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INTRODUCTION

The place of peripatetic music staff (or visiting music teachers, as they're now more commonly known) is a notoriously grey area for schools and heads of music. Who is responsible for them? Are they school staff, or not? Who does the admin? What support should they have? How can they contribute to the work of the music department?

This resource aims to dig deep into these questions, and provide some answers and guidance as to how to work with your VMTs in a way that's productive for everyone.

Who are your VMTs?

Are your VMTs appointed by the school or licensed by the local music hub? If your music hub has a system for recruiting and licensing VMTs, it's considerably less work for the school. The music hub will check a VMT's qualifications and suitability, and also run the necessary safeguarding checks. Hub VMTs will also have access to CPD provided by the hub, and have a network of monitoring and support.

If they're employed directly without hub involvement, the responsibility for all of these aspects of the VMT's employment will fall to the school. Even if your VMTs are self-employed and invoice parents directly, they will need to go through safeguarding checks, including an interview conducted by a member of staff who has completed Safer Recruitment training, and a full DBS check.

Who does what?

This is a thorny question, and it underpins the greyness of this whole area. Managing the VMT team is unlikely to be mentioned on a standard head of music's job specification. However, it's likely that the senior leadership team – and parents – will expect there to be instrumental lessons on offer at the school. This is one of those areas where goodwill makes the school system work. However, it's absolutely necessary to establish in advance who's responsible for what.

If VMTs are self-employed, and invoice parents directly, the school acts a venue for lessons to take place, and a source of students. In this scenario, it's the head of music's job to ensure that this runs smoothly. This will include:

- Fielding applications for lessons, and matching students with teachers.
- Ensuring that there's a system in place for communications about lesson times.
- Organising a schedule for teaching spaces, to ensure that all VMTs have a suitable space to teach in at a mutually agreed time.

However, there are other aspects of the system that also need to be clarified and agreed. These include:

- Who puts together the timetables?
- Who issues invoices and chases payments?
- Who chases students who do not attend their lessons?
- Who liaises with parents?

Where VMTs are self-employed, there's a strong argument for them to do all of these things themselves. You can help by ensuring that timetables are displayed somewhere central and distributed appropriately, and that any relevant information (ie regarding long-term student absence, or significant pastoral issues) is passed on.

If the VMT is employed directly by the school, all of these things are likely to come under the school's jurisdiction, and will need administrative support. A teacher should not be expected to undertake this kind of administrative work unless time or remuneration is given in return. If there is no possibility of the admin being done by office staff, you could ask the school to subscribe to an online management tool such as **My Music Staff**, which will give you considerable help in keeping track of everything. Current pricing is £9.95 per month, with an additional £2.95 for each teacher. So in a department with 10 VMTs, the monthly cost would be £36.50 (£438 per year). This should not come out of your department budget: the school's choice is to have office staff do the admin, or give a music teacher time and/or extra pay, plus the support provided by the subscription. Whichever option they choose, this is too large a burden to place on a busy teacher's goodwill: having this going on in school is going to cost, one way or another.

CONTRACTS

If your VMTs are hub-licensed, they're likely to use a contract set up by the hub. However, in every other situation a contract needs to be drawn up. A contract is absolutely necessary to protect the VMT's working life, so that everyone understands that having instrumental or vocal lessons is a commitment, and is not something that can be cancelled at the drop of a hat. The contract needs to cover how many lessons will be provided each term; how much they will cost; a notice period for cancelling lessons; and what happens in the event of a student (or VMT) missing a lesson. It all needs to be in proper legal language. These two templates from the Musicians' Union are invaluable:

- Contract between VMT and school
- Contract between VMT and parents

The VMT needs to have a copy of the contract, and it will be very useful for the school to hold a copy as well. You could use a scanning app (such as Scannable) on your phone or tablet to make easy, electronic copies.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS: ENSURING EVERYTHING RUNS SMOOTHLY

Here are some tips for making sure that the administrative side of having a team of VMTs in your school works effectively:

- Make sure that VMTs have a detailed calendar: you could supply this at the start of year, or before the start of each term. As well as term dates, they will need to know about any PD days, as well as special days such as sports day, activities days, and days with late starts or early finishes. It will also be helpful for them to know about periods of study leave, internal/external exams, trips and work experience.
- Ensure that VMTs know the routine for signing in and out, what to do if the fire alarm goes off, and how to make contact if they are running late or unable to come in.
- Have a system for distributing lesson times. This might include a central noticeboard, a way of publishing lesson timetables online, and distributing paper timetables via registers or a central pickup point.
- The school office will also need to know the times of all music lessons in advance, so that these can be entered into the school's registering system: this is a safeguarding requirement in most schools.
- Establish what should happen if a student does not show up for their lesson. You could equip VMTs with copies of students' timetables, or have a system whereby they can check in with student reception to find out if a student is in school (and if so, where). You can issue VMTs with pre-printed slips that they can fill in for non-attenders and then leave with the office for distribution on registers.
- If students miss music lessons due to illness or forgetfulness, there should be no obligation for the VMT to make up the time. Many VMTs will – through their own goodwill – make up time for lessons missed through illness, particularly if parents inform them in advance that the student is ill. However, this is up to them. Otherwise, if there's a reason for missing a lesson that's known in advance, it should be the parent's or student's responsibility to inform the VMT far enough in advance that the schedule can be adjusted.
- If a lesson is missed through illness on the part of the VMT, they will usually reschedule these lessons for another day, or in some cases will send a substitute teacher.
- Give regular reminders in staff briefing or via staff bulletins that students having music lessons should not be prevented from leaving class. These students have had their lessons paid for (by parents, the school, or through pupil premium funding) and are entitled to them. Acknowledge that this can sometimes be

frustrating, but encourage staff to give notice when important tests are happening, so that lesson times can be rearranged if necessary.

Ensure that VMTs have contact details for parents, and are also made aware of any SEND needs.

COMMUNICATIONS

One source of potential problems is that you might not actually see some of your VMTs. You might be teaching when they arrive and leave, or the location of the rooms used might make it unlikely that your paths will cross. You need to decide on the best method for regular communication between yourself and the VMTs. Nearly always this is email, with the option of text message or phone call for urgent communications. You may decide that giving each VMT a pigeonhole in the music office is the most convenient way to communicate.

Ensure that any communications from VMTs are answered promptly. It's their livelihood that you're supporting, and you cannot allow any slackness on your part to affect the smooth running of lessons. A rule of thumb here is that if you need to do something in order to allow someone else to do their job, then you must prioritise that thing.

Establish how VMTs should communicate with parents and with students. Email is good for parents, and can work for students too if there is a culture of student emails in your school. Some VMTs choose to communicate with parents by text, although they should not (for their own protection) share their mobile numbers with students. Otherwise, messages to students can be communicated via notes on the register or any other school-based communication channel.

How much support should be given to students in getting them to their lessons?

Having music lessons in school requires students to be quite organised: they need to remember when their lesson is, and to go to it at the appropriate time, and also remember all the equipment that they need. If they're coming out of another lesson, they will also need to catch up with what they've missed.

You'll need to decide exactly what level of support is appropriate for your students in terms of helping them to get to their music lessons at the right time. From most independent to most supportive, the options are as follows:

- Lesson times are on a central noticeboard. It's the student's responsibility to look at when their time is, and remember to go. If they miss one because they forget, it's tough – the lesson still has to be paid for, and is not made up. It's up to the student if they want to set themselves a reminder (eg their phone to vibrate in their pocket five minutes before music lesson time).
- A reminder is sent the day before, by email or text to the parent, or email or note to the student.
- Class teachers have a note on SIMS lesson monitor that tells them that a student is due to go to a music lesson. They then remind the student there and then (this is dependent upon the class teacher being on board with this idea, and not forgetting).
- Each student having music lessons knows where to find the next student on the timetable, and goes to visit them on the way back to lessons to remind them it's time for their lesson.
- The VMT goes and collects the student for the lesson.

The option that you decide on depends very much on the nature of your school and students. In a mainstream secondary school, I would personally go for the most independent option. However, even then, there will be some students who – for whatever reason – need a little bit more support. Sometimes this can be built into the timetable – for example, a student with SEND might benefit from having their lesson at the same time each week, or having extra reminders.

Timetables

A week-by-week timetable, or a whole/half term in one go? If at all possible, encourage your VMTs to organise their timetable in termly or half-termly chunks. There is less toing and froing with communications, and everyone can see well in advance if there's a clash that needs to be averted. Office staff entering lesson times onto SIMS can choose whether to do it all at once at the start of term, or in smaller chunks, which allows them to be more independent about managing their workload.

You may decide to distribute paper or electronic copies of timetables to duplicate what's on the noticeboard. Copying and distributing copies yourself is labour-intensive, and there may be better options. These include:

- Giving VMTs access to photocopying services within the school so that they can make the copies themselves, and then distribute them to their students.
- Having a central point – perhaps right next to the noticeboard – where extra paper copies are available for students to collect if they wish.
- Using your school's VLE (virtual learning environment) or website to make electronic copies of timetables available. You will need to decide how this will work best, depending on the system you have and how well students actually use it. If all students are regularly plugged into Google Classrooms or Show My Homework, then it can be super-efficient to capitalise on this to have another channel for communication of lesson times. You can even create bespoke 'classes' for each VMT, so, for example, everyone learning saxophone with Miss X is in a 'class' and can see the saxophone timetable.

