

# Substitute Teachers

Annual survey of experiences



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## **INTRODUCTION**

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Substitute teachers are integral to the education system, a fact that has been brought into sharp focus throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Without substitute teachers, many pupils would be denied the opportunity to be taught by qualified and dedicated teachers who ensure that schools can continue to provide the education to which children and young people are entitled. Substitute teachers make a vital contribution to securing high educational standards for all children and young people.

The NASUWT's annual survey of substitute teachers in Northern Ireland aims to examine the changing experiences of substitute teachers, including issues and trends.

The 2021 survey was undertaken between August and September.

A total of 189 substitute teachers responded to the survey.

This Report provides the main findings from the 2021 survey of substitute teachers and highlights the experiences of substitute teachers during the academic year 2020/21.

# THE SURVEY

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## Nature of work

Substitute teachers were asked about their ability to secure work teaching during the academic year 2020/21 and the COVID-19 lockdown from January 2021. Just under two fifths (39%) reported that they had problems securing work. Of those, one in ten (10%) stated that they had significant problems securing work, and just under one in ten (9%) stated that they could not secure any supply work.



*I couldn't get any teacher work. I had to accept TA work.*



## Access to work

During the academic year 2020/21 and the COVID-19 lockdown from January, just under half of substitute teachers (48%) reported that they were working for one school, 15% reported that they were working for two schools, and 13% reported that they were working for three schools. A further one in ten (9%) reported that they were working for four schools, and 7% reported that they were working for five schools. Eight per cent of substitute teachers reported that they were working for more than five schools

## Availability of work

Substitute teachers were asked where they were able to obtain work during the academic year 2020/21 and the COVID-19 lockdown from January 2021.

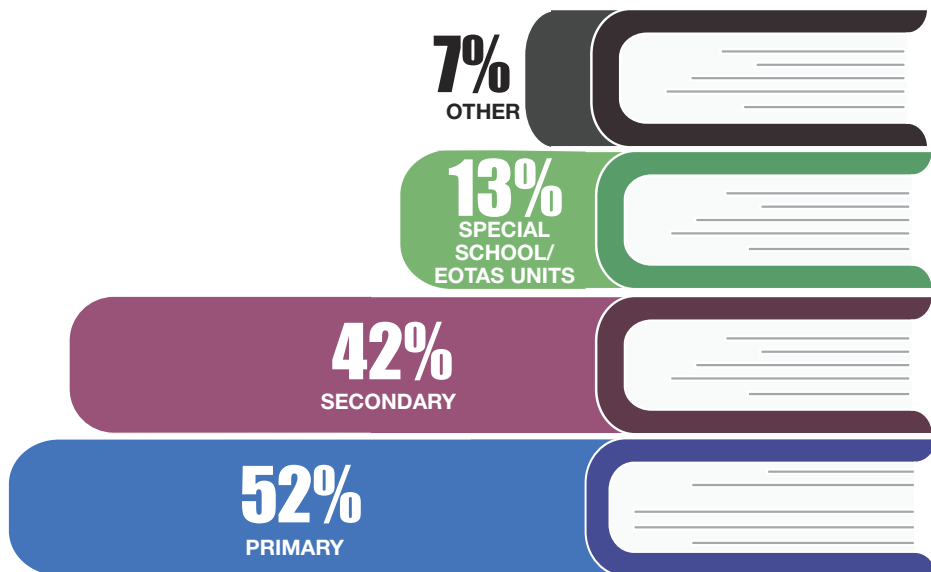
Just over half of substitute teachers (52%) who responded to the survey stated that their substitute work took place in primary schools, 42% stated that their work was in post-primary schools, and 13% reported that their work took place in a special school/Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) unit.



