Sustainable School Leadership: UK survey report

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About This Report

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About the Project

This survey report is one of several outputs from the **Sustainable School Leadership** project, a UK-wide study exploring the training, supply, and retention of senior school leaders across the UK. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the project runs from 2022 to 2026 and is led by the University of Nottingham and the University of Warwick. The project investigates how leadership development systems can better support equitable, successful and sustainable school leadership.

The research combines a literature review, expert interviews, place-based case studies, and secondary data analysis – along with the UK-wide survey reported here – to understand the lived experiences of school leaders and the systemic factors shaping their careers.

A final project report will be published in early 2026. More information is available at: sustainableschoolleadership.uk

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Executive Summary

Background

This report presents findings from the Sustainable School Leadership survey, exploring the working lives, wellbeing, support structures, and career pathways of school leaders in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. The survey forms part of a larger study of Sustainable School Leadership across the UK. No previous studies have sought to compare the work and experiences of school leaders in this way.

The survey was conducted online between November 2024 and February 2025. It received 1,624 responses in total: England (n=1,004), Scotland (n=333), Northern Ireland (n=242), Wales (n=45). Most respondents were headteachers (62%), with deputy and assistant heads, middle leaders, executive leaders, business managers and advisors also represented. These respondents were working in a broadly representative range of school settings.

Leadership Roles and Contexts

How do leaders spend their time?
- Across all three nations, the most time-consuming activity for headteachers is 'General administration', followed by 'Managing student attendance, behaviour, and wellbeing', and 'Staffing'.
- Interestingly, heads spend notably less time on 'Leading/developing teaching, learning, and the curriculum', despite this being a core expectation in policy.
- The proportion of heads with teaching responsibilities is highest in Northern Ireland (37.3%), followed by England (34.5%), and lowest in Scotland (26.3%).

How do respondents perceive leadership in their school?
- An overwhelming majority of all leaders agree that leadership has become more challenging since the Covid-19 pandemic. Open text responses highlighted issues such as rises in special needs, mental health concerns (among both staff and students) and increasing parental complaints.
- Headteachers consistently report a more positive view of their school's culture and values compared to deputy heads, assistant heads and other senior and middle leaders. For example, while just over half of heads (51.9%) 'strongly agree' that there is a strong sense of trust and collaboration in their school, just 20.2% of other leaders do.

How do leaders perceive their school and locality?
- Heads in Scotland (85.7%) and Northern Ireland (79.8%) are more likely than their peers in England (67.5%) to agree that their school serves students from the immediate local neighbourhood.
- Heads in England (72.2%) are the most likely to perceive a clear local hierarchy of schools in terms of status and popularity with parents (Northern Ireland - 64.9%; Scotland - 58.5%).
- Heads in Northern Ireland clearly see their school as part of the local community (73.7% 'strongly agree'), far more so than heads in either Scotland (49.1%) or England (41.8%).
- Heads in England are the most negative about the value of school inspections: only 26.6% agree that they learn new things from the process. This is in stark contrast to Scotland, where a small majority (54.4%) agree that inspections provide a learning opportunity.

Wellbeing and Sustainability

How are leaders feeling - are they thriving, surviving, or sinking?

- Respondents were asked: 'Overall, which of the following best describes your own experience of working in school over the last 12 months?'
- Leaders in Scotland report the most challenging experiences, with a combined 29.2% describing themselves as 'mostly' or 'sometimes sinking' (England - 21.9%; Northern Ireland - 19.1%).
- Around a third of leaders in all three systems describe themselves as 'mostly surviving' (England - 33.9%; Scotland – 36.1%; Northern Ireland – 38.2%).
- Leaders in Scotland (34.8%) are also the least likely to describe themselves as 'sometimes' or 'mostly thriving', compared to England (44.2%) and Northern Ireland (42.7%).

Wellbeing

- The survey included the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS), a widely recognised and validated measure. To complement this, we developed a set of items to explore aspects of work-related wellbeing, such as leaders' sense of purpose, workload, and burnout. The findings reveal a complex picture of professionals who feel effective and purposeful yet are experiencing high levels of personal strain.
- The SWEMWBS data shows that leaders generally feel competent and useful. A majority report that they are 'often' or 'all of the time': able to make up their own minds (69.1%); feel useful (57.8%); and deal with problems well (53.9%). However, this is contrasted with a widespread lack of relaxation; two-thirds of leaders (65.9%) report feeling relaxed only 'rarely' or 'none of the time'.
- This pattern is reinforced by the additional work-specific items. Leaders express a strong sense of purpose (65.3% 'often' or 'all of the time') and feel their decisions have a positive impact on their school (72.5% 'often' or 'all of the time'). Yet, this is accompanied by a significant struggle with workload and burnout. Nearly half of all leaders (47.9%) feel burnt out 'often' or 'all of the time', and a combined 38.5% feel in control of their workload only 'rarely' or 'none of the time'.
- In the wider UK general population, the average SWEMWBS score is 23.5 (with a standard deviation of 3.9). The mean score for school leaders is consistently slightly lower than the population average across most groups. Leaders in Scotland report the lowest mean wellbeing score (22.2), while those in special school settings report the highest (24.0).

What drains leaders?

- Respondents selected 3-5 factors that are the most draining for them in their role. Across most groups, five issues emerge: poor work-life balance, the weight of leadership responsibility, financial constraints, staffing issues, and special educational needs and inclusion challenges.
- There are some notable national variations among headteachers in terms of the top draining factors: for instance, 'SEND and inclusion challenges' are a major drain in England (57.3%) and Scotland (59.1%), but less so in Northern Ireland (33.5%). Headteachers in Scotland report 'behaviour challenges' as a particularly acute pressure (43.5%), while those in Northern Ireland are more likely to be drained by operational and administrative burdens (50.3%).
- 'Parental and community relations' were highlighted as draining less often (albeit varying from 13.5% of heads in Northern Ireland to 27% in England). However, open-text responses revealed a widespread view that parental complaints have become more commonplace and, often, more confrontational in recent years, often fuelled by social media.

What sustains leaders?

- In the same vein, respondents were asked to select the factors that sustain them in their role.
- The most powerful sustaining factors are relational and altruistic. 'Relationships with students and their success and growth' and 'collaboration with colleagues within school' are the top two sustainers for almost all groups. This is typically followed by factors such as pursuing values, having a sense of moral purpose and making a difference.
- A leader's role influences their sources of professional sustenance to some extent. For Assistant and Deputy Heads, and middle leaders, opportunities for professional development and receiving positive feedback are more important sustaining factors compared to headteachers. For headteachers, executive leaders and senior cross-school roles, the focus shifts outwards, with collaboration with external colleagues becoming more important.

Career Pathways and Development

What are the typical routes to headship?

- Serving and executive heads were asked about their route into headship. The most common pathway (57%) is where the aspiration for the role emerges over the course of a career in schools. A much smaller proportion (14%) stated that they had "always wanted to be a head" ever since starting work in school. A surprisingly large proportion (29%) described their route as more accidental, agreeing with the statement "I never really intended to be a head – it just happened".
- Male leaders are almost twice as likely as female leaders to report always wanting to be a head (21% vs 11%), while female leaders are more likely to say their route was accidental (36% vs 16%).
- Leaders in special schools report the highest proportion of 'accidental' headships (40%), considerably more than in primary (31%) or secondary (23%) schools.

Do middle and senior leaders aspire to headship?

- The survey asked middle and senior leaders, 'Would you like to be a headteacher/principal yourself one day?'
- Aspiration is highest in Scotland, where 39% say 'Yes, perhaps' or 'Yes, definitely', compared to 33.1% in England and 24% in Northern Ireland.
- Aspiration for headship differs by role, age and other personal characteristics. Encouragingly, over half (52.4%) of current deputy heads and vice-principals say they would definitely or perhaps consider applying for headship, compared to a quarter (25.7%) of those in less senior roles. Considering age, ambition is strongest among younger leaders - 18.5% of those aged 35-39 'definitely' want to be a head. Leaders from an ethnic minority background show stronger levels of aspiration (16.7% 'definitely') compared to their ethnic majority counterparts (9.1% 'definitely').

