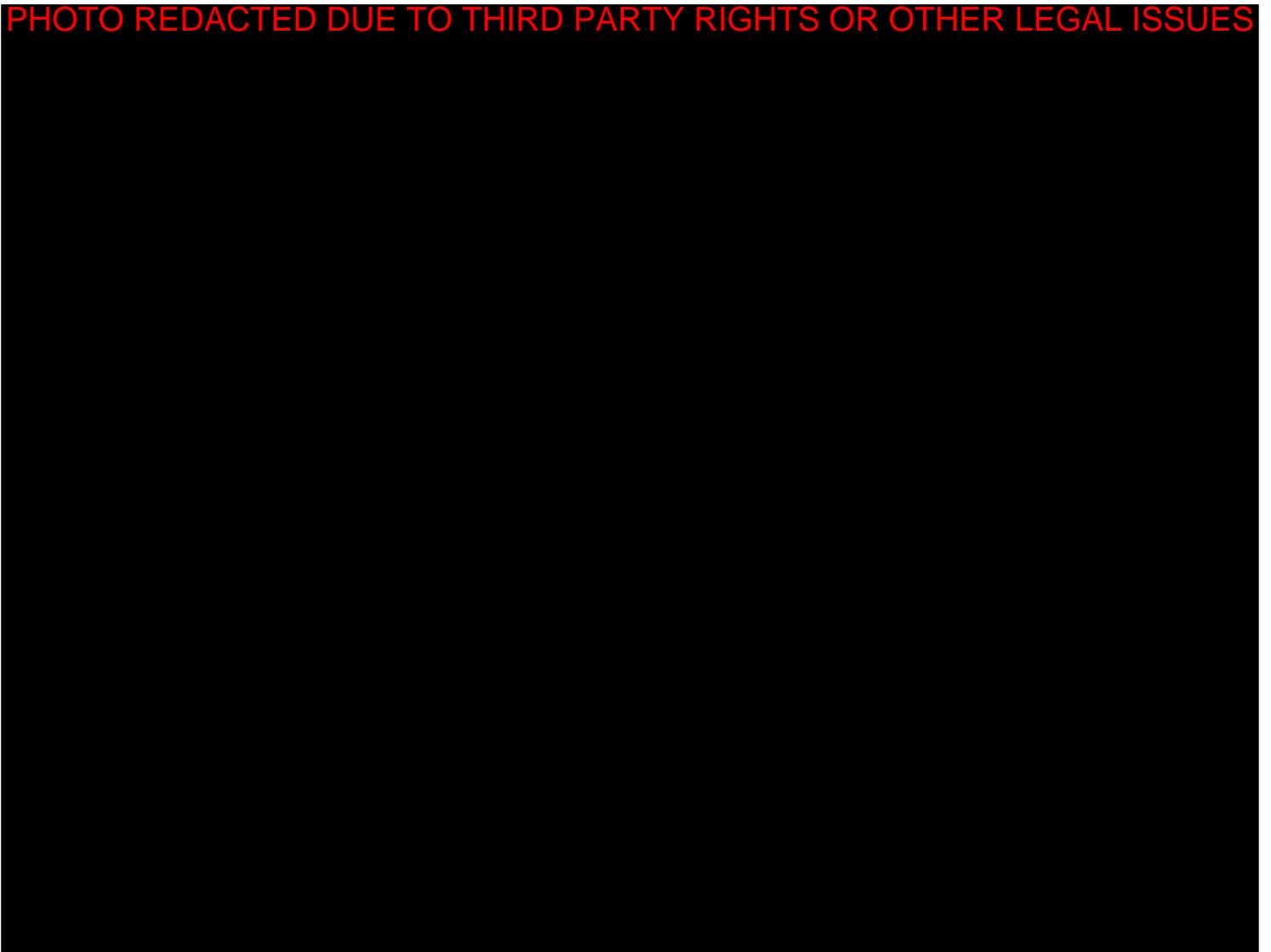# Effective management of school workforce attendance in primary schools
January 2017

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- ⚲ secondary schools
- ⚲ special schools
- ⚲ pupil referral units
- ⚲ all-age schools
- ⚲ independent schools
- ⚲ further education
- ⚲ independent specialist colleges
- ⚲ adult community learning
- ⚲ local authority education services for children and young people
- ⚲ teacher education and training
- ⚲ Welsh for adults
- ⚲ work-based learning
- ⚲ learning in the justice sector

Estyn also:

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- ⚲ makes public good practice based on inspection evidence

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Introduction

This report is written in response to a request for advice from the Welsh Government in the Minister's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2015-2016. The report is intended for the Welsh Government, headteachers and governing bodies in primary schools, local authorities and regional consortia. It may also be of interest to those working with faith schools through diocesan authorities.