*Fortunately got work teaching through the Engage Programme in a school which meant I had consistent work.*



**Where substitute teachers undertook the majority of their work during the academic year 2020/21 and the subsequent lockdown from January 2021.**



For those substitute teachers who reported that they were able to secure work during the academic year 2020/21 and the COVID-19 lockdown from January 2021, 28% reported that the majority of their substitute teaching was ad hoc/daily work, just over one in 20 (6%) said that this was weekly assignments, and 7% stated that this was monthly assignments. Just under one in ten substitute teachers (9%) reported that the majority of their work was termly assignments, and half (50%) stated that the majority of their teaching was on longer term assignments in excess of a term.

When substitute teachers were asked how many days on average they were able to obtain work during the academic year 2020/21 and the COVID-19 lockdown from January, one in ten (10%) said they obtained work one day a week, 14% two days a week, and 16% three days a week. Just under one in ten (9%) of substitute teachers in the survey said they were able to obtain work for four days a week and just over half (51%) stated that they were able to obtain work five days a week.

A quarter of substitute teachers (25%) stated that the amount of substitute work had decreased during the academic year 2020/21 compared to the year prior to the pandemic. Twenty-nine per cent of substitute teachers stated that

the amount of substitute work had increased, and well over two fifths (46%) of respondents stated that the opportunities had stayed the same.

Just one in ten substitute teachers (10%) stated that the advice from the Department of Education (DE) on the utilisation of substitute teachers had a positive impact on their ability to secure work during the academic year 2020/21.

Just over a quarter of substitute teachers (26%) stated that the DE's Engage Programme had a positive impact on their ability to secure work during the academic year 2020/21.



*Big span of time with no work at all.*



### **Working for a school during the academic year 2020/21 and the subsequent lockdown from January 2021**

Substitute teachers were asked about their experiences working for a school during the academic year 2020/21 and the subsequent lockdown from January.

Over three fifths (61%) of substitute teachers reported that they are always made to feel welcome *by the senior leadership in schools* and 30% stated that they are often made to feel welcome by the senior leadership in schools. However, 7% said that they are rarely made to feel welcome by the senior leadership in schools and 2% stated that they are never made to feel welcome by the senior leadership in schools.

When asked how welcome they are made *to feel by the staff in schools*, over two thirds of substitute teachers (68%) reported that they are always made to feel welcome, just under a quarter (24%) reported that they are often made to feel welcome by the staff in schools, and 8% reported that they are rarely made to feel welcome by the staff in schools.

When asked how welcome they are made *to feel by the pupils in schools*, over three fifths of substitute teachers (63%) reported that they are always made to feel welcome, and just under a third (31%) reported that they are often made to feel welcome by pupils in schools. One in 20 (5%) reported that they are rarely made to feel welcome.



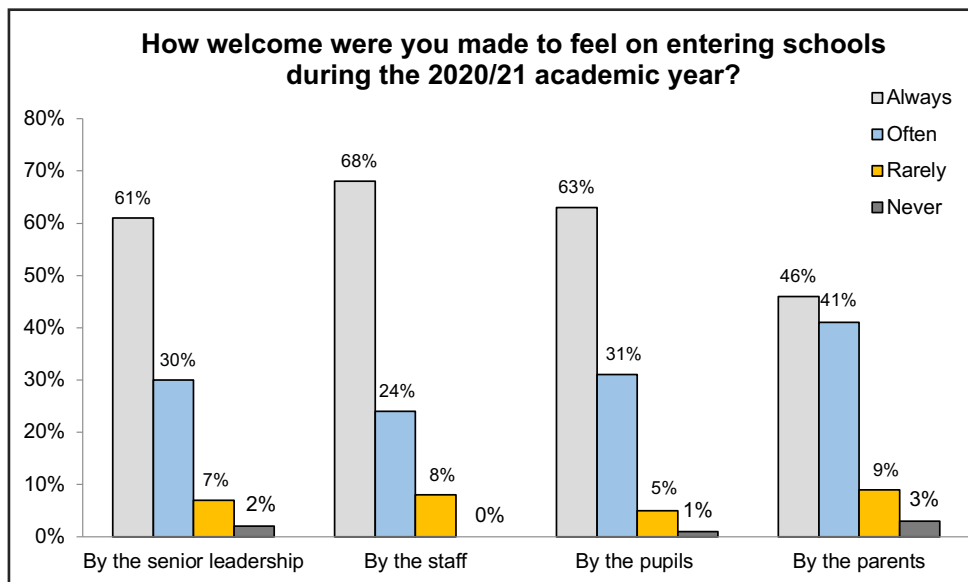
*I was on furlough for some of the time. When schools were fully open, I had all the work I wanted.*





One in 20 (5%) reported that they are rarely made to feel welcome by the pupils and 1% stated that they are never made to feel welcome by the pupils.

In respect of being *made to feel welcome by the parents*, well over two fifths (46%) stated that they are always made to feel welcome and just over two fifths (41%) stated that they are made to feel welcome by the parents. Just under one in ten (9%) stated that they are rarely made to feel welcome by the parents and just under one in 20 (4%) stated that they are never made to feel welcome by the parents.



Of those substitute teachers able to secure work during the 2020/21 academic year, just under two fifths (38%) stated that they were not given the school’s overall risk assessment and 14% stated that they were not given the procedures and protective measures for staff to follow to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19.

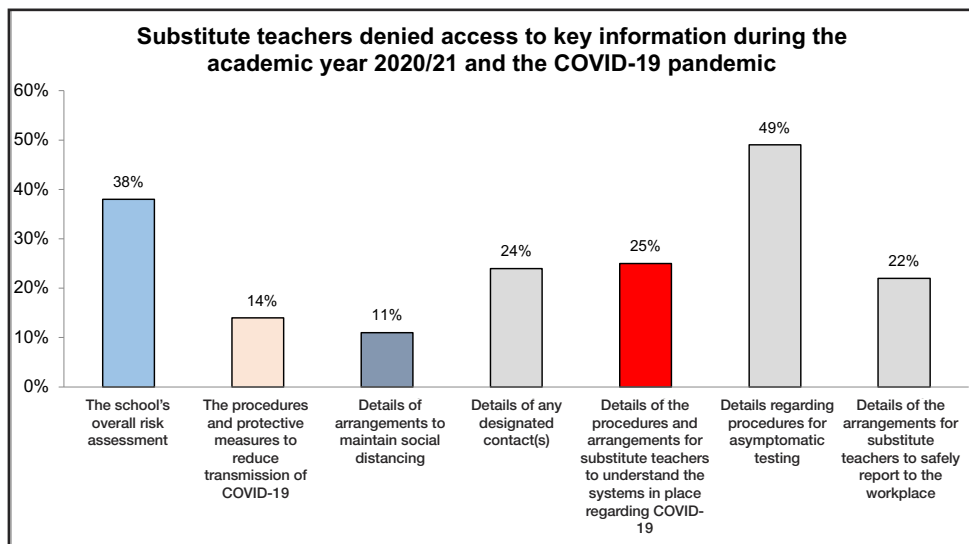
A quarter of substitute teachers (25%) stated that they did not have the arrangements in place for substitute teachers to report safely to the workplace and just over a fifth (22%) stated that they were not given the details of the procedures and arrangements to ensure there was adequate time for substitute teachers to be made aware of, and understand, the systems in place in respect of COVID-19. Just under a quarter (24%) stated that they were not provided with the details of any designated contact(s) for any questions, problems or emergencies (COVID specific or otherwise).

Just over one in ten substitute teachers (11%) stated that they were not provided with the details of the arrangements to maintain social distancing of both staff and students, and 25% stated that they were unaware of the details of the steps and procedures in place for asymptomatic testing, including for substitute teachers.

*No lateral flow tests offered or mentioned.*

Just under half of substitute teachers (49%) stated that they were not provided with the details of the contact person for obtaining the relevant NHS Test and Trace notification from the school, should they have needed to apply for any financial support.

*As a union activist I was aware of union guidance for schools, but no school gave me any more than a cursory run through of their policy.*



Over a quarter of substitute teachers (27%) stated that the need to maintain the integrity of 'bubbles' in schools had a detrimental impact on their ability to secure work, whereas well over two fifths (46%) stated that this had not had an impact on their ability to secure work during the academic year 2020/21.

## Health and safety issues for substitute teachers during the academic year 2020/21

*Rules and regulations varied between schools regarding the wearing of masks, sanitising hands etc.*

Just under two thirds of substitute teachers (65%) who secured work during the academic year 2020/21 stated that they were concerned about their health and safety when in schools, and 14% stated that they may have been penalised or had work cancelled for disclosing personal information about their health and safety.

*Senior management did not wear masks, setting a poor example in the school. Little encouragement to wear masks from senior management, no encouragement of social distancing from pupils. Most classrooms impossible to social distance in. Made to feel stupid for wearing a mask.*

Two thirds of substitute teachers (66%) at greater vulnerability to COVID-19 reported that their employer did not complete an individual risk assessment with them before undertaking an assignment.

*Pregnant, and regular school stopped phoning.*

## Rates of pay for substitute teachers during the academic year 2020/21 and the COVID-19 pandemic

In respect of rates of pay, substitute teachers were asked if they had been paid at the correct point on the teachers' pay scale for the work they had undertaken during the academic year 2020/21 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Well over four fifths (84%) reported that they had been paid on the correct point on the teachers' pay scale, but 16% of substitute teachers stated that this was not the case.

Just over three quarters of substitute teachers (76%) reported that the daily rate of remuneration offered during the academic year 2020/21 and the COVID-19 pandemic was in line with their level of experience and expertise.

## Financial situation during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown

Substitute teachers were asked about their financial situation during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown.



*Cut back on all living expenses, and live partly on my mother's pension.*



As a result of the period of school closures from January to March 2021 and the loss of work associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, just under two fifths of substitute teachers (38%) applied for the Covid Hardship Fund. Of those substitute teachers who applied, just under four fifths (79%) reported that they were successful in their application and received an 80% payment.



*Borrow off friends and family.*



Just over a quarter of substitute teachers (26%) reported that they had sourced work elsewhere other than teaching during the academic year 2020/21 and the lockdown from January 2021. Of those, 92% stated that the work sourced elsewhere other than teaching failed to provide the same level of financial income that they would have obtained had they been able to obtain work teaching.



...stated that they had experienced financial hardship as a substitute teacher.

**48%**  
of respondents...



...reported having to claim some form of state benefit during the academic year 2020/21 and the lockdown from January (e.g. Universal Credit).

**13%**  
of substitute teachers...



...stated that they had experienced financial hardship as a substitute teacher over the same period.

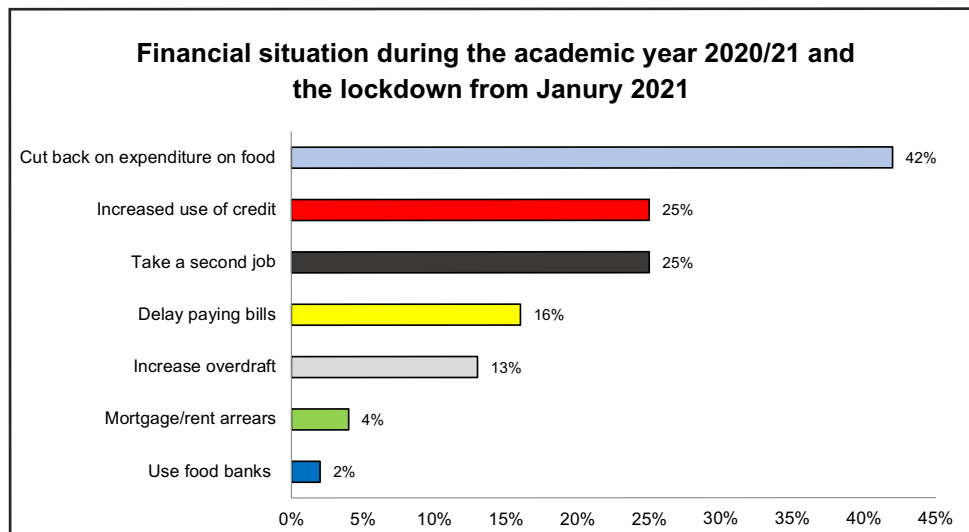
**48%**  
of substitute teachers...



*I have recently obtained a permanent post. However, I would've been extremely worried had I not, as substitute teachers are often living pay cheque to pay cheque...*



Well over one in ten substitute teachers (13%) reported having to claim some form of state benefit during the academic year 2020/21 and the lockdown from January (e.g. Universal Credit), and just under half of respondents (48%) stated that they had experienced financial hardship as a substitute teacher over the same period.

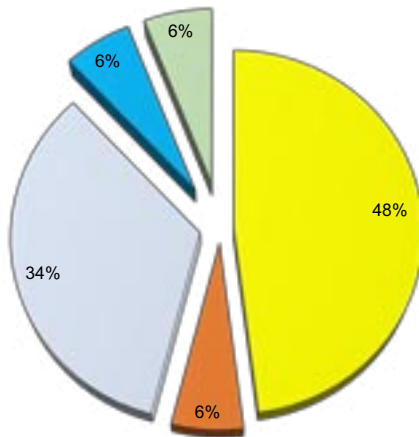


Thirty per cent of substitute teachers reported that they were required to self-isolate during the academic year 2020/21 and the lockdown from January 2021. Of those, over half (53%) reported that their employer did not make them aware of whether they were eligible for Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), and over a third of substitute supply teachers (35%) reported that they did not know.

Thirty per cent of substitute teachers who were required to self-isolate reported that they were not eligible for any financial support, and almost two thirds (64%) reported that they did not know.

**Just over a quarter of substitute teachers (26%) reported that they do not feel they are being treated with respect and dignity during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

### Ways in which the Northern Ireland Government could best support substitute teachers during the ongoing pandemic, as well as moving forwards



- Financial support, including sick pay grants and pay when self-isolating
- Stop using substitute teachers for long term posts
- Assist substitute teachers with employment, including permanent contracts
- Provide clearer advice on the use of substitute teachers in schools
- Expand the Engage Programme

**Based on their experiences as a substitute teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic, just under a third of substitute teachers (32%) reported that they were looking for work outside of teaching.**

*I have lost the passion I had for teaching and have been looking at other job.*

## CONCLUSION

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This is the second NASUWT substitute teachers' survey undertaken against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2021 Survey further highlights the importance of substitute teachers and the crucial role they have played during the academic year 2020/21, particularly in helping schools and colleges manage the worst excesses of the pandemic and the lockdown from January 2021.

