

Cover for teachers - a 5-phase plan to end ‘teaching on the cheap’

Introduction

Research carried out by UNISON in 2024 showed the [extent of excessive and inappropriate cover](#) by teaching assistants (TAs) in schools. TAs are being used to plug gaps in the teacher workforce, taking them away from their own crucial roles and creating additional workload and stress. This 5-phase plan provides an organising framework to work with schools in ways that engages members and builds UNISON organisation and strength, to ensure we win and sustain change to ensure TAs are deployed appropriately.

National guidance on cover (agreed between unions and the Department for Education) was developed in the 2000s and has not yet been superseded/withdrawn. However, since this time the school landscape and expectations around support staff roles have changed significantly. School support staff roles and responsibilities urgently need reviewing and this must be a priority for the new School Support Staff Negotiating Body. In the interim, this organising plan seeks to challenge the excessive and inappropriate deployment of TAs for cover purposes within the current system.

NB when levels are referred to below, these are based on the [NJC role profiles](#). However, whilst a national scheme, these have not been consistently applied and grading structures vary, so it is vital to check local agreements. Any information below based on national guidance does not override any locally agreed arrangements.

What do we mean by cover supervision?

Cover supervision is needed when a teacher is absent from the classroom on a short-term basis (e.g. due to illness). In theory, no active teaching takes place; rather pupils undertake work prepared by a teacher, but overseen by the person providing the cover (however our research found three-quarters of TAs and cover supervisors said cover often or always involves active teaching...).

Cover supervision can be undertaken by teachers, higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs – level 4 and above) and cover supervisors (which is a level 3 role in the NJC profiles – however please check local agreements). In some circumstances TAs at level 3 may provide short term cover

but check local agreements about the nature of this, since some branches may have agreed TA3 short term cover as only being for unplanned absences in emergency situations, for example. Also, in the [NJC role profiles](#), short-term cover is **not** listed as a core responsibility of a TA3; rather it is listed as a possible specialism that should be evaluated, so it is important to check job descriptions and whether roles have been evaluated to take this into account.

Cover supervision is inappropriate for medium-term or long-term absence. It is also inappropriate in a primary or special school setting since it is likely to quickly escalate into 'specified work'. If this is happening, branches could consider calling for it to stop, or for TAs to be regraded to the appropriate level for this work i.e. HLTA (more on this below).

What is specified work?

Specified work takes place in the event of a planned or routine teacher absence (e.g. to facilitate PPA time). Rather than supervising work, it involves planning and delivering lessons, assessing pupils and report on their development. Crucially, those carrying out specified work must be directed and supervised by a qualified teacher and the teacher remains responsible for the learning outcomes. Only level 4 and 5 TAs (i.e. HLTAs) can undertake specified work. If TAs at lower levels are undertaking specified work, again, branches could consider calling for it to stop, or for TAs to be regraded to the appropriate level for this work i.e. HLTA (more on this below).

What is the problem?

[UNISON's research](#) found that 17% of TAs providing cover supervision were level 1 or 2. Further, 68% of those who routinely deliver lessons (i.e. undertake specified work) are in a role below level 4. TAs are also carrying out cover supervision in primary schools and special schools where this is highly likely to involve active teaching, and hence should be on an HLTA grade. The research concluded that the extent and nature of TA cover has gone way beyond the parameters of official guidance. This is not fair on staff or pupils.

The 5 Phase Campaign Plan

The following 5 phase plan is a template guide for a UNISON best practice organising approach to the issue of inappropriate cover in schools. The approach can be adapted by organisers to any school workplace issue. However, this organising guide does not replace more detailed UNISON advice and guidance.

Phase 1 - Research and development

Gather the information required to run a successful campaign including:

- Workplace mapping. Understand UNISON's strengths and weaknesses.