The report evaluates the impact of the Welsh Government guidance on the 'Effective management of school workforce attendance' in primary schools. It considers how well primary schools, local authorities and regional consortia have implemented the guidance and the effect that it has had on the management of teacher and headteacher absence.

The findings of the survey draws on evidence from inspection and from 60 responses[1] to questionnaires sent to a representative sample of primary school headteachers, governing bodies and local authority representatives. Inspectors also interviewed a sample of headteachers, local authority representatives, and two teaching supply cover agencies.

Background

Under the Staffing of Maintained Schools (Wales) regulations 2006, schools across Wales are responsible for making decisions about how they organise, deploy and manage their workforce (National Assembly for Wales, 2006). An important aspect of this responsibility is how schools manage staff attendance and absence.

In response to a request for advice from the Welsh Government, Estyn published a report on '*The impact of teacher absence*' (Estyn, 2013). The report concluded that:

- In primary and secondary schools, learners make less progress when the class teacher is absent, and learners' behaviour is often worse
- Teaching of supply staff is often ineffective, mainly because they do not know enough about the needs of the pupils, particularly in secondary schools
- A few schools, particularly Welsh-medium schools and those located in rural or economically deprived areas, have difficulty finding suitable supply teachers
- Supply staff do not have access to many professional development opportunities and often have to arrange their own training courses

In parallel with this work by Estyn, the Wales Audit Office (2013) published a report on 'Covering Teachers' Absence'. The report questioned to what extent learners, schools and the public purse are well served by arrangements to cover teacher absence. The key findings from the report are:

- Expenditure on supply cover is rising and learner progress is being affected by an increasing number of lessons being covered by staff other than the usual teacher

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[1] 39 from headteachers, 8 from chairs of governors, and 13 from local authorities

- Schools do not manage cover arrangements well enough to ensure that all learners make good progress and are safeguarded
- Schools do not always manage resources spent on supply cover effectively

In response to these reports, the National Assembly for Wales Public Accounts Committee (2014) made a series of recommendations that the Welsh Government should:

- Capture and disseminates relevant and reliable data on teachers' absence from the classroom to enable more robust monitoring of occurrences of, and the reasons for, absence
- Conduct an evaluation of the effectiveness of training delivery; this evaluation should include the impact of different forms of training delivery on teacher absences from the classroom
- Amend regulations to make it a requirement for at least one member of each school's governing body to be designated to lead on HR matters
- Review the training provided to headteachers to ensure that there is a greater emphasis on managing classroom absences
- Work with representatives from WLGA, Supply Agencies and schools in developing the specification for the retendering of the Framework contract for school supply staff, to include a requirement for supply staff to have access to Continuing Professional Development

In July 2015, the Welsh Government published the guidance document, 'Effective management of school workforce attendance'. This document provides guidance on how schools can manage attendance and absence and ensure that they give priority to maintaining continuity of learning. The focus of the document is to assist headteachers, governing bodies, local authorities and regional consortia in establishing effective arrangements for managing classroom practitioner absence. The guidance explores effective cover for absence of classroom practitioners, roles and responsibilities in managing absence and ensuring appropriate cover arrangements are provided, managing performance, monitoring absence and safeguarding requirements.

In December 2015, the National Assembly of Wales, Children, Young People and Education Committee, published a report exploring the impact that supply teachers had on pupils. The key recommendations of this report include that the Welsh Government should:

- Start working on a new model for the employment of supply teachers
- Request a further thematic review by Estyn, at which time the effectiveness of the guidance can be assessed
- Undertake research immediately to establish whether there is an increased in the use of supply teachers in disadvantaged areas
- Work with schools to ensure that they develop targets for monitoring absence, as set out in the new guidance, that that are based both on the data they have collected and data from comparable schools

- Consider urgently the implications for Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) who are used as supply teachers to enable them to fully demonstrate their attainment of professional teacher standards
- Provide clear direction to local authorities and regional consortia on their role in relation to the use of supply teachers
- Provide clarity on how New Deal and school development plans can be used positively to support the continuing professional development needs of supply teachers

Main findings

Management of teacher attendance

1   The majority of the headteachers surveyed are aware of the Welsh Government's 'Effective Management of School Workforce Attendance' guidance, but only a minority have read and acted on the document's recommendations.