What motivates or deters people from becoming leaders?

- The survey asked respondents to identify the most important motivations when applying for their current role. The most common motivations are 'having greater impact on student learning and development' and an 'interest in shaping the strategic vision and direction of the school'.
- These motivations vary depending on a leader's role, career stage, and personal characteristics. For example, male leaders are more likely to select ambition (45.0% vs 37.5% for women), career growth (56.0% vs 47.4%), and better pay (31.9% vs 20.6%) as key drivers. Conversely, female leaders are more likely to cite 'encouragement or inspiration from a mentor' (36.6% vs 25.4%).

- Turning to disincentives, the 'increased stress, pressure or emotional toll' of the job and a 'lack of work-life balance and long working hours' are overwhelmingly seen as the primary deterrents. 'Inadequate compensation or benefits compared to the increased workload' is also seen as a deterrent, selected by over half of leaders.
- Leaders from an ethnic minority background are more likely to be deterred by a 'lack of representation or role models' (12.9% vs 5.9% for the ethnic majority) and 'concerns about unfairness or discrimination in the selection process' (16.3% vs 7.0%).
- The issue of 'lack of opportunities for flexible working' is felt more sharply by female leaders (38.1%) than their male colleagues (27.3%).

What are leaders planning to do next in their careers?
- We asked respondents to select a statement that best described their career plans in the coming year or two.
- In all three nations a large majority intend to remain in the profession for the immediate future. For example, just under three-quarters of heads in England (72.7%), Northern Ireland (71.1%), and Scotland (74.5%) plan to stay in their role or seek promotion in the coming year.
- The proportion of heads that plan to leave the profession or retire early in the next year or two is around 15% in all three nations.
- These career intentions are heavily influenced by a leader's age. The intention to leave early is most pronounced among older leaders (e.g. 50-54 – 16.6%; 55-59 – 35.8%). Retention is strongest among those in their mid-career, with leaders aged 35-49 least likely to be planning an early exit.

How confident do leaders feel?
- While most headteachers agree they had the necessary skills, knowledge, and qualities when they first took up headship, this confidence was rarely strong; only one in 10 (~10%) in all three nations chose 'strongly agree'. Meanwhile, a substantial proportion (e.g. 30.2% of headteachers in England) began their headship journey lacking confidence.
- Across the UK, around two-thirds of leaders not currently in a headship role express confidence in their ability to progress to a more senior role. The proportion who lack confidence for progression is relatively small – e.g. 16.9% in England.

What forms of development do leaders value?
- Three quarters (76.6%) of heads across the UK hold at least one national leadership qualification (e.g. NPQH in England, *Into headship* in Scotland), although uptake varies by nation. In addition, between a quarter and a half of headteachers in each nation hold a master's or doctoral degree.
- Respondents were asked to select the types of professional development they see as most valuable in preparing for headship. This shows that leaders value experiential and relational forms of development ahead of formal qualifications. The most widely endorsed approaches are: 'learning on the job and reflecting on experience', 'coaching and mentoring' and 'learning from role models'.
- Leaders were asked to indicate the areas they need most help with in their current role. Leaders feel least prepared for the operational and compliance-related aspects of their roles, such as 'financial, premises, and resource management', 'legal, regulatory, and managerial aspects of leadership' and 'dealing with staff, including poor performance'. In contrast, 'leading school improvement and change' and 'leading teaching, learning and curriculum development' were selected less often.

Conclusion and Next Steps for the Sustainable School Leadership project

The findings from this survey provide the most comprehensive cross-nation picture to date of school leadership in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. They highlight both the pressures that threaten leadership sustainability and the factors that sustain leaders in their roles.

The report includes multiple quotes and analyses from the open text responses provided by many participants, which help to bring the findings to life and illustrate some of the contextual issues. One powerful example is Table 9, in which we include quotes split between leaders who say they are 'mostly thriving' and those that are 'mostly sinking'. The two sets of quotes indicate that both groups of leaders face similar challenges, but while some feel stretched and empowered, others feel overwhelmed, raising important questions about what more could be done to help leaders to thrive.

In terms of succession planning, around 15% of headteachers in all three nations say they plan to leave the profession before full retirement age. Meanwhile, aspiration for headship among senior and middle leaders differs between the three nations and between different groups.

The picture that emerges is of a profession under significant strain, with some important messages for policymakers, employers and practitioners themselves. We will be exploring these implications and potential recommendations in the final stages of the project.

These results will inform the next stages of the Sustainable School Leadership project, including:

- Three national case study reports (Autumn 2025), which will explore the national survey findings in more depth and will also include case study evidence and secondary data analyses.
- The final project report (Spring 2026), which will integrate findings from across the three-year study and will set out implications for policy and practice.

For updates and access to future outputs, visit sustainableschoolleadership.uk.

Section 1: Introduction and Overview

1.1 Purpose and Aims of the Survey

This report presents findings from the Sustainable School Leadership survey, exploring the working lives, wellbeing, support structures, and career pathways of school leaders in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. The survey forms one part of a three-year mixed methods study of Sustainable School Leadership across the UK.[1] The study includes several strands of data collection and analysis, including seven place-based case studies and secondary analysis of workforce and wider data in each nation. In future publications the survey findings will be integrated alongside these other strands to provide a holistic assessment of school leadership and sustainability.

The survey was developed to capture a representative and detailed picture of what it means to lead in schools today – identifying what sustains leaders, what drains them, and how their experiences vary across contexts and roles. Various surveys of headteachers and, sometimes, other groups have been conducted in each UK nation at different points in time, often with a focus on leaders' experiences, attitudes and/or careers (e.g. Marchant et al, 2024; Greany and Higham, 2018; Earley et al, 2012; Macbeath et al, 2009). However, the focus of this survey across three UK nations is unique: no previous studies have sought to assess and compare the work and experiences of school leaders in this way.

The survey had three overarching aims:

- To describe the experiences, attitudes, roles, and careers of school leaders, with a focus on how these influence the sustainability of leadership roles.
- To identify the factors associated with thriving, sustainability, and career intentions.
- To feed into the continued work of the Sustainable School Leadership research project, and thereby inform policy and practice in leadership development, retention, and support.

1.2 A UK survey across three different schooling systems

As a comparative study, the Sustainable School Leadership project includes a substantial literature review exploring the educational context as well as programmes and policies to support school leadership development in each of the UK nations studied. Later in 2025 we will publish three national case study reports (i.e. covering England, Northern Ireland, and Scotland) which will outline this literature and the context of each education system in depth. The reports will include further country-specific analyses of this survey as well as workforce analyses and write ups from the locality case studies. The final report, due in early 2026, will explore contextual differences within and between the three jurisdictions and how these shape the experiences of leaders in depth. In this section, we sketch out some very high-level information on the three systems as a backdrop to the survey findings.

Education is a devolved responsibility in each UK nation, meaning that each jurisdiction has its own system of governance, funding, curriculum, assessment and accountability. This means that school leaders in each system are developed, appointed and supported in different ways, with different responsibilities and success measures. These differences interact with wider cultural, historic and

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[1] The study focus is on England, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. The original intention was to undertake a light touch review in Wales – largely informed by responses to this survey. We promoted the survey to leaders in Wales, including via two direct emails to all schools, but the response (n=45) was not sufficient to support a separate country-level analysis.

socio-economic differences between each nation, all of which shape the work of school leaders in distinctive ways.

England is by far the largest system, with around 24,000 schools, compared with around 2,500 in Scotland and just over 1,000 in Northern Ireland (Woods et al., 2020:16). At a symposium held in 2024 academics from each UK nation outlined key characteristics of policy and practice in each system, with a focus on implications for school leaders. They chose to highlight:

- England, as the most neoliberal of the four UK systems, following nearly 40 years of educational reforms mainly geared towards raising standards in academic tests. This has led to a centralised but fragmented system, characterised by particularly sharp forms of school accountability and by significant regional and local variations in the outcomes that young people achieve (Greany, 2024).
- Northern Ireland as a post-conflict society in which historic sectarian divides continue to impact, including in the form of "weak government" (Gallagher, 2024) and an extraordinarily complex, multi-stakeholder, selective schooling landscape. One consequence is that schools in Northern Ireland have been funded at lower rates than other parts of the UK, with educational inequality a particular challenge.
- Scotland as a relatively coherent and consensual but hierarchical system (Chapman, 2024), in which policymakers in national and local government work together to direct and oversee school leaders who have limited autonomy. Ambitious curriculum reforms together with investments in improving attainment and overcoming disadvantage have not yet succeeded in overcoming variations in performance and outcomes.

