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Leading after Lockdown:

Research on school leaders' work,
well-being and career intentions
(Phase 2 findings)

Spring 2022

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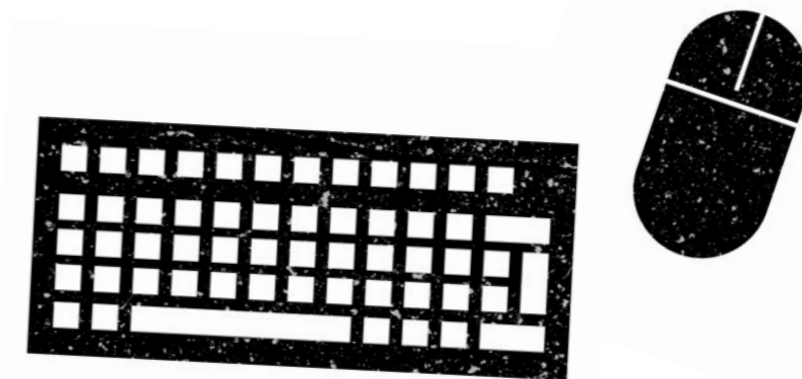
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We are grateful to the school staff and leaders who completed the survey and to the Assistant and Deputy Headteachers who found time to be interviewed. As this report shows all too clearly, the 2021-22 academic year has continued to be demanding and stressful for school leaders and their teams, and we are humbled by their commitment and patience in contributing to the research on top of everything else they have faced.

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Summary and implications

Senior school leaders' work through the pandemic

- Assistant and Deputy Headteachers described a similar set of 'highs' and 'lows', in terms of their experience of leading through the pandemic, to the headteachers we interviewed in the first phase of the research (Greany et al, 2021). However, there were differences in how they experienced these challenges, reflecting the more 'hands on' nature of their roles.
- Highs included a sense of pride in how they and their teams had worked together to address the many challenges they faced. Interviewees expressed satisfaction in how they had supported children and families, in particular the most vulnerable, and the progress that many children had made as a result.
- In terms of lows, every interviewee mentioned the lack of vision and clarity provided by the Department for Education (DfE) as a challenge. This lack of national leadership often served to amplify other issues, for example by increasing parental and pupil anxiety.

A pandemic in three phases: understanding the long-run impact

- The long-run impact of the pandemic on pupils and schools is now much clearer to interviewees: variable learning gaps; a loss of learning routines and demotivation for many pupils, with concerns over high levels of pupil absence; and increased numbers of children facing mental health issues.

- Interviewees characterised the pandemic in three distinct phases:

Phase one - March to August 2020 - included the first national lockdown, the tentative reopening of schools in the summer term, and the exams fiasco in August that year. The main challenges in this period included providing home learning, delivering food, and ensuring pupil welfare and safeguarding, while also providing support for staff at a time of fear and uncertainty.

Phase two - the 2020-21 academic year - was described as even more difficult. The logistics of opening schools safely was a significant challenge, due to the need for social distancing, masks, sanitised spaces, mass Covid tests, Track and Trace, pupil bubbles and so on. The pressure to focus on education and 'catch up' increased through this phase, and leaders oversaw a changing mix of classroom based and online learning. In secondary schools, national exams were cancelled again, so leaders were required to oversee the production of Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs). This was a huge logistical task, made more difficult by the fact that few believed it was fair to pupils or schools. As schools moved through this second phase, the sense of staff coming together – an initial 'blitz' spirit - began to wear thin, not helped by negative media headlines about the work of schools. Continuing high levels of parental, pupil and staff anxiety required a significant focus on communication and pastoral support.



Phase three - September 2021 to spring 2022 – has seen schools open continuously, while England saw the progressive removal of all Covid-related restrictions despite a surge in infections in early 2022. No interviewees agreed that schools were back to 'normal' in this phase, but views were evenly split on how the situation compared with earlier phases: around a third thought things were better; a third thought they were worse; while a third thought their work was equally challenging, but in different ways. Among the first group, this reflected the removal of most Covid-related requirements and the resulting ability to refocus on educational improvement. Among the second and third groups, this reflected three main challenges: first, Covid-related issues required continual attention, in particular due to very high rates of staff sickness and absence coupled with limited access to supply teacher cover, making it hard to move beyond crisis management; second, with the return of Ofsted inspections and national exams, interviewees felt under pressure, coupled with frustration that the realities of Covid had not been acknowledged nationally; third, addressing the 'long-run' impact of Covid, including variable learning gaps and a tidal wave of pupil well-being and mental health concerns.

Senior school leaders' well-being and career intentions

- Our national survey, conducted by Teacher Tapp, asked about respondents' overall experience of the pandemic. In 2022, just over a quarter (28%) of headteachers and senior leaders said they had been 'mostly' (6%) or 'sometimes' (22%) thriving. Just over two in five (42%) said they had been 'mostly surviving'. Meanwhile, three in ten (29%) had been sometimes (20%) or mostly (9%) sinking. Fewer leaders are thriving and more are sinking than when we asked the same question in 2021.¹ Leaders in primary schools and female leaders are notably more likely to be sinking.
- Interviewees explained that the pandemic had impacted negatively on their workload (36/42), health (20/42) and mental health and well-being (28/42). Interviewees described extended periods when they were constantly on alert to address urgent issues, even at weekends and in holiday periods, meaning they became ground down. To a large extent, the drivers of increased workload and the impact that this had on senior leaders' health and well-being were similar to the findings for headteachers, outlined in the previous report. One clear difference in the current academic year is that senior leaders have needed to cover more lessons for absent staff.

- Our survey asked how the pandemic had affected respondents' career plans. 30% of headteachers and 16% of senior leaders currently plan to leave the profession – for reasons other than full retirement – within the next five years. In addition, a further 10% of heads and 6% of senior leaders remain unsure about their career plans. This indicates that the proportion of heads and senior leaders planning to leave the profession has reduced somewhat since we asked this question in 2021, but still remains worryingly high.
- The interviews with Assistant and Deputy Heads revealed that for the definite 'leavers' (4/42) and undecideds (3/42), money was not the main driver of their decision. Rather, they had become disillusioned by the lack of recognition given to schools and teachers and felt a need to escape the profession to protect their own and their family's well-being.

The impact of the pandemic on aspirations for headship and the leadership labour market

- Our survey asked teachers and leaders whether or not they agree with the statement 'since the start of the pandemic the role of headteacher has become significantly more stressful'. The results reveal high levels of agreement among all staff groups, particularly senior leaders (94%) and headteachers themselves (96%). Our interviews with Assistant and Deputy Heads reinforced these findings: two thirds explained that the pandemic had negatively influenced their view of headship. However, even before the pandemic, headship was seen as problematic due to the pressures of constant policy change, reducing school funding, increasing accountability, and limited school autonomy.
- Based on an analysis of Teacher Tapp survey data from 2021, just under half of SLT respondents say they would consider applying for headship one day ('yes definitely' - 17% plus 'yes, perhaps' - 31%). This figure is similar to our interview sample, where 20 (out of 42) interviewees said that they would consider applying for a headship at some point. Among interviewees who did not aspire to headship, reasons given included: the 'unreasonable' demands on heads; the additional pressures caused by Covid; that the financial incentives were not strong; and that these leaders

enjoyed their current role, including because it enabled them to continue some class teaching.

- Among the interviewees who aspire to headship (20/42), 16 had already completed or were in the process of completing the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). Views on NPQH ranged from those who regarded it positively, through to more critical views. Even those who were positive tended to see other forms of leadership development, such as sitting in on headteacher meetings, as more powerful.
- We worked with Professor John Howson/ TeachVac to track the number of senior school leadership posts advertised in England in the first four months of 2022 (generally the busiest period for recruitment), comparing these to the equivalent period in the previous two years. In primary, the number of headteacher posts advertised increased by more than a third between 2021 and 2022. The number of primary assistant and deputy head posts also increased, by 80% since 2020 in the case of assistant heads. In secondary, the head teacher situation has been more volatile, but is higher in 2022 (n=261) than in either 2021 (n=169) or 2020 (n=209). The number of assistant and deputy head posts advertised in secondary has increased sharply, by 75% over two years in the case of assistant heads. These findings require caution, given they do not cover the entire year and that there has been significant volatility in the labour market these past two years. Many job adverts arise because of moves between schools, so we cannot assume that the increases necessarily represent an exodus from the profession. Nevertheless, these numbers align with our wider findings to raise a concern that more leaders are leaving and that some schools may struggle to recruit senior leaders in the coming period

How did England's pandemic response compare with other countries?

- At the start of the report, we review international evidence which compares educational policy responses to the pandemic across OECD nations.² England's approach could be characterised as relatively average overall, but less supportive of teachers and leaders than many other countries. For example, while 18 out of 30 countries gave teachers priority access to vaccinations, England did not.
- Emerging international research shows that school leaders everywhere have faced significant challenges during the pandemic. However, comparing research in England and Australia,³ it seems that leaders here have felt less well supported and are more likely to report negative impacts on their health and well-being as a result.

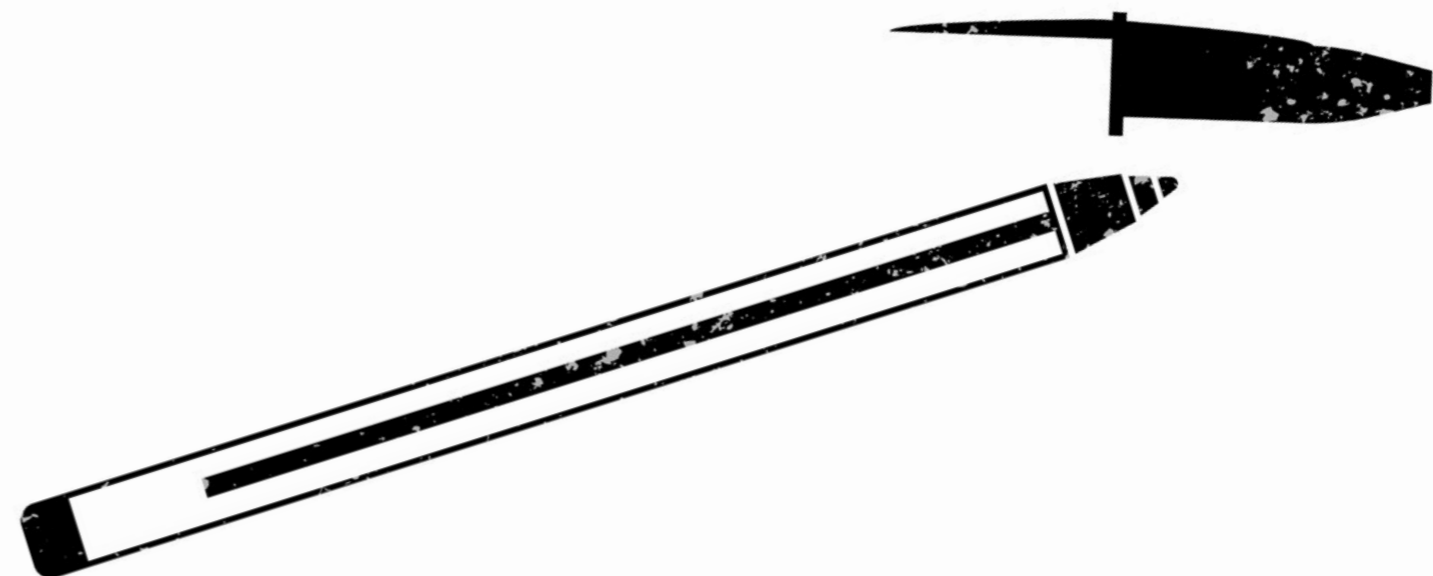
Conclusions and implications

- We argue that the mismatch in the current academic year between a national narrative which has emphasised 'catch up' and a return to 'normal', and the lived reality of leading schools that very much not 'normal', has been problematic. The government's recent white paper, Opportunity for All, focusses on the new NPQs as the only measure to support school leadership. Meanwhile, new attainment targets, new expectations on the minimum length for the school day, and further structural changes announced in the white paper will increase the pressure on leaders even further. We agree with the Education Select Committee's conclusion that the "current plans (for Covid recovery) do not go far enough."⁴

- We review the literature to identify the characteristics of school systems that are successful in supporting schools and school leaders to address complex challenges – comparing these 'healthy' systems with the characteristics of 'unhealthy' systems.

Healthy systems are successful in developing a shared sense of purpose and are prepared to acknowledge and address complexity, through collective sense-making, learning and adaptation. In contrast, 'unhealthy' systems are characterised by a climate of fear, complex problems are denied, administrative actions are presented as the only possible way forward, and discussions of values and ethics are sidelined through the use of apparently 'objective' evidence.

- We ask whether England's school system may have been uniquely ill-equipped to deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic. Our findings highlight two issues which made it harder for system leaders here to galvanise key stakeholders to develop a collective response to the crisis: an imbalance between national and local decision-making, and a lack of system-level trust.
- The implications identified in our first report remain relevant in the light of the new findings: restore trust; re-shape local models of support; recognise and value community leadership; and rethink leadership.



Conclusions and implications

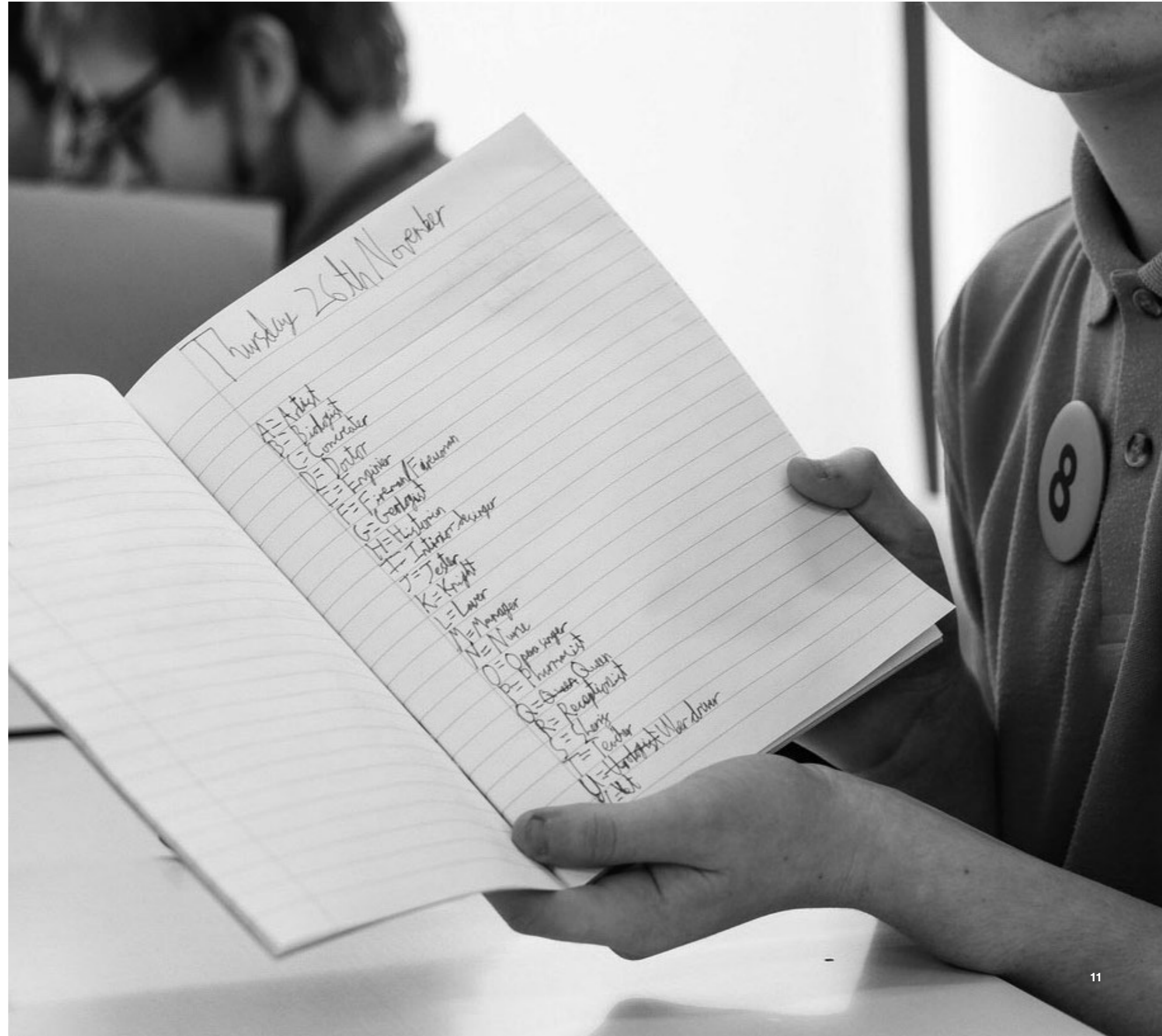
- In addition, we suggest changes that policy makers should make to address the findings in this research.

Shorter-term:

- Direct more funding to schools and trust leaders to spend it, weighted towards schools in more disadvantaged contexts
- Focus more attention on school leadership support and development, including succession planning for headship.

Longer-term:

- Move away from centralised 'top-down' approaches and compliance, towards an approach that values professional expertise, that recognises differing contextual needs, and that devolves decision-making to the lowest appropriate level.



1. Introduction

This report draws together findings from the second phase of an ongoing mixed methods research project that is exploring school leaders' experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic in England, in particular how this has affected their work, well-being and career plans.

1.1 Background – Findings from Phase 1

Findings from the first phase of the project were published in November 2021, in a report entitled *Leading in Lockdown: research on school leaders' work, well-being and career intentions* (Greany, Thomson, Martindale and Cousin, 2021).⁶ Phase one included a national survey of school leaders (n=1491) and interviews with 58 primary and secondary headteachers.

Headline findings from phase one of the project included:

- Leading schools during the first 18 months of the lockdown (i.e. up to summer 2021) gave most leaders a profound sense of satisfaction in providing a worthwhile public service at a time of national crisis. Many explained that in responding to the crisis they and their teams had developed new capabilities and ways of working, for example in relation to online learning, and/or had strengthened relationships, including with children and families and with other schools and local agencies.
- The 'lows' of leading in the pandemic largely stemmed from the external environment, in particular the perceived inadequate leadership provided by central government, which was seen as 'clumsy' and 'tone deaf'. In the survey, more than nine in 10 (93%) respondents disagreed that the advice provided by the Department for Education (DfE) was 'timely and straightforward', while two thirds (65%)

disagreed that they trusted the advice provided by DfE.

- Most leaders had coped with the pandemic – in the survey, fewer than one in 20 (4%) reported that they had been 'mostly sinking'. However, two in five (42%) were 'mostly surviving', while almost a quarter (23%) were 'sometimes' or 'mostly sinking'.
- The vast majority of headteacher interviewees experienced a negative impact on their workload during the pandemic. It was hard for leaders to switch off, including at weekends and during holiday periods, due to endless urgent tasks, so that, over time, they became ground down. Many interviewees described negative impacts on their well-being and health.
- Two fifths of leaders (40%) said they plan to leave the profession - for reasons other than full retirement – within the next five years. The interviews, undertaken two months after the survey in June/July 2021, indicated that the situation remained fluid: some 'leavers' now planned to stay, while some 'stayers' now planned to leave.
- In terms of what might persuade more leaders to remain in post, greater trust in the profession – by government – was seen as making the greatest difference, followed by action to reduce pressure and workload, while enhancing funding and support for schools and school leaders.

Phase 2: Leading after lockdown

Phase two of the research, reported here, was conducted between January and March 2022. This phase aimed to build on and extend the initial findings. We were particularly keen to understand whether and how the 2021-22 academic year had been experienced differently by school leaders 'after' the various lockdowns and school closures seen in 2020 and 2021.⁷ Given the finding that two in five leaders plan to leave the profession within five years, we wanted to explore in depth the views of potential future headteachers – i.e. Assistant and Deputy Heads – to understand how the pandemic had impacted on their work, well-being and career aspirations, and to examine any emerging evidence of how the pandemic is impacting on school leaders' career decision-making.

To this end, in this phase of the research we have:

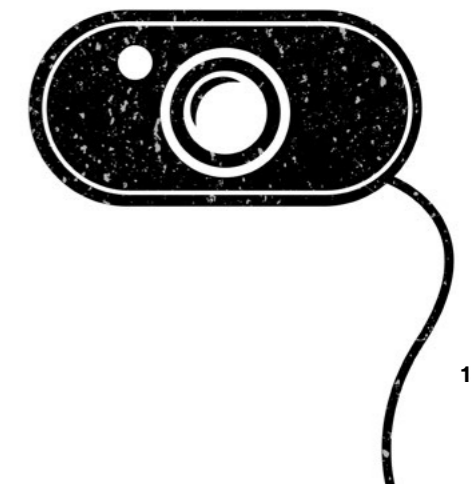
- reviewed the literature in relation to school and system responses to school leadership recruitment, retention and succession planning
- surveyed 6,057 teachers and school leaders in state-funded schools (via Teacher Tapp) to understand their experiences of the pandemic, how it has impacted on their career plans, and the extent to which it has altered their perceptions of headship
- re-analysed a small number of questions asked of teachers and school leaders in previous Teacher Tapp surveys to assess related issues, such as the proportions who aspire to headship in the future
- interviewed 42 Assistant and Deputy Headteachers in primary and secondary schools about their experiences of the pandemic and how it has impacted on their workload, well-being and career aspirations
- worked with Professor John Howson to analyse senior leadership job advertisements during this period, comparing this with previous years.

This report draws together the findings from these strands. In reporting on the interviews, we anonymise individual interviewees, but we use four category codes (PAHT - primary assistant headteacher, PDHT - primary deputy headteacher, SAHT - secondary assistant headteacher, SDHT - secondary deputy headteacher) to indicate their school phase and role at the time of the interview. We undertook considerably more interviews with secondary (n=35) than primary (n=7) leaders, despite our best efforts to increase the primary response rate, so it is important to recognise that the findings are less representative of primary leaders. Across the interview sample as a whole we sought to achieve a broadly representative mix in terms of individual and school characteristics. For example, the interviewees included two special schools, two alternative provision (AP) schools, three independent schools, one hospital school and one sixth form college. Appendix 1 includes further details on the project methodology and interview sample.

The project received ethical approval from the University of Nottingham School of Education Ethics Committee.

Phase 3: Leading beyond lockdown?

A third phase of the research will commence in summer 2022, funded through CAPE,⁸ with a report due in autumn 2022. In this phase we will hold a series of national and regional round table events involving the various stakeholders who are – or could be - involved in supporting leadership development and succession planning within and across schools, academies and trusts. These discussions will focus on practical steps that can be taken to enhance support for leaders and to address succession priorities. We will also revisit and update the 2021 national survey and undertake further analyses of national data.