Monitoring progress and celebrating success

Should parents receive a written report from VMTs about their child's progress? Again, this is a grey area, and yet again your response to it will depend on the nature of the VMT's employment. If they're employed directly by the school, you may choose to make report-writing part of their contract. However, if VMTs are self-employed and happen to be working in your school, you cannot add to their workload by insisting that they create written reports. If they choose to do written reporting as part of the service they provide, that's their choice. They may have a more informal way of communicating with parents about students' progress.

Encourage your VMTs to let you know about any grade exam success that their students have, or if anyone gets into a county or national ensemble, so that you can celebrate musical successes with the wider school community. Whether this is an item in the school newsletter, an 'honours board' in the corridor, a tweet, or certificates given out in assembly, you can bet that the PE department's achievements are being broadcast far and wide – so why not ensure that musical achievements are right out there in the public domain, too?

LOGISTICS: ROOMS AND EQUIPMENT

Have a plan for how VMTs access their teaching rooms. This will depend entirely on the layout of your department and how things run in your school. It may be best if all the practice rooms used by VMTs are unlocked by you first thing each morning. In other situations, it may work better if each VMT is given a key, or perhaps each VMT could collect a key when they sign in.

With regard to the rooms themselves, make sure that each VMT has what they need to teach successfully. No teacher should ever be in a teaching room with a student one-to-one unless there is a glass panel in the door – this is to protect both the teacher and the student. If your practice room doors do not already have glass panels, do everything possible to get this sorted out as soon as possible. Bringing it to your SLT as a safeguarding issue should garner a quick response, especially if you insist that VMTs teach with their doors open until the problem is fixed.

The next priority is the equipment in the room – especially pianos, drumkits and amplifiers. Most VMTs will use a piano even if they're not piano teachers – although clearly your piano teachers need priority access to the room with the best piano in it. Acoustic pianos must be kept in tune (if you're new to the school, be sure to negotiate who pays for piano tuning – if it comes out of the music department budget, this needs to be taken account of when the level of capitation is decided by SLT). Likewise, your percussion teacher needs to be able to walk into their teaching room and be able to teach straight away, without setting up the drumkit or searching

for missing parts. Ensure that the drumkit is maintained well: the drum teacher is likely to be very happy to advise on exactly what spare parts might need to be bought, and may well fit them for you. Guitar teachers will need access to a reasonable amp, and many VMTs like to play backing tracks, so an amp in each teaching room is a good idea.

A mirror is not necessarily essential, but if there is one in the room, it's likely that it will be used, particularly by singing teachers. If practice rooms get particularly hot or cold at certain times of year, VMTs will certainly appreciate being able to use a heater or a fan if there's no air conditioning.

Think about your VMTs' own needs – they are likely to be travelling from school to school without much in the way of home comforts, so a little consideration can improve their working day no end. Make sure that they know where the nearest staff toilet is, and where they can get water or make a cup of tea. If you have tea and coffee facilities in the department, perhaps in the department office, could these be made available to VMTs?

Where will VMTs park? Is it possible to have special parking spaces reserved for VMTs? Some will be carrying a lot of kit, and will appreciate not having to trek miles from their car to their teaching space. If this is not possible, perhaps you could have a system where they're able to drop off any bulky kit before parking further away.

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS

Even in the best-organised setup, problems will arise that inevitably end up involving the head of department. Being forearmed, especially with regard to having contracts for your VMTs that are as watertight as possible, is essential here.

When parents complain

The nebulous nature of the relationship between a self-employed VMT and a school creates a minefield as far as parental complaints are concerned, and a nuanced and thoughtful response is always required. The fact is that some parents just love to complain. It's never appropriate to ignore a parental complaint, but there is a very wide range of responses: you need to choose the right one for the circumstances.

If a parent (or student) makes a serious safeguarding allegation about a VMT, you must report this immediately to your school's designated safeguarding lead, and (if they're licensed by the music hub) the DSL for the hub. This is something much bigger than a head of music can deal with on their own, and it's part of your own safeguarding responsibility to pass anything like this up the line of command.

In the vast majority of cases, however, the parent's concern will be something much smaller. It may be that there's been a mishap in the communication of lesson times, or perhaps a student has not been allowed to miss a test for their music lesson. If a student has simply misread the timetable, or has forgotten to turn up for their lesson, it's their fault and there should be no expectation that the lesson is made up. If the VMT has made a mistake, then they should make the lesson up. If the mistake is down to the school's administration, there would be a strong case for the school paying for the student's lesson to be made up.

If a student has not been allowed out by a subject teacher, then you must see that teacher in person to explain the gravity of the situation: you have got a parent demanding that the lesson be made up, and a VMT who needs to be paid for their time – the music department should not have to pay for this teacher's lack of understanding, and the subject teacher must be left in no doubt that this situation cannot be repeated.