These differences can be traced through into the ways in which official headteacher preparation programmes and qualifications operate in each nation (Greany et al, 2025):

- In England, since the late 1990s, the national government has designed, commissioned and funded the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). This is a pre-headship programme and qualification which was previously mandatory but has been optional since 2012. Headteachers are employed by either an academy trust or by their Local Authority (LA).
- In Scotland, *Into Headship* was launched in 2015 (replacing the Scottish Qualification for Headship, in place since 1998).   It is the route for meeting the Standard for Headship, which is mandatory for all new headteachers. The programme is delivered through a partnership between seven universities, the 32 LAs (which employ all staff), and Education Scotland, a Scottish Government agency. The 60-credit post-graduate certificate is also aligned to the General Teaching Council for Scotland's Standard for Headship (GTCS, 2021).
- In Northern Ireland, the non-mandatory *Professional Qualification for Headship* (PQH) operated between 1999 and 2017, when it was paused by the Education Authority (EA).

These points begin to indicate some of the important differences between the three systems, many of which we explore further in this report.

1.3 Overview of the survey methodology

Survey Design and Development
The survey included a mix of closed and open-response items, designed to capture both quantifiable trends and rich narrative insights. The survey questions were developed by the project team in consultation with the project's three national Advisory Groups and were piloted with serving leaders. Some questions are taken from existing surveys, including the short Warwick-Edinburgh

short wellbeing scale and items from the Leading in Lockdown research conducted in England (Greany et al, 2021, 2022). Several questions were directly informed by the Sustainable School Leadership qualitative research (i.e. the seven place-based case studies) – notably, the factors that drain and sustain leaders.

The report covers the following thematic areas, largely mirroring the design of the survey itself:

- **Section 1: Introduction and Overview** – Outlines the aims of the survey, the structure of the report, who took part, and the methodology used.
- **Section 2: Leadership Within and Beyond School** – Explores the roles held by school leaders, how they spend their time, their perceptions of leadership culture, and how they view their school's place within the local context.
- **Section 3: Wellbeing, Experience and Sustainability** – Examines how leaders are feeling in their roles, what drains and sustains them, and what predicts wellbeing and burnout.
- **Section 4: Career Pathways and Development** – Investigates leadership journeys, motivations and barriers, future plans, confidence levels, and experiences of professional development.
- **Section 5: Conclusions and Next Steps** – Summarises the contribution and outlines how the results feed into further Sustainable School Leadership research and reports.

Survey Dissemination and Completion
The survey was conducted online between 1 November 2024 and 5 February 2025, with the majority of responses received during two key collection windows: 7 November to 17 December 2024, and 14 January to 1 February 2025. The survey was made available in both English and Welsh, ensuring accessibility for leaders across the UK.

The project team adopted a comprehensive, multi-channel dissemination strategy to ensure broad and inclusive participation. Two direct email invitations were sent to all publicly funded schools across the UK using contact lists sourced from national education departments and publicly available school contact databases.

To broaden reach and encourage participation, the survey link was also promoted through:

- Newsletters and social media channels operated by the project team and its partner organisations in each nation, including Twitter, LinkedIn, and Bluesky.
- Professional networks and online forums such as the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), National Governors Association (NGA), Directors of Children's Services in England, Directors of Education in Wales, School Improvement Consortia Leads in Wales, Teaching School Hubs Council, BELMAS, Chartered College of Teaching and local authority networks, and NPQ delivery partners.
- Presentations or mentions at relevant events and webinars during the survey window, coordinated through advisory group members and local contacts – for example, multi-academy trust (MAT) forums and local authority briefings.

National advisory group members played a key role in promoting the survey through their networks, ensuring strong representation across different phases, roles, and school contexts. This included targeted outreach in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and all English regions, with tailored messaging and follow-up communications to maintain momentum throughout the survey period.

Of the 1,624 total responses, 96% were at least 95% complete, with a median completion time of just under 17 minutes including open text responses. The survey design incorporated tailored routing based on role, phase, and location, enabling respondents to receive only the questions most

relevant to their context.[2] For example, some items were only asked of respondents in England, or only of those currently in headship.

Overall, the achieved sample reflects a broad cross-section of school leaders across the UK, but with a notable weighting towards headteachers, who make up around 62% of respondents (see Section 1.4, below). The sample also spans all school phases and sectors, though with some variation in composition between nations. These differences are likely to reflect both the structure of each system and the dissemination channels available.

Analytical Approach

Structure and Presentation of Results

The analysis in this report is organised thematically, with each section addressing a broad research question and presenting selected results from one or more survey items relevant to that theme. Within each section, the starting point is usually the national-level distribution of responses to a key survey question, disaggregated by nation (England, Scotland and Northern Ireland). In several sections, as indicated, country comparisons focus on responses from headteachers, principals and heads of schools (n = 998).

Following the national breakdown, several sections include additional analyses by other characteristics such as school phase, role, gender, age, and ethnic background. These subgroup analyses are presented in one of two ways. In many cases, separate tables are provided to show the figures for each subgroup, with the accompanying text describing the most notable patterns and differences. In other cases – especially where the pattern is relatively simple – the subgroup figures are reported directly in the text without an accompanying table. In both formats, the emphasis is on drawing out differences that are substantial, while avoiding overinterpretation of small variations.

Where relevant, the narrative also integrates illustrative quotations from respondents' open-text comments to contextualise and deepen the interpretation of the quantitative findings. These qualitative insights are drawn from an analysis of the 1,297 responses to three open-ended survey questions. Respondents were asked to reflect on: i) their personal experiences of school leadership; ii) policy and practice that helps or harms sustainable school leadership; iii) what they would change to make their leadership role more sustainable. This yielded a huge amount of rich data (~135,000 words) which we analysed thematically to inform the report.

Together, this combination of national comparisons, subgroup analysis, and qualitative evidence is designed to build a layered picture of the data – moving from broad descriptive statistics towards more nuanced understanding of variation across contexts and groups.

Data Setup and Cleaning

The survey dataset underwent a multi-stage cleaning and preparation process before analysis. Incomplete responses were identified and removed where appropriate, with most analyses restricted to cases that were at least 95% or more complete. Responses were recoded to ensure consistent categorisation across nations – for example, harmonising role titles, school phases, and sector types into common groupings while preserving underlying detail for finer-grained analysis. Derived variables were created for key subgroups such as nation, role, phase, sector, gender, age group, and ethnic minority status. Special attention was given to protecting anonymity in smaller groups; in some cases, categories were collapsed to avoid identifying individual respondents.

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[2] Respondents were invited to provide optional identifying information, such as their name, date of birth, school name, or local authority. This will allow us to connect survey findings with publicly available school and locality-level data, to be reported in future publications.

Throughout, missing values were handled explicitly, with non-response categories retained where informative for interpreting patterns.

Analytical Procedures

The analytical workflow was designed to produce both national-level comparisons and subgroup breakdowns in a consistent format across the report. For each survey item, headline results were calculated as percentages (and underlying counts) for England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, with Wales included where numbers permitted. Subgroup results were generated either through tabulations or by extracting key percentages for direct inclusion in the narrative. In some sections, additional derived measures (e.g. aggregated categories, combined scales such as the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS)) were calculated before tabulation. No formal statistical significance testing is presented in the report, in keeping with its primarily descriptive aims, but differences highlighted in the text reflect patterns that are both substantively meaningful, based on adequate respondent and subgroup numbers (see next), and consistent across related items.