- Ask teaching assistants in the school/trust to fill in a diary to log when they provide cover supervision / specified work, over an agreed period of time (e.g. a month). See template in appendix 2 which can be adapted and printed. Sending the diary/log to members before an organising visit will generate discussion in the workplace and early awareness which will help in Phase 2.
- Identify decisions makers. Who within the school/trust, and if necessary, above the school ultimately has the power to agree to make the change? Map out how we can influence them.
- Understand the issues. Use UNISON briefings to understand the employer's responsibilities around cover and potential means of redress for members. For issues around cover, this could involve
 - a) Looking to regrade any TA providing cover at levels 1 and 2 (or below what is agreed locally)
 - b) Looking to regrade any TA below level 4 in a primary school or special school, since cover in these circumstances is likely to become specified work (a level 4 and 5 activity, but check locally agreed arrangements)
 - c) Negotiating limits to 'short term cover' and defining what this looks like. Locally, some branches may have defined short term cover as only being for unplanned absences.
 - d) Negotiating a pay uplift for times a TA covers a class – whilst not a long term solution, this could be beneficial while wider discussions above cover and roles take place under the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB).
- Write up the organising and bargaining goals, identify available resource and plan an achievable timeline to implement the following phases.

Phase 2 – Base building

- Engage with members within a school, local authority or academy trust to discuss the issue of cover and the employer's responsibilities. Ideally face to face. Email is unlikely to generate a strong response.
- Build support for the plan to win the school's commitment to a meaningful policy around the use of cover.
- Emphasise the importance of high UNISON membership and ask members to nominate school support staff champions to help lead the campaign.
- Produce flyers about the diary/log activity.
- Encourage and support existing or newly nominated activists to recruit UNISON members and ensure all members complete the diary/log.
- Agree who will request a copy of relevant policies from management.
- Continue to involve, support and develop new activists through the campaign. See the Organising to Win (OtW) guide on identifying and recruiting workplace leaders and activists for further guidance.

Phase 3 – Campaign launch

- Meet with members to discuss the findings from the TAs' cover diaries, and whether the current school cover policy is "suitable and sufficient" based on those responses.
- Agree a UNISON pledge to send to school leadership and a plan to get it signed by as many members as possible – ideally the majority of support staff who carry out our cover. For example (but can be adapted to suit local circumstances):

We, the undersigned UNISON members, ask for a meeting with school senior leadership to discuss joint working to address issues of inappropriate and excessive cover in schools, starting with agreeing the following pledge:

Our school / trust understands an employer's responsibilities around cover and acknowledges serious concerns around(priority cover issues arising from TA cover diaries) Our school will urgently work with staff unions on a new / reviewed cover policy including:

- *Using floating teachers or supply teachers to cover classes in the first instance*
- *Considering the recommendations for school leaders on deploying support staff to cover classes [see appendix 3]*
- *Providing dedicated training time for cover supervision*
- *Providing dedicated training on managing behaviour*
- *Providing ongoing mentoring and monitoring*
- *Providing training on how to deal with threatening situations.*

We will also commit to grading reviews where appropriate and/or pay uplifts in the interim period while reviews are taking place.

- A UNISON checklist for a cover policy can be found in appendix 1. Give a reasonable deadline for a response.
- Prepare for the meeting to deliver the results of the TA cover diaries and with members ready to give testimony on the issues of inappropriate and excessive cover and its impact. It is important at this stage to prepare members for a response from management that blames funding, short staffing, and behavioural issues following Covid lock down – but does not accept employer responsibility for addressing legitimate concerns.
- Anticipate and prepare counter arguments.
- Keep members advised of UNISON activity and progress with regular communications.

Phase 4 – Bargain or escalate

The measures outlined in the pledge are not unreasonable. They only ask the school’s leadership to take seriously their responsibilities around cover and engage with UNISON on these matters. If phases 1,2 & 3 have successfully built member support for the plan and provided a strong collective voice on the issues, the school’s leadership should readily agree to the pledge and a framework and timetable to negotiate a new policy (or review any existing policy).

If not, then the campaign should be escalated. An escalation plan should include activity in the workplace and community ordered in a way that will incrementally increase pressure on the decision makers identified in phase 1. An escalating plan provides the decision makers with every opportunity at every stage, to sign the pledge and commence meaningful negotiations.

