



House of Commons

Committee of Public Accounts

The management of substitution cover for teachers

**Twenty-seventh Report of Session
2002–03**



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*Report, together with formal minutes, oral and
written evidence*

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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Angela Eagle MP (*Labour, Wallasey*)

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee is Nick Wright (Clerk), Leslie Young (Committee Assistant) and Ronnie Jefferson (Secretary).

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Summary

The education system depends heavily on substitute teachers providing cover for the absence of colleagues to maintain the smooth running of its schools. This dependence has been increasing in recent years. On average, pupils in Northern Ireland's schools spend approximately 10% of their school year being taught by teachers providing substitution cover.

In 2000–01 substitution cover in Northern Ireland cost £38 million and equated to an additional 1,735 full-time teachers. £24 million was paid by schools, principally on short-term sickness absences, maternity cover and cover for vacant posts. The remaining £14 million, met by the Boards and the Department, was for long-term sickness and absences due to teacher training. Expenditure on teaching staff providing substitution cover has risen rapidly over recent years, increasing by 29% in real terms since 1996–97. In addition just over £1 million was spent in 2000–01 on temporary teachers sourced through employment agencies.

On the basis of a Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General¹ the Committee took evidence from the Department of Education (Northern Ireland), the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools on three main issues: assuring the quality of substitute teaching; the re-employment of prematurely retired teachers; and the management of teacher attendance at school.

The over-riding impression the Committee formed about the management of teacher substitution and sickness absence in Northern Ireland is one of complacency. While the need for substitution cover has been growing steadily over recent years and sickness absence is currently running at alarmingly high levels among teachers, we found that sufficient attention has not been given to these issues as key management priorities. There are three areas which we consider require particular attention.

- **Lack of review of substitute teaching**

The central concern about the use of substitution cover is how such teaching will affect the quality of pupils' education. In view of this, the Committee found it surprising that the Department's School Inspectorate had not undertaken an evaluation of the management and effectiveness of substitute teaching. We consider that the lack of attention to these issues could compromise the quality of experience which pupils have in the classroom. We note that the Inspectorate intends to carry out a review of substitute teaching during the 2003–04 school year and we wish to be kept informed of the outcome of this exercise.

- **Inadequate control over the premature retirement of teachers**

The Committee is disturbed that the Department's failure to live up to undertakings given to our predecessor Committee in 1992 may have led to substantial resources being

1 C&AG's Report, *The Management of Substitution Cover for Teachers* (NIA 53/02, Session 2002–03)

unnecessarily committed. Given the high level of redundancies in recent years, a requirement that retraining and redeployment of teachers should always be considered before redundancy decisions are finalised, appears to have been largely ignored. In response to our questions, it has been estimated, using what we regard as conservative assumptions, that the establishment of a redeployment “pool” of teachers instead of approving their redundancies could have yielded savings in the order of £3.6 million in 1999–2000. In addition to this, despite an assurance that the re-employment of prematurely retired teachers would be limited to exceptional cases, we found that the practice had actually increased during the same four-year period.

- **Ineffective management of sickness absence**

The health record of teachers can have an important influence on the behaviour and performance of children. The reasons for this range from the ability of teachers to provide positive role models for their pupils to the potentially serious impact on a child’s education, if continuity in teaching and learning is broken. Teachers in Northern Ireland took on average 10 working days sickness absence in 2000–01, ranging from 6.8 working days’ to 14.7 across regions and school sectors. This compares with an average sickness absence rate of 6 days per teacher in England. The Committee believes that these statistics indicate that the management of sickness absence among teachers has not been accorded sufficient priority within the education system. For instance, no targets have been set to bring sickness levels down or into line with England. It is essential that teachers’ health problems are identified and acted upon and that greater commitment is shown towards managing sickness absence more effectively. Strategies that have a clear impact on reducing teacher absences have the potential to save millions of pounds in salaries paid to absent teachers and to reduce the costs of substitute cover.