2   Nearly all schools have robust systems in place to track and monitor staff absence due to illness, in line with their management of attendance policy. However, very few schools or local authorities hold data on how often class teachers are absent from their class for reasons other than illness, for example for training or other school-based duties.

3   Around half of headteachers have received training within the last three years on managing staff attendance. However, around half of these do not fully understand or apply all aspects of their local authority's absence management procedures.

4   Many headteachers report on staff attendance to their school's governing body regularly, but only a very few schools include information on staff attendance in their school development plans or set targets for its improvement.

5   When arranging planned cover for class teachers, the main factors considered by school leaders are the quality of teaching, the quality of behaviour management, and whether the cover personnel are known to the school. When arranging unplanned cover, the main factors considered by school leaders are how quickly a person can arrive at the school and the cost.

6   Nearly all schools have experienced difficulty in arranging suitable cover for absent class teachers. For a minority of schools, this happens about half of the time and for a few schools this happens about three-quarters of the time. In Welsh-medium primary schools, schools are often restricted in the choice and quality of supply teachers available.

7   For planned absences, most teachers leave work and planning documents for the supply teacher. Only in around half of schools is the work at the same level as pupils would normally receive. For unplanned absences, in the majority of schools supply teachers use the classroom teacher's planning documents to provide some context for their lesson planning. However, when this planning information is not available, supply teachers plan their own work for the pupils without guidance. Often this means that they focus on keeping children busy, rather than building on what pupils already know and can do.

8   In most schools, teachers provide some kind of feedback on the performance of supply teachers to school leaders and supply agencies. However, very few schools feed back to the supply teacher themselves. Only a very few schools undertake any formal performance management of supply staff, unless they are employed at the school for a term or more.

Management of headteacher attendance

9   Although the Welsh Government 'Effective Management of School Workforce attendance' document provides schools with useful guidance on managing teacher absence, it does not provide schools, governing bodies or local authorities with guidance on managing headteacher absence. The majority of schools do not have a plan in place on how best to arrange to cover a headteacher's absence.

10   In nearly all schools, during a period of short-term headteacher absence, the deputy headteacher assumes the role of the headteacher. In nearly all schools, during a long-term absence of the headteacher, the local authority liaises with the chair of governors or full governing body to arrange suitable cover. This cover is also most often provided by the deputy headteacher. If the deputy headteacher is not the most appropriate person to lead the school when a headteacher is absent, local authorities use a variety of alternative cover solutions. In the best practice, local authorities keep a register of senior leaders from other local schools who could provide suitable leadership cover in these circumstances.

Recommendations

The Welsh Government should:

R1 Promote the 'Effective Management of School Workforce attendance' document more widely

R2 Provide schools and local authorities with guidance on monitoring, recording and evaluating the impact of staff absence due to activities other than illness, such as training, conferences and school-to-school support

R3 Produce guidance on the effective management of headteacher absence

R4 Ensure that the provision of supply cover in the Welsh-medium sector is addressed when reviewing the teacher workforce strategy

Local authorities should:

R5 Ensure that training on managing workforce attendance is available for all headteachers and forms part of an induction package for all newly appointed headteachers

R6 Provide schools with regular benchmarking data on staff attendance in line with Welsh Government guidance

Schools should:

R7 Monitor the work of supply teachers regularly and ensure that all pupils continue to make appropriate progress when their usual classroom teacher is absent

R8 Provide supply teachers with feedback on their performance

R9 Ensure that supply teachers can always access teacher planning documents

Impact of the 'Effective management of school workforce attendance' guidance

11 The majority of headteachers surveyed are aware of the Welsh Government's 'Effective management of schools workforce attendance' guidance document (Welsh Government, 2015). However, only a few headteachers have read it and acted on its recommendations.

12 In the few schools that have made changes following the publication of the document, leaders have:

- raised staff awareness of the importance of regular attendance and the potential impact of their absence on pupils
- improved procedures for recording and monitoring staff attendance
- applied the school's policy on managing staff absence more consistently
- updated relevant policies
- included appropriate targets to improve workforce attendance in the school development plan
- improved systems to manage the performance of supply staff

This has led to improved management of workforce attendance in many of these schools.

13 Only a minority of governing bodies surveyed are aware of the guidance. A few of these governing bodies have used the useful self-reflection questions in the annex to help them monitor their performance and procedures for managing staff absence.