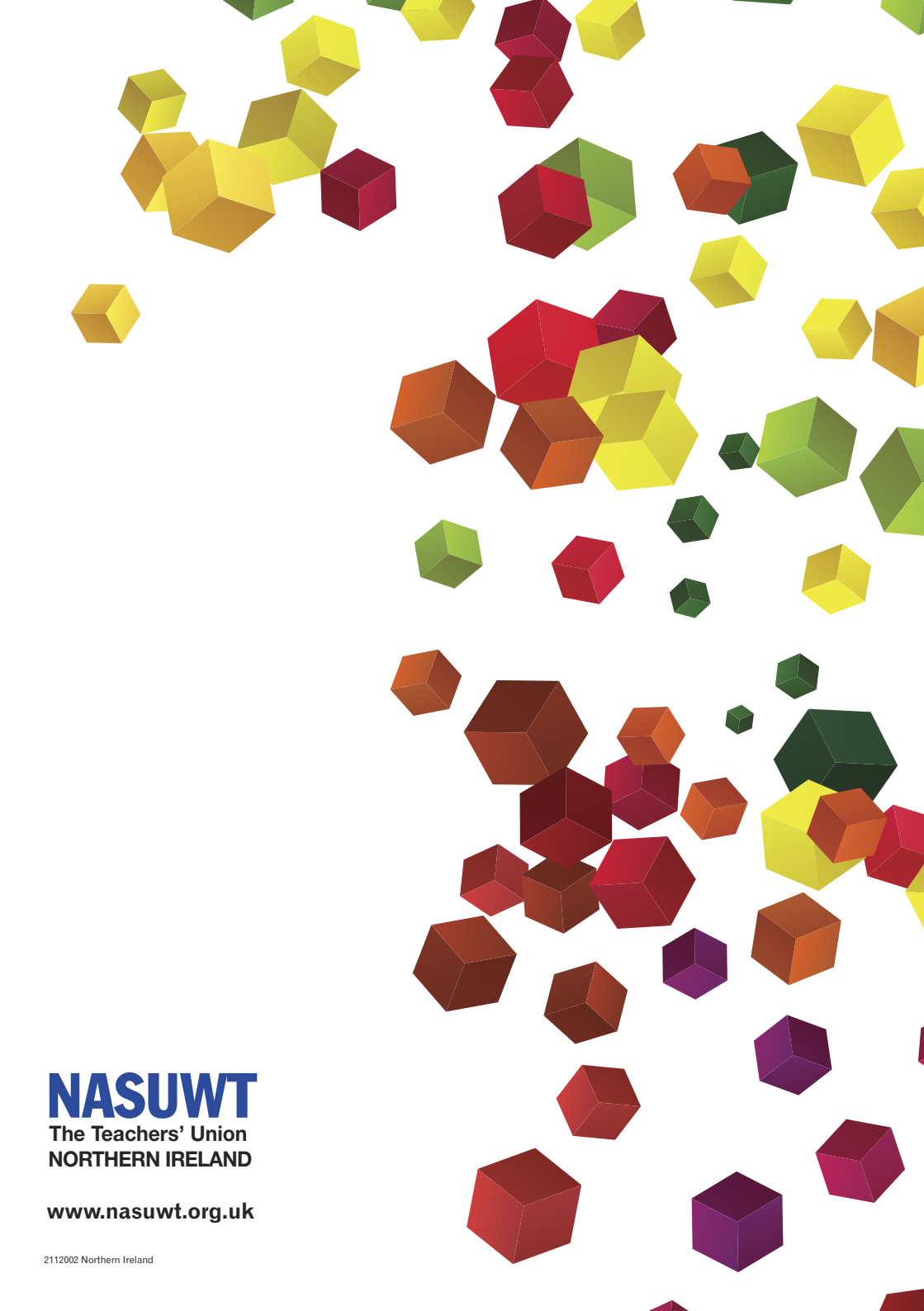
However, the Survey still demonstrates that the experiences of substitute teachers throughout the pandemic and academic year 2020/21 have been mixed. For some substitute teachers there is more work available, including through schemes such as the Engage Programme, but for others this is not the case.

The lack of financial support available to supply teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic and the failure of the Government to act has resulted in a situation where a number of supply teachers have been placed in a precarious financial situation where they have had to make tough decisions about their expenditure, or rely on the increased use of credit or the generosity of family and friends to make ends meet. Some supply teachers have been forced to claim Universal Credit and there are those who have had to rely on food banks. This has exposed the disparity between the pay of supply teachers and others.

In addition, there are concerns that these disparities in treatment are impacting disproportionately on women, black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and disabled teachers, who are more likely to be employed on precarious supply teaching contracts. There is a pressing need to address the failures of the market in teacher supply, which is having profoundly adverse equalities impacts.

Furthermore, the stress and anxiety felt by some supply teachers during the academic year 2020/21 has not been alleviated by the failure of many agencies, schools and local authorities to provide even the most basic health and safety information to enable hard-working and dedicated supply teachers to feel confident when undertaking an assignment.

In this context, the results from the 2021 Survey reaffirm and reinforce the pressing need for action on the part of the Government to address the concerns of hard-working and dedicated supply teachers, who make an important and significant contribution to the public education system, and ensure that they are afforded some level of financial support going forwards.



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