2. The impact of the pandemic on school leadership: reviewing the evidence

2.1 School leaders under pressure, before and through the pandemic

Even before the pandemic, school leaders in England were under pressure. The government's recent 'Opportunity for All'⁹ white paper highlights evidence that 'leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an in-school influence on children's learning'.¹⁰ This explains why school leaders are seen as an essential ingredient for high quality schools that can make a positive difference for children, with all the associated policy expectations and accountability requirements that this brings. Of course, this evidence is not new and school leaders have been autonomous and accountable in England since the 1988 Education Reform Act introduced changes such as school-based management of budgets, parental choice of school, and a national approach to inspection through Ofsted. However, changes introduced over the past decade, including curriculum reforms, raised expectations for pupil and school performance and reducing gaps, and the expansion of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), have all placed additional pressures on school leaders.¹¹ Meanwhile, reduced real-terms funding for education and the removal of most of the local and national forms of support that had previously been available has left many school leaders feeling exposed and exhausted.¹²

Meanwhile, wider pressures on schools have also increased. Rapid changes in society, including the continuing expansion of social media and changes wrought by Brexit and the cost-of-living crisis, continue to impact on children, families and their communities. Rates of child poverty have increased over the past decade, making it harder for schools in deprived contexts to narrow or close gaps in academic outcomes.¹³ Wider children's services, including Sure Start children's centres and Children and Adolescent Mental Health

Services (CAMHS), have been cut or pared back since 2010, meaning that schools have been left to address increasingly complex needs with minimal support.¹⁴

These issues were already impacting on the work and lives of school leaders before the pandemic. There was evidence that systemic pressures were affecting leaders' well-being and that rates of retention for headteachers and other senior leaders were reducing.¹⁵ However, these issues were not seen as critical, and the focus of policy and practice was firmly on efforts to address concerns around the workload, recruitment and retention of teachers, rather than leaders.¹⁶

Ever since the government's decision to introduce the first national lockdown in March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented new challenges for school leaders while at the same time exposing the many cracks in the system within which they operate. The first Leading in Lockdown report explored these issues, in particular from the perspective of headteachers, with the key findings summarised in the Introduction, above. It highlighted the impact on school leaders during the first 18 months of the pandemic, including increased workloads for all and well-being and health challenges for many. It also highlighted the associated risk that significant proportions of leaders were planning to leave the profession as a result.

2.2 How does England's response compare with other school systems globally?

Given the pressures that school leaders have faced during the pandemic, it is important to ask whether England is unique. What can we say about the impact of the pandemic on school leaders in other systems globally, in particular in jurisdictions in the global north that might be seen to have similarities with England? Of course, comparing findings across diverse national contexts and between studies that have different methodologies requires caution, especially in relation to a pandemic that continues to evolve and mutate,¹⁷ so our aim here is simply to provide a snapshot based on the studies we have reviewed to date.

The OECD's reviews of educational responses to the pandemic¹⁸ indicate that England's policy response could be characterised as relatively average overall, but less supportive of teachers and leaders than many other countries. For example, in terms of the overall number of days that schools were closed, England was just slightly below the OECD average.¹⁹ However, in relation to support for teachers and leaders, while 18 out of 30 countries surveyed by the OECD gave teachers priority access to vaccinations, England did not. More than half of these countries abandoned standardised assessments altogether in 2020 and 2021, whereas England attempted to retain these through the use of Centre and Teacher Assessed Grades (CAGs and TAGs) and, in 2020, the failed algorithm. As our interview analysis in this report shows, the CAGs and TAGs processes were particularly stressful for secondary leaders.

Turning to studies of the impact of the pandemic on school leaders in specific countries or regions, the evidence is still emerging.²⁰ Without doubt, these studies show that the pandemic has been challenging for leaders everywhere and that many of the challenges they have faced – including policy overload and the strategic and managerial demands of closing and opening schools, providing online learning and addressing public health concerns – have been similar across countries and contexts.²¹ Several studies explore school leaders' responses, where there is an emphasis on prioritising flexible, values-based approaches and involving staff and wider stakeholders in co-designing new approaches.²²

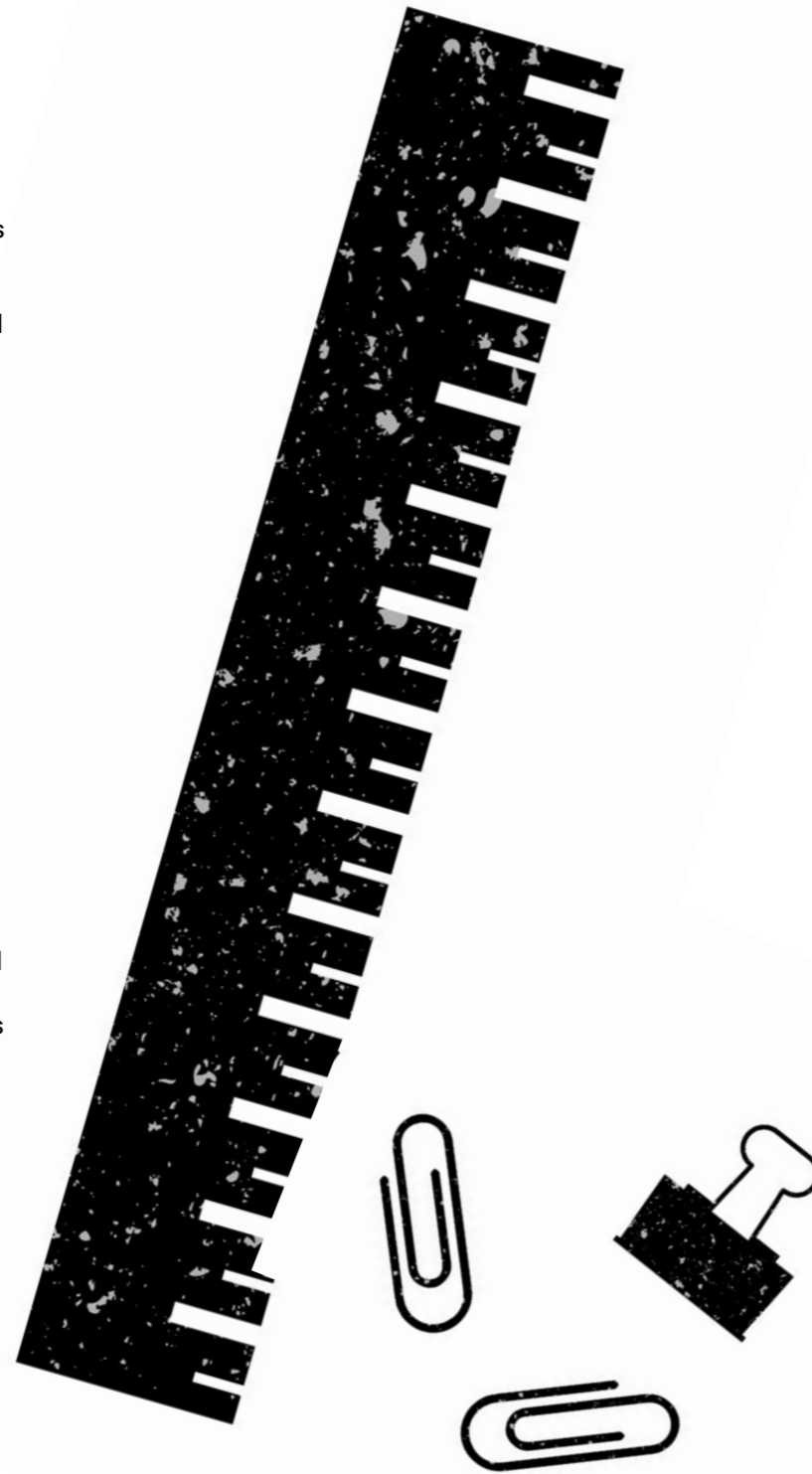
Not surprisingly, these pressures have caused stress and, sometimes, burnout, for school leaders across many of the international contexts that have been studied.²³ However, there are some indications that leaders in England may be more likely to report negative impacts on their health and well-being as a result of the pandemic. For example, analysing ten years of data from the Australian Principal Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey (APHSWS), Arnold, Rahimi and Riley (2021)²⁴ found that school leaders there were less likely to report overwhelming workloads and also experienced higher levels of social support from their supervisors in 2020 than in previous years. This is in stark contrast to the findings from the first phase of this research in England, where four out of five headteachers experienced a negative impact on their workload, three quarters (76%) rated themselves as unable to relax and switch off, and less than half (45%) agreed that they had been well supported in their leadership role through the pandemic.²⁵



2.3 In good health: what is needed for sustainable schools and school systems?

In this final literature-based section, we focus on research which identifies the characteristics of school systems that are successful in supporting schools and school leaders to address complex challenges. We conceptualise these findings in terms of ‘healthy’ systems - and contrast them with the characteristics of ‘unhealthy’ systems - arguing that these findings can serve as indicators or priorities for policy makers in England to focus on as we move forwards. Of course, there can never be a definitive template for a healthy school system and we are wary of simplistic policy borrowing, so we focus on principles and themes rather than specific prescriptions. In addition to the specific studies cited here, our thinking is informed by the various comparative reviews of leadership policy and support undertaken in recent decades²⁶ and by our own work across diverse systems globally.²⁷

A healthy organisation – and by corollary a healthy school system - is “one whose culture, climate and practices create an environment that promotes employee health and safety as well as organizational effectiveness”.²⁸ Organisational health is not accidental but is produced through the combination of purposeful and morally guided leadership, backed by sound management, opportunities for staff to learn and develop, and undertake rewarding work which is manageable, where they have a clear role, control and autonomy, and are not over-burdened and overwhelmed.²⁹ Researchers argue that employers should go beyond epidemiological measures such as illness and absence to be concerned with employee wellbeing - “happiness, financial security, job and retirement security, a sense of purpose, justice, and equity”.³⁰



In contrast, the literatures on unhealthy – or toxic – organisations in education³¹ suggest that poor employee well-being stems from practices such as:

- Legitimation of urgency - administrative actions are presented as the only possible way forward because of an emergency.
- Pacification - the existence of a problem is either denied or there are claims that it has been resolved
- Topic avoidance - rules and procedures are used to prevent discussion. Alternatively, alarmist narratives are used to head off critique
- Neutralisation - discussions of values and ethics are side-lined through the use of apparently ‘objective evidence’
- Individuation of expertise - sharing of interpretation of events is prevented so that some interpretations can be excluded on the grounds that they are eccentric or biased. Selected evidence from favoured experts is used.
- Creation of a climate of fear through tactics such as negative representations in the press and performance measures reinforced by punishment regimes.



The role of national policy in shaping healthy or unhealthy school systems relates partly to how reforms are implemented. Much of the classic literature on policy implementation and scale-up in education sees school leaders as ‘empty vessels’, who must be incentivised – or mandated - trained and supported to adopt new ways of working.³² School leaders are then expected to implement these reforms, unquestioningly and with fidelity, but such efforts commonly fail or lead to surface implementation, because school leaders and teachers are not given opportunities to question, shape, understand and own the changes. Munby and Fullan (2016)³³ described the consequences of such implementation-focused approaches to policy change as follows:

“

Many of us have worked for years in systems which are caught in a struggle between ... country level policy on the one hand and the action or inaction of individual schools on the other. Policy pushes in one direction, the profession pulls in another. The result is a type of friction which produces heat but not light: plenty of activity but not enough systematic change or improvement in outcomes.”

Meaningful and sustainable system change achieves depth, reflecting a shift in reform ownership.³⁴ Instead of seeking to drive prescribed changes from the top, policy makers should seek to involve key stakeholders, and particularly school leaders and teachers, in the change process. This involves providing genuine opportunities for stakeholders to co-design and adapt an approach that fits with their own and their school's values, priorities and contexts. This suggests a broader approach to leadership across the system, as one of us has written previously:³⁵

“

What seems clear is that ‘successful’ leadership is not something that some people are born with, existing in finite quantity. Rather, it seems that leadership agency can be shaped and grown – or diminished - by the wider context. Leaders will quickly learn from their role models and peers whether to collaborate or compete and will respond to whether the wider framework they operate within is enabling or punitive. In systems where trust is high, where schools collaborate and share their expertise and capacity so that effective practice spreads, where leadership development and capacity building are prioritised, and where leaders have a voice in shaping policy so that they are committed to achieving shared goals, then leadership agency will be increased. The opposite is also true; where leaders, teachers and schools are criticised and assumed to be under-performing, where they risk dismissal if the results in any given year are poor, and where they can see that the way to get on in a politicised environment is to game the system, then leadership agency will be diminished.”



Healthy school systems are successful in developing a shared sense of purpose and are prepared to acknowledge and address complexity, through shared sense-making and processes of collective learning and adaptation. Singapore is frequently highlighted as a system that has embraced such approaches as it seeks to develop its Thinking Schools Learning Nation and Teach Less Learn More agendas.³⁶ The resulting model is generally characterized in terms of ‘centralised-decentralisation’, involving a combination of tight central prescription over aspects such as the curriculum and required pupil outcomes (which include, but go beyond academic test scores), together with a looser level of control over how schools and school networks operate to achieve these outcomes. These efforts include a significant focus on developing school leaders, including through the flagship Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) for aspiring principals

run by the National Institute of Education (NIE). Launched in 2001, the LEP is a six-month full-time programme, with content covering systems and futures thinking, organisational learning, and dealing with complexity as well as more operational aspects of leadership. It includes a two-week visit to another country and a Creative Action Project (CAP), where participants propose and implement a “value-adding change” in a different school to their own. Jensen et al. (2017)³⁷ use the LEP as an illustration of how systems can look beyond rigid competency-based approaches to develop challenging, dynamic and open-ended learning experiences which foster genuine systemic thinkers for schools. Singapore’s example thus demonstrates the potential for complexity thinking as a route to disrupt the linear, ‘empty vessels’ approach to policy reform and implementation.³⁸



3. Leading before the pandemic

In this section we draw on evidence from the interviews with Assistant and Deputy Heads to briefly explore motivations for senior leadership and the highs and lows of leading before the pandemic.

3.1 Why become a senior leader?

Interviewees described their roles in different ways, reflecting the particular structures and divisions of responsibility in place in each school. Not surprisingly, primary leaders tended to be all-rounders, and often had some teaching responsibilities in addition to their leadership role. In secondary, roles were more clearly differentiated, falling into three broad areas: teaching and learning/school improvement/professional development, curriculum and timetabling, and pastoral/behaviour/inclusion (including special needs and safeguarding). Some of the more experienced interviewees explained that they had worked across two or three of these areas during the course of their career, but most had specialised in one area, reflecting their particular interests and professional strengths.

We asked interviewees why they had chosen to apply for a senior leadership role. This decision was driven largely by a desire to influence the vision and direction of the school and to have a wider impact across a broader range of areas. Increased autonomy to make your own decisions and the satisfaction of designing and overseeing programmes of change were important motivators for many. Some relished the particular challenges involved in addressing technical tasks, such as curriculum planning or timetabling. Others enjoyed managing people and leading the professional development of teachers, fulfilling a passion for how children and adults learn.

“

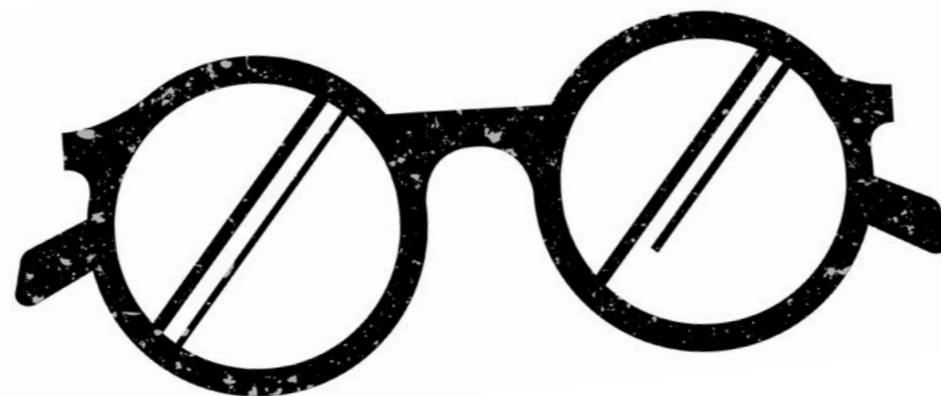
The Headteacher is sort of a figurehead and, actually, Deputy is where you get to do a lot of the work and the decision making around what actually goes on day to day.”

SDHT

“

You get to see a bigger picture (as a senior leader), whereas if you just teach, then your world is much, much smaller.”

SDHT



3.2 The highs and lows of senior leadership before the pandemic

Interviewees had varying levels of experience, ranging from those who had been appointed during the pandemic to those who had been in post for more than a decade. We asked the more experienced senior leaders about the highs and lows of leading before the pandemic.

The positive aspects of the role largely mirrored the reasons why interviewees had chosen to take on senior leadership in the first place. Success in making a difference to the lives and futures of children, particularly those who have faced challenges, was widely seen as one of the most rewarding aspects. Other satisfying elements included: the joy of working with children and seeing them develop; the variety, where “no two days are ever the same”; developing staff; and solving specific technical challenges. For many, the fact that they continued to teach some of the time was also important – as we explore below, some worried that this aspect would be lost if they became a head.

Turning to the lows of leading before the pandemic, the most often cited challenge was ‘finances’ or ‘lack of resources.’ A minority cited falling rolls as the cause of their school’s funding challenges, but more commonly this was related to national cuts to school funding and to wider services for children. Reductions to services for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and welfare, particularly Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), were seen as a growing concern. Funding pressures had sometimes led to restructures within schools, to reduce costs, which was seen as stressful and eroding of confidence for both leaders and teachers. More generally leaders explained that they were having to do more with less, in particular in relation to pastoral support and welfare, as they struggled to address rising demand for support in a context of ever reducing funding and capacity.

The second most commonly cited source of challenge before the pandemic was the relentless pace of change. Some of these changes were occurring beyond education but were nevertheless impacting on schools, such as Brexit affecting demographics, or wider cultural and social changes, such as on-line abuse. Most of this

change was seen to stem from national education policy, including changes to the school funding formula, Ofsted frameworks, curriculum and assessment frameworks, and teaching guidelines, such as synthetic phonics in primary schools. Changes to school structures and job roles were also common, for example as a result of joining a MAT.

“

The politics hamper what we’re all in the job for, which is to help children and their families. The frequent changes of education ministers, the frequently changing agendas by people that don’t seem to know schools.”

SDHT

“

Changes introduced via the back door, Ofsted change their criteria for inspection and suddenly we’re all changing how we teach.”

SDHT

At the same time, leaders cited an intensification of their roles, as additional expectations were added, particularly in the area of safeguarding and pastoral care.

“

Teaching is massively changed ... even in the last five years, safeguarding is radically different. In the last 10 years it is unrecognizable. I mean, you know, pastoral work ten years ago, completely different, completely ... And I mean, I think it's changed rightly, but I just, I don't know how sort of sustainable it is and I kind of feel like I do about five jobs 'cause I'm the safeguarding lead, I'm in charge of diversity, I'm in charge of staff well-being, I'm in charge of the school's mental health leaders as well ... There's quite a lot of jobs in there and new things just get added all the time, don't they? ... schools are now responsible for racism and knife crime and sexism in a way that we weren't maybe five years ago. And it's right, you know, we've got to do these things... (but) it's all just getting a bit much really.”

SDHT

This constant change added to leaders' workloads and a sense of conflicting priorities, with some of the pressure arising from “being held accountable for things you can't control”, a pressure felt particularly strongly in schools which served disadvantaged families.

“

Ofsted because I've always worked in challenging schools and challenging schools get Ofsted knocking on their door regularly and you then get into this world of senior leadership where you're doing things for Ofsted. You don't want to be, but you know you have to.”

SDHT

“

Carrying the can for whatever happens in the school, whether it's something you can influence or not.”

PDHT

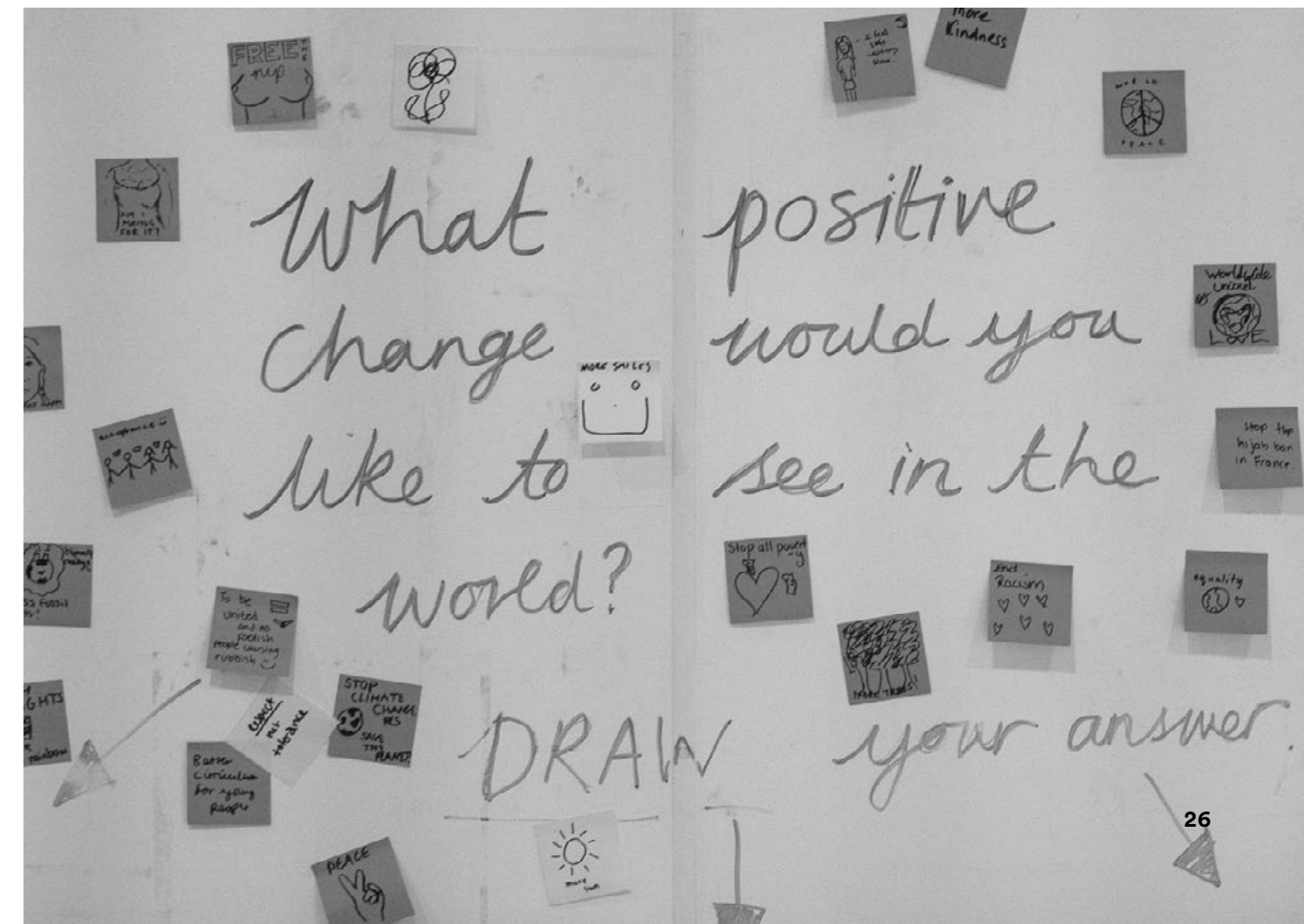


The pace, extent and number of changes over the last decade had led, our respondents felt, to a sense of insecurity which often impacted on well-being.

