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National Assembly for Wales  
Cardiff Bay  
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Page: 1 of 4

Dear Darren

## **COVERING TEACHERS' ABSENCE**

When I presented our report *Covering Teachers' Absence* to the PAC on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2013, I was asked to provide additional information about the correlation between teacher absence and attainment, and on the arrangements in Northern Ireland and Scotland including the involvement of school governors.

### **Correlation between absence data and attainment**

My report on '*Covering Teachers' Absence*' and the Estyn remit report on '*The Impact of Teacher Absence*' highlighted that pupils make less progress when the usual teacher is absent and that the level of sickness absence varied significantly at local authority level. At the PAC meeting we were asked about the relationship between sickness absence and attainment. We responded that there is likely to be a link but we were unable to demonstrate a clear causal relationship. We have considered this further and this remains our view. School level sickness absence data is not available. Analysis of the data available to us at local authority level shows a weak, but not statistically significant, correlation between sickness absence levels and attainment— see *Figure 1*. Whilst one would expect there to be such a link we have not been able to illustrate a causal link because of the range of other variables involved. These include:

- sickness absence only accounts for about half of covered lessons;
- different cover strategies may mitigate the impact to a greater or lesser extent;
- the sickness data is at local authority level whereas the best link would be at school level;

- sickness absence leading to covered lessons may not have an impact on attainment in statutory assessment until some years afterwards; and
- apart from covered lessons, attainment will be affected by the quality of teaching and learning, school improvement arrangements, the quality of leadership and management within a school and a range of other factors.

**Figure 1: Teacher sickness absence in 2011-12 compared with attainment of Level 2 (Five GCSE A\*-C including English and Maths) at local councils.**

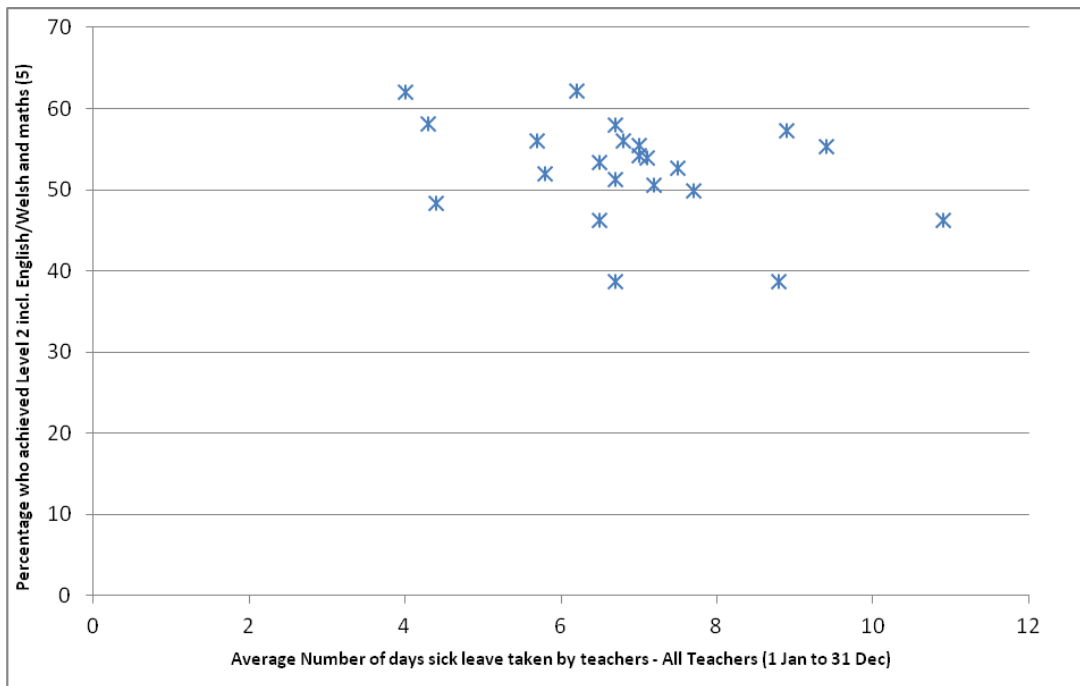


Figure 1 shows the Level 2 attainment at GCSE and the average days of teacher sickness absence for local councils in Wales. It is likely a similar picture would be derived from an analysis of other attainment data.

Source: Sickness data from local councils used to compile the SDR 101/2013 Teachers in service, vacancies and sickness absence table, January 2013, Table 7. Attainment data source – Statistics for Wales.

