



9 July 2015

Dear Ann,

Many thanks for your letter dated 2 July 2015 and for the feedback the Committee has provided on the guidance document, *Effective management of workforce attendance*.

Whilst I have thought very carefully about the Committee's comments, it is still my intention to publish the *Effective management of workforce attendance* prior to the end of the summer term. This is so that all key stakeholders can use the guidance to inform their policies and practices for the beginning of the academic year.

I want to reassure members of the Committee that this document was co-constructed with the support of Newport City Council. I can also assure the Committee that my officials have engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, who have provided both oral and written feedback. Additionally, my officials have held meetings with practitioners, local authorities, union representatives and the Wales Audit Office to inform the guidance. Both Estyn and the Wales Audit Office have seen the draft that you received and provided some further feedback which has subsequently been incorporated and neither organisation raised any issues of significant concern. In fact, Estyn's opening comment in their feedback was "Overall, this is a clear document which covers the wide spectrum of circumstances in relation to teacher absence."

This document was always intended to be a 'living document' that will evolve with the changing requirements of the educational environment and given our extensive engagement I feel that the document reflects the current requirements of the education system in Wales. Also, as stated in my evidence to the Committee, the Welsh Government will be making a request to Estyn for a further thematic review to be undertaken in 2016/17, on cover arrangements and to assess the effectiveness of the guidance.

I will address each of your areas of concern in turn:

Collection and use of data

- Provides insufficient clarity and detail on what data would actually be collected;

The guidance clearly states who is responsible for collating, reporting and analysing data on sickness absence. The Welsh Government will continue to provide a data template to local authorities, for them to populate, which will be used to inform the publication of sickness absence data on a local authority level. By publishing the data at a local authority level, schools and local authorities will be required to ensure that the data submitted is accurate and meaningful. We will be working closely with local authorities in developing the data template to ensure that our requirements are practical and achievable.

- Does not meet the objectives of providing clarity with regard to teacher absence or eliminating the variations in the reporting of absence;

The publication of teacher sickness absence data by local authority on an annual basis will raise the profile and importance of ensuring that teacher sickness absence is reported accurately and appropriately at a school level. This information will be reported, via the local authority, to the Welsh Government. By having a more robust system of monitoring and reporting absence data at a school level, governors and consortia will be better informed to regularly monitor an individual school's performance.

- Does not provide enough detail on how the local authority regional consortia will monitor and interrogate the data;

It is the Welsh Government's responsibility to set the strategic direction for both local authorities and the regional consortia as such it would be inappropriate for the Welsh Government to be overly prescriptive on the detail of the day-to-day operations of the consortia who are responsible for school improvement services. The guidance complements the *National Model for Regional Working: Revitalising People Management* guidance and sets out the requirements for each consortium; it is an operational decision, based on the needs of the school, as to how they will monitor and interrogate the data.

- Is unclear on the type of information that the regional consortia's templates should include;

Regional consortia offer a school improvement service. As set out in the *National Model for Regional Working* their data templates will be developed in consultation with local authorities, school leaders and governors and these data templates will reflect the areas that require further monitoring for improvement in their schools. The *Effective management of workforce attendance* reiterates the *National Model for Regional Working* which provides a clear outline of the type of information that the regional consortia templates should include, including data on 'staff sickness absence'.

- Role for local authorities in monitoring schools' implementation of their attendance management policies; and role for local authorities or consortia in the oversight of schools' use of supply teachers;

As stated in the guidance, it is the school's responsibility as the employer, to ensure that there is an operational attendance management policy in place which is being deployed in an 'equitable, fair and confidential manner'. The Governing Body has the responsibility for ensuring that these policies are applied rigorously through regular monitoring and evaluating. The local authority will provide guidance, support and assistance in developing these policies; and are encouraged, through the guidance, to provide management

information for the school, governors, and consortia to inform Governing Body meetings and/ or Challenge and Review meetings.

Ultimately it is the duty of individual head teachers, working with their Governing Body and wider school team, to determine the best way to manage absences and provide cover in their schools – including the use of supply teachers. Local authorities utilise the National Procurement Service (NPS) for areas of common and repetitive spend and as customers of the NPS they identified supply teaching as such an item of expenditure. The role of local authorities in the oversight of schools' use of supply teachers is set out within the guidance. The guidance specifies (in the section on the roles and responsibilities of local authorities) a number of ways that they will meet this, including:

- Collate and benchmark absence data in schools;
- Evaluate a schools arrangements for managing supply cover, and;
- Review the framework contract to ensure value for money.

The guidance further reiterates this role in 'Effective management of the cost of absence' section by stating that local authorities should ensure that the preferred supplier, New Directions, is providing the quality of service (including an element of Continuous Professional Development and Performance Management) that they are contracted to provide. In addition, the Welsh Government, in conjunction with the NPS will be monitoring the national picture on a regular basis.

As stated above, I would like to reassure the Committee that this document will be a living document that will be developed further following its initial implementation, roll-out and with feedback from practitioners from every level of the education system.

I would, as ever, welcome a constructive dialogue with the Committee as the document is developed and look forward to receiving your comments.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Huw Lewis', written in dark ink.

Huw Lewis AC / AM
Y Gweinidog Addysg a Sgiliau
Minister for Education and Skills