Low Cell Counts

In reporting subgroup analyses, care was taken to ensure that each cell in a table or figure represented a sufficiently large number of individuals to provide a meaningful basis for interpretation. As a general rule, results about subgroups and categories were reported only where they contained at least 50 respondents, with a preference for counts over 100 wherever possible. This approach helped to reduce the risk of drawing conclusions from small or unrepresentative samples, particularly when results were broken down by multiple characteristics such as phase, nation, and age group. In some instances – for example, where certain combinations of subgroup characteristics yielded smaller counts – categories were combined or omitted to maintain statistical and ethical robustness. On the few occasions where borderline or smaller counts were retained, this is noted explicitly in the text to help the reader interpret the precision and reliability of the estimates.

1.4 Who Took Part

This section provides a brief overview of the survey sample. Further demographic and contextual breakdowns are provided in the thematic sections that follow.

The survey received responses from over 1,600 school leaders across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and a smaller number from Wales. Respondents included headteachers, deputy and assistant heads, middle leaders, and executive leaders working in a wide variety of school settings.

Overview

The survey received responses from 1,624 school leaders across the UK, with strong representation from England (n=1,004), Scotland (n=333), and Northern Ireland (n=242), and a smaller number from Wales (n=45).[3] Respondents included headteachers, deputy and assistant heads, middle leaders, executive leaders, and others in senior roles such as business managers and advisors. See below for further details of leadership roles represented in the sample.

Leaders from all phases of education took part, including primary and pre-school (55%), secondary and post-primary (30%), and special or alternative provision settings (9%). The sample also reflected a wide range of school types and governance structures. In England, for example, school responses were broadly balanced between schools in an academy trust (45.5%) and local authority-maintained schools (47.0%), with some representation from independent schools (5.3%). In Northern Ireland, there was a mixture of controlled, maintained, and integrated school types. Most Scottish schools were Local Authority schools, with the exception of a small number of independent schools. Respondents spanned the full age range, with the largest groups aged 50–54 (29%) and 45–49 (22%), and smaller but notable proportions under 35 (4%) and over 60 (5%). Most leaders (89%) reported working primarily in a single school, while 11% held roles across multiple settings, for example as an executive head. Respondents were 70% female and 30% male, with women particularly well represented in primary leadership (77% female), compared to secondary/post-primary (58%).

Leadership Roles in the Sample

As shown in Table 1, below, the survey captured a wide range of leadership roles, reflecting the diversity of leadership structures across the UK. The majority of respondents (62%) were in headteacher, principal, or head of school roles, with a further 26% in deputy, assistant, or middle leadership positions. Around 8% held executive or director-level roles, while a small proportion (4%) were in advisory, managerial, or other senior leadership positions such as school business leaders. Table 1 also shows notable differences in role distribution across the three nations, with England having the vast majority of executive and director-level roles (120 out of 131 total in the survey) and senior advisor, manager or business leader roles (51 out of 62). This might reflect differences in system structure and governance arrangements as well as survey response patterns.

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[3] While 45 responses is not sufficient to support country-level results for Wales, we have included these in more general analysis of leadership sustainability in the UK

TABLE 1 – LEADERSHIP ROLES IN SAMPLE BY NATION

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	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales	Total
Headteacher, Principal or Head of School	581	155	232	30	998
Assistant or Deputy Head, or Middle Leader	249	81	87	10	427
Executive Head, Leader, Chief or Director	120	supp[1]	supp	supp	131
Senior Advisor, Manager or Business Leader	51	supp	supp	supp	62
Total	1001	240	332	45	1618

[1]Figure suppressed due to low (<10) cell count to protect individual anonymity

Leadership roles also varied by phase, as per Table 2, below. Primary and pre-school settings accounted for the largest share of headteachers (680 out of 998), while secondary and post-primary schools had a higher proportion of deputy and assistant heads. Special and alternative provision settings were represented across all role types, including a notable proportion of executive leaders.

TABLE 2 – LEADERSHIP ROLES IN SAMPLE BY PHASE

	Primary/ Pre-school	Secondary / Post-Primary	Special or Alternative Provision[1]	Other	Total
Headteacher, Principal or Head of School	680	211	71	36	998
Assistant or Deputy Head, or Middle Leader	135	240	26	26	427
Executive Head, Leader, Chief or Director	55	28	28	20	131
Senior Advisor, Manager or Business Leader	22	14	15	11	62
Total	892	493	140	93	1618

[1] These schools are a mixture of phases, including all-through age range.

In terms of gender, women made up the majority of respondents across all leadership levels, but especially in headship (659 out of 967, 68%) and senior and middle leadership roles (313 out of 419, 75%). Men were more evenly represented in executive roles (52 out of 128, 41% male), suggesting a gendered pattern in progression to system-level leadership. Ethnic minority leaders were present across all role types, comprising around 9% of the total sample. Representation was highest among deputy and assistant heads (44 out of 427) and headteachers (82 out of 998), though further analysis is needed to explore progression patterns and contextual factors with population workforce data.

Age patterns followed a broadly expected trajectory: younger respondents (under 40) were proportionately more likely to be in middle or assistant leadership roles, while those aged 50 and above were more likely to be headteachers or executive leaders. A small number of respondents under 35 were already in headship roles, suggesting some accelerated career pathways. See Figure 1, below for the proportion of respondents by role, by age group.

FIGURE 1 – LEADERSHIP ROLES BY AGE GROUP

	under 35	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60 and over
n	68	117	279	352	461	256	79
%	4.2	7.3	17.3	21.8	28.6	15.9	4.9
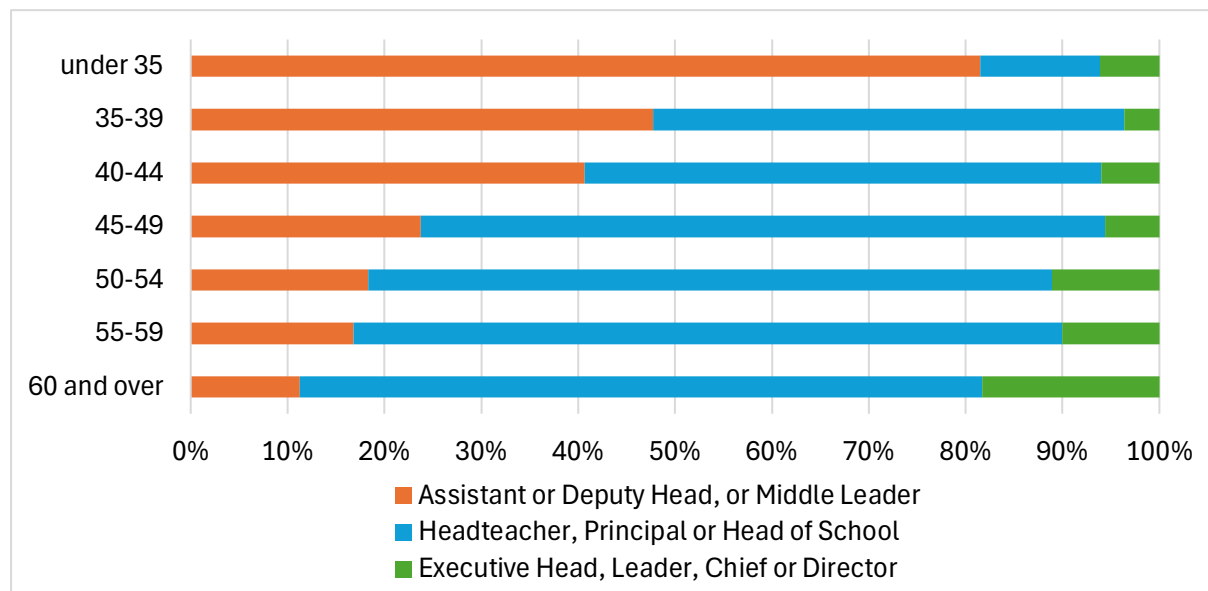
This role-based breakdown provides important context for interpreting the findings that follow, particularly in relation to workload, wellbeing, and career intentions.

