



HLTAs and Cover Supervisors - your questions answered

NEU Guidance for Support Staff Members

For a whole variety of reasons, but normally because of budget constraints, schools are increasingly using support staff as *de facto* teachers. Indeed, some schools have been found to use TAs and even non classroom-based support staff to stand in for absent teachers.

The evidence is stark: In our 2019 survey of support staff members, 76% of members who undertake cover supervision reported no difference in criteria between their duties and those of a supply teacher. Furthermore, 73% of those acting as Cover Supervisors said it is not possible to supervise a class in their school without delivering the lesson themselves.

The Workload Agreement

The Agreement was signed in 2003 by the then Labour Government and most of the major national teachers' and general workers' unions. Its primary aim was to tackle the excessive workload burden faced by teachers, by eliminating all 'non-teaching' functions from their daily workload. To achieve this end, the Agreement established two new support staff roles: Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) and Cover Supervisor. At national level, the Government established the tripartite Workload Agreement Monitoring Group (WAMG), with the task of ensuring compliance with the terms of the agreement.

What is an HLTA?

The agreed definition of an HLTA is:

"To complement the professional work of teachers by taking responsibility for agreed learning activities under an agreed system of supervision. This may involve planning, preparing and delivering learning activities for individuals/groups or short term for whole classes and monitoring pupils and assessing, recording and reporting on pupil's achievement, progress and development." ([Level 4 Supporting and Delivering Learning Model Job Profile - Preamble](#))

But this definition can and is undermined in the following ways:

- by using HLTAs predominantly or exclusively to cover PPA time

- by loosely interpreting the phrase ‘short term’ to mean anything up to a whole term or even longer. In practice, this can mean that HLTAs are expected (and timetabled) to plan, prepare and deliver (i.e. teach) lessons to whole classes on an ongoing basis.

HLTAs - Q&A

Do TAs need to qualify as an HLTA before commencing their duties?

No. Staff do not need to have secured HLTA accredited status in order to be appointed to an HLTA vacancy. The headteacher must be satisfied that support staff have the skills, expertise and experience to carry out a range of activities at different levels – including, for some staff, working with whole classes:

“Headteachers should have regard to the national HLTA professional standards in considering whether a member of support staff has the necessary skills and expertise to undertake an HLTA role even though they may not yet have achieved HLTA status.” (WAMG guidance on HLTA roles for school support staff).

What does supervision of an HLTA doing ‘specified work’ by a qualified teacher require?

School support staff, when undertaking specified work, must be subject to the direction and supervision of a teacher in accordance with arrangements made by the headteacher of the school.

A system of supervision is required for each HLTA who undertakes ‘specified work’. The system should not be bureaucratic and should include:

- a) Which elements of the ‘specified work’ can be carried out by a particular HLTA documented in their job description
- b) Which teacher is responsible for managing, supervising and monitoring the work of the HLTA and how that supervision will be delivered

What ‘specified work’ can be carried out by an HLTA?

‘Specified work’ is defined as:

- a) Planning and preparing lessons and courses for individual pupils, groups and whole classes
- b) Delivering lessons to pupils including delivery via distance learning or computer aided techniques
- c) Assessing the development, progress and attainment of pupils
- d) Reporting on the development, progress and attainment of pupils

The teacher will exercise their professional judgement, based on what is best for pupils, as to whether it is more appropriate for them or an HLTA to carry out

particular 'specified work'. This will depend on the level to which the professional judgment and expertise of a teacher is required, e.g.

- "Delivering lessons to pupils" could include anything from an 'A' level class in Further Maths to practising times tables. A higher level of professional expertise and judgment of a teacher is required in the former whilst the latter could be delegated to an HLTA of sufficient competence
- "Assessing the development, progress and attainment of pupils" could include anything from the formal assessment of coursework to marking and collating scores from a multiple-choice test. The former is a more complex and demanding task that requires the skills of a teacher, whilst the latter could be delegated to an HLTA.

The responsibility for teaching, learning and outcomes remains with the teacher and, ultimately, the Head.

Should an HLTA undertaking 'specified work' have support in the classroom when the teacher is not present?

The use of HLTAs to undertake 'specified work' is not intended to worsen pupil-teacher ratios but improve them so in a situation where support is normally present the level of support should not be reduced. So if the HLTA or another TA is normally present in the classroom when the teacher is present, there should be additional support for the HLTA when the teacher is not present.

Should HLTAs providing 'specified work' receive PPA time?

Yes. HLTAs who undertake specified work should have an appropriate percentage of paid time within their contracted hours set aside to enable them to plan and prepare for their own role in lessons and liaise with their class teacher/s.

Should HLTAs be employed on split contracts being paid at a lower rate for part of the week?

Sometimes TAs with HLTA status are issued with split contracts, whereby they are deployed to do higher level work for part of the week and paid a higher rate for this, but are then deployed for the rest of the week as a general TA at a lower level of pay.

Such practices are based on the assumption that HLTA work only relates to working with a whole class. However, if a TA has the skills and knowledge to take a whole class they clearly have a range of skills that can also be used in a variety of other settings supporting the work of teachers.