Examples of potential escalating actions, ordered to incrementally increase pressure

These may not all be appropriate at every school, and neither is the list exhaustive. An escalation plan must be based on what has been learned through phases 1,2,3 and members’ collective strength of feeling.

Step	Workplace	Community
1	<p>Carry out a survey of staff to assess confidence in existing measures to provide cover appropriately and how to raise and record concerns.</p> <p>Investigate level of teacher absence – info could be gathered from governor meeting minutes, FOI requests for data etc</p> <p>Place concerns based on the above in writing to school leadership team – signed by members.</p> <p>Support the local rep to write a report based on member logs and remedies requested including a timeframe.</p>	
2	<p>Raise a collective grievance regarding the school’s failure to adequately respond to pledge request. Prepare member spokespeople to present testimony in any hearing.</p>	

3		Letter and meeting request to “higher decision maker” i.e. Local Authority or Academy Trust CEO / Board.
4		Engage members in letter writing campaigns. Engage with local MPs and Councillors or members of Academy Trust Board – asking for their intervention. Consider the decision makers identified in Phase 1 and analyse their key interests to identify new opportunities to influence them.
5	Having exhausted other options – take UNISON regional advice on lodging a trade dispute and consultative ballot for action.	Media and social media coverage of safety issues, dispute, and consultative ballot.
6		Complaint to DfE, after seeking advice from UNISON Education unit.
7	Request a formal industrial action ballot.	Media and social media coverage of safety issues, dispute and ballot.

Phase 5 – Win, celebrate, review and sustain

Securing the new or improved policy is a great success, but it’s not the end. Cover is a live issue and positive change will only be sustained through active and engaged UNISON membership with trained and supported workplace health and safety representatives and branch infrastructure.

It is important to continue to develop UNISON’s local infrastructure by ensuring new reps receive training and support. It is also important that we continue to build effective UNISON health and safety committees and structures in schools and branches, and across Local Authorities and in Multi Academy Trusts.

Other resources

- Further “Organising to Win” guides with more detail on one-to-one skills, workplace mapping, identifying new activists etc are on the OtW tile on the [Organising Space](#).
- Appendix 1 – Cover policy checklist
- Appendix 2 – TA cover log template
- Appendix 3 - Recommendations for school leaders.

Appendix 1 – Cover policy checklist

Cover checklist for reps and branches

Reps and branches may find the following checklist useful when discussing cover policies or charters. NB the NJC levels referred to, while part of a national scheme, have not been implemented consistently. Employed grades and roles can therefore vary by area/region so it is important to check local arrangements.

- Schools must have a cover policy in place which has undergone consultation with staff and unions, including definitions of short, medium and long-term cover.
- Cover supervision is only for short-term absence; it is not appropriate for medium or long-term absence.
- Schools should firstly seek to ensure that cover is undertaken by qualified teachers. In circumstances where this is not reasonably possible, only support staff with appropriate levels of skills, experience and remuneration should undertake cover.
- Cover supervision is not appropriate to cover PPA time. Only staff with appropriate training to deliver 'specified work' should be deployed to ensure that delivery of the curriculum is maintained.
- Specified work is a level 4/5 (HLTA) activity so should be paid at least at level 4 (but please check local agreements and grading structures).
- Cover supervision is not appropriate in primary and special settings since short-term supervision will quickly escalate into specified work. It is therefore inappropriate to deploy support staff to provide cover in this instance unless they are trained to level 4/5.
- For cover supervision, lesson plans should be provided along with any necessary resources, there should be an emergency contact for support with class behaviour, and ongoing supervision/training should be provided.
- The number of adults in class should not be reduced when a lesson is covered.
- Curriculum interventions and catch-up programmes delivered by HLTAs/TAs should not be disrupted by the need for cover.
- All cover arrangements should be recorded for monitoring purposes.
- Cover practice should be monitored and regularly reviewed.
- Consider sharing the recommendations for school leaders on deploying support staff to cover classes (see appendix 3).