1 Assuring the quality of substitute teaching

1. We were surprised to find that the Department's Education and Training Inspectorate had not undertaken a separate review of the quality of substitute teaching within Northern Ireland schools. Instead, the Department told us that if substitute teachers were in a school at the time of an inspection their teaching would be inspected as part of that process. The evidence from the annual inspection programme was that substitute teaching was not identified as a particular problem area.² By contrast, we note that a recent report by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED)³ has focussed attention on the question of the quality of supply teachers in England; for example, it found that the quality of some pupils' work had declined in approximately half of the secondary schools it inspected as a result of being taught by temporary teachers for a significant period of time. Moreover, it found that temporary teachers teach a higher proportion of unsatisfactory or poor lessons than permanent teachers; twice as many in primary schools and four times as many in secondary schools.

2. There also appears to be some divergence between the view of the Inspectorate on the quality of substitute teachers and that of schools. Half of the schools surveyed for the Comptroller and Auditor General's report felt that there were usually not enough or never enough good quality substitute teachers available.⁴ Similarly, the Committee noted the statistical analysis carried out by the Department for the C&AG's Report which indicates some link between the use of substitute teachers and reduced pupil attainment levels.⁵

3. The Committee notes that school inspection in Northern Ireland has less independence than its counterparts in England and Wales where it is carried out by OFSTED—a non-ministerial government department. In Scotland also, the Inspectorate has been established as an executive agency. We are concerned that in Northern Ireland, the Inspectorate's status may mean that its relationship with the Department has become too cosy which may have implications for how it approaches issues such as substitute teaching.

4. While the shortage of good substitute teachers was seen by many schools to be a problem, we note from the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report that there are weaknesses in what is offered to substitute teachers in order to improve their performance in terms of induction, training and performance appraisal.⁶ Furthermore, we consider it a serious shortcoming that few schools carry out a formal evaluation of the performance of substitute teachers.⁷

2 C&AG's Report, para 2.42; Qq 2–4

3 OFSTED Report, *Schools' use of temporary teachers* (HMI 503, December 2002)

4 C&AG's Report, para 2.40; Qq 4–5

5 C&AG's Report, para 2.53 and Appendix 3

6 *ibid*, paras 2.25, 2.35, 2.46

7 Q 6

5. The C&AG's Report draws attention to a marked increase in the use of recruitment agencies as a source of teachers to provide substitution cover. The regulation of those agencies needs to be rigorous. Recent research in England has raised concern over the failure of some agencies to carry out basic checks on teachers.⁸ In the Committee's view the use of agencies simply mirrors the centralised "pooling" system operated by the Boards prior to the introduction of local management arrangements. We were told that the Department and the Boards intend to use new technology with a view to piloting the establishment of a Substitute Teachers' Register which schools could access to meet their substitution needs.⁹

8 C&AG's Report, paras 2.18–2.19

9 Q 101

2 Re-employment of retired teachers

6. We pressed the Department on the high level of premature retirements among teachers—70% of all retirements in 1999–2000—and whether it was convinced that these were all justifiable. The Department pointed to a reduction in the percentage of teachers who retired early in the interests of the efficient discharge of the employer’s function, but said that significant numbers of teachers were now being affected by redundancy as a result of a number of factors such as falling school rolls and movements of population.¹⁰ We found the Department’s explanation unconvincing. We note with some concern that the statistics suggest that efficient discharge cases may have simply been re-categorized as redundancy cases over the course of recent years;¹¹ moreover, the Department’s explanation that high levels of early retirement among teachers are forced on employers by falling school roles does not stand up to close scrutiny. The statistics presented in the C&AG’s Report clearly indicate that the number of permanent teachers within the system has remained constant during recent years.¹²

7. We also find it difficult to accept that the 50% of teachers who retire early for reasons other than infirmity are not needed in the education system. The C&AG’s Report shows that the need for substitute teachers has been growing significantly.¹³ Redundancies among teachers between 1996–97 and 2000–01 have meant that the taxpayer has paid expensive enhancements to dispose of a quarter of a million teaching days, only to see many of these teachers re-engaged by schools as substitutes.¹⁴ In view of the savings made by some English education authorities that have established redeployment “pools” of teachers on which schools can draw to meet their substitution needs, we asked the Department and the C&AG whether any costing of such an option had been attempted.¹⁵ According to figures supplied by the Department,¹⁶ a typical enhancement could comprise the following elements:

	£
Pension enhancement	2,455
Lump Sum	7,367
Statutory redundancy payment	<u>15,317</u>
	<u>25,139</u>

During 1999–2000, 286 redundancies were approved, however, the Department pointed out that it was very unlikely that all of these redundant teachers could have been redeployed. For instance, due to family circumstances, it would be unreasonable to expect

10 Qq 7–8

11 Q22; C&AG’s Report, Appendix 4

12 C&AG’s Report, para 2.1, Figure 3; Qq 102–105

13 C&AG’s Report, para 1.4, Figure 1; Q 23

14 Qq 104–105

15 Qq 33–41

16 Ev 14

some teachers proposed for redundancy to relocate, while it is unlikely that there would be an exact match between teachers' qualifications/experience and available posts. Moreover, the Department also said that potential savings from redeployment would be offset to some extent by the cost differential of retaining older teachers on higher salaries and the administrative costs of managing a redeployment pool. However, as a broad indicator of potential savings, if it is assumed that 50 % of the teachers made redundant in 1999–2000 would be redeployed, then annual savings would be around £3.6 million.¹⁷

8. The Department also indicated that to introduce such a system would require legislative change. The Committee takes the view that the potential savings which a re-deployment pool could generate far outweigh cost offsets and we consider that a legislative barrier should not be an impediment to bringing arrangements into line with Great Britain.

9. We are incredulous at the Department's suggestion that redundancies in schools are fuelled by a need to protect young teachers from compulsory redundancy. We find it hard to see how strategic planning can be at all effective if older teachers have to be given expensive redundancy packages in order that younger teachers can be employed. In our view operating such a system amounts to little more than throwing taxpayers' money down the drain and demonstrates that the whole process of managing teachers totally lacks a proper strategic overview.¹⁸

10. In redundancy cases the decision to retire a teacher proposed by a school rests with the employing authorities—the Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Boards being responsible for meeting the additional compensation costs. Following a Report by this Committee in 1992,¹⁹ the Department reminded employers that re-training and redeployment options should always be considered before decisions on redundancy are finalised. Moreover, it also gave an undertaking that the School Inspectorate would monitor and evaluate the assessment by schools of teachers proposed for redundancy.²⁰ Given the high level of teaching redundancies in recent years, the Committee finds it difficult to believe that the feasibility of redeployment has been adequately assessed as part of the necessary only for the teacher to be almost immediately re-employed as a substitute.²¹

11. The Department advised employers in 1984 and 1988 that teachers who had been retired prematurely should be re-employed only in exceptional circumstances. The Report by our predecessor Committee in 1992 also called on the Department to ensure that this guidance was observed. The C&AG found that as a proportion of all temporary days, those worked by prematurely retired teachers have actually risen from 10% to over 13% between 1996–97 and 2000–01.²² We are concerned that this may indicate that young teachers are being squeezed out of permanent employment opportunities. Statistics produced for the Committee by the Department show that three years after graduation two-thirds of newly

17 Ev 16

18 Qq 24–27, 104–105

19 17th Report from the Committee of Public Accounts, *Department of Education Northern Ireland: Premature Retirement of Teachers* (HC 84, Session 1992–93)

20 Department of Finance and Personnel, Memorandum on the 17th and 18th Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts, (Cm 226, Session 1992–93), paras 10–11

21 Q 57

22 C&AG's Report, paras 3.6–3.8

qualified teachers have secured permanent positions, leaving one-third on temporary contracts.²³

3 The management of sickness absence

12. Teachers in Northern Ireland took on average 10 working days sickness absence in 2000–01. There is also a wide variation in teacher absence between regions and sectors within Northern Ireland ranging from 6.8 working days to 14.7.²⁴ In general, sickness absence in Northern Ireland is significantly higher than the average 6 days taken by teachers in England. In particular, the Committee found it difficult to understand why the number of sick days per teacher in Northern Ireland should be double that in London. The main explanation offered by the Department centred on the sick leave taken by female teachers as a result of childbirth and the fact that, in Northern Ireland, females make up a higher proportion of the teaching workforce. However, when we explored this issue in more depth with the Department it was accepted that extended maternity leave was only one of many factors involved.²⁵ What those other factors are was not explained to the Committee's satisfaction.

