

Dr Mary Bousted & Kevin Courtney
Joint General Secretaries
NEU

Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary
NASUWT

By email

4 November 2020

Dear Mary, Kevin and Patrick,

The role of supply agencies

I'm writing further to the article in today's TES. As you know, we approach this matter from different stand points. But as a parent and previous chair of governors, I come at this with the best interests of students in mind, just like you do.

I think we can agree that supply teachers are necessary. In the last year for which ONS data is available, there were just shy of 1,000 teacher vacancies in England and on average, teachers took 4.1 sick days per year (ONS, June 2020). In this climate, supply teachers are performing a critical role.

Your own surveys also show how supply teachers are working this way out of choice in the vast majority of cases - mainly because of ongoing frustrations with the education system or a desire to work more flexibly.

Given the scale of need and the demand to work this way, I'm baffled as to how you think supply teachers would get work without an agency.

Local authorities are already overstretched and budget cuts have bitten even harder this year. Small uplifts from central government will not help them provide the service you are suggesting, particularly not in this year of all years. In another era, local authorities did perform the role an agency now undertakes - but it was outsourced many years ago due to the growing burden it placed on local authorities and a substantial lack of resources to manage this safely or effectively.

If your proposal is for schools to perform the matching service and due diligence that agencies perform - that isn't practical. Unless you are a private school, it's highly unlikely you have someone who can perform recruitment duties - asking schools to do this means it will just add a role to a member of staff who is often overworked already.

Agencies are there because at extremely short notice, the school can call an agency and within a couple of hours, the agency has supplied a teacher to cover the classroom.

Providing this service means a recruiter is on call for work from 5.30am. They don't finish work until late in the evening. When a supply teacher is placed on assignment, the agency then charges the school a fee - to cover the wage of the supply teacher, their tax liabilities (such as employer national insurance), the costs of performing safeguarding checks on the staff member and to cover their own employee's wage. This isn't profiteering - this is running a vital service. Market forces mean that agencies exist and schools can shop around. It's worth noting the agency only charges a fee on placing someone on assignment - there are many occasions where the assignment doesn't go ahead.

Teacher recruitment and retention requires a proper workforce engagement strategy. That's where we should be asking DfE to focus attention and we'd be delighted to work with you on such a campaign. Further, we've always collaborated with you when it comes to ensuring the ethical treatment of agency workers, and we hope that will continue to be the case. Those are the issues that need our attention, now more than ever.

Yours sincerely,



Neil Carberry
Chief Executive
Recruitment & Employment Confederation