“

In senior leadership, particularly, because your job security and employment basically hangs by a thread all of the time, that is not conducive to good personal health, or mental health and actually it's a preventative to doing your job.”

SAHT



4. Leading during the pandemic

In this section we draw on the interviews to assess the highs and lows of leading during the pandemic and to explore how the crisis has been experienced by senior leaders over time, describing three distinct phases and focussing in detail on the current academic year.

4.1 The highs and lows of senior leadership through the pandemic

Interviewees were asked about the highs and lows of leading through the pandemic. Not surprisingly, many of their responses mirrored the highs and lows identified by headteachers, reported in detail in the phase one report (Greany et al, 2021). At the same time, there were some important differences in how Assistant and Deputy Heads had experienced these challenges when compared with headteachers, largely reflecting the more 'hands on' nature of their roles. For example, the detailed work involved in interpreting the guidance and then working with staff across secondary schools to agree student grades for submission through the CAGs and TAGs processes had largely fallen on Assistant and Deputy Heads, involving both intensive workloads and some difficult conversations with staff in cases where grades needed to be moderated down.

Starting with the positives, the most often cited aspect among both primary and secondary leaders was a sense of satisfaction in having overcome the many challenges presented during the pandemic. This included a sense of pride in progressing from remote learning in the first lockdown to live lessons during the second lockdown, having quickly put the technology in place and 'upskilled' staff so they could make best use of it. Also common across both phases was a sense of pride in the collegiality and creativity

shown by school teams, who had come together at a time of crisis. This sense of collegiality was felt not only within schools, but also across local areas.

“

Meeting the demands of everything that was being asked of us in a very short space of time. And putting on what we thought was a really, really good offer was rewarding.”

SDHT



“

All the school leaders within our local area during this time, it has been inspiring to see - every school in our geographical areas is that little bit different and we all had to find slightly different solutions for our schools, but we did it. So we kept our schools open and, as someone aspiring to headship, to see those heads working together and work with them day-to-day, it gives you a bit of faith irrespective of what the DfE says, we can do this and we're pretty good at what we do.”

PAHT



A second rewarding aspect was how schools had supported children and families, in particular the most vulnerable, and the additional progress that many of these children had been able to make as a result.

“

There was a lot of pastoral care, making sure that laptops were personally delivered to students, the food bank immediately switched, so that we were making sure that those students who needed food were getting it, the home visits didn't stop, the welfare checks.”

SDHT

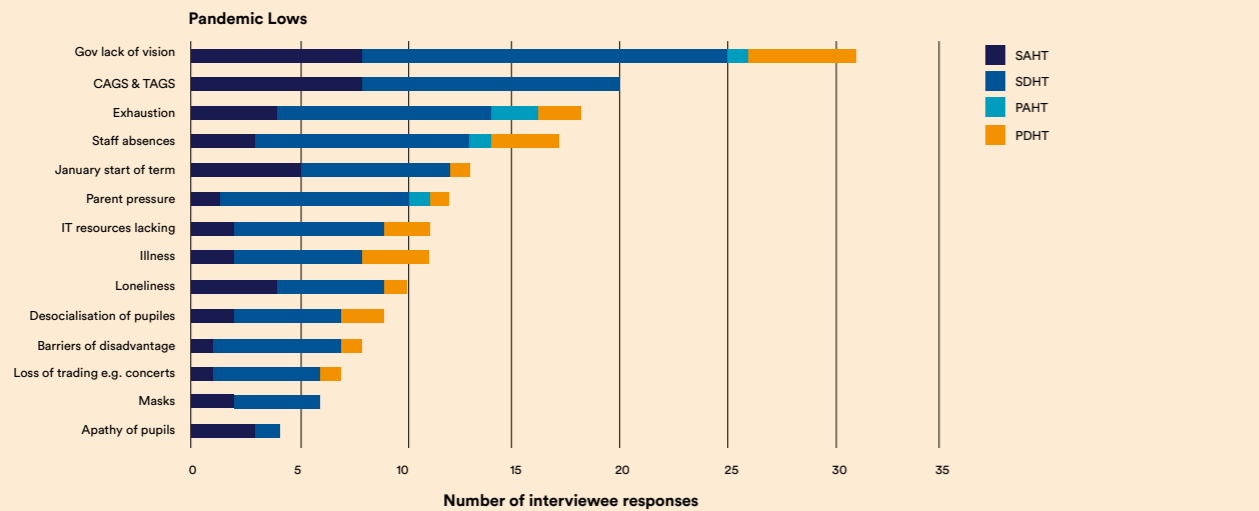
“

The progress of some of our more vulnerable students and how, because there were fewer children in school, they were really able to be themselves a bit more than they would. So we saw their confidence grow.”

SAHT

Figure 1: Interviewees pandemic 'lows'

The chart below provides an overview of the most common challenges mentioned by interviewees.



Every interviewee mentioned the lack of vision and lack of clarity provided by the DfE and national government as an issue. Leaders described schools as having been “buffeted in a whole political swirl” (SDHT) of masks/no masks; bubbles/no bubbles; opening/closing; exams/no exams. The last-minute about-turn decision to close schools after a single day in January 2021 was frequently cited as a particularly egregious example of government incompetence.



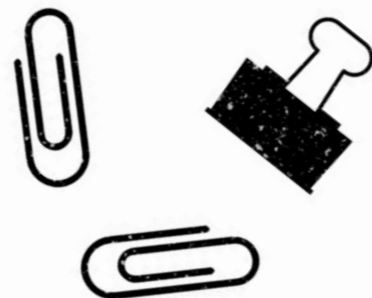
Biggest challenge has been the last minute information and the last minute changes. For instance, I had written a full school timetable and we were told at the end of June, three weeks left in school, that there would be a whole new programme from September. ... Everything has been short notice.”

SAHT



The guidance came out in school holidays, late at night. We would see it on the news – that would be the first time we'd know about it and then the Head and I would be on the phone to each other working out how that was going to apply to us.”

SDHT



Although the government’s leadership was by no means the only challenge that leaders faced, it often served to amplify other issues: for example, when late and inconsistent messaging created tensions with parents, or when the national approach to assessment increased tensions with staff. The constant changes led to anxiety and an increasing lack of cooperation from pupils and parents.



We’ve had lots of school refusal. But it's very difficult because everyone could understand why they were refusing as there were massively mixed messages on whether vulnerable students should be back in school.”

SDHT



The toughest thing, as a senior team, was dealing with the anxiety of other people, magnified by the pandemic ambiguities, because people always want a really clear-cut answer.”

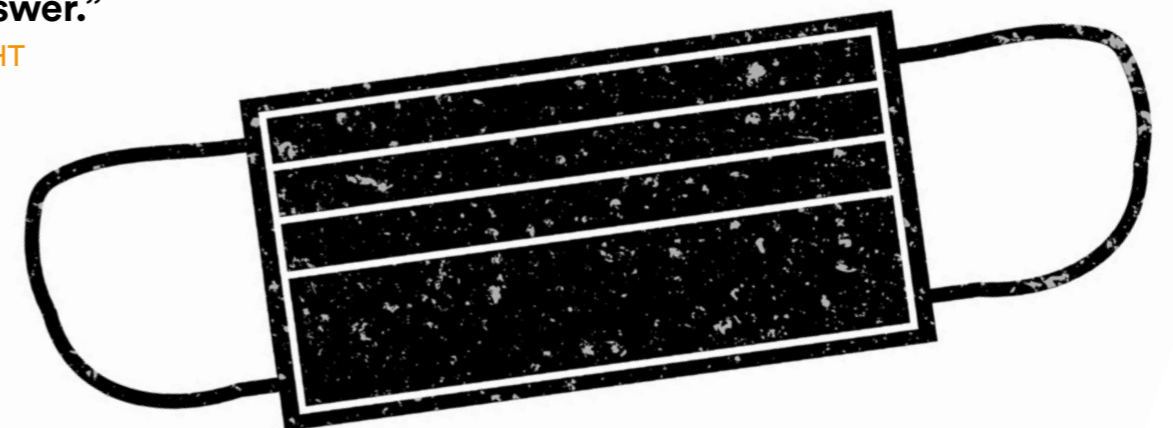
SDHT

Several interviewees explained that they had become increasingly frustrated by the ‘incompetence’ of the DfE and its refusal to listen to the teaching profession. There were numerous examples of how leaders’ individual agency had been hampered by the ‘top down’, centralised nature of decision-making by government, in particular where this was also last minute and/or poorly matched to the needs of particular schools and contexts. Examples given included the DfE’s guidance on schools closing/opening, exams guidance and the challenges of accessing vouchers for free school meals and laptops. One interviewee had met with his MP to complain about the unreasonable approach to CAGs in 2020, and had written several letters to the Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, before finally receiving a response he was half-way satisfied with.



It's absolutely made me furious with the government and the Department for Education having absolutely no understanding of what it's like to walk the walk.”

SDHT



Transcript poem 1: Does every bubble have a toilet?

We probably got about one week's holiday over the summer
The whole thing with the assessed grades.
But we also had to run the bubbles.

We had to zone people because we're quite a large school and quite a small site.
We had a grassed area at the back where we could put one of our year groups.
But we're at the bottom of the hill, all the runoff went onto the grass.
So we used the school reserves to put in an all-weather surface.
We did it with about a day to spare.

We had to take out workshops.
We didn't have enough rooms.
I remember looking into toilet blocks.
It sounds ridiculous but
How do we make sure every bubble got their own toilet bowl?

Teaching within bubbles was very restrictive.
It wasn't any fun for the children. No contact.
It's just not how humans operate,
and certainly not children.
The staff were physically exhausted from having to travel round every single lesson
and carry all their equipment
As much as we did to try and alleviate that, it was
a big change to their day,

So much risk assessment.
It literally affected the very heartbeat of the school
Ventilation.
It's much better to have students lining up outside than inside.
You control the corridors, the highest area of risk.
And then you can actually get the students into the classes.
Where they're all facing the front.

One thing now is absences.
The idea that COVID has gone and it hasn't.
Each day we average about four out of a staff of just under 70 away.
But the bigger challenge is what have students learnt.
We had to send whole year groups home and they missed periods of time
And remote learning is not the same as being in a classroom.
And not everybody had the same experiences.
So even though our curriculum map is like, yeah, yeah they did this back when they were in year 10.
Well they certainly didn't.

When you think about head-teaching,
the scale on which you do things is much larger
And that's the bit that's always attracted me
as opposed to senior leadership roles.
Being able to understand what it is that makes a large organization tick
and how you can influence and correct it.

But I want to see this school in a good place
get through this next bit,
And then think about next steps.



4.2 A pandemic in three phases: has the current academic year (2021-2022) felt 'normal'?

We were interested to know whether the 2021-22 academic year had been experienced as different from the first 18 months of the pandemic by interviewees, partly because this period was not covered in the first phase of the research, but also because schools had been open from September 2021 onwards, with the national narrative during that period being one of 'freedom' and the progressive removal of all Covid-related restrictions. Some leaders described the entire period, from March 2020 onwards, as continuously "unreal" or having "a surreal quality". However, within this overall fog, three distinct phases, each with its own particular challenges, could be identified.

Phase one: March to August 2020

The first phase covered the period from March to August 2020, including the first national lockdown, the tentative reopening of schools in the summer term, and the exams fiasco which culminated with the decision to abandon the algorithm in August that year. The main challenges in this period included the rapid move to provide home learning, deliver food, and ensure pupil welfare and safeguarding. There was a climate of real fear and uncertainty, with a focus on trying to keep staff and students safe and to address anxiety - "it was a dark time for everybody". An initial focus was on ensuring children had access to home learning and technology, while training staff and developing online materials. Later on, concerns over whether pupils were engaging in the learning dominated. Leaders frequently had to field concerns about learning from parents. In addition to maintaining a focus on education, schools took on wider community support roles, as a result of reductions in wider services.



“

We have a high number of Children in Need or on Child Protection Plans [and] children that we know have difficult family situations and it felt for us throughout the pandemic period, particularly the first lockdown actually, that all other services just vanished and we were the ones having to manage really, really complex family situations... and we had no other services that were supporting, everybody was working from home.”

PDHT

“

One of the big things from lockdown is, other services haven't had staff or the services are short so they've put lots of students on our roll. We've gone from 5 students pre-lockdown to 150. Our role has significantly changed through the pandemic - we were just a hospital school. We now seem to be the school picking up all the anxieties from the maintained schools being referred to us and from the pupils on the 'out of school' register.”

SAHT

Taking on this more holistic support role enabled teachers and leaders to gain new insights into the conditions of many children's lives. Even leaders with years of experience working with disadvantaged pupils described the "eye-opening" nature of the pandemic experience. Interviewees from a range of schools expressed concern at the increasing gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

“

It's the number of barriers, I guess, that some families face and unless you're in that position you couldn't possibly imagine them, so that was a real learning point for me around disadvantage and what it truly means.”

SAHT

“

A bit more of a real understanding of our students who were entitled to free school meals. Maybe what their everyday life really was. You know, we thought we knew, but actually we became the real focus for those families because, for a lot of them, they couldn't access social workers face to face ... couldn't get GP appointments. So we became that hub of, the people you can get hold of ... I found myself really just being a troubleshooter for grocery shopping and electric bills, not having devices and just general grumpiness at the state of the world.”

SDHT



During this first phase there was a strong sense of most staff pulling together in a crisis and of contributing to a national effort. However, for secondary leaders in particular, the exams fiasco in August 2020 caused major anxiety and disappointment on behalf of students that was hard to then recover from. More generally, as schools moved into the second year of the pandemic, the sense of a 'blitz' spirit began to wear thin.

“

One of the low points of my career was A level results day in 2020 when we were giving pupils grades that were so out of line from what they should have got. And that was probably one that sticks with me now as being a really really rubbish day because we were the ones facing the pupils and you could see on their faces they knew we knew that what they'd got was not what they should have got.”

SAHT



“

Early on I think staff pulled together. It was very much a 'blitz' spirit with people pitching in. As the pandemic has gone on that's worn off. I think people's tiredness. People are just bogged down and sick of things and you get less buy-in now than maybe we did at the beginning of the pandemic.”

SAHT

Dealing with these many demands led to increases in workload for our interviewees, with work overtaking most weekends and holidays, meaning that when they started the 2021-21 academic year they were already tired and felt 'ground down'.

“

There was nothing to look forward to. Normally, you look forward to the holidays, don't you? And obviously there were no holidays. And when do you stop work when it's online school? And you just miss chats with colleagues and you missed the social. So yeah, I suppose it was just it was workload in the first lockdown.”

SDHT

Transcript poem 2: I've had a couple of wobbles

I have to almost count on my fingers when the pandemic started,
How many years ago.
How long we've been working in the way that we've been working,
I am still drowning in work.
I'm available to everybody
I'm directly line managing 13 people.
I've got five people who pass things to me

You know, I just want to do a good job and I don't want to let people down.
I've worked full pelt.
I've had a couple of wobbles,
I've got upset.

The first time was the suicide of a parent and I'd been supporting some parents through terminal cancer and students through their parent with terminal cancer and that came to a head.
I hadn't realized that I'd just been carrying it all.
And it just hit me.
It was something that someone said, really insignificant,
but I realized I've been carrying all this grief myself.

The second time was when I applied to be a deputy head.
The whole experience was awful
I came away feeling absolutely destroyed.
I've never felt like that before.

I don't know whether it was me being completely and utterly exhausted, not able to function properly.
But the first round was about twelve of us going for the one job.
And we had to do a speed dating thing in a hall
Go from one person to another to another to another
Being asked about a whole range of different things
Even though the role was a pastoral one.

All I know about is pastoral because that's all I've been doing since the pandemic.
I've not been able to look broader than that.

The things that were being fired at me out there I was just a rabbit in headlights.
I couldn't think straight.
It was horrendous.
It really knocked my confidence.

I really hit rock bottom.
I came out of that interview process feeling destroyed.
I didn't want to come back to school in September.
I just hit the wall
I was thinking I'm going back into more of the same.

I'm thinking Well, I'm not going to be a deputy head.
So what else can I do to get some sort of satisfaction?
I've now taken on safe-guarding responsibilities working across the trust.

Phase two: September 2020 – August 2021

The 2020-21 academic year was described as even more difficult than the first phase. The logistics of opening schools safely was both a practical and emotional challenge, with social distancing, masks, and sanitising spaces; administering Covid tests for large numbers of students; blended learning, where some pupils in a class were present and others were on-line at home; all while dealing with the anxieties of staff, parents and pupils.

“

Transitioning back into school in the September of 2020 was difficult for a lot of staff, to suddenly go from seeing no one to mixing with 900 students. And in a relatively old school, we've got very narrow corridors, we don't have a lot of teaching spaces around the school either, so trying to put in measures to make staff feel safe was more challenging in terms of the site.”

SAHT



Many of these challenges were compounded by government requirements and expectations, which were seen as unreasonable and imposed without consultation or understanding of the logistical implications. Whereas, in the first phase, schools received thanks and praise for their part in the national effort, the mood in the second phase was felt to be far less supportive. Negative headlines in the media in this period, often as a result of comments from ministers or Ofsted, were felt to be unfair and hurtful.

“

There was definitely a feeling in March 2020 that the country needed us. There was a job that required doing, like being at war, you know, just sort at war with the virus, and we're all in it together. And obviously, the two years that we've just had have kind of eroded that.”

PDHT

“

Parents not following regulations, sending their kids in with coronavirus ... it felt like quite a dangerous environment at times. ... It feels like we're at the front line and I don't think that is recognized at all. It was horrible. So, I think that lack of respect ... not being valued by the national media.”

SDHT

Interviewees described the need to make decisions as a school or Trust on issues which are complex, including ones they did not feel qualified to make: “we were dealing with situations where we felt out of our depth, in terms of our own training and expertise.” One example of this was the requirement to administer lateral flow tests.

“

It's etched in my memory: March the 8th, 2021. When it was so exciting because we got all the kids back in, but I was just full of fear because I didn't know how the COVID testing would really work. I mean, now people are testing and my 4 year old can do the test herself and it's easy peasy. But at the time there was a lot of uncertainty from parents as well, about, 'it's confidential information. It's a medical procedure, why you're doing it in school? What will my data be used for and what do we do if we do get a positive case?' and all of that. That was a real low because it just felt so uncertain when all we wanted to do was have kids back and just get on with teaching and letting them be young people. And instead I was dragging them out every five seconds for a COVID test. And I really, genuinely don't know where the government think the staffing for that comes from.”

SDHT

The number of decisions which were left to schools to make rendered senior leaders vulnerable to parental pressure on issues which polarised opinion.

“

We've had solicitors' letters because we're facilitating the vaccines, addressed personally, not just to the Trust - they're actually addressed to us and it's not pleasant. And then on the other side of it, you know, we've got people who are very strongly for vaccines. We've got people very strongly for masks and people very strongly against. So, it's very polarizing, I think.”

SDHT

“

People just seemed a lot more angry. We dealt with a lot more complaints than we have ever had.”

PDHT



In addition to increasing negative interactions with parents, leaders felt uncomfortable with the need to act as the 'Covid police' when pupils returned to school, creating a sense of continual negativity in relationships. Leaders were also required to support teaching staff in dealing with increases in disruptive behaviour in classrooms and around school. Primary leaders in particular described how successive lockdowns had affected the socialisation of young children.

“

It became only negative interactions with students because it's telling them off. You know where 'you must do this?' 'Don't go there'. 'You can't enter that door'. 'Stay outside'. 'I'm cold'. 'Well, we've got to have the windows open.' It just felt a constant process of telling people off.”

SDHT



“

A large number of children had literally not left their flat for months. So, we were dealing with children with poor physical health, we could see the rise in obesity. Our younger children had regressed both in terms of forgetting how to speak English, but also more worryingly than that in terms of their independent skills, so we had children returning to school in nappies who hadn't been in nappies. We had children [of] five or six years old who had regressed to being bottle fed milk.”

PDHT

The 2020-21 academic year saw an increasing emphasis on education and 'catch up' for pupils. In secondary schools, national exams were cancelled once again, with leaders required to manage the production of Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs) for all GCSE and A' Level students. Some interviewees did acknowledge that the process had led to improvements in how their school moderated work, but there were also frequent tensions, for example if they had to ask teachers to moderate down. The entire process was described as a huge logistical task, and one that was made even more difficult by the fact that few staff believed it was fair to pupils or schools.

“

We were managing appeals for a system that we didn't necessarily believe in. ... And that was very challenging. It was difficult to have those conversations with students at the time and tell them, “you know you didn't get that grade. The reason you didn't get that grade was because this was the system that was in place.”

SAHT



“

150-page documents that I had to read and digest then put out to the staff as something they could understand and follow ... schools had to come up with our own policy ... the weight of the responsibility because it's pupils' GCSE grades and ... we have a lot of staff who care a lot and they wanted to get it right - if we get this wrong then that could impact someone's future.”

SAHT

Leaders remembered the year as an exhausting time: “there was no off” (SDHT); “the weariness, I suppose, of it just going on and on” (SDHT). In addition to their own work and personal concerns, they felt a need to support their teams.

“

We had people with families that find it really difficult to delineate between work and home; people who lived on their own who were finding the loneliness really difficult, then me being in a position where as a leader I was shouldering some of that burden being there for someone to talk, became quite wearing.”

SDHT

Transcript poem 3: We don't really use the staffroom now

Because of the pandemic we don't really use the staffroom now in the way that we used to. If anyone's in there, it's grabbing a quick coffee and leaving,
We now have two years' worth of new colleagues that don't know what the school looks like, They've met a very limited number of colleagues face to face.
They've had limited opportunities to have meaningful conversations with those colleagues in a relaxed environment.
We don't have a culture of using the staff room any longer.
Me included.
Instead of getting to work and going and sitting in the staff room I get to work and come and sit in this office.
I see people on the screen.
When I'm having a bad day I can't go and tell people about it.
And when other people are having a bad day they can't go and tell people about it.
But more importantly we don't overhear people We can't say “Oh look, have you tried this? or “That's OK. I'm having an awful week as well, but you know, try this, 'cause it will help” or “Hey, let's all go down the pub.”
Which we don't promote any longer because it doesn't feel safe to do that at the moment.
It was clear at the beginning that the government thought we were a bunch of lazy shysters, That's their communication.
That's how it made us feel. That's how many of us still feel,
And we're not.
We went the extra mile.
We went the extra mile with no leadership from central government.
We went the extra mile, fumbling in the dark, going from one press conference to the next, sitting in leadership meetings, waiting for their conference
so that we knew what we were going to have to decide on at no notice for the next day.