When a parent complains about the competence of a VMT, this throws up all manner of problems. These are diminished significantly if you are absolutely sure in your own mind about the VMT's capabilities. If you know that there are many students who are happy and successful with them, then you can safely back up Mr or Ms X's credentials and dig deeper into what the problem really is. If you have no idea whether Mr or Ms X is any good or not, there's a greater problem.

MONITORING VMTs

How can you be sure that your VMTs are doing a good job? To what extent could or should you monitor their teaching?

As with many things, this depends on the nature of the VMT's contract. If they're employed directly by the school, they are subject to the same sort of monitoring procedures as everyone else, and can expect formal and informal observations to happen in line with the school's system (in proportion to the hours they teach).

If, however, they are freelance VMTs, the situation is different. Hub-licensed VMTs are likely to be monitored by their head of department or the head of service, who may drop in to observe lessons from time to time. Non-licensed freelance VMTs are subject to none of these measures – which makes the selection and vetting of these teachers even more crucial. If you and you alone are responsible for ensuring the quality of the VMTs in your school, you need to be doubly sure that all appropriate checks have been made in advance of them starting – and you also need to be prepared to devote some time to dropping in on lessons to check on standards. Make it absolutely clear in advance that this is what you intend to do: an unannounced drop-in will go down like a lead balloon.

If it becomes apparent that a VMT is not teaching good lessons, or is disorganised, you need to decide on a proportional course of action. Do they need more support in terms of knowing what best practice looks like? Or – at the other end of the spectrum – do they need to be replaced? The hub should be your first port of call with licensed VMTs. With non-hub VMTs, you will need to use every ounce of your professional judgement to decide what's appropriate – a chat, an offer of some peer observation, a warning, some CPD – and make sure that everything you do is documented.

Even highly competent and successful VMTs sometimes have a student that they do not get on with. This may be down to a clash in personality or teaching/learning preferences, and it may be that swapping to another teacher is going to be the best for everyone in the long run. If this is not possible within school, don't feel bad about recommending that tuition be sought elsewhere, and advise parents to contact the hub to find out about other teachers. Having music lessons in or out of school is a parental choice, and it does not reflect badly on your department if some choose lessons out of school for their child.

WHEN A STUDENT OR A VMT COMPLAINS

If a student makes a minor complaint about a VMT, use your professional judgement about how to follow it up. It may well be that the student dislikes being made to work hard, or expects to make rapid progress without practising or receiving feedback. As before, if you can be absolutely certain about Mr or Ms X's capabilities, you can refer the student to the many others who are happy and making great progress, and can advise them to stick at things a while longer before thinking about stopping lessons or requesting another teacher.

On rare occasions, a VMT might decide that they no longer wish to teach a particular student. It might be that they are persistent non-attenders or non-payers, or are simply making no progress due to a complete lack of effort. This eventuality should be covered by the initial contract between VMT and parent. If appropriate, you may need to mediate and perhaps advise parents on where they can find another teacher.

QUITTING WITHOUT NOTICE AND NON-PAYMENT OF FEES

It's always surprising how often parents sign a contract without reading it, and then assume that lessons can be stopped as soon as they say the word. This is another area where having a watertight contract agreement (and keeping copies of it) is invaluable. If lessons are to be stopped immediately, then fees in lieu of the notice period must be paid.

Chasing unpaid fees should not be something that the head of music is required to do: if employed by the school, this should be something that the Bursar assists with. In the case of self-employed VMTs, the hub or their union will help in recovering unpaid fees.

HOW ELSE CAN VMTS HELP YOUR DEPARTMENT?

With all this expertise visiting the department every week, it makes sense to consider ways in which to harness it in everyone's best interests. Here are some ideas about how to get maximum value from what your VMTs can offer:

- Are there funds to pay a VMT or two to run ensembles as part of your extra-curricular programme? This can bring a new lease of life to your offer: just be sure to negotiate in advance whether the VMT will be present at performances, and if so, whether they are to include this on their invoice. Will the cost of this be covered by the department, or by the students participating?
- A similar approach applies to accompanying. If you're lacking a pianist in your department, the services of your piano VMT may be very welcome. This can also be extended to putting together a band for your school show. Many shows require parts that students may not be able to play (unless you're particularly lucky) – particular problems include woodwind parts that require instrument doubling, tripling or even quadrupling. Just be sure to negotiate per-call rates in advance.
- Most VMTs will be happy to do demonstrations on their instrument in KS3 lessons or assemblies if there's a possibility of more students wanting tuition as a result.
- VMTs may be willing to help maintain equipment, putting strings on guitars or skins on drums, for example. If this is a bridge too far, then they will definitely be able to advise about what equipment/spare parts you need to buy, and where you can get it from.