13. There are big financial gains to be made by reducing the high level of sickness absence among teachers. For instance, if sickness absence was reduced to the equivalent levels in Great Britain, pro rata savings on substitute teachers would be approximately £4 million, while the teaching and learning benefits of £6 million worth of permanent teachers' time would not be lost to the classroom. The Department has yet to set targets for reducing sickness absence among teachers in order to try and bring it into line with levels in England.²⁶

14. We questioned the extent to which the variations in sick leave within the Northern Ireland school system had been investigated by the Department. The Department has not undertaken any specific investigation of this but told the Committee that it had carried out a survey into the health and well-being of teachers in Northern Ireland.²⁷ We welcome the fact that through this exercise the Department has identified some effective practices for managing sickness absence which it considers it can learn from.

15. There is a need for the Northern Ireland teachers' employers to explore the potential for making counselling services available to teachers as a way of tackling sickness absence.²⁸ The Department told the Committee that the survey of teachers' health and well being had supported its approach of trying to develop new practices and methodologies through schools in order to address the problems of teacher sickness and absence.²⁹

24 C&AG's Report, paras 4.4–4.5

25 Qq 10, 46, 67–77

26 C&AG's Report, paras 4.7, 4.14–4.23; Q 53

27 Qq 44–45; Department of Education, *The Northern Ireland Teachers' Health and Wellbeing Survey* (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, December 2002)

28 C&AG's Report, para 4.28

29 Q 53

4 Availability and reliability of management information

16. The primary source of information about substitute cover and sickness absence is derived from the Department's payroll and personnel system. However, the system was not specifically designed to support the management of these two elements. The C&AG's Report points out that, while the Department has set up an extensive menu of reports which can be accessed to explore aspects of sickness absence, employers had expressed a need for greater access and the ability to use information to provide more meaningful monitoring reports.³⁰

17. We noted that, where a school does not provide the Department with a reason for the absence of a permanent teacher, the related period of substitution is classified on the system as being cover for a vacant post. Recognising the limitations of the payroll and personnel system as a tool for managing substitution, the Department told us that it is currently looking at implementing a new management information system to take account of such deficiencies.³¹

30 C&AG's Report, paras 4.15–4.16

31 Qq 107–112

Conclusions and recommendations

Assuring the quality of substitute teaching

1. Given that substitute teachers constitute a much larger proportion of the teaching workforce in Northern Ireland than England, the Committee is surprised that the Inspectorate has not addressed the issue of substitute teaching earlier. The Department has assured us that it has now commissioned the Inspectorate to undertake a review and this will take place during the 2003–04 academic year.
2. We believe that greater independence from the Department would improve the Northern Ireland Inspectorate's standing both within and beyond the education community.
3. There should be better mechanisms in place to support substitute teachers. We find it remarkable that substitute teachers can be put in regular charge of classes without proper induction, training and performance evaluation. We are pleased that the Department is to give serious consideration to formalising the evaluation of substitute teachers and we look forward to it taking prompt action on the outcome of its deliberations.
4. The Committee stresses that the regulation of employment agencies supplying teachers needs to be robust. We also welcome the fact that the Boards will be establishing a pilot scheme to examine the cost/benefits of setting up their own "pooling" arrangements whereby head teachers could access a centralised database to book substitute teachers on-line.