I can't genuinely say that I ever wanted to be a head teacher.
I still don't want to be a head teacher, but the flip side is considering that what I do next.
I have thought about that a lot more.
And I've thought a lot more about my health during the pandemic.
And that has helped me think a bit more clearly about the age at which I want to still able to do things.
I've been working hard to save money for a long, long time
My plan was to be mortgage free by the time I was eligible for early retirement.
I'm still not wanting to make that decision.
The pandemic hasn't made me think I'm going to get out of schooling quicker.
But it definitely hasn't made me want to progress more.
I'm probably even more happy staying at the level that I'm staying at
picking the jobs that I want to do.
The work that I want to do rather than chasing a title.
Offering more money would be lovely, but that's not what 's going to make me wish to step further up.
What's going to make me wish to step further up is
central government showing the respect that they should have for us that they don't.

Phase three: September -2021-spring 2022

On 19th July 2021 – ‘Freedom Day’ - most legal limits on social contact were removed in England. Schools returned in September 2021 and have remained open since then, with no further lockdowns. However, in December 2021, the emergence of the Omicron variant led the government to reintroduce some limited measures (e.g. facemasks) and by spring 2022 the number of Covid cases nationally had reached the highest levels ever, although the impact in terms of hospitalisations and deaths was lower than previous waves.

By the time of the interviews, in early spring 2022, the long-run impact of the pandemic on pupils and schools was becoming much clearer to interviewees: variable learning gaps; a loss of learning routines and demotivation for many pupils, with concerns over high levels of pupil absence; and increased numbers of children facing mental health issues. These challenges were compounded at the time of the interviews by very high rates of staff sickness and absence and limited access to supply teacher cover, making it hard to move beyond crisis management. With the return of Ofsted inspections and with national tests and exams due to take place in summer 2022, interviewees described feeling under intense pressure.

In this context, no interviewee agreed that schools were back to ‘normal’: “No, it feels like Government wants things to be back to normal and they’re not normal, not on the ground” (SAHT). However, views were roughly evenly split about how the situation compared with earlier phases of the pandemic: around a third thought things were better; a third thought they were worse; while a third thought their work was equally challenging, but in different ways.

Among those who saw the current year as an improvement, this largely related to the removal of most Covid-related requirements – i.e. Track and Trace (i.e. monitoring and managing Covid cases in school through bubbles, regular testing and sending students who had been in contact with a known case home) and school/teacher assessments (CAGs and TAGs) - and the resulting ability to refocus on the school’s main educational purpose.

“

Our job very much became focused on making sure we were following all the regulations... on infection control what we're getting back to now is education and the priorities we have for that.”

SAHT

Among the two thirds of interviewees who described the current academic year as worse than, or equally bad as, earlier phases, this was largely due to three challenges. First, leaders were addressing the recommencement of the ‘usual’ pressures of managing complex organisations with large numbers of staff and pupils and a return of external scrutiny. Second, the need to manage Covid-related issues was continuing, including: keeping people safe; negotiating strongly held polarised positions on how best to do that; increasing infection rates leading to pupils missing different lessons at different times and large numbers of staff absent through sickness. Thirdly, there was the need to make up for pupils’ pandemic losses in both learning and social behaviour.

“

The stressors were around anxiety and not understanding and not knowing and having to learn and reassure - now it's about the pressure of catching up, of running a whole school with over 10% of staff out every day pretty much since September.”

SDHT

Figure 2

Figure 2 shows the current challenges mentioned by interviewees, in order of frequency. We outline the nature and impact of the main challenges briefly below.

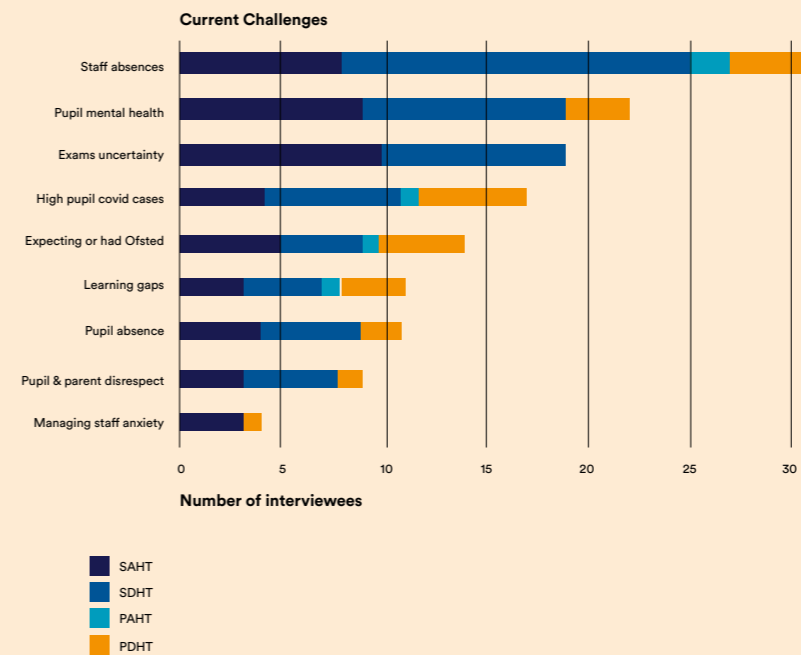
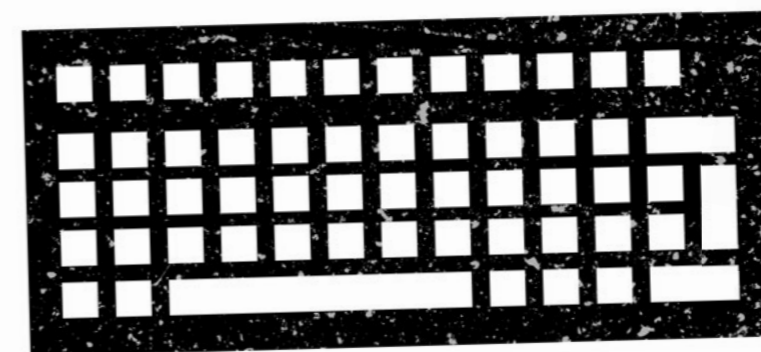


Figure 2: Current challenges facing interviewee school leaders (spring 2022)



Staff absence:

Managing high levels of staff absence and keeping all classes running was the main challenge cited by respondents in all four categories. Supply staff were often difficult to find, with many reportedly not willing to risk going into a school environment where infection rates were high. For some schools, the cost of cover staff was prohibitive. The loss of consistency for pupils, from not being taught in regular lessons by a familiar teacher, was felt to be causing further loss of learning and more behaviour problems. Leaders from special schools and AP reported being particularly hard hit, as they struggled to find supply staff adequately trained or willing to cover classes with challenging pupils. Lack of consistency in staffing made it hard to re-establish routines and could affect the school ethos: "it's turned from being collegiate at the beginning [of the pandemic] into situations where it's us and them" (SDHT). At the same time, the general anxiety had led to increased parental criticisms. All this had knock-on effects on senior leaders, who were left working to keep the school running and maintain morale while also covering lessons for absent colleagues, although several had fallen sick themselves.



Staff absence, up to 60% of our staff, so the impacts on my well-being is that I know I'm doing a bad job in other areas. I still think I'm doing a good job in the classroom, covering lessons. But you know, all the other things which define my role and for which I am responsible have been difficult to keep going. It makes me feel a bit useless. It makes me feel I'm rubbish at my own job."

SDHT



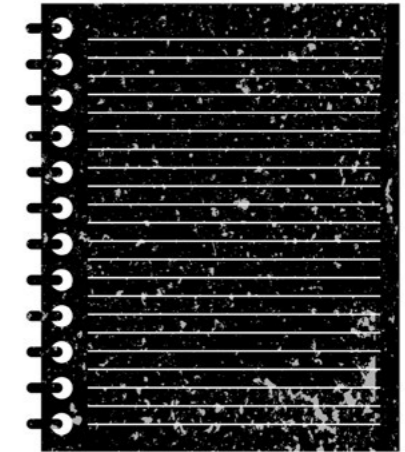
I think in terms of leadership at the moment we're needing to do a lot more work to try to keep morale among staff and help children find their feet again. Help teachers not feel that it's this mountain that's impossible to climb ahead of us because staff absence due to Covid is increasing, everybody is being asked to do extra and everybody's been amazing at doing that. But it does come at a cost and I think people are really tired."

PDHT



Pupil safeguarding and mental health:

Safeguarding is a challenge that featured in both phases one and two of the pandemic and has continued to be a major challenge in the current academic year. In phase one, 2020, the concern was mainly around children identified as vulnerable. As the pandemic progressed, leaders became aware that many young people from all home backgrounds were suffering extreme anxiety and, in some cases, mental health issues. Leaders from all settings reported huge rises in referrals to the safeguarding team, in one case "by over 200% - I've never known anything like it in my life" (VP, sixth form college). The situation is of particular concern due to the lack of capacity in external support services. For pastoral leaders in particular these issues were always challenging and, in some cases, devastating.



We have anxiety issues, amongst our Year 11 students particularly, a huge cause for concern. We have lots of students who are just not here, or they're turning up sporadically and we can't get help from CAMHS and our education welfare officer is completely swamped."

SAHT



We had a student who died by suicide in June 2021, and that is by far the most awful thing that's ever happened to me professionally. I've had students die before. It's always awful, but this, this is just another level and the aftermath of that, even six months or so... like me crying about everyday things."

SDHT



Exams:

For secondary phase leaders, continuing uncertainty regarding how examinations will be run in 2022 and the need to prepare for different scenarios have added to levels of anxiety for both pupils and staff. Some schools have carried out what they describe as a “pre-mortem of everything that could go wrong”, most had put in place structured catch-up, and all had run additional, moderated, in-school assessments, all of which had added to teacher and leader workloads.

“

The exam series this year is incredibly challenging ... in normal GCSE years, we schools get very good at predicting and being able to understand how well a cohort is going to do before they go in for the examination. We don't have that benchmark because of the last two years, and they've told us that that benchmark is going to be different and we still don't understand what it will be.”

SAHT



“

I don't feel what we are asked to do is purposive, e.g. in relation to assessment that must run this year - so that all pupils in Years 11 and 13 must be assessed three times during the course of the year so that if schools do shut again because there is yet another variant ... we have something in the bank to assess students with. It's a very considerable piece of work for a school with as many students as we have.”

SAHT

**Ofsted:**

Respondents described “the threat of impending inspection” as a pressure they felt “almost powerless to do much against, because we're being held accountable to an academic standard from a long time ago”. Those who had experienced an Ofsted inspection in the current academic year described a lack of understanding of the reality of life in schools during a pandemic.

“

It was a bit unpleasant, actually. ... There was almost no acceptance that COVID was taking place at the time. The inspection was still very much about the academic provision. They seemed surprised that the students were struggling with some of their relationship issues at the time.”

SAHT

“

We've also had Ofsted in this period, just post-Christmas, so it's been incredibly difficult. We are just recoiling from that, that has really knocked us as a senior leadership team in terms of our resilience, in ways that it has never done in the past. ... The process felt very judgmental and personally judgmental.”

PDHT

Learning gaps and pupil behaviour and absence:

Leaders were very conscious of the need to close ‘learning gaps’, which was challenging in the face of variation in how much and what each pupil had missed. In addition, interviewees were increasingly aware of the longer-term impact of the pandemic on pupil behaviour: younger pupils were described as ‘desocialised’, with increases in bullying and unkindness as well as disruption in lessons due to the loss of learning habits. Persistent absence numbers were higher than usual for many interviewees – a combination of Covid-infections, some pupils becoming used to being independent at home and feelings of anxiety about returning to school.

“

It's quite a struggle at the moment to get some of our year groups to engage with education again, where they've just kind of been out of it and been able to do it at their own pace... (and) the students' mental health is a real challenge. ... it most commonly presents itself in really poor behaviour, or in truancy of lessons, avoiding the contact altogether, avoiding education, because they feel like, lots of them are feeling like, they've missed out so much, but it's easier to fail on their terms by just not going.”

SAHT

Working to address these issues had – not surprisingly - been hugely challenging for interviewees, many of whom faced their own stresses and worries outside work. This phase of the pandemic may not have had the same level of newness and intensity as the earlier phases, but it was still exhausting. Meanwhile, there was a wider sense that education had fallen off the national radar and that schools were perceived to be back to normal.

“

The first wave was the biggest shock and was intensive workload, everything was really intense and it took over my life. I think at the beginning you have that kind of adrenaline and energy to somehow find the capacity for that because it was unusual, it was exceptional. It was an emergency. But the length of time that it's gone on for has meant that it's become much more wearing.”

PDHT

“

This last half term in many ways has been the most difficult - I find it much more difficult to drag myself out of bed in the morning... it's just ground me down.” SDHT

“

This half term I think the head and I both agree has been the hardest half term out of the whole pandemic and it's the staff absence rate, managing staff with COVID, children with COVID, we've been hit hardest this half term and it feels harder because we've disappeared out of the public view. You know, if you were general members of public, I don't think you'd have a clue what's going on in schools at the moment.”

PDHT

“

I know from colleagues that for quite few this has been the 'I've had enough' moment.” SDHT



Transcript poem 4: Chained to my laptop

When the head retires, I would go for her job.
 My role as assistant head is around teaching and learning
 In lockdown I was coordinating how remote learning was going to look
 That was difficult at a distance.
 The biggest challenge was technology overload
 Every day I'd find myself with a laptop in front of me and then an iPad to one side and my phone next to me.
 And you go from one to the other to the other.
 It's been difficult since to switch off.
 I keep trying to.
 I would have loved to go for a walk in the country, do yoga, but unfortunately I'm chained to my laptop
 There's just so much going on.

The expectation on schools to be available 24/7 has had a significant impact on workload.
 The last few months trying to manage staff absences.
 When a member of staff has been off work for two weeks and then returns
 It takes a long time to get your class back to where you want them.
 Things don't immediately go back to normal.

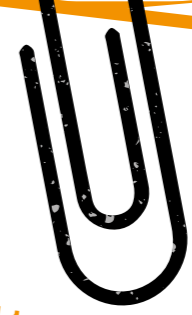
We've got a whole staff WhatsApp group with 70 or so people
 Quite often somebody will text at ten at night or at seven o'clock on a Sunday.
 It's redrawing those boundaries that's almost been more challenging.
 It's just surviving at the moment.

The Ofsted regime is back
 As if the last two years had never happened
 But the effects of this will last for years.

Expecting to be ready for an Ofsted inspection at any point adds a layer of stress which is pretty unmanageable for all of our staff and leaders.
 Going from Outstanding to Good could be catastrophic for our school in terms of pupil numbers
 There's a lot of pressure for that inspection to go well.
 It almost feels more fraught now in school than it did during the pandemic.

It's the accountability pressures making it almost unbearable
 What's driving people out of the profession is this sense that right, we're back to normal now
 We're a long, long, long way off being back to normal in schools.

It doesn't put me off being a headteacher, but the last two years have made me think that I won't do it for long.
 It's fairly imminent that I would be applying for headteacher roles.
 I'll probably do it for 10 years and then stop.



5. The impact of the pandemic on senior leaders' workload and well-being

In this section we draw on the survey and interview data to explore how the pandemic has impacted on senior leaders' workload and well-being, as well as where leaders have turned to for support.

5.1 Are leaders thriving, surviving or sinking?

We commissioned Teacher Tapp to survey 6,057 teachers and school leaders in state-funded schools in late January 2022, including some slightly adapted questions from our 2021 survey of school leaders.³⁹ Our analysis here focuses on responses from senior school leaders (i.e. headteachers and members of the Senior Leadership Team – SLT), except where indicated.

Both surveys asked about leaders' overall experience of the pandemic. When we asked this in 2021, just over a third of leaders (35%) said they had thrived to some extent, with around one in 10 (11%) saying that they had been 'mostly thriving'. The largest group, just over two in five (42%), said they had been 'mostly surviving', while almost a quarter (23%) had been sometimes (19%) or mostly (4%) sinking.

Responses from the 2022 survey are shown in Figure 3, below.⁴⁰ They show that just over a quarter (28%) of leaders had thrived to some extent, of whom 6% said they had been 'mostly thriving'. Once again, the largest group, just over two in five (42%), said they had been 'mostly surviving'. Meanwhile, 29% had been sometimes (20%) or mostly (9%) sinking.

Although the two surveys cannot be compared directly, the fact that a smaller proportion of leaders said they were 'mostly thriving' in 2022 (6% vs 11%), while a larger proportion

were 'mostly sinking' (9% vs 4%), fits with the findings from our interviews outlined in the last section, in which two thirds of respondents argued that the current academic year has been either the same as or more challenging than previous phases of the pandemic.

In the 2022 survey, responses from class teachers and middle leaders were broadly similar to those from senior leaders, but slightly more negative. For example, while 6% of senior leaders had been 'mostly thriving', this figure was 4% for both class teachers and middle leaders. Similarly, while 9% of senior leaders were 'mostly sinking', this figure was 10% for both class teachers and middle leaders.

Interestingly, when we compared responses to the 2022 survey from state-funded schools with a weighted sample of responses from private schools we saw more variation, with staff in private schools more positive overall. For example, in private primary schools, 12% of staff described themselves as 'mostly thriving' while 3% described themselves as 'mostly sinking', compared to 3% 'mostly thriving' and 11% 'mostly sinking' in state-funded primary schools. In private secondary schools, 8% described themselves as 'mostly thriving' and 3% described themselves as 'mostly sinking', compared to 5% 'mostly thriving' and 8% 'mostly sinking' in state-funded secondary schools.

Figure 3:

Overall, which of the following best describes your own experience of working in school since the start of the pandemic?

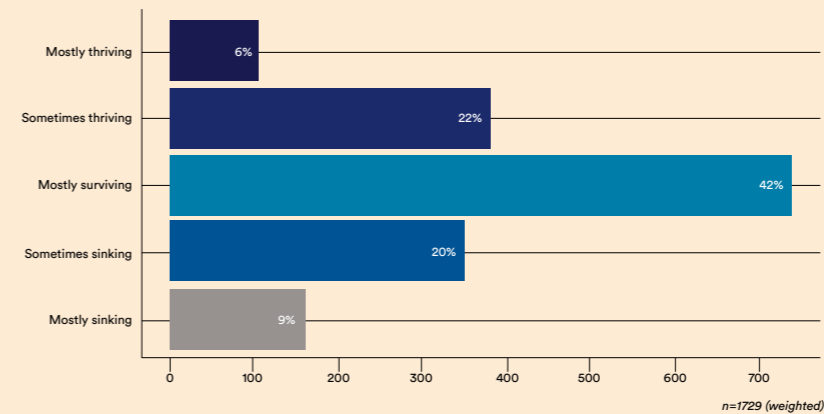


Figure 3: Senior leaders' overall experience of the pandemic (state-funded schools January 2022)

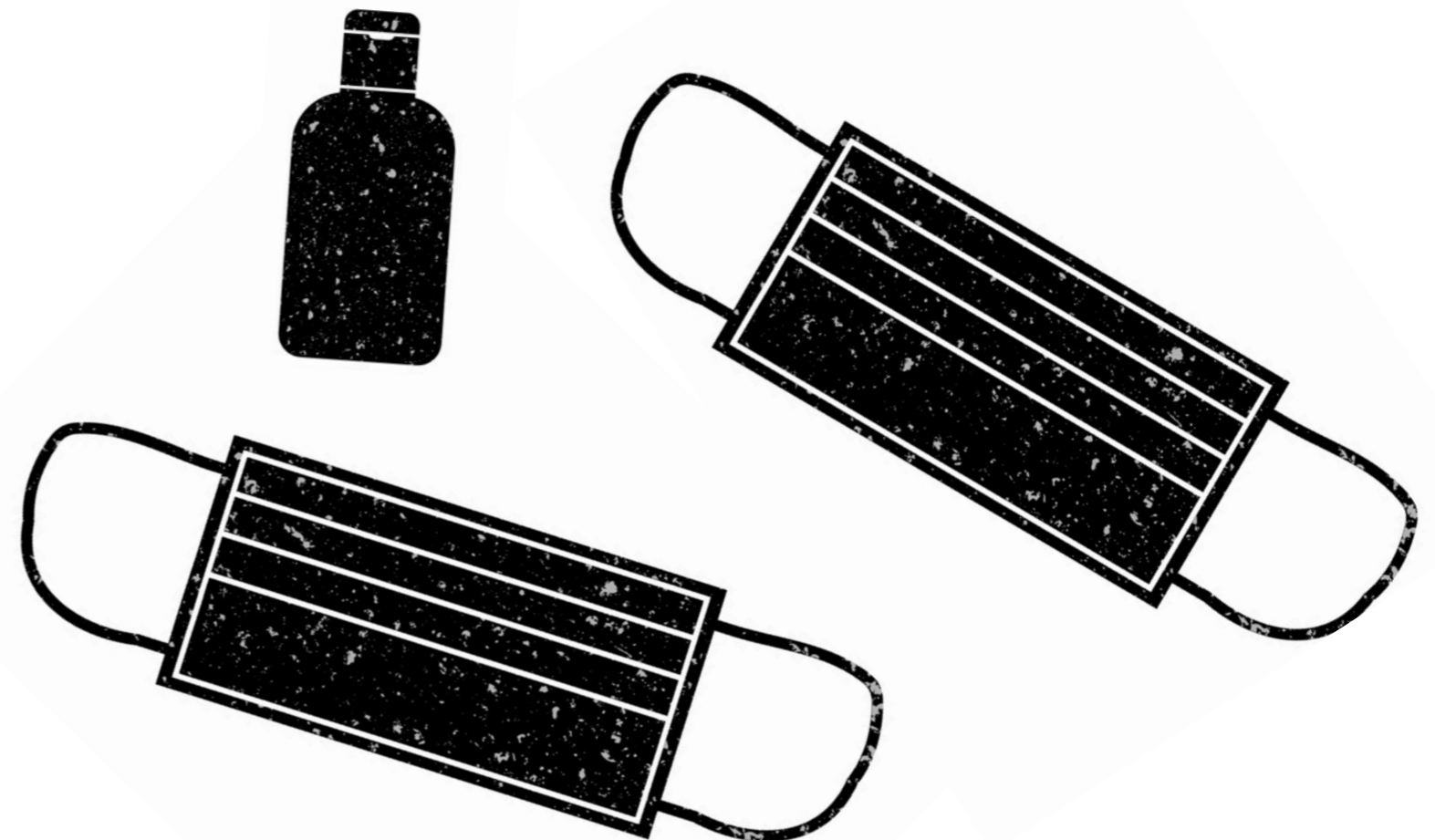


Figure 4 shows the responses to the 2022 survey differentiated by school phase, focusing on state-funded schools only. The 2021 survey found that leaders in primary schools were less likely to say they had been thriving and more likely to say they had been sinking than their peers in secondary schools and the 2022 survey shows a similar picture. While around a quarter (24%) of primary leaders in 2022 say they have been thriving to some extent, over a third (36%) of secondary leaders have thrived. In contrast, almost a third of primary leaders (31%) have been sinking to some extent, compared to a quarter (25%) of secondary leaders. In the previous report, we suggested that primary leaders may have struggled more due to having smaller staff teams than in secondary, which meant that primary leaders had less scope to distribute leadership and to share the stresses involved in managing the lockdowns.⁴¹

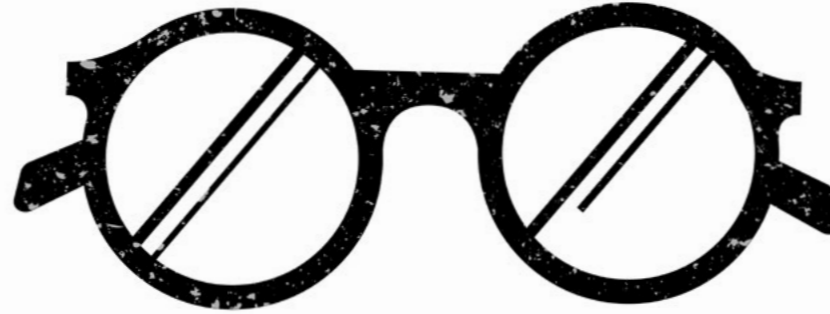


Figure 5 shows responses to the 2022 survey from senior leaders in state-funded schools differentiated by gender, showing a marked difference between how male and female leaders have experienced the pandemic. Over a third of men (36%) say they have thrived to some extent, while around one in five (21%) say they have been sinking. In contrast, around a quarter (24%) of women say they have thrived to some extent, while a third (33%) have been sinking.