Section 2: Leadership Within and Beyond School

2.1 How do leaders spend their time?

This section explores how school leaders allocate their time across key domains of responsibility. The survey asked respondents to estimate time spent on activities such as staffing, curriculum leadership, administration, external engagement, and professional development. It also captured data on classroom teaching and additional duties not typically listed in formal role descriptions.

Headteachers made up the majority of the survey sample (over 60%), while the representation of other roles varied by nation. This section therefore focuses primarily on headteachers for cross-nation analysis, to prioritise comparability, before looking at how time use varies by role and phase.

Headteacher Time Use

We asked all respondents to estimate the amount of time spent on a range of activity groups in a typical week. Table 3, below, reveals distinct patterns in how headteachers allocate their time across key leadership domains, albeit with some notable differences between nations in some areas.

TABLE 3 – TIME USE BY COUNTRY (%) (HEADTEACHERS, PRINCIPALS AND HEADS OF SCHOOL ONLY)

		None	Less than 1 hour per week	1-4 hours per week	5-10 hours per week	Over 10 hours per week
Staffing (inc. recruitment, support, and performance management)	England	0.0	5.6	42.8	37.4	14.3
	Northern Ireland	0.7	4.1	42.6	32.4	20.3
	Scotland	0.4	6.6	52.4	31.4	9.2
Leading/developing teaching, learning and the curriculum	England	0.2	9.6	51.8	33.0	5.4
	Northern Ireland	0.0	8.3	44.1	29.0	18.6
	Scotland	0.4	8.7	52.0	30.6	8.3
Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing (inc. SEND and inclusion, safeguarding)	England	0.4	2.8	26.6	38.8	31.5
	Northern Ireland	0.0	6.0	38.7	30.7	24.7
	Scotland	0.0	4.0	18.1	37.6	40.3
Managing finances, premises and resources	England	0.0	6.3	54.1	32.0	7.7
	Northern Ireland	1.4	4.1	46.0	39.2	9.5
	Scotland	0.0	10.6	58.2	26.0	5.3
General administration (inc. emails, compliance and reporting)	England	0.2	0.4	12.7	37.2	49.7
	Northern Ireland	0.0	0.7	14.7	36.7	48.0
	Scotland	0.0	0.4	8.4	34.1	57.1
Meetings with external agencies, advisers or partners	England	0.0	9.4	59.8	27.9	3.0
	Northern Ireland	0.0	10.8	60.8	24.3	4.1
	Scotland	0.0	7.5	59.9	24.7	7.9
Working/communicating with parents and the community	England	0.0	5.2	55.4	33.3	6.1
	Northern Ireland	0.0	3.4	53.7	35.6	7.4
	Scotland	0.0	2.7	57.1	31.0	9.3
Your own professional development (inc. conferences, networks, reading)	England	3.5	52.3	40.6	3.5	0.2
	Northern Ireland	2.7	52.0	37.8	6.8	0.7
	Scotland	3.1	39.9	48.7	5.7	2.6

Headteacher roles encompass a wide range of activities, with significant time spent across multiple domains. Across all nations, 'General administration – including emails, compliance, and reporting' – is the most time-intensive activity. Between 48% (Northern Ireland) and 57.1% (Scotland) of headteachers report spending over 10 hours per week on administration. Other time-intensive

activities include 'Managing student attendance, behaviour, and wellbeing', and 'Staffing, including recruitment, support, and performance management.'

It is striking that heads in all three nations report spending less time on 'Leading/developing teaching, learning, and the curriculum' than on several other areas, despite this being positioned in national standards and training programmes as their core 'instructional leadership' role. Headteachers in Northern Ireland are somewhat an exception to this (18.6% spend over 10 hours weekly), but this may simply reflect a different pattern of teaching responsibilities and staffing structures in small schools there (see below). The following open-text response from an experienced primary headteacher in England reflects on how she is increasingly pulled away from her educational leadership role by the need to focus on safeguarding:

> *I love my job but it has changed beyond recognition. I trained to educate – whilst I fully understand the importance of us needing to safeguard the children but too often we are having to investigate and hold cases. This is fast becoming the norm and in a large school like mine in an area of high deprivation it is unmanageable.*

<div align="right">Headteacher, Primary, England</div>

Turning to differences in time use between the three nations. 'Student behaviour, wellbeing and inclusion' appears to occupy more time for headteachers in Scotland, with 40.3% spending over 10 hours weekly, compared to 31.5% in England and 24.7% in Northern Ireland. In contrast, staffing responsibilities appear slightly less time-intensive in Scotland, where Local Authorities are largely responsible for this. Finally, in all three nations, the area with the least time devoted to it in a typical week is headteachers' 'own professional development'.

Variation in Time Use by Phase and Role

In this section we highlight how time use varies by phase and role, drawing on the full survey. Unsurprisingly, time use varies meaningfully by school phase, reflecting the differing demands and structures of primary, secondary, special, and other settings. Key areas of variation are as follows:

- 'General administration' is consistently high across all phases, with over 43% of leaders in every phase spending more than 10 hours per week on emails, compliance, and reporting. Primary leaders report the highest levels, with 47.5% spending over 10 hours.
- 'Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing' is a major time commitment in all school phases. In primary schools, 70.6% of leaders spend more than 5 hours per week on this area, and in special schools, the figure is 62.2%. Even in secondary schools, well over half (54.6%) of the senior leaders in our sample spend more than 5 hours per week on this.
- Staffing responsibilities are most time-intensive in special schools, where over 52% of leaders report spending more than 5 hours per week on recruitment, support, and performance management. In contrast, the corresponding figures for primary and secondary leaders are 39.5% and 43.2%, respectively.
- Just under half of leaders in all phases (48 to 49%) spend 1 to 4 hours per week on 'Leading teaching and learning'. Special school leaders are less likely to spend over 10 hours per week (5.9%) compared to primary (11.1%) and secondary (10.9%) leaders.
- 'Finance and premises management' is most time-intensive in primary schools, where 36.3% of leaders spend more than 5 hours per week. In secondary schools, this figure drops to 20.6%, suggesting more delegation or specialist support in larger settings.
- External meetings are most common in special schools, where 36.1% of leaders spend more than 5 hours per week, compared to 30% in primary and 22.1% in secondary.

- Parental and community engagement is most time-intensive for leaders in primary schools, where 42.5% of leaders spend more than 5 hours per week, compared to 23.7% in secondary and 23.5% in special schools.
- Finally, professional development receives the least time across all phases. The majority of leaders in every phase report spending less than 1 hour per week on their own development.

Variation by role is along the lines that might be expected given levels of seniority. Assistant and deputy heads, and other senior and middle leaders spend considerably more time on leading teaching, learning and the curriculum and less time on activities such as staffing, finance and external meetings compared to headteachers and executive leaders. External meetings and activities relating to finance and premise management are more common for executive leaders compared to headteachers.

Teaching Responsibilities

The survey reveals that a substantial proportion of school leaders continue to engage in classroom teaching, though this varies significantly by country, phase, and role. Among headteachers, the proportion with teaching responsibilities is highest in Northern Ireland (37.3%), followed by England (34.5%), and lowest in Scotland (26.3%). Teaching heads in Northern Ireland also teach for more hours than elsewhere, with 67.9% reporting that they spend over 10 hours per week in the classroom – reflecting smaller school sizes and fewer non-teaching leadership roles.