Re-employment of retired teachers

5. The manner in which the Department has operated the Teachers' Premature Retirement Scheme has led to a massive drain on educational resources. There must be higher priority uses for this money in a region such as Northern Ireland rather than handing out bounties to teachers who still have a contribution to make to the schooling system. In allowing teachers to pursue an early retirement strategy which is lucrative to them but at the expense of the taxpayer, the Department is failing in its duty as a custodian of the public purse. The Committee pointed out to the Department the savings made by some English education authorities that have established redeployment "pools" of teachers. We recommend, therefore, that the Department should examine thoroughly the cost/benefits of establishing redeployment "pools" of teachers in order to decide whether to take powers to facilitate their introduction within the Boards.
6. We are concerned that the Department is failing to adequately assess its teaching requirements. The witnesses did not convince us that they had the strategic overview which we believe is essential for effective planning of teacher numbers and the proper management of substitution and absenteeism. We recommend that the Department comes to an early decision about the teaching workforce it needs and takes urgent action to strengthen its strategic planning to achieve it.

7. One of the most disturbing features to emerge from this session is that the Department has not been successful in complying with undertakings it gave to this Committee in 1992 that strict controls would be exercised over the re-employment of teachers who had benefited from premature terms and that the process for approving redundancies would be suitably policed. We do not expect to revisit these issues eleven years later only to find that the situation has actually deteriorated. We expect the Department to take firm steps to ensure that employers give the proper degree of preference to unemployed teachers before considering re-employing those who have been retired with enhanced terms. We acknowledge that two-thirds of newly qualified teachers achieve permanent posts within three years of graduation. However, for the remainder, there remains a strong suspicion that their permanent employment is being displaced by long-term substitution among prematurely retired teachers. In this regard, we recommend that the Inspectorate re-establishes its role in the monitoring and evaluation of the premature retirement of teachers. In view of the Department's poor record of action, we are asking the C&AG to give particular attention to monitoring these issues.

Managing sickness absence

8. Sickness absence rates among teachers in Northern Ireland are much higher than their counterparts in England and the Committee is disturbed that the Department has failed to set targets for their reduction. We recommend that the Department develops an action plan and establishes sickness reduction targets aimed at achieving the savings identified in the C&AG's Report.
9. In the Committee's view, reducing sickness absence is not rocket science. The Department needs to explore with the employers and schools the reasons for high sickness absence rates and ensure that Boards and schools benchmark their management practices against those with better records, both within Northern Ireland and across Great Britain, in order to identify and remedy their deficiencies.
10. The Committee agrees that teachers' employers should pilot the use of counselling services in schools. We recommend that they and the Department should promptly review the results of the pilots and expand the provision of these services where there is a clear business case for doing so.
11. It appears that a culture of high absenteeism may have been allowed to develop in some parts of the teaching workforce in Northern Ireland, which gives rise to a particular concern about how this will impact on pupils' learning. Even if teacher absenteeism does not induce similar behaviour among pupils, it is clear that schools and the education system in general have a key role to play if this culture is to be changed.
12. We were told by the Treasury Officer of Accounts that the high rates of sickness absence among teachers are mirrored throughout the public sector in Northern Ireland. This is an obvious concern to us and we have asked that the C&AG reports back to the Committee on this in due course.

Availability and reliability of management information

13. A basic step in managing both teacher substitution cover and sickness absence would be to establish accurate and comprehensive information on their levels, patterns and costs. The Department needs to take urgent action to ensure that improved recording arrangements are introduced so that reliable and easily accessible data is available on the use of substitution cover and the nature of sickness absence.

Formal minutes

Wednesday 4 June 2003

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Brian Jenkins

Mr George Osborne

Mr David Rendel

Mr Gerry Steinberg

Jon Trickett

Mr Alan Williams

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (The management of substitution cover for teachers), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 17 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Twenty-seventh Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That the provisions of Standing Order No. 134 (Select Committees (Reports)) be applied to the Report.

Adjourned until Monday 9 June at 4.30 pm

Witnesses

Wednesday 26 February 2003

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Mr Gerry McGinn and **Mr John Caldwell**, Department of Education (Northern Ireland), **Mr Donal Flanagan**, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, and **Mr Jackie Fitzsimons**, South Eastern Education and Library Board

Ev 1

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