Appendix 2 – TA cover log - This template can be adapted to suit local circumstances.

- Name: _____
- School: _____
- Setting (primary/secondary/special/other): _____
- Your role and level: _____
- Date: _____

	Time spent providing cover (hours and minutes)	Year group covered	Subjects covered	Were lesson plans provided?	Did you have support from a TA?	Reason cover was needed
Monday						
Tuesday						
Wednesday						
Thursday						
Friday						

Appendix 3 – Recommendations for school leaders on cover arrangements were developed by Rob Webster in collaboration with UNISON, NAHT and Headteachers’ Roundtable following UNISON’s cover research (‘Teaching on the cheap?’, 2024). They may be helpful when discussing a school’s cover arrangements.

1. Clarify cover roles	Review and identify which HLTAs and TAs can and cannot be deployed to undertake cover supervision and/or specified work. Conduct a skills audit to verify that only appropriately trained and experienced members of support staff undertake cover supervision and/or specified work.
	Consider creating a substantive role(s) specifically for cover supervision and/or specified work. Consider blending a ‘floating’ HLTAs role with a substantive non-class duty (e.g. creating resources/displays) that can be carried out during periods when class cover is not required.
	Ensure timetables for curriculum interventions and catch-up programmes delivered by HLTAs/TAs are not disrupted by the need for cover. Consider deploying a limited number of HLTAs/TAs to run all programmes, and prevent them from being deployed to cover classes. When disruption to the delivery of intervention sessions is unavoidable, reschedule sessions for as soon as practically possible.
2. Specify expectations and procedures	Decide which subjects can and cannot be covered by HLTAs, TAs and cover supervisors. Clarify exactly what they should and should not be required to do when undertaking cover supervision and/or specified work. Communicate these expectations to the whole staff team. Regularly monitor cover arrangements to ensure fidelity and effectiveness, and make adjustments in response.
	Codify expectations in a ‘cover charter’ to complement the school’s cover policy. Summarise what HLTAs, TAs and cover supervisors can expect when they cover (e.g. provision of lesson plans and resources; emergency contact for support with class behaviour; ongoing training/supervision; arrangements for claiming any pay uplift).
	Limit the need for partial lesson cover; for example, when a HLTAs/TA may be required to take charge for part of a lesson because the teacher has to attend a meeting. Develop clear procedures for the occasions when this is unavoidable.
3. Provide training and support	Develop a training and induction programme for HLTAs, TAs and cover supervisors on lesson cover. Ensure this includes the safe management of classroom activities and the physical learning space and resources, and effective strategies for dealing with behaviour at the class and individual level. Consider providing opportunities for HLTAs, TAs and cover supervisors to develop and practise their skills via co-teaching with a teacher.
	Where possible, ensure an additional TA is present to support pupils in lessons led by HLTAs/TAs as part of specified work.
	Provide planning, preparation and assessment time for HLTAs/TAs that undertake specified work. Wherever possible, provide opportunities for teachers and HLTAs, TAs and cover supervisors to discuss lesson plans and/or provide feedback after cover lessons.
4. Provide planning	Ensure teachers or subject leaders always provide a clear plan and sufficient, well-targeted activities for cover supervision lessons. Make sure there are clear instructions for HLTAs, TAs and cover supervisors on how to explain activities to the class, and supply any necessary resources/materials. For staff covering classes with which they are less familiar, ensure teachers provide key information about pupils with additional/specific needs.
	Consider developing a cover lesson plan template that teachers can use to summarise key information, and that HLTAs, TAs and cover supervisors can use to record brief feedback (e.g. on the sufficiency/suitability of work set; extent to which pupils completed work; behaviour; issues to report). Ensure there is an efficient and accessible system in place for collecting, storing and sharing cover lesson information, before and after lessons.
	Consider using online resources, such as Oak National Academy’s video lessons, to develop a bank of ‘back-up’ lessons to deploy for no-notice cover. Provide training for HLTAs, TAs and cover supervisors on how to access and supervise online lessons.