Other responsibilities reported by participants

Several participants gave more detail about their responsibilities and time use. These 'other' activities spanned a wide range of responsibilities, many of which overlap with the survey's time use categories but add important detail and nuance. The most commonly mentioned activities were:

- **Duties, Supervision, and Behaviour Management** (95+ responses): The most frequently mentioned area, overlapping with the 'Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing' category in the survey. This includes tasks like being on duty before school, during breaks, at lunch, and after school. It also covers being 'on-call' for behavioural incidents, supervising detentions, managing behaviour support provisions, and dealing with dysregulated pupils.
- **Human Resources (HR), Staff Management, and Cover** (80+ responses): This covers a wide range of tasks, often overlapping with the 'Staffing' category. These include line management of other leaders and staff, staff development, coaching, and mentoring. It also involves managing staff absence and arranging cover – a significant time commitment – as well as handling HR issues like capability, disciplinary actions, and supporting staff wellbeing.
- **Operational, Site Management, and Health & Safety** (60+ responses) overlapping with the 'Managing finances, premises and resources' category: Leaders report spending significant time on non-pedagogical tasks, including acting as the site manager, dealing with building maintenance (e.g., floods, broken toilets), IT issues, and caretaking duties – especially in schools with limited site staff. Health and Safety compliance, fire safety, and risk assessments are also key responsibilities.
- **Safeguarding and Child Protection** (45+ responses) overlapping with the 'Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing (including SEND and inclusion and safeguarding)' category: A substantial number of leaders cited their role as the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL). This involves dealing with child protection cases, liaising with social care, making referrals, documenting concerns, and managing complex family issues.
- **SEND, ASN, and Inclusion** (40+ responses) also overlapping with the 'Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing (inc. SEND and inclusion, safeguarding)' category: Many leaders retain the role of SENCo or have significant responsibilities for Special Educational Needs (SEND) or

Additional Support Needs (ASN). This involves writing EHCPs, chairing reviews, liaising with external agencies, managing provision for pupils with high needs, and handling tribunals or placement consultations.

- **Working with Governors and Trusts** (40+ responses): This includes all aspects of governance; preparing reports for meetings, attending board and committee meetings (often in the evening), communicating with governors and trustees, and strategic planning. For those in trusts, it also includes collaboration with central teams and other schools.
- **Parental, Community, and External Engagement** (35+ responses) overlapping with the 'Working/communicating with parents and the community' category: This category covers a broad range of external-facing work. A frequently mentioned task is managing and investigating parental complaints. It also includes marketing the school, managing admissions, community engagement, liaising with the police or health services, and running school events.
- **Administrative, Data, and Strategic Tasks** (30+ responses) overlapping with the 'General administration' category: Leaders are responsible for numerous administrative and strategic duties. Common examples include data analysis, timetabling, managing exams, policy writing and review, and responding to surveys and requests from the local authority or trust.
- **System Leadership and External Roles** (25+ responses): A number of leaders hold roles beyond their own school. This includes supporting other schools as a school improvement advisor, chairing local headteacher groups, working on local authority panels, and contributing to national working groups or professional associations

Time in the Open Text responses

Time was an important theme in the open text responses from leaders in all three nations.

The most common theme was that leaders work extremely long hours during term time, often taking work home to be completed in the evenings or at weekends. While some respondents seemed to accept this as a given ("You have to be married to the job – it is always going to be long hours – and I'm fine with that" – Headteacher, Primary, England), many highlighted how such working practices impact negatively on their family life, health and/or wellbeing:

> *Work life balance. I have no children, no pets, a partner I rarely see. I work 60 plus hours per week and it never seems to be enough. Burn out is always near.*
>
> Headteacher, Primary, Scotland

A second common time-related theme was how hard it can be to manage your time in school. In part this reflected the sheer breadth of roles that leaders need to play, especially in small schools:

> *In the past year as a HT I have needed to be a teacher, social worker, plumber, cook, grief counsellor, marriage counsellor, paramedic, electrician, tarmacker, builder, gardener, computing expert, HR, lawyer, surveyor, and tree surgeon! Often in small rural primaries all of these roles fall to the HT as the team is small and part time, so as a HT you find yourself supporting the staff well being by taking on more roles for yourself.*
>
> Headteacher, Primary, England

Several respondents highlighted the lack of opportunities to work flexibly and how hard it can be to plan your day because unplanned but time-consuming tasks – often safeguarding-related – eat up your day. These issues were often related to lack of staffing capacity, both as a result of tight finances and the recruitment and retention crisis:

> *Safeguarding trumps everything else in school and you do not know from one day to the next how many hours will be taken up following up safeguarding concerns.*
>
> Headteacher, Primary, England

A final time-related theme was expressed by more experienced leaders, who reflected on how school leadership has changed over the course of their career. Several viewed this as resulting from wider societal changes that have impacted on children and parents and on their expectations of schools:

> *I have been a Headteacher for nearly 28 years. There has been a slow creep (like a clock with no second hand so you can't see it moving) of previously "toxic childhood" and now toxic society from this previously toxic childhood.*

> Headteacher, Primary, England

2.2 How do respondents perceive leadership at their school?

This section explores how school leaders perceive the leadership culture within their schools. It examines the prevalence of trust, collaboration, and innovation, and considers how these qualities shape the working environment. The data also provide insight into the longer-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on leadership. Table 4, below, breaks down responses to key questions, distinguishing between two groups: Heads, Principals and Heads of School, and Assistant Heads, Deputy heads, Senior and Middle leaders.

TABLE 4 – LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH LEADERSHIP-FOCUSED STATEMENTS BY ROLE (%)

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Teachers feel empowered to take on leadership roles within the school	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	3.8	18.3	12.9	49.7	15.5
	HT, Principal or HoS	3.1	8.1	8.4	53.0	27.5
There is a strong sense of trust and collaboration among staff members	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	3.8	11.7	11.3	53.1	20.2
	HT, Principal or HoS	1.1	3.3	3.9	39.7	51.9
The school has a clear set of values that are consistently upheld	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	3.0	8.9	7.7	42.2	38.2
	HT, Principal or HoS	0.8	1.0	2.1	31.2	64.9
Leaders and staff draw on research evidence to inform their practice	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	4.7	7.5	10.1	53.1	24.7
	HT, Principal or HoS	1.6	6.5	8.8	55.5	27.6
Teachers and staff are encouraged to experiment with new teaching methods	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	3.5	9.9	9.4	51.4	25.8
	HT, Principal or HoS	1.3	4.5	7.2	47.4	39.6
There is a culture of continuous improvement within the school	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	2.1	5.4	9.2	43.0	40.4
	HT, Principal or HoS	1.0	1.9	3.6	34.6	59.0
School leadership has become more difficult since Covid	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	1.2	5.9	11.0	29.8	52.1
	HT, Principal or HoS	1.2	2.6	7.8	21.7	66.7

Table 4 indicates a generally positive view of leadership culture within schools, although there are notable differences in perception depending on the leader's role. Headteachers consistently report a more positive view compared to other senior and middle leaders.

This perception gap is most evident in key areas of school culture:

- **Trust and Collaboration**: While a majority in both groups perceive a strong sense of trust and collaboration, headteachers perceive this much more strongly. Over half of headteachers (51.9%) 'strongly agree' that this is the case, compared to just 20.2% of other senior and middle leaders.

- **Upholding Values**: Headteachers express very high confidence that their school's values are consistently upheld, with 64.9% 'strongly agreeing' with this statement. While other leaders also tend to agree, they do so with less certainty (38.2% 'strongly agree').
- **Continuous Improvement**: A similar pattern emerges regarding a culture of continuous improvement. A combined 93.6% of headteachers agree or strongly agree that such a culture exists, compared to 83.4% of their colleagues in other leadership roles.

These differences in perceptions of school culture between headteachers and other leaders could be discerned in some of the open text responses. For example, some headteachers described difficult and emotionally draining staffing situations, such as where a member of staff had put in a formal complaint against them. Several headteachers in Northern Ireland highlighted the impact of the prolonged period of Action Short of Strike (ASOS) called by the unions there. Equally, a minority of middle and senior leaders raised concerns about toxic and over-bearing leadership:

> *As an experienced middle leader with a successful track record and passionate values driven educator, my current school's culture is killing my love for the profession. Poor systems, overly officious HR, unprofessional, untrusting and grumpy colleagues, the highest levels of paperwork and historically poor management make for an unpleasant environment that I can't wait to get out of.*
>
> Middle leader, Secondary, England

On other aspects of leadership, Table 4 shows the views of these two groups as more aligned. For instance, there is broad agreement that leaders and staff draw on research evidence to inform their practice and that teachers are encouraged to experiment with new teaching methods.