14 Nearly all local authorities surveyed are aware of the document. A minority of these use the self-reflection questions in annex 1 as a starting point for discussion with school leaders on how the school manages staff absence. Only a very few local authorities have arranged workshops or briefings for headteachers on using the guidance, or have enhanced and improved support for schools in managing staff absence.

15 The document provides helpful guidance on how schools can manage attendance and the absence of classroom practitioners. However, it does not provide schools, governing bodies and local authorities with specific guidance on managing headteacher absence. This means that there is no guidance from the Welsh Government to make sure that all local authorities manage headteacher absence in a consistent and effective manner.

Management of teacher attendance

Monitoring and tracking teacher absence

16   Irrespective of their knowledge and use of the 'Effective management of school workforce attendance' guidance (Welsh Government, 2015), nearly all schools surveyed have robust systems in place to track and monitor when staff are absent from work, in line with their own management of attendance policy. They keep accurate records on absence from work due to sickness. They use a variety of approaches to monitor and report on staff absence including:

- implementing a staff signing in and out procedure
- monitoring individual staff attendance
- acting upon absence trigger points
- logging data on the local authority's electronic systems
- completing monthly absence reports for the local authority
- analysing data received from the local authority to compare absence rates and patterns

17   However, very few schools record information on how often class teachers are absent from their class for other reasons, for example for training, school-based duties or involvement in local and national initiatives. As a result, there is no data available to analyse how often pupils are taught by a person other than their class teacher.

18   Nearly all schools hold 'return to work' interviews after a member of staff has been absent from school due to illness. These meetings enable school leaders to understand the reasons behind the absence and help schools manage workforce attendance better.

19   Very few schools include information on staff attendance or set targets for improvement in their school development plan in line with the Welsh Government School Development Plan Guidance (Welsh Government, 2014). Most schools have yet to implement this guidance.

20   Many headteachers report on staff absence due to illness in their termly report for governors. A minority of local authorities provide schools with a template for this purpose to help headteachers present staff absence data clearly and identify trends.

21   Many governing bodies monitor the use and cost of supply teachers as a result of staff absence due to illness. However, very few consider the impact of staff absence overall on standards and provision.

22   Around half of headteachers have received training on managing staff attendance from their local authority during the last three years. In the best practice, local authorities include training on managing workforce attendance as part of the induction package for newly appointed headteachers. As a result, in these local authorities, all headteachers are aware of processes and expectations in managing staff absence.

23   Nearly all local authorities collect data from schools on staff absence due to sickness or ill health, normally using electronic systems. Many schools send details of 'return to work' interviews to their local authorities. However, very few collect data from schools on the amount of time class teachers are away from their class for other reasons. Only a few local authorities provide schools with any benchmarking data on attendance to assist school leaders in managing and comparing their own staff attendance rates.

24   Local authorities with best practice use a variety of methods to monitor the attendance of school staff including:

- ensuring that, if adopted by the governing body, schools comply with the local authority policy on managing staff attendance
- issuing regular updates to schools on the effective management of staff
- the use of a variety of electronic recording systems to help schools complete regular returns on attendance, which are recorded centrally
- regular analysis of school attendance tracking reports
- issuing quarterly reports to schools on days lost per employee and trends in absences; discussions on the data take place at headteacher consultation group meetings and the education service senior management team meetings

Managing cover for absent teachers

25   School leaders take good account of factors such as the quality of teaching and behaviour management when arranging cover for planned absences. However, when making arrangements to cover unplanned absence, leaders give greater weight to factors such as how quickly supply staff can arrive at the school and the cost.

26   For planned and unplanned absences of up to a week, the most common forms of cover used to teach a class are:

- the use of internal support staff and cover supervisors [2]
- employing teachers through a teaching agency
- employing supply teachers known to the school directly

27   For planned and unplanned absence of over a week, the most common form of cover is the use of teachers employed through a teaching agency.

28   Other forms of cover used less regularly, particularly for short-term absence, include:

- the use of teachers who do not have a class responsibility (including the headteacher)
- arranging for teachers employed at the school on a part-time basis to work additional hours
- distributing pupils to other classes

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[2] In line with Education Workforce Council (2016)

29   A few headteachers are concerned about the affordability of supply cover. In these cases, headteachers often select the cheapest option available when arranging supply cover.

Difficulties in obtaining supply teachers

30   Nearly all schools experience some degree of difficulty when arranging suitable cover for absent class teachers. In a few local authority areas, this difficulty is due to a shortage of staff with the right skills and experience, particularly during periods of high demand. In a very few cases, headteachers choose not to use available agency supply teachers because of previous concerns about the quality of their work.

