009/10 total spending on supply teachers was £875 million, equating to £123 per pupil on supply teachers. This was nearly 5 per cent of schools’ total expenditure on teachers. On the whole this spend has been relatively consistent since 2002/03, equating to between £120 and £130 per pupil throughout this period. Primary schools spent more on supply teachers (3.2 per cent of their spending), than special schools and secondary schools.

However, there is considerable variation in the amount spent on supply teachers. Our analysis shows that it is a considerable cost for some schools, with a quarter of schools spending more than £185 per pupil on supply in 2009/10 (Figure 3). Nearly 20 per cent of schools are spending over 10 per cent of their teaching budgets on supply teachers. Only a small amount of this variation can be explained by factors external to the school (including London location, pupils eligible for free school meals and school size), suggesting there is considerable scope for savings.

Figure 3: **Supply teachers are a considerable cost for some schools**
Variation in schools’ spend on supply teachers, 2010

Source: Audit Commission analysis of DfE workforce census 2010
Although spend on supply teachers has been largely static over time, there has been a change in how they are sourced. When selecting supply teachers to cover classes schools can source directly, utilising contacts with known supply teachers; or through council-approved lists; or indirectly through a supply teacher agency. Several considerations will affect their options including the role played by the council in sourcing supply teachers and local market conditions. Schools have increasingly sourced supply teachers through agencies, with the proportion of supply teachers sourced in this way rising from 43 per cent to 54 per cent between 2003 and 2010. Agencies will charge a fee for their services, but can offer advantages in terms of timely sourcing of staff with the required specialisms and experience.

Schools can choose to insure against the cost of employing supply teachers to cover classes. Seventy-eight per cent of schools pay premiums for supply teacher insurance in the case of unexpected teacher absence, three-quarters of which made a claim against their insurance in 2009/10. In total some £115 million, 13 per cent of expenditure on supply teachers, was met by insurance claims.

Whether schools use insurance will depend on absence rates, the extent to which they use in-house cover arrangements and the affordability of insurance schemes. Special schools and primary schools made most use of supply teacher insurance: 19 per cent of special schools’ and 15 per cent of primary schools’ spending on supply teachers was met by insurance claims.

Before considering insurance, schools should consider the likelihood of the costs of premiums outweighing those of covering absence, and explore ways of mitigating the risk of staff absence. In 2009 schools paid a total of £152 million in supply insurance premiums and claimed £115 million, a difference of £37 million. Supply teacher insurance was more expensive (relative to claims) for rural primary schools with between 100 and 300 pupils, and for secondary schools with no sixth form with more than 1,200 pupils.
Questions for school leaders, governing bodies and councils

- How do you monitor and report on the use and costs of supply teachers? How have these changed over time?
- How have you benchmarked spend on supply teachers locally and with similar schools? How do you justify your spend - by need or supply teacher quality?
- How have you assessed the relative costs of direct contracts with supply teachers and using agency staff?
- Have you conducted a financial analysis of the viability of supply teacher insurance?

Contact Details

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References


4 *The Education (Specified Work and Registration) (England) Regulations 2003*