Figure 4

Overall, which of the following best describes your own experience of working in school since the start of the pandemic?

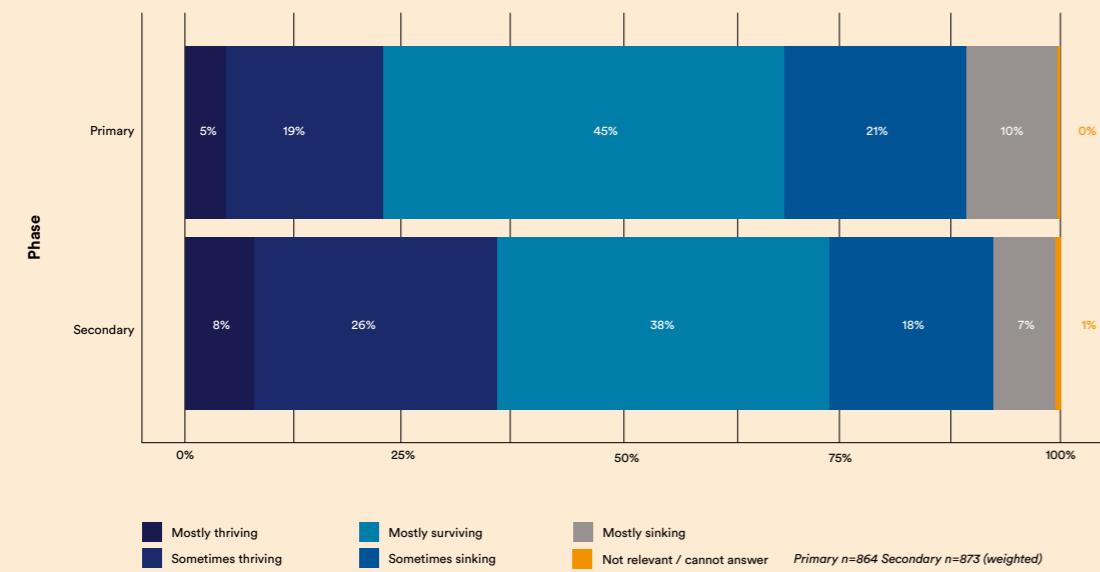


Figure 4: Senior leaders' overall experience of the pandemic by school phase (state-funded schools January, 2022)

Figure 5

Overall, which of the following best describes your own experience of working in school since the start of the pandemic?

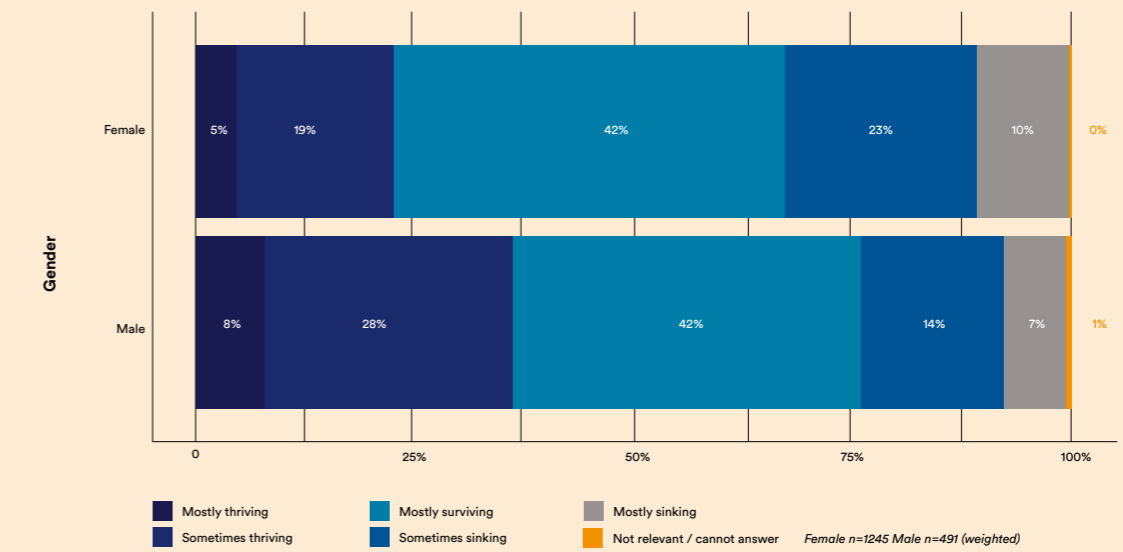


Figure 5: Senior leaders' overall experience of the pandemic by gender (state-funded schools)



The overarching themes outlined in this report applied equally to men and women and we did not identify any consistent findings which might explain why women were less likely to be thriving. The exception is for the subset of women who had young children at home, who commonly indicated that they were expected to work flexibly and 'pick up the slack' at home, as indicated in the quotes below, which will undoubtedly have created additional challenges. We return to this issue below, in relation to aspirations for headship.

“

It feels really important to me at this point in my life that I have a chance to focus some time on my own children and my family. ... I was able to negotiate a part-time role, which is unusual as a Deputy Head. The thing is that teaching is always far more than the time you're here. So essentially the three days a week makes it more like a normal full-time job. If I were to work for five days, it would absolutely take over the weekends as well. And that's what I wasn't prepared to sacrifice at the moment [with 2 young children]."

PDHT

“

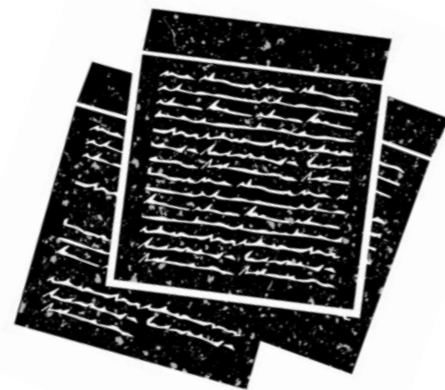
What has been holding me back is having young children, that work life balance doesn't work with children, especially as my husband's a Head. Someone's got to pick up the slack."

SDHT

“

I think you just want to feel like you, you know, you're still a valid professional. But also you want to be a mum ... and carve out that time and feel like it's OK, you know, to not work all day Sunday. I don't know. I mean, what I'll do when [the baby] stops napping because that hour or two is super productive. But yeah, there is certainly a pressure there as well."

SAHT



Transcript poem 5: A relatively small woman

I've always been deeply ambivalent about senior leadership.
I kind of love it and I kind of hate it.

I love that you really can make a difference
I love mentoring colleagues and students.
I love sharing experiences
And helping families. There are families dealing
with situations they can't tell their friends about.
They don't even tell their extended family. But
they'll tell us.
And we can support them

But people don't see a person like me as a leader.
When when I say a person like me, I mean a
woman,
A relatively small woman.
I work with big, tall blokes who walk into a room
in their suit and everyone goes,
There's a leader.
I have worked with people who cannot
understand how I have any influence
But I do,
And it freaks them out.
Sometimes I just find that a little bit hard.
I don't want to be the leader who struts around
and is more important than everyone.
I'm much more collaborative.

I was going to say I've never wanted to be a head
But I did want to be a head until I came to this
school
and, ironically, worked with an excellent head.
I thought, I can't. I just don't think I can do that.
I've almost lost confidence as I've become more
experienced.
It bothers me because I know people who are less
experienced than me who have applied to be and
have become heads
My contemporaries are definitely heads.
But I don't want to be a head.

One of the reasons that put me off headship is
having to deal with crisis situations
and having to make fast decisions when you don't
have enough information
Whether it's an accident on a school bus or a
global pandemic
Having the confidence to say, Right,
This is what we're going to do.
This is what we're going to say about it.

In November 2021 I thought I don't want to do this
job anymore.
I want to be a teacher. I want to be in the
classroom.
I don't know why I'm doing this.

It's not the first time I've had those feelings,
But it was probably the most intense
I did nearly write to the head and say I'd like to be
a teacher from next September.
Please can you make it happen?

I didn't write it.
I feel a bit better now.
But I'm applying for another job at the moment
It's the same job at a different school, but more
strategic, less day to day.
I will probably carry on doing this for another five
years
And then step down, step back.
Step back to teaching.

5.2 How has the pandemic impacted on senior leaders' workload, health and well-being?

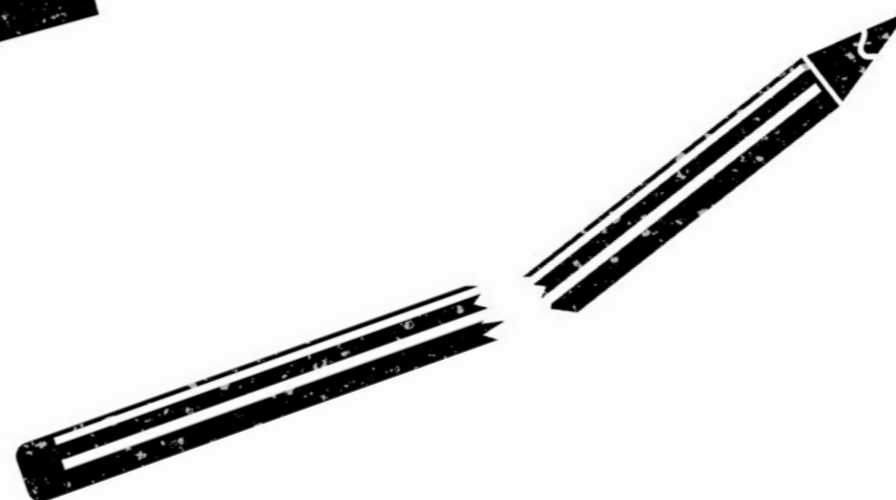
Interviewees explained that the pandemic had impacted negatively on their workload (36/42), health (20/42) and mental health and well-being (28/42). To a large extent, the drivers of increased workload and the impact that this had on leaders' health and well-being was similar to the findings for headteachers, described in detail in the previous report (Greany et al, 2021). Our Assistant and Deputy head interviewees described extended periods when they could not switch off, even at weekends or in holiday periods, because the government might announce a change in the Covid rules or a pupil might have a positive test. As indicated above, Assistant and Deputy heads often took day to day responsibility for significant change projects, such as moving teaching online, which created additional work. One difference in the current academic year has been that senior leaders have been more likely to have to cover lessons for staff who are off sick with Covid.

For a minority of interviewees (5/42), the experience of the pandemic had been challenging, but this had served to reconfirm their commitment and confidence.

“

It's made me think that if I can get through the pandemic I can get through anything, that if we are able to successfully navigate this period and if we can try and help our students progress onto the next stage of their education and induct themselves into society as better people, if we can do it in this context, and under this stress, [we] can do anything.”

SAHT



More common was a realisation that the cumulative impact of dealing with challenges over a prolonged period of time had led to fatigue, a loss of morale and, for some, a sense of being close to the edge of breakdown.

“

The emotional impact of everything that was going on: we actually expected an awful lot of ourselves and an awful lot of our teachers and an awful lot of our young people.”

SDHT

“

Mostly now it's fatigue. And people are reflecting and thinking: 'Well, we've just carried on'. Morale has dipped - I think there's a lot of resentment and bitterness amongst staff.”

SAHT

“

I hit quite a low point in October and not necessarily all pandemic, but there was just an awful lot of work and I had a point where I realized that nobody else was, you know, I try and look after my team, but no one was going to look after me. And actually, I have to look after myself.”

SAHT

The impact of unreasonable workloads was exacerbated where interviewees faced additional challenges in their personal lives at the same time.

“

The ongoing stress at school and the stress from my husband being ill and stress of looking after young children and keeping them on the straight and narrow - at times you can see how they're affected by it. Having Covid I expected it would be a bit of a cold and I'd be out in five days, but I've been just really ill with it and being off school with a huge 'to-do' list you feel like you're letting people down when you're not there.”

SDHT

For many respondents, these challenges in their personal and professional working lives were exacerbated by a wider set of frustrations with how the system treats pupils, teachers and schools. Sometimes this was expressed in terms of unfairness, for example that teachers were not prioritised for vaccinations or provided with PPE, or – as in the quote below – that they could not benefit from the kinds of flexibility seen in other fields. Other interviewees expressed sharp anger at a system that they saw as failing children. This anger was compounded by the lack of government consultation, leaving interviewees feeling undervalued and powerless to affect the kinds of changes that they felt were required.

“

Our staff find it really hard, so many of them have got friends that work outside of teaching that have been able to have flexible working arrangements and that for them has been a positive outcome of the pandemic. But we've had to say to staff: 'no you're back as normal, you can't have flexible working hours. We need you in the building'.”

SDHT



“

Four in ten children are being systemically failed, a damning indictment, not of the teaching profession but of those in control.”

SAHT

“

A lack of consultation, the way things have just been decided, you don't know what's going on until you hear it on the news.”

SDHT)

One deputy headteacher summed up the cumulative impact of a job that has changed beyond recognition.

“

I cry every day. I hate my job. I hate it. I hate everything about it at the moment because it's not what I want to be doing. I'm in it for the young people and that's where my heart is. And all I was doing was damaging them, is what I could see, constant uncertainty, constant change and constant testing, not any of the things I believe in.”

SDHT



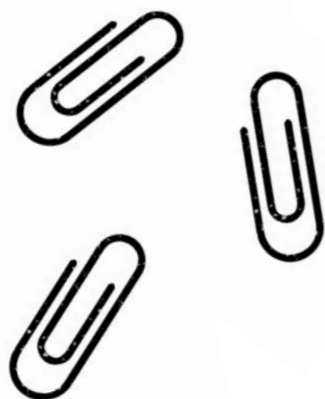
5.3 What has kept senior leaders going?

Above all, interviewees were sustained by their sense of commitment to children and to education.



It's what sustains you through 25 years of teaching really... that you want to do the best for the children, and particularly I think for us in this setting and what took me into alternative provision and keeps me in alternative provision and was writ large during the pandemic, is that we are so fundamental to those children and to their well-being that if you don't do the best for them then that's going to have a really profound impact on people who are hugely disadvantaged and hugely vulnerable. ... So I guess that's what keeps us going."

SDHT



We were making a positive difference to some of the most needy students in the city."

SAHT



I just really believe in what I'm doing and the importance of it has seemed more and it really has felt that we have been able to make quite a significant difference."

SDHT



Beyond this intrinsic motivation, interviewees cited a range of sources of support, most commonly from their partner, family and/or friends. Also important for many were the school's headteacher as well as colleagues in the senior team and across the wider staff. Professional networks, including the advice and resources provided by NAHT and ASCL, were also cited for practical support and guidance. Many mentioned specific coping strategies, such as regular exercise, regulating diet, and talking to loved ones or a coach. Several respondents also testified to the importance of external feedback and validation, for example from parents.



Feedback from our own community. Just saying 'thanks for everything you've done. You've done a really good job. We appreciate it must have been really difficult.' That's so rewarding and absolutely vital in keeping us going."

PAHT



Parents coming in and saying 'you've done such an amazing job, the communication's been brilliant'. You just need one person to tell you you've done a really good job and suddenly it's kind of all worth it - or one of the pupils to come up to you after they've done their exams and say 'thank you'."

SDHT



6. Still leading after the pandemic?

In this section we draw on the survey and interview data as well as the analysis of senior leadership vacancies to examine senior leaders' career plans - including their perceptions of and aspirations for headship – and to outline evidence on the current state of the leadership labour market.

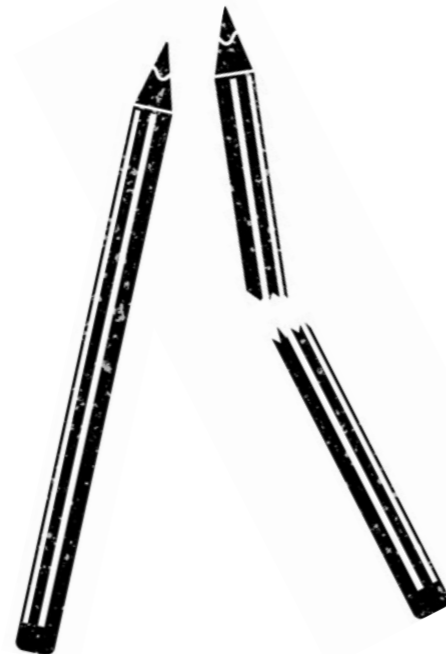
6.1 What are leaders' career plans?

In the 2021 survey we found that two fifths of leaders (40%) planned to leave the profession - for reasons other than full retirement – within the next five years. This figure broke down differently between headteachers (42%) and other senior leaders (26%). However, the headteacher interviews (conducted two months after the survey) indicated that this picture remained fluid, with small numbers of 'leavers' now planning to stay, and similarly some 'stayers' now planning to leave.

The 2022 survey asked all respondents how the pandemic has affected their career plans, if at all. It asked them to select the statement that best described their career intentions, with eight options available in total, as in 2021.⁴⁴ Three options involved staying in the profession (I have no plans to change my role, I plan to apply for a promotion in my current school/college/MAT in next year or two, I plan to apply for role in different school/MAT in the next year or two). A fourth option involved retirement at full retirement age. Three options involved leaving the profession early (within the next year, three years or five years) while a fourth involved taking early retirement within five years.

The findings are shown in Figure 6, with the results aggregated. This shows that 30% of headteachers and 16% of senior leaders currently

plan to leave the profession within the next five years. Among the headteachers who plan to leave, just under half (14%) intend to take early retirement, compared to a third (5%) of senior leaders. In addition, a further 10% of heads and 6% of senior leaders remain unsure about their career plans and are not definitely committed to staying in the profession. Although the two surveys cannot be compared directly, they indicate that the proportion of senior leaders planning to leave the profession may have reduced since 2021. Nevertheless, it remains concerning that almost a third of headteachers plan to leave early, while a further 10% is not definitely committed to staying.



Our survey findings that 30% of heads plan to leave the profession within five years, with a further 10% undecided, are similar to the numbers of headteachers who actually left the profession within the previous five years, based on figures provided to NAHT by the DfE based on the School Workforce Census (SWC).⁴⁵ They show that 37% of secondary heads and 25% of primary heads appointed in 2015 had left the profession within five years, an increase from the previous 2011-2016 period in both phases. The SWC figures exclude school leaders over 50, in order to reduce the influence of early retirement.

Our interviews with Assistant and Deputy Heads (i.e. SLT, excluding head) revealed a similar picture to the survey, although with a slightly higher proportion of 'stayers' and lower proportion of 'leavers'. Of the 42 senior leaders interviewed, 35 intended to stay in education, four intended to leave, and three were undecided. Primary leaders were more likely to express the intention to leave, although the small number of primary interviewees warrants caution.

In Section 3.4, below, we focus on how the pandemic has impacted on aspiration for headship among senior leaders.



Figure 6

How has the pandemic affected your career plans or intentions, if at all?

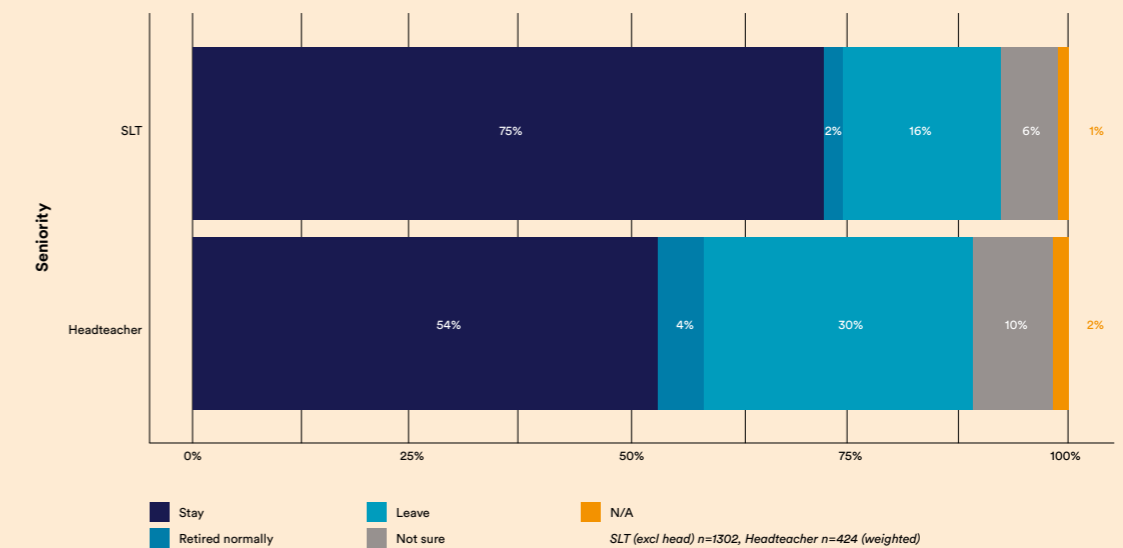


Figure 6: Senior leaders' career intentions in the light of the pandemic (state-funded schools)

Transcript poem 6: I'm on my own now

There was an unbelievable amount of goodwill from staff.
We had a rolling rota for keyworker students.
There was never any question about who's coming in.
People had to adapt so fast. And learn new things.
Skill up.
Everybody just went for it.