31   Often, Welsh-medium primary schools find it difficult to find suitable supply teachers. This is due to a shortage in the number of Welsh-speaking supply teachers. This means that these schools occasionally compromise quality in order to use staff with Welsh-language skills. Very occasionally, the Welsh-language skills of supply staff deployed are not of a high enough standard to work in a Welsh-medium school.

32   Many local authorities consider the impact on schools when co-ordinating training events across the year. In the best practice, local authorities help schools to mitigate the impact of staff absence due to training by:

- spacing events carefully throughout the school year
- liaising with headteachers to select dates for events that cause the least disruption to schools
- giving schools ample notice of important training events to assist in organising staff cover

The use of teaching agencies solely to provide supply cover

33   The majority of schools are aware that the National Procurement Service has awarded the contract for the provision of agency workers in schools to a preferred teaching agency. However, a few schools are unsure whether they must use this agency to meet their supply teacher requirements. Welsh Government guidance indicates that there is no compulsion to do so.

34   A few local authorities require schools to arrange all supply cover through teaching agencies. This is impacting negatively on headteachers' ability to find suitable cover. For example, existing part-time school staff cannot be deployed to provide additional cover, which provides continuity of supply cover, without registering with an appropriate teaching agency.

Safeguarding arrangements

35   Many schools require all new supply teachers, employed directly by the school or through an agency, to provide a copy of their DBS certificate before commencing work at the school. However, in a few schools, leaders do not ensure that these checks are routinely undertaken.

36   Too many schools do not provide new supply teachers with important information about the school's safeguarding policies and procedures. While many schools give a verbal briefing on safeguarding, only a majority of schools ensure that supply staff have read and understand the school's safeguarding policy and procedures. In many schools, new supply staff are given a verbal briefing on the school's safeguarding procedures and are required to read the school's policy.

Work undertaken by pupils when the class teacher is absent

Planned absences

37   For planned absences, most teachers provide supply teachers with appropriate work for pupils to complete. In around half of schools, the work is at the same level as the pupils would normally receive. However, in other schools, the teacher leaves work that may be at a lower level than usual and pupils do not make the progress that they are capable of.

38   In most schools, supply teachers follow the school's policy when marking pupils' work. In many schools, supply teachers leave the class teacher a helpful note setting out what work the pupils have completed and provide an overview of any issues that might have occurred during their time with the class.

Unplanned absence

39   In the majority of schools, supply teachers are able to use the class teacher's planning to gain some context for their lessons. When planning information is not available, supply teachers provide their own work for the pupils without guidance. Often this means that they focus on keeping children busy rather than building on what pupils already know and can do.

Performance management and training opportunities for supply teachers

Managing the performance of supply teachers

40   In most schools, teachers provide oral feedback to the headteacher or a member of the school's administration team on the performance of supply teachers. Only a very few schools keep a written record of feedback on the performance of supply staff.

41   Very few schools provide supply teachers with feedback during their time at the school, particularly when they are only there for a day. Any evaluation of the supply teacher's work is usually gathered at the end of the school day or when the usual classroom teacher has returned to work.

42   When a supply teacher is employed through a teaching agency, most schools provide the agency with feedback on the teacher's performance. It is common practice for supply agencies to share this information with individual teachers, especially when feedback has been particularly favourable or poor. The agency does not usually deploy teachers to schools providing poor feedback again, unless this is the only option available. In these cases, the agency checks with the school before allocating the teacher to them.

43   In the best practice, teaching agencies develop and maintain a close working relationship with the schools that they serve. They arrange regular visits to schools by an account manager to discuss the performance of individual supply teachers and any particular supply needs that the school may have. One teaching agency also reported that they meet regularly with the local headteacher steering group to discuss generic issues and to obtain general feedback on the agency's performance. In the best practice, teaching agencies match the skills of their supply teachers closely with the needs of different types of schools. However, on days when there is a particularly high demand for supply teachers or when schools make requests at short notice, they cannot always achieve this match.

44   In a few schools, leaders make supply teachers employed on a long-term basis aware of the school's priorities. Leaders undertake formal lesson observations of their teaching and scrutinise pupils' work from their lessons. Leaders set these supply teachers individual targets for improvement in line with the school's performance management policy and procedures, and support them to improve their teaching.