Improved monitoring of absence data and use of supply cover, as recommended in my report, should enable better analysis to be carried out in the future, at school, sector and local authority level.

### Arrangements in Northern Ireland and Scotland

In both Northern Ireland and Scotland the devolved arrangements include bodies responsible for teachers' pay and conditions of service. This provides the devolved administrations the potential to use terms of pay and conditions to help address issues related to cover arrangements.

## Northern Ireland

As noted in the report (Appendix 6), the Department for Education in Northern Ireland requires that schools may only use supply teachers (the term 'substitute teacher' is used in Northern Ireland) who are registered through the Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register (NISTR). Substitute teachers are booked and payments arranged online. Schools' boards of governors are required to ensure that their school has a policy for planned and unplanned absence.

In May 2010, the Northern Ireland Audit Office published a follow up report to its earlier work on the Management of Substitute Cover for Teachers<sup>1</sup>. They found that the establishment of the NISTR in 2006 had been a success although there had been teething problems. It noted *'One of the proposed main benefits of a centralised system is to avoid duplication of effort among both employers and substitute teachers in the range of recruitment, application and selection procedures that have to be undertaken. The system also performs enhanced disclosure checks on the references, qualifications and criminal records of each registered teacher. This removes the need for schools to complete such checks, and reduces the administrative burden on the Department'*. However, the review also found that there were significant variations in the cost of absence cover across Northern Ireland, and that schools were continuing to employ prematurely retired teachers.

In 2011 the Workload Agreement between the Management and Teachers' Sides of the Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service Committee included guidance on the allocation and operation of cover arrangements and a 'model school cover policy'<sup>2</sup>.

The model policy sets out responsibilities of teachers, principals and other designated staff for notifying and arranging cover. The guidance affirms that it is the Board of Governors' responsibility to ensure that appropriate arrangements for providing cover are in place although the model policy does not prescribe specific reporting to governors. In Northern Ireland, as all external cover teaching is arranged through the NISTR and substitute teachers are paid on the same scale as permanent teachers, the model policy does not cover the use of agencies or the pay of supply teachers. The model policy requires the recording and monitoring of cover and says that the Principal (or senior manager) will carry out an annual review of the cover policy in consultation with the recognised trades unions in the school, and will update the policy when required.

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[http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/index/publications/report\\_archive\\_home/reports\\_archive\\_2010/the\\_management\\_of\\_substitution\\_cover\\_for\\_teachers\\_-\\_follow-up\\_report.pdf](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/index/publications/report_archive_home/reports_archive_2010/the_management_of_substitution_cover_for_teachers_-_follow-up_report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The Workload agreement and supporting documents are available at:

[http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/school-staff/81\\_teachers-payandconditions\\_pg/81-employment-conditions-and-procedures.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/school-staff/81_teachers-payandconditions_pg/81-employment-conditions-and-procedures.htm)

## Scotland

As noted in my report, the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT) concluded a workload agreement in 2011 which requires cover teachers to be paid at Point 1 of the teachers' main scale for a 25 hour initial five day period before their pay rate is increased to the level they would otherwise be paid on if they were permanent staff. This agreement led to the issuing of guidance by education authorities on the management of the arrangements for short-term supply cover and fixed term contracts

Whilst the workload agreement was agreed through the SNCT, some trades unions were unhappy with the arrangements for supply teachers. The SNCT said it would monitor the impact on the availability of supply teachers, and over the last two years there have been some instances of shortages, particularly in some localities and in specific subjects. During 2013 the SNCT proposed that the five days qualifying period would be reduced to three days as part of a wider package of changes to terms and conditions arising from the McCormac Review of Teacher Employment in Scotland. The changes were subject to teachers accepting the whole package of changes. A consultative ballot by EIS, the largest teaching union in Scotland, rejected the changes. As at the end of November 2013, discussions were continuing.

In Scotland, the governing role of school boards was replaced in 1997 by parents' councils as a means of parents getting involved in the life of the school. Parents councils support schools in their work and represent the views of parents but do not have formal responsibilities related to cover arrangements. The SNCT *'Code of Practice on Short-term Supply'*<sup>3</sup> sets out the responsibilities of headteachers and notes that local councils have prime responsibility in ensuring short term supply is managed efficiently and properly.

I hope this information is helpful to you in progressing your inquiry.

Yours sincerely



**HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS**  
**AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES**

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<sup>3</sup> SNCT Code of Practice on Short-term Supply: [http://www.snct.org.uk/wiki/index.php?title=Appendix\\_2.8A](http://www.snct.org.uk/wiki/index.php?title=Appendix_2.8A)