And it wasn't just the academic side of things.
There was a lot of pastoral care
Making sure laptops were personally delivered to students,
Making sure those students who needed food were getting it.
The home visits didn't stop.
There was somebody checking in on students.
Phone calls.
We were just making sure that none of them were forgotten
We knew that most of them weren't accessing the work because they didn't have a quiet place at home.
We know our students very well.

I don't think I've had a full class since September.
The rolling absence because of students getting COVID or reacting to their booster or having to isolate
But it really has felt that we've been able to make quite a significant difference.
All this chaos has been going on but you come into school and somebody will still tell you
Tuck your shirt in.
Underline the title.
School is a safe place because the routines are there
Everybody knows what to expect.

My personal circumstances have been very challenging because my husband died.
After his terminal diagnosis was confirmed there were periods where I was teaching and caring for him, and
Then I was off work.

I've really been thinking about work-life balance
I looked at what the head teacher here was having to deal with.
I decided that that wasn't for me

It was a very hard decision.
This is the first time that I thought
No, I'm not going to do this. I don't want to be a head.
I'm on my own now.
If become a headteacher, I'll be on my own in a new school.
I don't need any more of that.
I don't need to be the sole person accountable.
I can do an awful lot where I am now.



Transcript poem 7: A life-changing step

Moving to head seems less an incremental step than from teaching to assistant or deputy. It seems to be a life-changing type step. The pandemic was a very different experience for our heads than for the rest of the team. Heads were having to read mounds of paperwork coming from DfE on Bank Holiday Friday Putting in huge amounts of hours when not everyone else was, I'm not the one that's been directly dealing with staff not being able to turn up and not being able to get anyone through the supply agency.

That hasn't necessarily made me less interested in headship, but Carrying the can for whatever happens in the school, whether it's something you can influence or not. The stress levels of the buck stopping with you constantly Ofsted inspectors can come to the school with an agenda that has a direct impact on your career That can be really difficult to come back from. The accountability system that we have in our country is detrimental to schools But particularly to school leaders because it's almost that you're singularly accountable for how children perform in standardized assessments.

There's a buffer between all those things and me at the moment I can have a healthier life as a result.

The statistics about headteachers generally having a shorter lifespan. Because of the stress that they're under. People experience leaders getting out of headship, left, right and centre Because of the stress that they're under. People going into headship and ending up not being physically healthy, Because of the stress that they're under. I've got quite young family, so I've rethought it for the time being.

The financial benefit of moving to headship is probably zero
If I got the headship in our school now I would probably be on the same pay for huge amounts more of my personal time, Huge amounts more stress.

I went to look around a school to with a view to an getting interview
The head left at the school was quite happy and quite positive.
They've since moved to another school and are now leaving headship.
And they looked terrible and I just don't think it's done them any good.

When I look at my life as a whole I'm not sure if that's a situation I want to put myself into.
When I moved here the idea was that I would be here for a short amount of time, with a view to move to headship.
But I've shelved that for the time being.

I think inevitably I'll go into headship at some point.
I might not, but probably.
And my hope would be that my Masters degree will give me flexibility
Maybe coming out of headship sooner.



6.2 Should I stay or should I go?: career decision drivers and motivation

It is important to understand the reasons why school leaders and teachers might choose to remain in or leave the profession and a growing body of research has begun to explore this in detail.⁴⁶ Among the group of interviewees who intend to stay in the profession (35/42) in the current research, the most common motivation was their continued love of teaching and their commitment to education. However, within this group, six of the 35 said that they would consider leaving if they could find another job with equivalent pay. This led us to consider the extent to which pay and pension arrangements influence decision-making.

We analysed existing Teacher Tapp survey data, from 2021, which asked whether respondents would leave teaching if they could find a job elsewhere that matched their existing salary. The results are shown in Figure 7, differentiated by level of seniority in school.

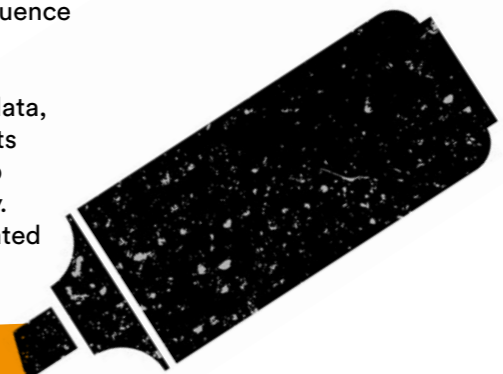
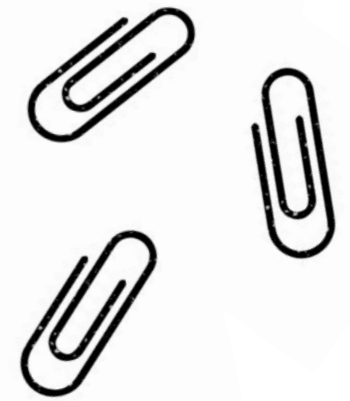


Figure 7

How much do you agree with the following statement: "I would leave teaching if I could find a job that matches my salary."

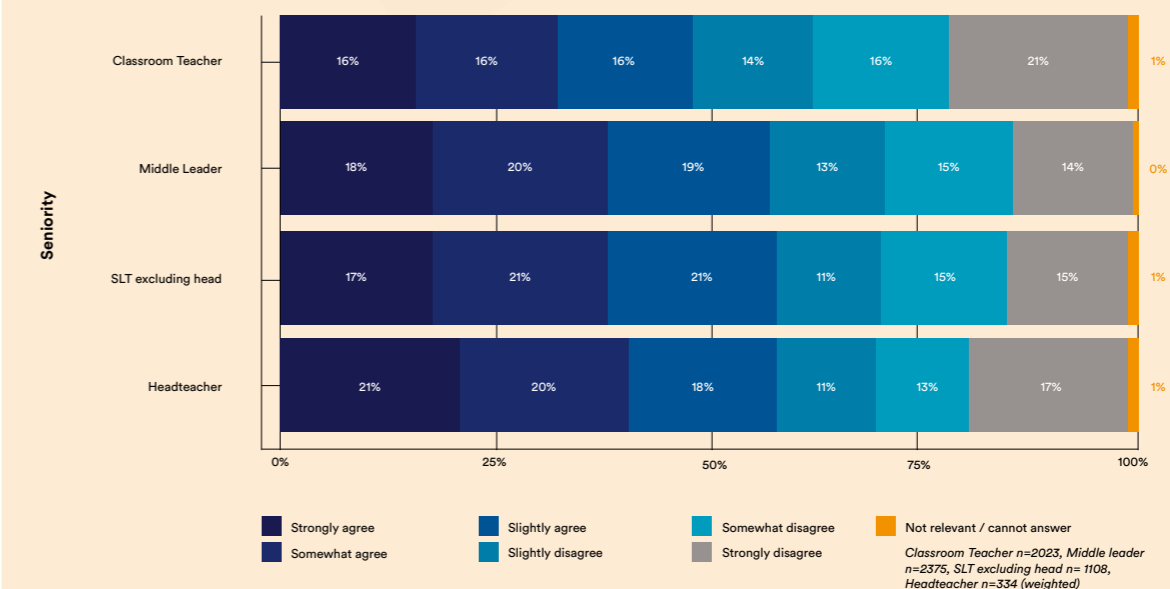


Figure 7: School staff views on 'I would leave teaching if I could find a job that matches my salary'

Class teachers are the least likely to agree with this statement, while headteachers are the most likely to agree. 41% of headteachers strongly or somewhat agree that they would leave teaching if they could find another job that matched their salary, while 30% somewhat or strongly disagree. Of course, this finding could be interpreted in different ways. One interpretation could be that two in five headteachers are actively looking for other well-paid jobs outside the profession and will leave as soon as they can find one. But it seems equally plausible that respondents don't really believe they will find an equally well-paid and secure job elsewhere – i.e. 'I would leave if I could, but I don't really think it will happen' – indicating that they feel trapped, but are unlikely to leave in practice.

Our interview findings in phases one and two of this research support both interpretations to some extent. For example, in phase one, several headteacher interviewees talked about considering leaving and taking on much less well-paid work (e.g. 'to stack shelves in Tesco'): for these leavers it seemed that the need to get out, to protect their mental health and well-being, was greater than the need for financial security. Other headteacher interviewees in phase one explained that they wanted to leave but could not afford to – at least, not yet – seeming to support an argument that financial security is a dominant consideration for most leaders.

In this second phase of interview research, it was clear that among the group of leaders who definitely plan to leave teaching (4/42) or who were considering leaving (3/42), money was not the main driver. None of these interviewees had secured a new job outside education and there was no indication that money was a major consideration in their decision-making. Rather, as indicated by the quotes below, they had become progressively disillusioned by the lack of recognition given to schools and teachers and/or felt a need to escape for their own and their family's well-being. One primary assistant head had already resigned with effect from the end of the current academic year and had refused to take an offered sabbatical year.

“

Very devalued really, just because I know how difficult it still is in schools, and there's no recognition of that at the moment. There's no sense of anybody even knowing how hard it is still in schools at the moment.”

PDHT

“

The main worry with me about headship is, it feels almost futile. I see heads working extremely hard, for very little thanks. Society's expectations of what falls to schools now, it's gone through the roof.”

SDHT

“

It's made me question whether I want to stay in education, which I never thought it would do. I came into education and I really thought I had a calling into it. But it has made me think about other things that I can do with my life. I think quality of life for myself.”

PDHT



6.3 How has the pandemic influenced perceptions of headship?

In the 2022 Teacher Tapp survey we asked teachers and leaders whether or not they agreed with the statement that ‘since the start of the pandemic the role of headteacher has become significantly more stressful’. The results are shown in Figure 8, showing high levels of agreement among all staff groups, but particularly among senior leaders (94%) and headteachers themselves (96%).

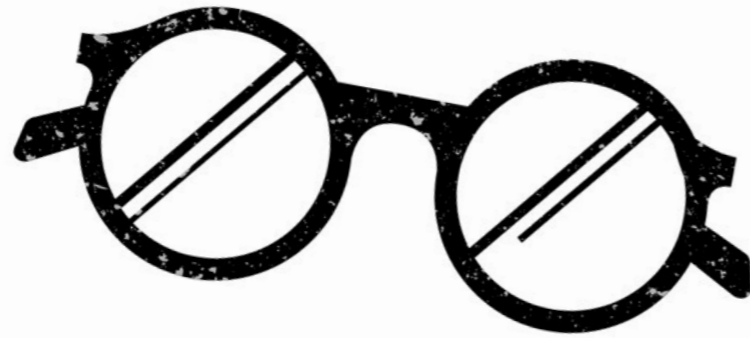


Figure 8:

Since the start of the pandemic the role of headteacher has become significantly more stressful than before.

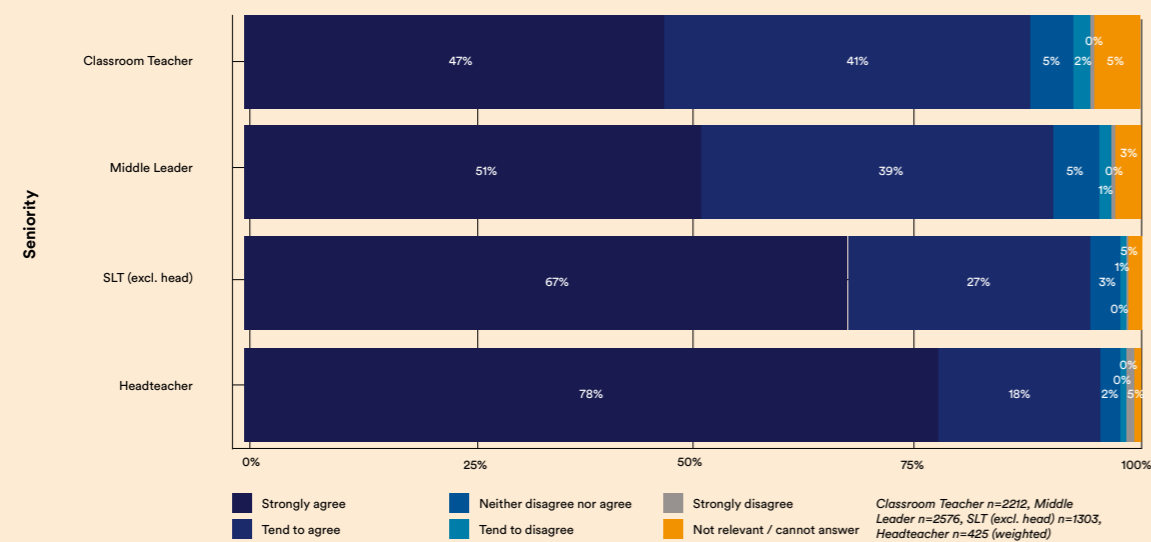
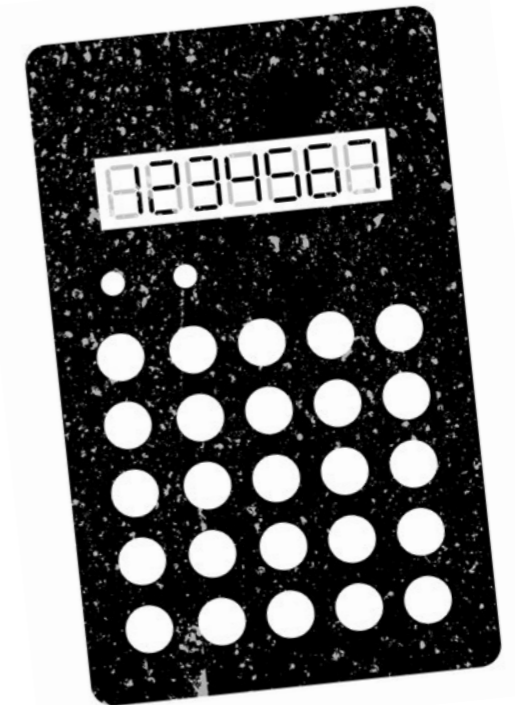


Figure 8: School staff views on how the pandemic has impacted on the headteacher role, by level of seniority (state-funded schools)

Our interviews with Assistant and Deputy heads broadly confirmed these findings: two thirds explained that the pandemic had negatively changed their view of headship, while none argued that it had positively changed their view of the role.

However, the interviews also provided a more nuanced picture, indicating that even before the pandemic headship was already seen as problematic by many senior leaders. These pre-pandemic concerns stemmed partly from heads having to deal with reduced funding and increased accountability, as outlined above, but also from a view that the role has become less satisfying due to structural changes and reductions in school autonomy.



“

As a head, I don't know where you get your sense of satisfaction anymore.... Headteachers have no autonomy.... Dictat emails come through last minute and you just have to change everything... a lot of decisions have been made at a national level but are not suitable on the local level I think we suffered from being in a MAT because we're at the mercy of chief executives giving us instructions and some of them have never been a teacher and that was quite difficult. So I think now, politically, for heads - I have really seen it up close. I am not sure how much control they have. They get all the accountability and it's their head on the block and that doesn't seem an attractive job to have all the responsibility without any of the decision making.”

SDHT

“

Being Headteacher is still a very dangerous job. I was only speaking to mine about it this afternoon and she was trying to make it very clear that before going for headship you need to make sure you know how you're going to leave headship.”

SAHT

“

Me having autonomy is really, really important. So actually, if I got a headship and I was in a Trust and everybody told me what to do, I don't want that. I don't know where the future of all of this is going, but I'm sensing perhaps there are headteachers out there at the moment who haven't got as much autonomy as they had before. And I don't want to be that kind of head.”

SAHT

Some interviewees questioned whether headteachers are able to stay true to their core values, in relation to pupils and colleagues, simply because the demands are now too great.

“

I'm exploring now, if I can see a model in which my values and the things that get me up in the morning I can see reflected within education. Do I even believe it would be possible to be able to be a head teacher and have anything that I feel is important and I'm not sure ... Having to be the expert because the guidance is so unclear, having to constantly hold all of those decisions and also as an employer, responsible for all of the teaching staff and [make] really difficult decisions for people whose lives have been dramatically impacted, no childcare, let alone all the health issues that people have had and then the mental health issues that have come out of that.”

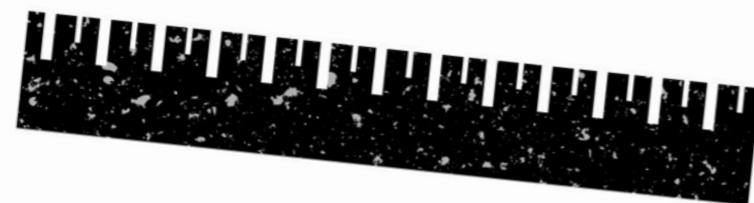
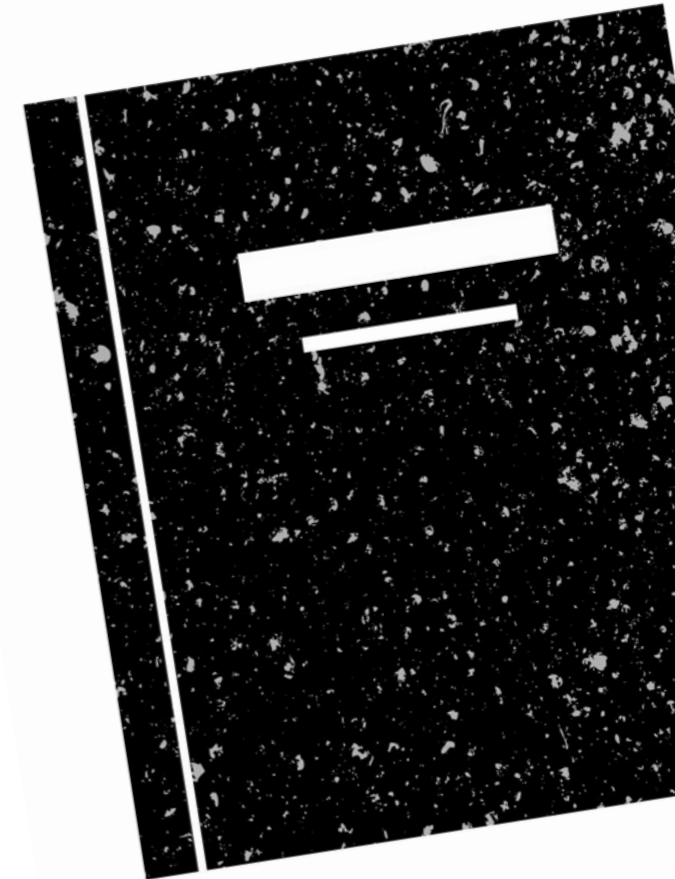
SDHT

What was clear was that the pandemic had exacerbated these concerns, making it less likely that some leaders would apply for headship, as we explore in the following section.

“

I think the pandemic exposed some of the attitudes from senior leaders to their employees and ... exposed the gap between that recognition of mental health and well-being and what needs to be done to make sure that every single employee is safe and they feel safe ... That's what it exposed for me - that gap and that disconnect.”

PDHT



6.4 How has the pandemic influenced aspiration for headship?

We analysed existing Teacher Tapp survey data to assess whether the pandemic has influenced aspirations for headship among staff in schools. Two times in the past five years Teacher Tapp has asked its panel of respondents whether they aspire to headship themselves one day – once before the pandemic (2018) and once during (2021).⁴⁷ The results are shown in Figures 9 and 10, broken down by level of seniority.

The headline finding is that the pandemic does not appear to have greatly reduced aspiration for headship in any group (i.e. class teachers, middle leaders or SLT excluding heads). There are small reductions in the proportions of class teachers (6%-3%) and middle leaders (6%-5%) who say they definitely do want to become a headteacher one day, together with a 1% increase in the proportion of senior leaders who say this (16%-17%). In all three groups there are larger proportions who say they might perhaps consider headship one day, although these groups all declined somewhat between the two surveys, with a 5% reduction in the SLT group and a parallel 3% increase in the proportion who say they definitely don't want to become a head.



Figure 9

Would you like to be a headteacher yourself one day? (2018)

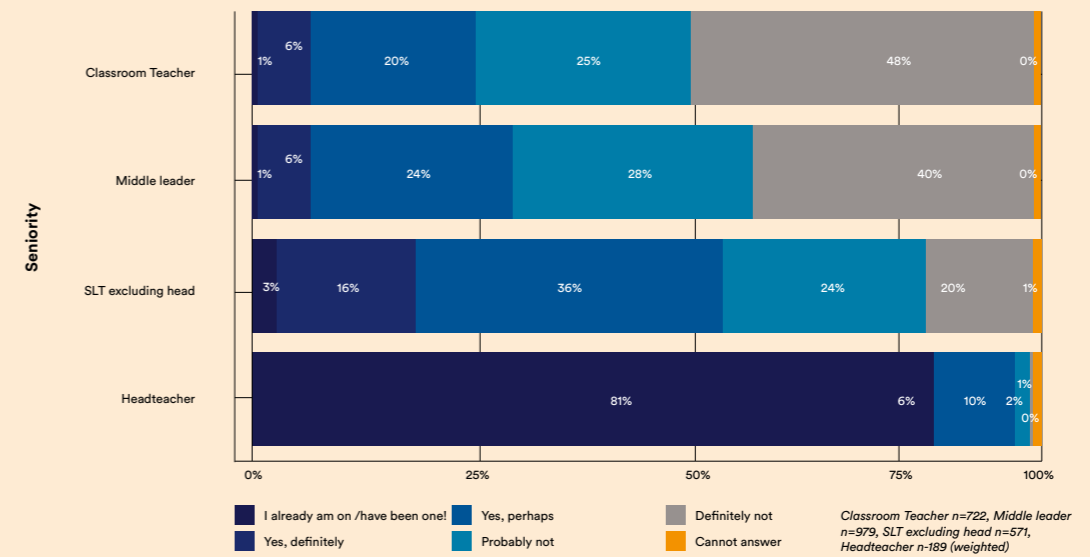


Figure 9: Aspiration for headship among staff in schools, 2018

Figure 10

Would you like to be a headteacher yourself one day? (2021)

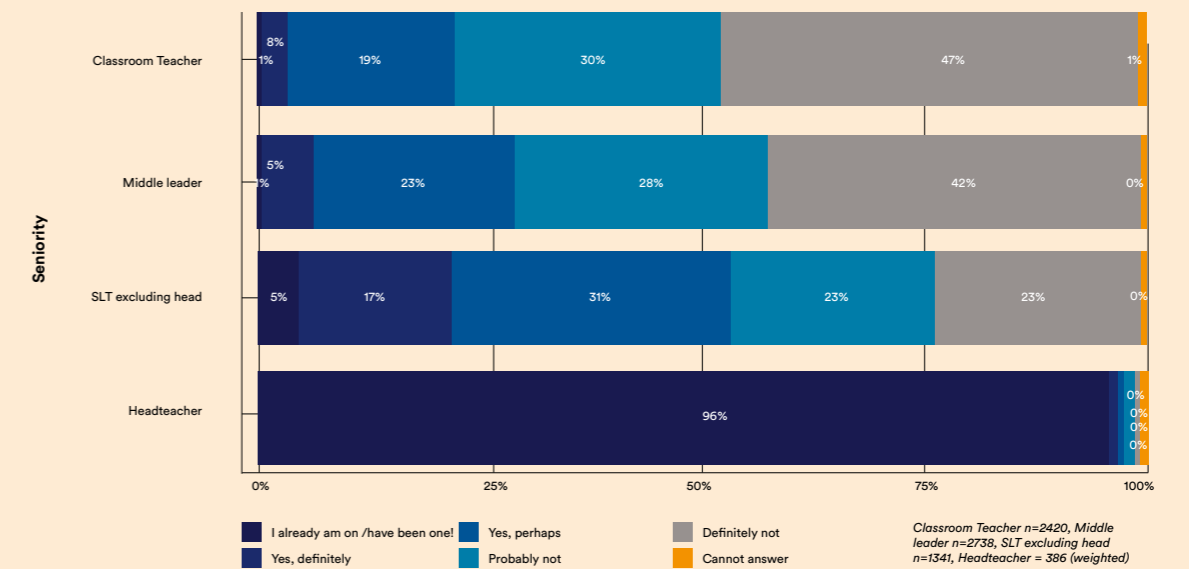


Figure 10: Aspiration for headship among staff in schools, 2021

The 2021 response (Fig. 10) indicates that just under half of SLT respondents would consider applying for headship one day ('yes definitely' - 17% plus 'yes, perhaps' - 31%). This raises the obvious question of whether these numbers are sufficient – i.e. will there be enough experienced senior leaders who are ready and able to step up to headship when the current generation of headteachers leaves? Addressing this question requires sophisticated modelling, for example to consider the number of schools in each phase and the likely rate at which existing headteachers might leave. It would also need to consider additional factors, such as regional variations and breakdowns by school type (e.g. faith schools, LA maintained vs MATs, levels of deprivation etc.) and performance categories, given we know that some schools struggle to recruit more than others. In the next phase of the research (outlined in the Introduction) we aim to undertake some preliminary investigations of these issues.