WAMG advice on this states that casual arrangements – which give to TAs who meet the HLTA standards enhanced pay only for those hours when they are deployed with whole classes – are not in line with the aims of workforce reform and the principles of the National Agreement. Therefore, schools should consider whether they have a broader range of work that would enable them to maximise their

use of an HLTA's skills or, indeed, whether these resources could be used more widely in collaboration with other schools.

What is the going rate for the job?

In a four-level grading system, HLTAs should be paid at Level 4 i.e. the highest support staff grade.

What is cover supervision?

The agreed definition of cover supervision is:

“Cover supervision occurs when no active teaching is taking place and involves the supervision of pre-set learning activities in the absence of a teacher:

1. Supervising work that has been set in accordance with the school policy
2. Managing the behaviour of pupils whilst they are undertaking this work to ensure a constructive environment
3. Responding to any questions from pupils about process and procedures
4. Dealing with any immediate problems or emergencies according to the school's policies and procedures
5. Collecting any completed work after the lesson and returning it to the appropriate teacher
6. Reporting back as appropriate using the school's agreed referral procedures on the behaviour of pupils during the class, and any issues arising.”

(WAMG Guidance for Schools on Cover Supervision)

Cover supervision Q&A

What does 'short term' mean?

“Cover supervision should only be used for short-term absences. These might be known in advance (for example, where a teacher has a medical appointment or is undergoing professional development) or unexpected (for example, absence due to illness). Longer-term absence – e.g. due to long-term sick or maternity leave should be covered by a teacher.”

“Head teachers will use their professional judgment in determining what should be regarded as 'short-term' absence. There will be a number of considerations which the head teacher will need to take into account when deciding whether cover supervision is appropriate or not:

- The extent to which the continuity of learning can be maintained
- The length of time a particular group of pupils would be working without a teacher

- The proportion of the total curriculum time affected in a specific subject over the course of a term

In a setting where a class is predominantly led by one teacher for the majority of the day, it is likely that cover supervision will very quickly become 'specified work' and active teaching would be required. In any case, it would clearly be inappropriate in such settings for a class to be 'supervised' for more than three consecutive days. On the other hand, where pupils are only timetabled for occasional lessons which are affected by teacher absence, the use of cover supervision over a longer period of time may be appropriate."

(Both statements taken from WAMG Supplementary Guidance)

In all other circumstances, NEU advice is that cover supervision should not be used for more than five consecutive days, or over an extended period, one day a week for a half term in a primary school, or one lesson a week for a half term in a secondary school. Any sickness absence longer than five days should be deemed 'long term' and covered accordingly. (WAMG Supplementary Guidance – see also WAMG notes 12 and 13).

What is the headteachers' role?

There will be a number of considerations which the headteacher will need to take into account when deciding whether the use of cover supervision is appropriate or not. The key factors are:

- The extent to which continuity of learning can be maintained
- The length of time a particular group of pupils would be working without a teacher
- The proportion of the total curriculum time affected in a specific subject over the course of the term

What training should be provided?

The head teacher needs to ensure that Cover Supervisors have been appropriately trained, particularly in pupil behaviour management. Such training is essential if those responsible for cover supervision are to make a real contribution to reducing the burdens on teachers. (See STPCD, paragraph 87, page 187, 2012 edition)

Should Cover Supervisors be used to cover PPA?

No. "Schools should be clear that they cannot use staff in cover supervision roles to fill gaps in the timetable created by teacher PPA time." (WAMG note 13 – see also WAMG notes 17 and 22).

What is the going rate for the job?

The agreed national model job profiles reflect the expectation that staff providing cover supervision would have skills and knowledge at the level or equivalent to NVQ3. (i.e. Level 3 in a four-Level system).

How can abuses of the Workload Agreement be tackled?

The task of policing the implementation of the letter and spirit of the Workload Agreement was made harder in 2010, when the coalition Government moved away from the concept of 'social partnership' with the unions and abolished the national WAMG. However, the Workload Agreement itself is extant, and all parties to it – schools, employers and unions – are bound by its terms.

In particular, individual schools have a clear responsibility to ensure that support staff are not exploited: "Schools should review their individual cover policies to ensure that these activities are only undertaken by those members of staff with appropriate levels of skills, status and experience and that any necessary training is provided."

"It is vital that schools have distinct and documented cover and PPA policies in place that define the roles and responsibilities of support staff members. These policies need to be communicated to and understood by all school staff. If members of support staff are required to deliver specified work, the school will also need to have in place a written system of supervision."

(Both references taken from WAMG guidance note 22 – The Appropriate Deployment of Support Staff in Schools)

In particular, schools will need to clarify the "short-term" cover issue when drawing up their cover and PPA policies.

Conclusion

If you are an HLTA, Cover Supervisor, Teaching Assistant or Learning Support Assistant, and you have concerns about the way your role is being interpreted by your school, speak to your NEU School Rep or Branch Secretary in the first instance.

Need advice? Your first point of contact for advice and support is your Workplace Rep. The NEU website also has an extensive help and advice section, with a wealth of guidance covering the issues our members face at work (<https://neu.org.uk/help-advice>).

For advice and support on employment issues contact the Employment Adviceline: Fill in the web form here (<https://neu.org.uk/employment-adviceline>, or call 0345 811 8111.