One of the most striking findings is the shared sentiment that leadership has become more challenging since the Covid-19 pandemic. An overwhelming majority of all leaders agree with this statement. Headteachers feel this most strongly, with two thirds (66.7%) 'strongly agreeing', compared to just over half (52.1%) of assistant heads, deputy heads, and middle leaders. Numerous open text responses aligned with this view. The pandemic is widely seen to have exacerbated challenges, with rises in special needs, mental health concerns (among both staff and students), and parental complaints often mentioned. The following quote is one example:

> *Much more difficult since Covid due to staff absences, low morale, increase in behaviour and ASN, less budget and more focus on attainment date than ever before. A broken system that does not look at the whole child. Expectation on schools to 'fix' families and society with little expectations on families.*
>
> Primary, Headteacher, Scotland

However, there was also a recognition that these issues were on the rise even before the pandemic. For example, one respondent suggested the pandemic was "becoming a red herring", used to explain deeper structural issues, such as "the difficulties of finance, recruitment, wellbeing etc." (Headteacher, Special/ASN, England), that pre-existed the crisis.

Variation by nation and phase

While leadership culture is perceived positively overall by headteachers, there are some notable variations between the nations (Table 5, below). Headteachers in Northern Ireland, for example, are significantly less likely to 'strongly agree' that teachers feel empowered to take on leadership roles (15.6%) compared to their counterparts in England (29.4%) and Scotland (30.0%), possibly reflecting the ASOS situation referenced above. Perceptions of trust and collaboration are strongest among headteachers in England, where 58.1% 'strongly agree' this is the case; this compares to 39.7% in Scotland. Headteachers in England are considerably more likely to 'strongly agree' that

their staff draw on research evidence (33.9%) than those in Scotland (20.2%) or Northern Ireland (18.4%).

TABLE 5 – LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH LEADERSHIP-FOCUSED STATEMENTS (%) (HEADS ONLY)

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Teachers feel empowered to take on leadership roles within the school	England	1.4	7.6	7.9	53.7	29.4
	Northern Ireland	9.1	12.3	11.7	51.3	15.6
	Scotland	3.5	6.5	7.4	52.6	30.0
	Total	3.1	8.1	8.4	53.1	27.3
There is a strong sense of trust and collaboration among staff members	England	0.5	2.6	3.8	35.0	58.1
	Northern Ireland	2.0	4.0	2.0	44.1	48.0
	Scotland	1.3	4.8	4.8	49.3	39.7
	Total	0.9	3.3	3.8	39.8	52.1
The school has a clear set of values that are consistently upheld	England	0.4	0.9	1.2	28.9	68.7
	Northern Ireland	1.3	0.0	3.3	27.3	68.2
	Scotland	0.9	1.7	3.9	37.8	55.7
	Total	0.6	0.9	2.2	30.8	65.5
Leaders and staff draw on research evidence to inform their practice	England	1.2	5.6	6.4	53.0	33.9
	Northern Ireland	4.0	9.9	12.5	55.3	18.4
	Scotland	0.9	5.3	12.7	61.0	20.2
	Total	1.6	6.2	8.9	55.2	28.1
Teachers and staff are encouraged to experiment with new teaching methods	England	0.7	4.3	7.6	49.7	37.6
	Northern Ireland	2.0	7.1	7.1	39.6	44.2
	Scotland	1.7	3.5	6.5	47.0	41.3
	Total	1.1	4.6	7.3	47.5	39.5
There is a culture of continuous improvement within the school	England	0.5	2.1	3.6	31.0	62.7
	Northern Ireland	2.0	3.3	4.6	33.6	56.6
	Scotland	0.9	0.9	2.2	43.0	53.1
	Total	0.8	2.0	3.5	34.3	59.5
School leadership has become more difficult since Covid	England	1.2	3.6	8.1	23.3	63.7
	Northern Ireland	1.3	0.0	6.5	20.9	71.2
	Scotland	1.3	2.2	8.7	18.7	69.1
	Total	1.3	2.7	8.0	21.8	66.2

When analysed by phase, drawing on the views of all respondents, the data reveals differences in how leaders perceive their school's culture, particularly between secondary schools and other settings. Leaders in primary and special schools report a much stronger sense of trust, collaboration, and shared values. For instance, only 29.9% of secondary leaders 'strongly agree' that there is a strong sense of trust and collaboration, compared to 49.1% in primary and 47.5% in special schools. This pattern is repeated for upholding school values, where secondary leaders (41.7% 'strongly agree') are again less positive than those in primary (63.7%) and special school (59.0%) settings.

Variation by personal characteristics

In contrast to the variations seen across different school phases and nations, perceptions of leadership culture are broadly very similar between male and female leaders. The most notable exception is the perception of a 'culture of continuous improvement', where female leaders are more likely to 'strongly agree' (56.8%) than their male counterparts (46.1%). Conversely, male leaders are slightly more likely to 'strongly agree' that leadership has become more difficult since Covid (65.1%) compared to female leaders (59.8%).

A clear trend emerges when analysing leaders' perceptions by age; older leaders consistently report a more positive view of their school's culture. This is particularly evident in perceptions of trust and shared values. For instance, the proportion of leaders who 'strongly agree' that there is a strong sense of trust and collaboration rises from just 25.0% for those under 35, to 59.5% for those aged 60 and over. A similar pattern is seen in the belief that school values are upheld, with the 'strongly agree' figure increasing from 33.8% in the youngest group, to 67.1% in the oldest. In contrast, the view that leadership has become more difficult since Covid is felt most acutely by those in the middle of their careers – peaking at 68.0% 'strongly agree' for the 55-59 age group – with leaders under 35 (39.7%) and over 60 (45.6%) feeling this less strongly.

Analysis by ethnicity suggests that leaders from an ethnic minority background tend to report fewer positive perceptions of their school's culture compared to their peers from an ethnic majority (i.e. white British and, in Northern Ireland, white British or white Irish) background. This difference is apparent across several key areas; for example, leaders from an ethnic majority background are more likely to 'strongly agree' that there is a strong sense of trust and collaboration (43.3%) than leaders from an ethnic minority background (31.9%). Similarly, 8.5% of leaders from an ethnic minority background 'strongly disagree' that teachers are empowered to take on leadership roles, compared to just 2.8% of leaders from a majority background. Despite these varied perceptions of school culture, both groups align in their view that leadership has become more difficult since Covid, with over 61% of all respondents 'strongly agreeing'.

2.3 How do leaders perceive their school and locality?

This section shifts the focus from the internal dynamics of school leadership to the external context in which schools operate. It explores leaders' perceptions of their school's context, relationships with local communities and other schools and their views on wider aspects of governance, including school inspections.

Table 6, below, sets out views on key questions, distinguishing between headteachers and other senior and middle leaders.

TABLE 6 – LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH SCHOOL- AND PLACE-FOCUSED STATEMENTS BY ROLE (%)

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	omewhat agree	Strongly agree
Schools in my area face distinctive challenges, compared to other areas	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	3.0	14.8	23.9	31.6	26.7
	HT, Principal or HoS	2.1	8.6	20.5	37.6	31.3
There is a clear local hierarchy of schools in my area, in terms of their status	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	1.9	6.3	19.0	39.1	33.7
	HT, Principal or HoS	3.8	10.6	17.7	39.7	28.1
Our school primarily serves students from the immediate local neighbourhood	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	10.3	11.7	6.1	32.8	39.1
	HT, Principal or HoS	7.8	13.9	4.4	29.8	44.1
Our school feels like a strong part of the local community	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	1.2	10.3	11.5	45.2	31.9
	HT, Principal or HoS	2.1	4.4	8.6	36.3	48.6
Schools in our area regularly collaborate with each other	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	7.8	22.9	15.8	41.8	11.8
	HT, Principal or HoS	4.4	11.9	8.8	48.3	26.6

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	omewhat agree	Strongly agree
School inspections provide an accurate picture of my school	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	11.5	23.2	24.6	33.3	7.5
	HT, Principal or HoS	10.3	17.1	26.3	34.6	11.6
As a school, we learn new things from school inspections	AHT, DHT, SL or ML	20.2	22.1	26.1	28.4	3.3
	HT, Principal or HoS	19.4	21.5	22.9	29.8	6.4

Key differences indicated in Table 6 include:

- **Local Collaboration**: Headteachers have a much more positive view of inter-school collaboration. A combined 74.9% of headteachers agree or strongly agree that schools in their area collaborate, compared to only 53.6% of other leaders.
- **Community Embeddedness**: Headteachers also feel more strongly that their school is part of the local community. Nearly half (48.6%) 'strongly agree' with this statement, compared to 31.9% of other senior and middle leaders.
- **Distinctive Challenges**: While a majority in both groups feel their area faces distinctive challenges, headteachers (68.9% agree/strongly agree) are more likely to hold this view than other leaders (58.3% agree/strongly agree).
- **Local Hierarchy**: Other senior and middle leaders are somewhat more likely to perceive a clear local hierarchy of schools. A total of 72.8% of these leaders agree or strongly agree that a hierarchy exists, compared to 67.8% of headteachers.

