

**Advice for members on cover issues**

Throughout the pandemic, school staff have gone above and beyond to keep schools running to support children and young people. During this time support staff have stretched the boundaries of their job roles to help schools out while vulnerable colleagues were forced to stay away from work or while other colleagues were re-assigned to other areas. School meals workers, admin, estates staff, learning support, teaching assistants and all other support staff are all going the extra mile to help try and keep pupils safely in school.

UNISON fully understands the challenging circumstances in which schools are operating, but it is not fair to staff or pupils if staff are being deployed inappropriately or in an unsafe manner. Such practices are exploitative and detrimental to educational provision for pupils.

Covid absences in the coming weeks could put enormous pressure on staff and could mean staff being asked to cover absences for colleagues. Unless specified in your contract, this should be on a short-term basis only and mutually agreed. Any proposed changes in role or responsibility for support staff should be discussed and agreed with the individual staff member and be part of a risk assessment. Schools should not impose new roles or duties on staff. UNISON expects that changes which impact on others should be discussed with all those affected, and that the local UNISON reps/contact should be involved. If there are no school based reps, then schools should [contact the local UNISON branch](https://branches.unison.org.uk/).

If you are unhappy with proposals or are aware that your school has not talked to the union you should [contact your branch](https://branches.unison.org.uk/). Staff should not be exploited by schools and colleges.

**What should I do if I’m asked to undertake a role that I believe is unsafe or that I’m not trained/qualified for?**

UNISON members should not agree to potentially unsafe practices or inappropriate cover and deployment arrangements. Our advice is to:

Raise such concerns immediately with your line manager / head teacher.

Speak to your local UNISON rep.

If the school insists on going ahead, urgently [contact your local UNISON branch](https://branches.unison.org.uk/) for support.

In the case of a health and safety issue, branches can follow our local escalation procedure. Staff have a right to a safe working environment and individuals should not have to work where they reasonably believe that they (or others) face serious and imminent danger. [Our website outlines employers’ legal health and safety responsibilities.](https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2021/01/Schools-safety-responsibilities-advice.docx)

**What about special schools?**

In special schools, recruiting suitable cover for absent staff can be challenging and disruptive for pupils. Where schools have staff shortages, they should use risk assessments and discussion with staff and parents to determine the best course of action in the circumstances.

**Should teaching assistants/learning support assistants be leading classes?**

UNISON has concerns that in schools with staff shortages, teaching assistants will be asked to lead full classes and cover full teaching duties. This would not be fair on staff or pupils. Any proposed changes in role or responsibility should be discussed and agreed with you.

Our clear position is that only suitably experienced teaching assistants should be asked to lead classes and then only in situations known about in advance, for example where a teacher is working from home due to being clinically extremely vulnerable and where another teacher is unavailable. Suitably experienced teaching assistants should only be those whose job description already includes this occasional responsibility, usually Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs, working at levels 4 and 5 according to the [[NJC model job profiles](http://www.skillsforschools.org.uk/media/1053/model_school_profiles_teaching_and_learning_support_23jul13.pdf)](http://www.skillsforschools.org.uk/media/1053/model_school_profiles_teaching_and_learning_support_23jul13.pdf)), and who are paid at the appropriate grade.

Where HLTAs are deployed to lead classes, they should be provided with enough time, within their contracted hours, in which to plan and prepare, including opportunities to liaise with class teachers. They too should be supported by a teaching assistant. UNISON is clear that HLTAs should not be expected to lead classes on an indefinite basis. Any arrangement for a HLTA to lead a class should be reviewed and agreed with the staff member on at least a fortnightly basis.

UNISON released the findings of [research into TAs’ experiences during the pandemic](https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2021/04/UnSung-heroes-TA_CA-22.3.21-Final-v2-002.pdf), led by the Institute of Education at University of London. These findings will inform our work to support TAs as we move into the next phase of the pandemic and recovery.

**What about cover supervision?**

Cover supervision should only be for a teacher’s short-term absence from the classroom where the absence was not known about in advance (for example to cover short-term sickness) and pre-prepared work is available. To undertake cover supervision, TAs should have skills and knowledge of at least level 3 and be paid at the appropriate grade for this level (see the [NJC model job profiles](http://www.skillsforschools.org.uk/media/1053/model_school_profiles_teaching_and_learning_support_23jul13.pdf)). In this situation there is no expectation that active teaching takes place. Rather, pupils should carry out a pre-prepared exercise under supervision. For more information see our [factsheet on cover supervision](https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2018/04/24922.pdf).

Schools should consider contingency arrangements for appropriate cover supervision in their planning.

**What about cover for teacher PPA time?**

Schools are required to put additional qualified staff into their timetable to ensure that teaching continues during PPA time.

**Need further advice?**

Please speak to your local UNISON rep, [contact your branch](https://branches.unison.org.uk/) or contact UNISONdirect [online](https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/online-enquiries/) or via 0800 0 857 857. UNISONdirect's hours are Monday to Friday 6am to midnight, and Saturday 9am to 4pm.

For more information, visit our [website](https://cymru-wales.unison.org.uk/campaigns/school-support-staff-cymru-wales-corona-virus/) and like us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/walessupportstaff/)

If you’re not a UNISON member you can [join now here](https://join.unison.org.uk/?gclid=CjwKCAiA24SPBhB0EiwAjBgkhrS4oevWMpNOXKbGMe-YK_xhhj6Z7w9YpOwxHvFFTVq_OJ70P5cbJxoCNYsQAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds)