

Health and Safety for Substitute Teachers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Substitute teachers have a vital role to play in raising and maintaining high educational standards in schools. Campaigning to secure professional entitlements for substitute teachers is a key priority of the NASUWT, together with securing decent pay and working conditions for all substitute teachers.

The NASUWT is aware that there are a significant number of substitute teachers who will be concerned about working in schools and colleges from September 2021, particularly in regards to the reopening of schools and the potential opportunities that this may provide for substitute teachers.

The NASUWT expects that there will be a high demand for substitute teachers due in part to the Department of Education (DE) Engage Programme, as well as from individual schools to cover for teachers who are self-isolating or medically required to work from home.

In light of this, the Union has revised its advice and guidance to assist substitute teachers to stay safe from September 2021 and to ensure you are aware of your responsibilities in terms of keeping yourself and others safe.

It should be noted that this advice and guidance should be considered in conjunction with the comprehensive advice, health and safety checklists and other associated guidance produced by the Union: www.nasuwt.org.uk/Covid19AdviceNorthernIreland.

In addition, the general regulations pertaining to risk assessment remain in place and schools and colleges remain obliged to risk assess and take all reasonably practicable steps to ensure the health, safety and welfare of all staff and pupils, including substitute teachers.

The DE guidance confirms that substitute teachers can be used by schools to meet the additional staffing requirements during the pandemic.

Indeed, the Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register (NISTR) confirms that schools will require the services of substitute teachers during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and they encourage substitute teachers to update their details and note their availability.

Where substitute teachers are required to undertake work, they should ensure that they are fully informed about any health and safety issues with each assignment, provided with access to information on the safety arrangements (i.e. risk assessments) and that these are provided as soon as possible after a substitute teacher is booked for an assignment.

Before taking up substitute work with a school, in order to stay safe, you should ask for:

- The overall risk assessment for the school.
- The procedures and protective measures for staff to follow to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus.
- The arrangements in place for substitute teachers to report safely to the workplace.
- Any reasonable adjustments you may require if you have a disability or are a pregnant or breastfeeding mother.
- Details of any designated contact should you have any questions, COVID-specific or otherwise, or in the event of a problem or emergency, where and to whom you should report each day.

As a substitute teacher, on first reporting for work at a school (or beforehand if possible), in order to stay safe, you should ask for:

- Details of the procedures and arrangements for any visitors (e.g. substitute teachers) to ensure there is adequate time to be made aware of, and understand, the systems in place, including in respect of COVID-19.
- Details of any designated contact should you have any questions, COVID-specific or otherwise, or in the event of a problem or emergency.
- Details of who and where you should report to each day, including details of the signing-in process.
- Any guidance for staff in respect of COVID-19 safe working practices.
- Details of how to raise any concerns about health and safety, including those specific to COVID-19.
- Details of how to call for assistance, including first aid.
- A tour of the school site, identifying where you will be teaching, Details of the nearest first-aid room or appropriate area, including where to send those with suspected symptoms of COVID-19.
- Details of the nearest fire exit and any revised evacuation plans, including routes and procedures (these should identify any additional mitigations required in the context of COVID-19).
- Details of what to do in the event of a suspected case of COVID-19, including contingency plans for managing outbreaks.
- Details of the staffroom and toilets.
- A copy of the timetable, including breaks and lunch periods, as well as expectations on staff during such times, including, as appropriate, the supervision of pupils.
- Details of how to access relevant information on schemes of work for the subjects you will be expected to teach.
- Details of access to computers (including laptops or fixed computers), with log-in details and what to do at the end of the school day.
- Details of any resources you may reasonably be expected to provide (such as pens) to minimise contact, and where these can be safely and securely stored.
- Details of the schemes of work and programmes of study, including the provision and access to relevant teaching materials.
- Details regarding access to, and availability of, hand sanitiser to enable you to wash your hands frequently throughout the school day.
- Details of the provisions in place to ensure classrooms and work areas are kept well ventilated.
- A list of the pupils in the class(es) you will be teaching, including details of any medical conditions, behavioural issues or special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), and the details of how these should be managed.
- Details of any pupils known to be potentially violent, and how this will be managed, including revised risk assessments in place, as well as any specific training which is required, along with how this can be appropriately accessed.

(continued overleaf)

- Details of the registration process and expectations for the appropriate movement of pupils around the school site between lessons, at breaks and at lunchtimes, and at the end of the school day.
- Specific details of the school behaviour management procedure, including the support that is available to assist in managing behaviour effectively.
- Details of any events, meetings or specific activities taking place during an assignment.
- Details of the arrangements for school transport, as appropriate.

The Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978

The Health and Safety at Work Order places a responsibility on all employers to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of all employees and non-employees in their workplace. This includes identifying and assessing risks to health and safety, and steps to reduce or eliminate these risks, so that all those working in a school are safe, including substitute teachers. This applies to COVID-19 in the same way as it would to any other hazard.

The role of the ‘competent person’

A ‘competent person’ should be someone in the school or college who has sufficient training and experience or knowledge to assist in the process properly.

The level of competence required will depend on the complexity of the situation, but there is an expectation that the ‘competent person’ is able to offer the specific advice and guidance required.

This can include the employer or someone within the school or college. If this is the case, you should enquire as to their experience and expertise so you can be satisfied that any and all concerns you have regarding your situation can be addressed accordingly.

Your duties as a supply teacher

Whilst your school has responsibilities in regards to your health and safety, you also have a duty to take reasonable care for your own health and safety and that of other people who may be affected by your actions at work, particularly during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

You must co-operate with your employer by providing them with any information which may necessitate the provision of a risk assessment before you undertake an assignment with a school.

For example, if there is a concern over your situation which makes it difficult for you to undertake an assignment in a school, or which should be disclosed to a school prior to an assignment, then you should disclose this as soon as possible. This would include any conditions that increase your vulnerability to COVID-19 (e.g. you are pregnant or you are from a black and minority ethnic (BME) background). This may also include personal situations which impact on your ability to undertake an assignment (e.g. you are a single parent or you have issues relating to childcare).

Once disclosed to an employer, they have a statutory obligation to consider any measures necessary to enable you to undertake each assignment safely.

However, this should not automatically impact on your ability to undertake an assignment, provided there is evidence that this has been factored into the risk assessment and you have been fully advised before you undertake the assignment.

The NASUWT would want to hear from substitute teachers if an assignment is cancelled on the basis of providing such information.

If information is provided which does not impact on your ability to undertake an assignment but the assignment is cancelled nevertheless, you should contact the NASUWT for further advice and guidance at: advice@mail.nasuwt.org.uk.