Turning to the interview data, just under half of our interviewees (20/42) said that they plan to apply for a headship at some point in the future. Among the remainder of the interview sample, we highlighted above that four plan to leave teaching and a further three are undecided, which leaves 11 who plan to remain in their current role and four who want to return to a less senior teaching role.

Starting with the 20 who aspire to headship, many had been influenced by a current or former headteacher they had worked with, who had inspired and encouraged them to develop.



“

I've been very, very fortunate that I've worked with two heads in particular who are absolutely amazing. You know, they could balance achieving amazing things for children with really looking after their staff. And I've benefited hugely from that. I kind of want to be able to do that for other people as well. ”

PAHT

“

Many also expressed a desire or moral duty to contribute to the education of children. For some this was combined with a sense that they had a lot to offer, reflecting their career and expertise to date.

A kind of moral sense, I've hugely benefited from the education system and wanted to make sure that I could share those benefits with others. And just a sense of, I suppose, duty to wider society. I think if we're going to make this society what we want, we've got to help children thrive as individuals, not just academically, but socially, emotionally as well. Help them learn how to grasp life, but also cope with the difficulties of life. And I just felt I had the capability, so it's always been a duty to take that on in leadership because then I could have a more positive impact on more children, young people and also staff. ”

PAHT



“

I feel like I've got a wealth of knowledge and I feel like I want to be part of sharing that. I think we're losing so much expertise out of teaching now.... we seem to be leaking experience and people seem to be being promoted really quickly.”

SDHT

In a minority of cases (5/42), the pandemic had confirmed or even spurred the decision to apply for headship.

“

The pandemic has highlighted to me how important is the job we do and how going forward, I think there will be more issues around equity in society - you know, people are seeing that actually throughout the pandemic the people with the lowest paid jobs bore the brunt of doing all the work when everyone else was at home. And I feel like we've got quite an important job to do in the future in promoting equality and making sure all of our students do the best that they can.”

SAHT

Considering the interviewees who did not aspire to headship, some of this group had been promoted to their senior leadership role relatively recently, and so did not yet feel ready to make the jump to headship. Several interviewees explained that they were largely happy in their existing role, arguing that this gives them enough strategic influence, without the level of risk that comes with headship. Many also relished being able to continue teaching in their current role, which gave them great satisfaction, but were concerned this would not be possible as a head. More generally there was a view that the jump from senior leadership into headship would be life changing.

“

I don't think enough of my job would be the bit that I really want to do, if I were the Head teacher... like making sure the learning experience of our children is appropriate for them.”

PDHT

“

The thing that puts me off the Headteacher role is the lack of teaching - lots of the Headteachers that I know don't really teach or teach so minimally that it takes away a major part of what I love about my job and Assistant Principal at the moment seems to have that nice balance of being able to teach quite a bit, but still have the ability to change things.”

SAHT



The most commonly cited reasons given for not applying for headship were not pandemic related: rather, the 'unreasonable' burdens on heads and the effect this might have on personal or family life. This was connected to a view that the headteacher role is lonely and constantly exposed to the risk that you could lose your job if things go wrong. Some described the headteacher role as overly distracted by 'little things', like a broken boiler or the state of the toilets. Others highlighted the stress of having to deal with difficult parents, including online. Several explained that headship would not bring a significant increase in salary, while increasing stress and the risk of failure considerably.

“

It's just too much. I think it's just too, too demanding. There's too much expectation on headteachers. My husband's a headteacher, so I probably see it closer up than most people. And I have seen the collateral damage on both of them (my husband and my head) I don't think I want that extra stress. It's got quite unpleasant, I think, in schools.”

SDHT

“

The pressures that have been put on schools without any seeming understanding of what the pressure was going to be, has been absolutely unmanageable, and that's the bit I don't want to even get involved in.”

PDHT

“

To be the Head of a secondary school in the state-maintained sector in England, it would only be about the exam results and it would not be about anything else.”

SAHT

“

There's more vitriol from parents and more things on social media and that next layer up, the Deputy and the Headteacher, carries that weight of responsibility for it that I don't think I want.”

SAHT

“

There's nowhere to hide as a headteacher.”

SAHT



For a sub-set of these leaders, the pandemic had been instrumental in leading them to change their mind and decide not to apply for headship.

“

Whatever doubts I had two years ago have been certified by the last two years and I've no intention of going any higher than I am. I don't want to take on more responsibility than I've already got, to take on more of these difficult parents and problematic pupils.”

SAHT



We noted above that women leaders were less likely to say they had been thriving and more likely to say they had been sinking during the pandemic than men, and indicated some of the challenges that mothers of young children have faced in 'picking up the slack' at home. Both male and female leaders who do not aspire to headship explained that this was partly based on a view that headship precludes a 'normal' home-life, but again this was a view expressed more often by women.

“

Just my own well-being, my ability to have a family life, have a life outside of work which is hard enough, almost impossible anyway. But with the pandemic and the extra responsibility of headship. That's the key reason for me - I would worry that I would see even less of my own children and my husband and my friends and I would have even less time [for my] physical well-being, doing some exercise and all those things will only be harder moving into headship. That's the key thing that that's stopping me now.”

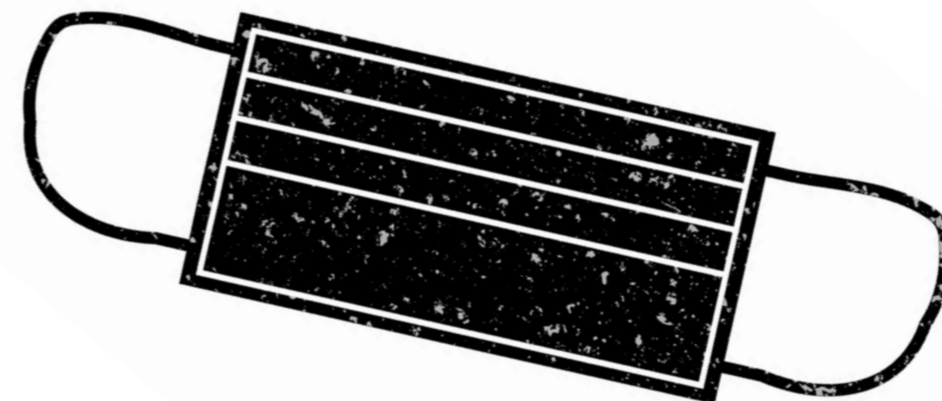
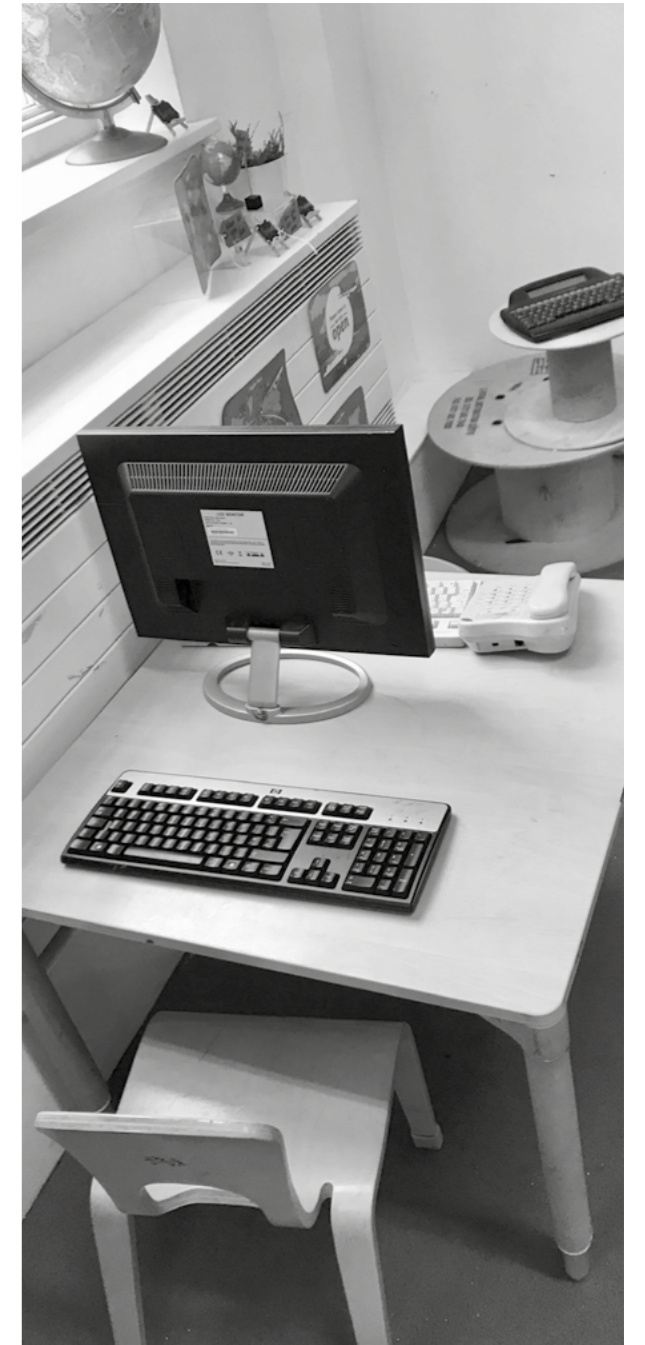
PDHT

Finally, several interviewees mentioned the need for more creative thinking around teaching roles, not only at headship level: “thinking about the whole work life balance thing, you know, we're seeing more requests for flexible or part time work across the school” (SDHT). At headship, the potential of co-headship or job-shares were considered to make female leaders, in particular, more likely to take on a more senior role.

“

If something were to come up along those lines [co-headship] yeah, but at the moment it's made me feel a bit 'on pause'. Prior to the pandemic, I was definitely doing a bit more active looking to see whether there were any of those opportunities around and that's obviously all had to go completely out of the window the last couple of years because it's been hectic and it's all been about everybody working together to make things happen.”

PDHT



Transcript poem 8: I don't feel stuck any more

I do find management attractive
That's what I've now taken on in my role as deputy head.
I do the management of the day to day stuff
Working out have we got supervisors in the right place, sorting out COVID absences within staff.
Following education COVID rules when other agencies have different rules to follow.
When health weren't coming into schools because it wasn't safe for them, we had to be here.
And when track and trace were telling us that COVID symptoms are common symptoms of the common cold.
But education is telling us something else.
We've had to make sure that we're clear on what our understanding of the rules is because it's been very unclear.

I didn't have ambitions to become headteacher.
But the pandemic has made me realize that
I definitely don't want to do that, I'm definitely not going to go down that route
Because the pressures that have been put on schools
without understanding of what the pressure was going to be
has been absolutely unmanageable.

I'm not intending to move from this role.
I'm 10 years off being 60,
so I'm looking at whether I just stick it out here
or whether I might do another career shift like I did when I was in my 30s
Think about something completely different.

I came into education late, I really thought I had a calling.
The pandemic has made me question whether I want to stay in education.
I never thought I would do that.
I love educating children.
I love being in a school and looking after children in a school,
But I think there are other ways that I might be able to do that.

I don't feel stuck anymore in a school.
I feel like I'm choosing to be here because there are other options open to me.
It's been a been a godsend to open my eyes to that.

6.5 How well does NPQH prepare senior leaders for headship?

Among the interviewees who aspire to headship (20/42), 16 had already completed or were in the process of completing the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). For most, it was in response to a recommendation from their headteacher or an awareness that it was a 'requirement' in advertisements for headteacher appointments.

Views on NPQH ranged from those who regarded it positively, through to more critical views, including one interviewee who described it as "nonsense" (SDHT). Perhaps not surprisingly, no interviewees felt that NPQH had prepared them well for leading in a pandemic. One interviewee had chosen not to undertake NPQH, but had completed a Masters in Educational Leadership instead, which they saw as more valuable.

“

There's an Assistant Head at my school who is doing the NPQH, and you know the Masters is a more rigorous course and, you know, I read a lot more research. I have to do a lot more reading of research. It feels like it goes down to a deeper level than maybe, you know, the NPQH which ... From what I've seen from a colleague who's doing it, seems quite process driven, it seems, you know, you have these boxes to go through and then in the end you're given your NPQH yeah.”

SAHT

Positive aspects of NPQH were seen to be a growth in confidence from having covered a relevant syllabus, and particularly the visits to other schools and networking opportunities. In terms of preparation for headship, it was seen as less useful than some targeted local authority or MAT-run training on specific areas, such as 'safer recruitment' and 'finances.' Even those interviewees who were positive about NPQH tended to see other forms of leadership development, such as sitting in on headteacher meetings, as more powerful.

“

I found the NPQH programme, I quite like stuff like that, so I found it quite interesting. ... I definitely learned some things. But really, the bit about headship that I always felt I liked the most was whenever, you know, whichever head it was - my previous or current head - you know they invited me into a budget meeting or governor meetings or kind of a discussion with the HR manager, and maybe because it feels more tangible ... you are really involved and so you kind of know bits and pieces about it.”

SDHT

6.6 What do we know about the current leadership labour market?

In this section, we draw on data from TeachVac⁴⁸ to show the number of senior school leadership posts advertised in England in the first four months of 2022, comparing these to the equivalent period in the previous two years. TeachVac’s ability to monitor adverts and re-adverts for schools across England provides a good indication of changes in the labour market. However, according to Professor John Howson,⁴⁹ the founder and Chair of TeachVac, there are challenges in tracking education job adverts comprehensively over time, for example because some MATs choose not to advertise posts externally and because the number of schools – and therefore posts – changes as a result of changes in pupil demographics.

In addition to these practical challenges, the volatility of the school leadership labour market over the past two years makes it difficult to assess whether any recent changes are significant or not. For example, in most years, the three-month window between January and the end of March is the busiest period for advertising headteacher jobs. Around half of all jobs advertised in any given year tend to appear in this period. However, the pandemic has impacted on advertising patterns in both phases and the proportion of annual adverts in the January to March window was smaller in 2021 than in most ‘normal’ years. This volatility makes it harder to compare patterns over time. For example, it is possible that higher levels of advertising in this period in 2022 will be followed by lower than average levels during the remainder of the year.

We show the total number of adverts between January and April for head teachers (Figure 11), primary assistant and deputy heads (Figure 12) and secondary assistant and deputy heads (Figure 13) between 2020 and 2022. In primary, there has been a sharp increase in the number of headteacher posts advertised this year compared to both 2020 and 2021, increasing by more than a third between 2021 and 2022. The number of primary assistant and deputy posts has also increased each year, by 80% over two years in the case of assistant heads. In secondary, the head teacher situation has been more volatile, with a reduction in 2021 (n=169) compared to 2020 (n=209), followed by a rise in 2022 (n=261). The number of assistant and deputy head posts advertised in secondary has increased sharply each year, by 75% over two years in the case of assistant heads.

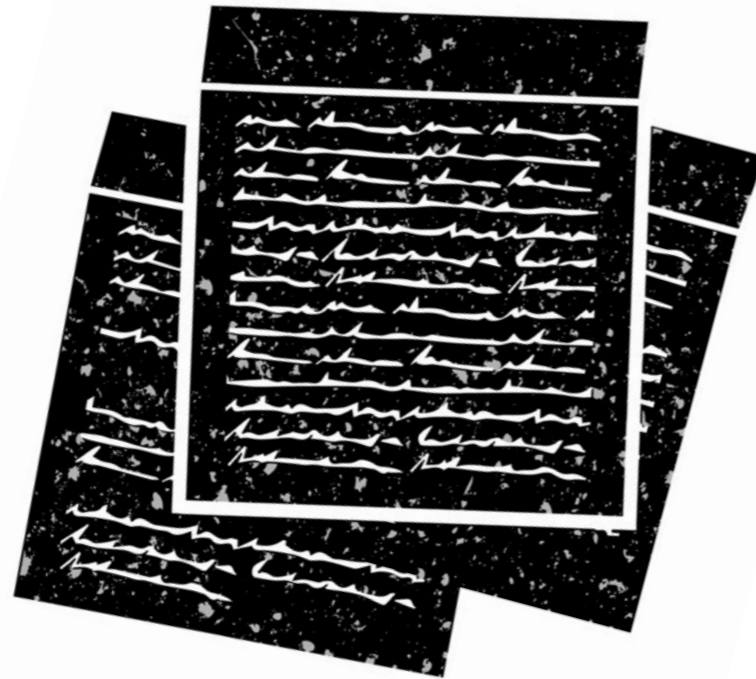


Figure 11

Head teacher job adverts in England January-April period by year

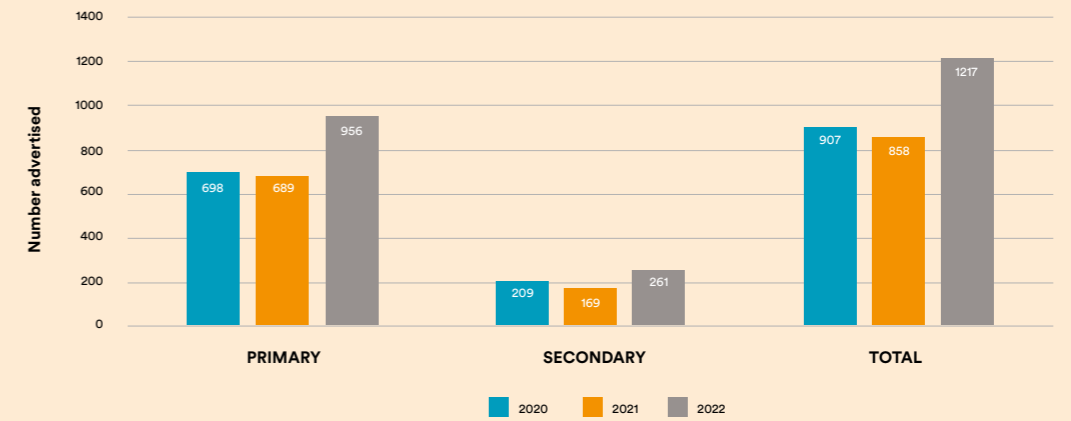


Figure 11: Head teacher job adverts in England between January-April by year. Source: TeachVac.

Figure 12

Primary Assistant and Deputy Head job adverts in England January-April period by year

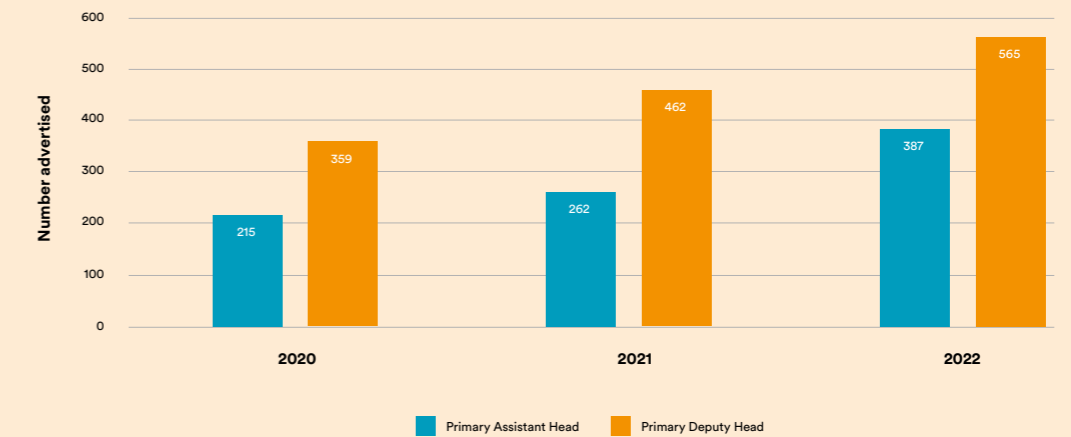


Figure 12: Primary Assistant and Deputy Head job adverts in England between January-April by year. Source: TeachVac.