Professional Development arrangements for supply teachers

45   The School Development Plan guidance (Welsh Government, 2014, p. 12) states that:

      'The school's School Development Plan must contain details of the school's provision for addressing the professional development needs of all staff, including leadership development, in relation to achieving the school improvement priorities. These provisions also include staff temporarily placed at the school which will include short- and long-term supply teachers. Schools' provision for supporting the professional development of these practitioners will naturally reflect the nature of their tenure and deployment.'

46   Most schools invite supply staff to attend school-based training sessions when they are working in school, even if they are only deployed to the school for a short period of time. Many schools encourage supply teachers to attend whole-school training days on a voluntary basis, but only pay staff to attend when they are working at the school on a long-term basis. Only a few local authorities organise training courses specifically for supply teachers. Examples of this training include those on safeguarding and on behaviour management.

47   Many schools use newly qualified teachers as supply teachers. If schools employ newly qualified teachers to cover a short-term absence, their professional development needs and additional entitlement are not usually addressed by the school. In most cases, supply teachers working at schools for a term or more have access to statutory induction entitlement, including additional non-contact time, training and a school-based mentor. In addition, teaching agencies play an important role in supporting newly qualified teachers employed by them and in ensuring that they receive their entitlement. However, a few schools have concerns over the quality of this support and guidance.

48   Most teaching agencies offer a range of generic training courses for supply teachers employed by them. These courses include safeguarding, first aid, behaviour management and training based on commercial schemes for literacy and numeracy. Teaching agencies do not usually pay for supply staff to attend school training days.

Management of headteacher attendance

49   Only around half of schools have a specific policy for managing the absence of the headteacher. Where such contingency plans exist, the transfer of responsibilities to an acting headteacher when the headteacher is absent is more likely to be smooth. Other schools do not have a contingency plan in place, but in most cases schools, governing bodies and local authorities work together to make arrangements to cover the headteacher's absence. However, these arrangements are a result of crisis management, rather than of a predetermined plan.

50   For short-term absence, the deputy headteacher assumes the role of the headteacher in nearly all cases. For longer-term headteacher absences, the local authority liaises with the chair of governors or full governing body to make arrangements to cover the absence. In most cases, the deputy headteacher again assumes responsibility and is supported by local authority or regional consortia officers.

51   Local authorities play an important role in managing long-term headteacher absence. The local authority assists schools in securing effective leadership arrangements when the deputy headteacher is not in a position to lead the school. In most cases, meetings take place between local authority representatives and members of the school's governing body to decide on the best arrangements for the school.

52   In most cases, a local authority representative provides the school's governing body with a range of cover options. These often include:

- a secondment of a headteacher or deputy headteacher from another successful school
- the appointment of an executive headteacher with shared responsibility for more than one school
- an executive headteacher appointed, but with the additional appointment of a senior leader to be 'head of school' responsible for the day-to-day running of the school
- the appointment of a recently retired headteacher on a short-term contract

53   In the best practice, the local authority maintains close contact with the chair of governors and interim headteacher throughout any interim arrangements. Many local authorities also provide an induction programme as well as regular support for the interim headteacher. In a few instances, this includes the support and guidance of a mentor, who is usually an experienced headteacher, to support and guide them.

54   A minority of local authorities write to schools to ask whether they have senior members of staff who would benefit from a development opportunity. This

information is recorded and is used when the authority is seeking suitable cover for absent headteachers. These volunteers are often teachers who have shown an interest in completing the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). However, there is too much variation across Wales in the amount of support that local authorities give to successful acting headteachers to assist them in securing a place on the NPQH assessment programme. As a result, there are too many acting headteachers who cannot be appointed to the position permanently as they do not hold the NPQH qualification.

Glossary

Absent (when referring to a class teacher)	Not available to teach their class
Absent (when referring to the headteacher)	Not on the school premises
Executive headteacher	A headteacher with overall responsibility for two or more schools
Federation	A formal and legal agreement by which a number of schools (between two and six) share governance arrangements and have a single governing body
Long-term absence	An absence longer than four weeks
National Procurement Service (NPS)	The National Procurement Service has been established as a cross public sector collaboration to procure common and repetitive spend for Wales.
Planned absence	When a member of staff is absent from the school due to a pre-agreed reason, authorised by their headteacher
Short-term absence	An absence of up to four weeks
Supply cover agencies	Organisations who provide cover to schools for absent staff
Support staff	Non-teaching staff employed to support pupils and the teacher, for example teaching assistants, learning support assistants, higher level teaching assistants
Unplanned absence	When a member of staff is absent from the workplace due to illness, an emergency or other reason and has not given notice of the absence

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