Figure 13

Secondary Assistant and Deputy Head job adverts in England January-April by year

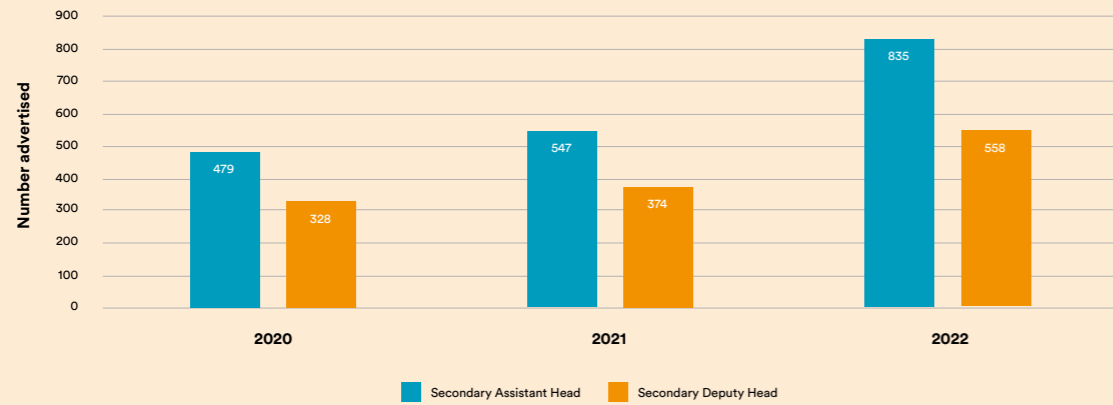
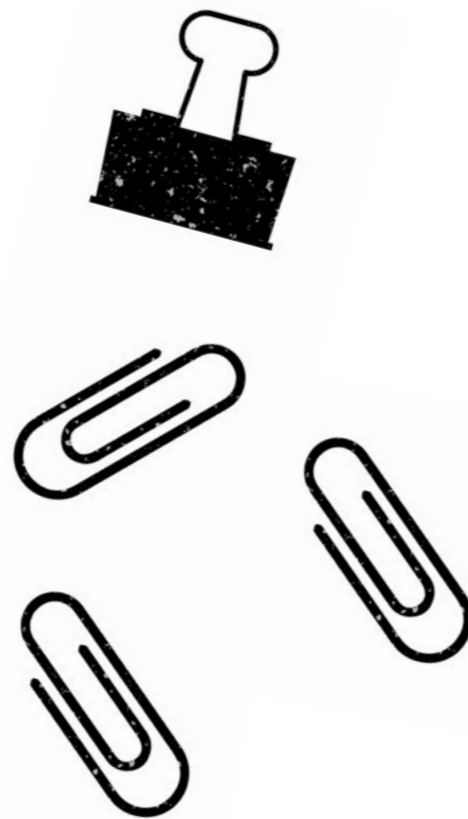


Figure 13: Secondary Assistant and Deputy Head job adverts in England between January-April by year. Source: TeachVac.

Of course, the fact that a leadership post is advertised by a school does not mean that the previous incumbent has retired or left the profession. Many adverts will reflect leaders moving job, to another school, so it is likely that some the increase in 2022 simply reflects an increase in the number of such moves after the lockdown had largely put them on hold. Nevertheless, the increases do appear to show that much higher numbers of school leaders are choosing to either move job or leave the profession in 2022. Such an outcome would fit with the findings in both the first Leading in Lockdown report (Greany et al, 2021) and the current study. For example, in the first report we included comments from several head teacher interviewees who said they wanted to see their school through the lockdown period before leaving. In this report, we highlighted the Teacher Tapp survey finding that 30% of headteachers and 16% of senior leaders plan to leave the profession – for reasons other than full retirement - within the next five years, as well as the more detailed career thinking across our 42 senior leader interviewees, several of whom had decided to leave or revert to a teaching position.



7. Conclusion: restoring the health of the English leadership system

7.1 Understanding the long-run impact of the pandemic – more than ‘catch up’

One finding that stands out in the current research relates to the 2021-22 academic year. None of the leaders we interviewed agreed that this year has felt ‘normal’ – and two thirds argued that it was actually worse than, or equally difficult as, the previous two years. This might surprise some readers, given that schools have been open and that Covid-related restrictions across wider society have been removed in this period. As we set out in the report, there are three main challenges that leaders have faced this academic year: first, Covid-related issues have required continual attention, in particular due to very high rates of staff sickness and absence, making it hard to move beyond crisis management; second, the return of Ofsted inspections and national exams have renewed the pressure on leaders and created an unrealistic expectation that schools should be operating as ‘normal’; third, the long-run impacts of Covid on education, including variable learning gaps and a tidal wave of pupil well-being and mental health concerns, have presented challenges which go far beyond the government’s focus on ‘catch up’ through one to one tutoring.

The mismatch between a national narrative which emphasises ‘catch up’ and a return to ‘normal’, and the lived reality of leading schools that very much not ‘normal’, seems problematic. The government’s white paper, ‘Opportunity for All’,⁵⁰ and the parallel SEND and Alternative Provision green paper, ‘Right support Right place Right time’,⁵¹ do acknowledge that the pandemic has been challenging for staff in schools and that the impact continues to be felt. However, in practical terms, these papers do not offer any significant new support for schools to address

the impact of the pandemic, simply re-stating the funding for one-to-one tuition and providing small-scale funding for mental health teams and implementing the SEND reforms. The support that these documents offer to school leaders specifically is limited to the roll out of the new NPQ programmes. Meanwhile, the government is introducing new attainment targets, new expectations on the minimum length for the school day, and further structural changes, all of which school leaders will, inevitably, be expected to address. We therefore agree with the Education Select Committee’s conclusion in March 2022 that the “current plans (for Covid recovery) do not go far enough.”⁵²



7.2 Comparing 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' systems

In the opening section of this report, drawing on the wider literature, we set out the characteristics of school systems that are successful in supporting schools and school leaders to address complex challenges – comparing these 'healthy' systems with the characteristics of 'unhealthy' systems. Healthy systems are successful in developing a shared sense of purpose, with children's learning and outcomes at the centre. Policy makers in these systems avoid top-down implementation approaches, seeking to listen to the voice of practice and to engage stakeholders in shaping new ways of working. Complex challenges are acknowledged and addressed through collective sense-making, learning and adaptation. We gave the example of Singapore, which has introduced and embedded ambitious reforms over the last two decades, and which invests heavily in helping school leaders to work together to address complex implementation challenges. In contrast, 'unhealthy' systems are characterised by a climate of fear, complex problems are denied, administrative actions are presented as the only possible way forward, and discussions of values and ethics are side-lined through the use of apparently 'objective evidence'.

In the light of this evidence, we ask whether England's school system may have been uniquely ill-equipped to deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic. In asking this, we recognise the benefits of hindsight. The pandemic has been – and continues to be – unprecedented and unpredictable, and we are not suggesting that England simply needed a better plan for dealing with it. Indeed, one of our headteacher interviewees in phase one of the research explained that she did actually have a pandemic plan, but that it was useless in the face of the complex and exhausting reality she faced.



Nevertheless, based on our findings in this report and the last one, it seems clear that school leaders in England have experienced the system as more 'unhealthy' than 'healthy'. Understanding why this is the case is, inevitably, complex, but our research indicates two areas as particularly important:

An imbalance between national and local decision-making:

We highlighted in the Introduction that school leaders perceived the central government's response to the pandemic to be 'clumsy' and 'tone deaf'. This view reflected multiple overlapping concerns, mainly with how and when decisions were made and communicated and with how those decisions were then implemented, or not, in practice. Inevitably, this leads to questions about the competence of particular ministers and the Department for Education (DfE) that they run, but the broader issue it reveals is the over-centralisation of the school system following 12 years of mass academisation and the roll-back of local governance.⁵³ Linked to this is the complex and fragmented nature of the system, which the DfE itself acknowledged in its recent white paper. The trend towards over-centralisation was already well underway before the pandemic,⁵⁴ but has been further accelerated during the crisis, during which time the locus of decision-making has shifted even further from the local to the national level. For example, responsibility for providing free school meal vouchers and for online tutoring was given to two different offshore companies (Edenred and Randstad), with disastrous consequences in both cases.⁵⁵ When Greenwich local authority moved to close its schools just before Christmas 2020, it was instructed by the Schools Minister to keep them open and threatened with legal action if it did otherwise.⁵⁶

A lack of system-level trust:

A second important finding from the first phase of the research was that two thirds (65%) of leaders disagreed that they trusted the advice provided by DfE. In both phases of the research, school leaders told us that they felt mistrusted by policy makers, for example when the Secretary of State told parents to complain to Ofsted if they felt that their child's school was not doing enough to support online learning during lockdown. Clearly, these findings relate to the points above: a centralised bureaucracy will generally be trusted less than one that has a human face, while policy makers will turn to blunt accountability tools if they do not have direct relationships with practice. Yet, as Ehren and Baxter (2021)⁵⁷ argue based on their comparative review of school systems worldwide, trust between policy-makers and school leaders is critical for the operation of a successful and healthy system. Looking beyond education specifically, the OECD⁵⁸ argues that trust is the basis for the legitimacy of government and is necessary for 'the fair and effective functioning of government institutions... (and) may help government to implement long term structural reforms with long term benefits.'

7.3 Implications

In our first report, we set out the following implications. The findings in this report serve to reinforce these conclusions further, so we reiterate them here and suggest they provide a starting point for moving forward:

1.

Restore trust. School leaders have been frustrated by what they perceive as a lack of trust in them and they have also lost trust in national government.

2.

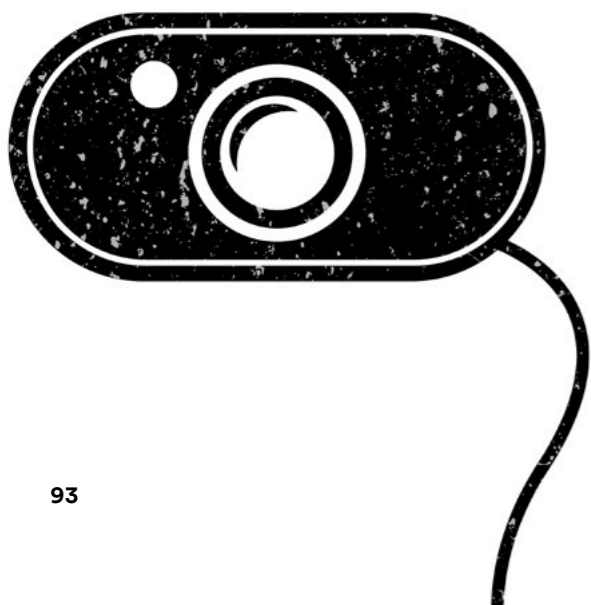
Re-shape local models of support. Overall support for leaders has been patchy and, for some, non-existent. This unevenness highlights the wider ways in which the school system has lost coherence at local levels over the past decade – we must think seriously about ways to develop a more equitable and resilient system.

3.

Recognise and value community leadership. Schools have acted as anchors, in particular in the most deprived communities, through the crisis – leaders must be encouraged to see this wider role as central to their work and success in future, but a return to overly narrow accountability measures will prevent this.

4.

Rethink leadership. The pandemic has revealed a need for a broader view of leadership than one that is purely technical and managerial – in complex times we need leaders who can also work flexibly and with moral purpose. Broadening out our notion of successful leadership might also attract a wider pool of leaders into headship in future.



Building on these points, we suggest that there are both shorter and longer-term changes that policy makers should make to address the findings in this research.

Shorter-term recommendations:

Direct more funding to schools and trust leaders to spend it:

We agree with the Education Select Committee (2022: p4) that there is a need to “end the ‘spaghetti junction of funding’... Future investment in education recovery must be directed to schools, who know their pupils and their needs the best... using existing mechanisms for identifying disadvantage.. to ensure schools in the most disadvantaged regions receive more.” Directing more money to schools, particularly schools in disadvantaged contexts, and trusting school leaders to use this funding to address the short and long-run impact of Covid on children would send a powerful signal that schools are trusted. It would also be more efficient and effective than the existing mechanisms.

Focus on school leadership support and development, including succession planning for headship:

The government has rightly focused on addressing workload issues for teachers in recent years and has sought to enhance teacher recruitment through raising the starting salary. However, our findings show that a focus on teacher recruitment and retention alone is insufficient. School leaders lack support, many feel overwhelmed, and large numbers are considering leaving the profession. Losing large numbers of experienced leaders at a time when schools continue to face huge ‘long-run’ challenges from the pandemic would be catastrophic, destroying any hope of achieving the government’s wider ambitions. Providing new NPQs might help, but it will not address the challenges we have identified or prevent a succession crisis. There is an urgent need to focus on school leadership support and development, including succession planning for headship.

Longer term shifts

Turning to the longer-term shifts that need to be made to develop a ‘healthy’ school system in England, this requires an immediate change in mindset and approach from national policy makers - moving away from a relentless focus on top-down control and efficiency, seeking instead to develop as a learning system. This requires an approach that values professional expertise, that recognises differing contextual needs, and that devolves decision-making to the lowest appropriate level. Such shifts would help to address our findings summarised above, in terms of the imbalance between national and local decision-making and the lack of system-level trust.

Appendix 1: Methodology

The research was conducted between January and March 2022.

Interviews

We interviewed 42 Assistant and Deputy Headteachers in primary and secondary schools about their experiences of the pandemic and how it has impacted on their workload, well-being and career aspirations. Interviewees were recruited via the 2021 survey (see Greany et al, 2021) and via additional requests distributed through ASCL and NAHT newsletters in early 2022. Interviews were conducted by two members of the team using a semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews were undertaken online, via MS Teams, and were recorded and transcribed and then analysed by three members of the team.

The interview sample included more secondary (n=35) than primary (n=7) leaders, despite efforts to increase the primary response rate. Across the interview sample as a whole we sought to achieve a broadly representative mix in terms of individual and school characteristics. For example, the interviewees included two special schools, two alternative provision (AP) schools, three independent schools, one hospital school and one sixth form college. The number of years that interviewees had worked in their current role ranged from 1 year to 13 years.

Respondent phase, role and gender

	Male	Female	Total
SAHT	7	6	12
SDHT	10	12	22
PAHT	0	2	2
PDHT	2	3	5
Total	19	23	42

Survey

We commissioned Teacher Tapp to survey their panel of teachers and school leaders in late January 2022. We also reanalysed some questions that Teacher Tapp asked in previous years, as indicated.

The survey charts show the % of the Teacher Tapp panel responding to each response category for the question, focusing on SLT and headteacher responses where indicated, with samples weighted to reflect the national population of teachers/leaders in England (see below) and also providing the total number of responses. The sample nature of the survey means that results are subject to random variation, with a 95% confidence interval where 50% of respondents chose a response reflecting the random variation underlying any survey's result.

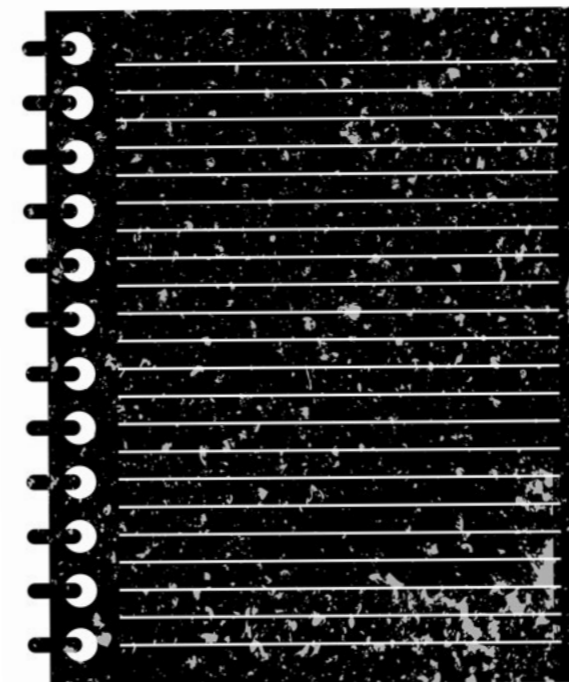
The re-weighted sample from Teacher Tapp reflects the teaching/leadership population in England:

- drops the results of all respondents who do not have a valid school identifier (Unique Reference Number)
- retains teachers who provide valid information on their gender, age and job post, the characteristics used for matching against the School Workforce Census
- calculates population share in census data for 48 groupings of teachers who are allocated according to their phase, funding, region, gender, age and job post
- calculates sample shares in the Teacher Tapp responses for the question, which yields weights as a ratio of population to sample share

Labour market

We commissioned Professor John Howson/ TeachVac to assess the number of senior school leadership posts advertised in England in the first four months of 2022, comparing these to the equivalent period in the previous two years.

TeachVac is a free advertising service for school job vacancies which also monitors other school vacancies that are posted online across England (e.g. school websites, local authority job sites and various advertising sites). This provides a good indication of changes in the labour market but is not a comprehensive picture, as there are challenges in tracking job adverts. For example, many schools advertise in multiple places, so TeachVac vets each vacancy to try to avoid duplication. Some schools and MATs choose not to advertise posts externally, but it is not clear how many. The number of schools – and therefore posts – also changes over time as a result of changes in pupil demographics. In addition, job advertising patterns have been affected by the pandemic, for example with a drop in the overall proportion of jobs advertised in the first four months of the year between 2020 and 2021 (Howson, 2022).



Endnotes

¹ Both the 2021 and 2022 surveys achieved a good response rate from school leaders, providing a cross-sectional picture of their attitudes at the time. However, the methodology and sample for the surveys was not the same, so direct comparison of the results requires caution

² OECD (2021) The state of global education: 18 months into the pandemic. Paris: OECD.

³ For Australia see: Arnold, B., Rahimi, M., & Riley, P. (2021). Working through the first year of the pandemic: A snapshot of Australian school leaders' work roles and responsibilities and health and wellbeing during Covid-19. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 53(3-4), 301–309. For England, see our first report (Leading in Lockdown: research on school leaders' work, well-being and career intentions (Greany, Thomson, Martindale and Cousin, 2021) and the recent NAHT survey <https://features.naht.org.uk/health-and-well-being/index.html>

⁴ Department for Education (2022) Opportunity for all: Strong schools with great teachers for your child. London.

⁵ House of Commons Education Select Committee (2022: pp3-4) Is the Catch-up Programme fit for purpose? Fourth Report of Session 2021–22. London: House of Commons.

⁶ The Phase 1 research report is available on the project website (<https://schoolleadersworkandwellbeing.com/>) together with a seminar recording, blogposts, research posters, links to media related coverage, and associated research papers.

⁷ Schools have remained open to all students for in-person teaching since September 2021, while national policy on Covid-19 has seen the progressive removal of all restrictions, despite England seeing the highest rates of infection of the entire pandemic during the research period.

⁸ Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) – see <https://www.cape.ac.uk/#:~:text=CAPE%20is%20>

⁹ Department for Education (2022) *Opportunity for all: Strong schools with great teachers for your child*. London. p.17

¹⁰ Leithwood, K. Day, C. Sammons, P. Harris, A. and Hopkins, D. (2006) *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*. Nottingham: NCSL.

¹¹ Greany, T., and Earley, P. (Eds) (2021) *School leadership and education system reform* (2nd Edition). London: Bloomsbury

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¹² Courtney, S. J., Gunter, H. M., Niesche, R., & Trujillo, T. (Eds.). (2022). *Understanding educational leadership. Critical perspectives and approaches*. London: Bloomsbury.

¹³ Child Poverty Action Group statistics, accessed 19.4.22 <https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/child-poverty-facts-and-figures>

¹⁴ Partridge, L; Strong, F; Loble, E; and Mason, D. (2020). Pinball kids: Preventing school exclusions. London: Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce.

¹⁵ Burke, J., Kinnerney, P., & Salokangos, M. (2022). 'Split in all directions': An exploration of the of well being and daily responsibilities on post-primary school leaders' perceived stress. *School Leadership & Management*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2021.2016683>.

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¹⁶ Department for Education (2015) Reducing teachers' workload, London: DfE.

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¹⁷ Fitzpatrick, P. (2021) The challenges of international comparisons of COVID-19. *International Journal of Medical Science*; 190(2): 483–484. doi: 10.1007/s11845-020-02370-9

¹⁸ OECD (2020) Lessons for education from COVID-19: A policy maker's handbook for more resilient systems. Paris: OECD.

OECD (2021) The state of global education: 18 months into the pandemic. Paris: OECD.

¹⁹ NB: schools in England remained open for the children of key workers even when they were otherwise closed and offering online education.

²⁰ See our working list of relevant studies on the project website, here: <https://schoolleadersworkandwellbeing.com/the-research/related-research/>

²¹ Hayes, Flowers and Williams (2021) "Constant Communication": Rural Principals' Leadership Practices During a Global Pandemic in *Frontiers*, 6 Jan. 2021 <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.618067>

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²² See, for example, Jones, M-A., Dehlin, E., Skoglund, K. and Dons, C. F. (2021). Crisis as opportunity: experiences of Norwegian school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Education in the North*, 28(3) 274-292.

²³ Reid D (2021) Suppressing and sharing: how school principals manage stress and anxiety during COVID-19, *School Leadership & Management*, DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2021.1974827

²⁴ Arnold, B., Rahimi, M., & Riley, P. (2021). Working through the first year of the pandemic: A snapshot of Australian school leaders' work roles and responsibilities and health and wellbeing during Covid-19. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 53(3-4), 301–309.

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²⁷ Greany, T., and Kamp, A. (2022) *Leading educational networks: Theory, policy and practice*. London: Bloomsbury. Thomson, P., (2009) *School leadership: heads on the block?* Routledge.

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- ³⁸ T. Burns and F. Köster (eds) (2016) *Governing education in a complex world*, Paris: OECD Publishing. Davis, B. and Sumara, D. (2006), *Complexity*
- ³⁹ In the first phase of the project we surveyed school leaders across England in April and May 2021 (see Greany et al, 2021 for methodology and findings). In this second phase of the research, we commissioned Teacher Tapp to survey 6,057 teachers and school leaders in state-funded schools in late January 2022, including slightly adapted versions of some questions from the 2021 survey. Both surveys achieved a good response rate from school leaders, providing a cross-sectional picture of their attitudes at the time. However, the methodology and sample for the two surveys is not the same, so direct comparison of results requires caution. We focus here on the 2022 findings, explaining where and how these differ from the 2021 survey where relevant.
- ⁴⁰ Percentages are rounded throughout the report, so totals might not equal 100%.
- ⁴¹ As we note above, in the current research we interviewed fewer deputy and assistant heads in primary (n=7) than secondary (n=35), so we are less able to draw conclusions around how the pandemic was experienced by primary leaders specifically.
- ⁴² It is possible that these differences intersect with the phase differences outlined above, given that primary headteachers are more likely to be women, while secondary headteachers are more likely to be men. 73% of primary headteachers and 38% of secondary headteachers are women (DfE, 2018).
- ⁴³ Our interview sample was reasonably well balanced between men (n=19) and women (n=23).
- ⁴⁴ Plus 'Not sure/would rather not to say' and 'Not relevant/cannot answer'.
- ⁴⁵ NAHT (2022) Evidence submission to the School Teachers' Review Body's (STRB) 32nd remit. Available at <https://www.naht.org.uk/Portals/0/PDFs/Policy/NAHT%20response%20to%20STRB%2032nd%20remit%20FINAL.pdf?ver=2022-03-03-163000-827>
- ⁴⁶ Burge, P., Lu, H., and Phillips, W. (2021) *Understanding teacher retention using a discrete choice experiment to measure teacher retention in England*. Washington: RAND
- ⁴⁷ The Teacher Tapp sample in 2018 was smaller than in 2021, so these results should be interpreted with caution.
- ⁴⁸ TeachVac is a free advertising service for school job vacancies, which monitors school vacancies across England. For details see https://www.teachvac.co.uk/teachvac_about_us.php
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