Views on school inspections are more aligned, with a general sense of scepticism from both groups. Fewer than half of all leaders agree that inspections provide an accurate picture of their school, and an even smaller number – around a third – feel that their school learns new things from the process. On these inspection-related statements, there are no major differences in opinion between headteachers and other leaders, but we note some interesting differences by nation below.

Variation by nation and phase

Perceptions of place are notably different by phase. Reflecting their distinct role, leaders in special schools are far less likely to report serving their immediate neighbourhood; only 9.4% 'strongly agree' with this, compared to 49.9% of primary leaders. In terms of community connection, primary leaders feel the strongest bond (52.4% 'strongly agree'), while secondary (32.3%) and special school (24.6%) leaders feel this less acutely. Secondary leaders are the most likely to perceive a 'clear local hierarchy' of schools (37.2% 'strongly agree').

Looking at how leaders in each nation perceive their local school environment and inspection systems, significant differences emerge (Table 7). Heads in Scotland (85.7%) and Northern Ireland (79.8%) are more likely than their peers in England (67.5%) to agree that their school serves students from the immediate local neighbourhood. Similarly, heads in England (72.2%) are the most likely to perceive a clear local hierarchy of schools in terms of status and popularity with parents (Northern Ireland – 64.9%; Scotland – 58.5%). Perhaps unsurprisingly, heads in Scotland (85.2%) and Northern Ireland (82.2%) are more likely to report regular collaboration with other local schools than heads in England (68%). The sense of being part of the local community is exceptionally strong for principals in Northern Ireland; 73.7% 'strongly agree' with this statement, far higher than in either England (41.8%) or Scotland (49.1%).

The most striking divergence, however, relates to inspections. Headteachers in England are the most likely to agree that school inspections provide an accurate picture of their school (49.2%) (vs 45.2% in Scotland and 32.9% in Northern Ireland[4]) but are the most negative about their value; only 26.6% agree they learn new things from the process. This is in contrast to Scotland, where a small majority (54.4%) agree that inspections provide a learning opportunity. While scepticism towards school inspections is common across all phases, it is most pronounced in secondary, where only 3.7% of leaders 'strongly agree' that they learn new things from the process.

TABLE 7 – LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH SCHOOL- AND PLACE-FOCUSED STATEMENTS (%) (HEADS ONLY)

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Schools in my area face distinctive challenges, compared to other areas	England	2.3	8.1	20.7	37.3	31.6
	Northern Ireland	2.0	5.9	20.3	39.9	32.0
	Scotland	2.2	12.2	20.0	35.2	30.4
	Total	2.2	8.7	20.5	37.2	31.4
There is a clear local hierarchy of schools in my area, in terms of their status	England	1.7	9.5	16.6	43.0	29.2
	Northern Ireland	5.3	9.9	19.9	34.4	30.5
	Scotland	8.3	13.5	19.7	34.9	23.6
	Total	3.9	10.5	17.8	39.7	28.1
Our school primarily serves students from the immediate local neighbourhood	England	9.7	16.8	6.1	28.7	38.8
	Northern Ireland	6.5	10.5	3.3	31.4	48.4
	Scotland	3.9	8.7	1.7	30.0	55.7
	Total	7.8	13.8	4.6	29.5	44.3
Our school feels like a strong part of the local community	England	2.6	5.4	10.7	39.6	41.8
	Northern Ireland	2.0	1.3	5.9	17.1	73.7
	Scotland	1.3	4.0	5.3	40.4	49.1
	Total	2.2	4.4	8.7	36.2	48.6
Schools in our area regularly collaborate with each other	England	5.5	16.4	10.0	45.7	22.3
	Northern Ireland	4.0	3.3	10.5	49.3	32.9
	Scotland	2.6	7.4	4.8	53.9	31.3
	Total	4.6	12.2	8.9	48.2	26.2
School inspections provide an accurate picture of my school	England	12.1	18.9	19.9	38.6	10.6
	Northern Ireland	9.2	15.1	42.8	24.3	8.6
	Scotland	6.6	14.5	33.8	30.3	14.9
	Total	10.3	17.2	26.8	34.3	11.3
As a school, we learn new things from school inspections	England	27.5	27.7	18.2	22.3	4.3
	Northern Ireland	12.4	12.4	35.3	34.6	5.2
	Scotland	5.3	12.3	28.1	42.5	11.8
	Total	19.8	21.6	23.3	29.1	6.3

A significant proportion of open text comments focussed on school inspections and accountability issues. In line with the survey finding above, comments about inspection from school leaders in England tended to be the most negative. Common themes related to:

[4] Note – due to ASOS, the Education and Training Inspectorate in Northern Ireland has not been able to conduct full school inspections for significant periods in the last decade.

- **Stress and pressure caused by inspections**: "Schools do need to be accountable for what they are doing. However the Ofsted regime is purely punitive and is not supportive in any way." (Headteacher, Primary, England)
- **A lack of fairness in a system which judges all schools the same way**, despite contextual differences: "Ofsted will never be fair, a system where heads with a similar demographic are paired to support one another with school improvement would be better" (Headteacher, Primary, England)
- **A lack of faith in the skills of inspectors and/or the consistency of snapshot inspection judgements**, despite high stakes consequences for leaders: "HMI should be staffed by HTs rather than selected people ... Anyone who has a voice in education should spend time in school" (Headteacher, Scotland).
- **A view that inspections and accountability requirements are homogenising the work of schools in ways which prevent leaders from meeting the real needs of children**: "There is no such thing as a one size fits all approach to education, yet this is precisely what any form of accountability naturally does" (Executive Head, England).

One experienced head in England reflected on her experience of her school being judged Inadequate by Ofsted, drawing parallels with the tragic case of Ruth Perry (a headteacher in England who died by suicide in 2023 following a negative inspection):

> *I experienced the worst time in my professional life. I was amazed, standing outside of myself, how this judgment affected my self-esteem and sense of self-worth ... (I suffered) from sleeplessness, experienced a sense of shame and felt totally drained for at least three months before I managed to recover ... When I read about the suicide of Ruth Perry, I totally understood it.*

> Headteacher, Special, England

All that said, a minority of open text responses were more positive about inspections, where they were seen to identify school strengths and highlight legitimate areas for development:

> *As much as it was a stressful period, I enjoyed the school inspection process and feel proud of the way in which I successfully led my school community through this. I feel the inspection gave us credit where it was rightly due but also gave us the next steps to help shape the direction we are going in today.*

> Headteacher, Special/ASN, Scotland

Variation by personal characteristics

While male and female leaders share similar views on many aspects of their school's locality, some modest differences can be observed. Female leaders, for example, tend to have a more positive view of inter-school relationships, with 70.6% agreeing that schools regularly collaborate, compared to 63.1% of male leaders. Regarding inspections, male leaders express greater scepticism; 36.0% disagree or strongly disagree that inspections provide an accurate picture of their school, compared with 28.7% of female leaders. A similar pattern is evident on the question of learning from inspections, where 45.5% of male leaders disagree that this happens, versus 40.0% of female leaders.

Perceptions of a school's place within its locality and the wider system appear to evolve with a leader's age. A sense of feeling part of the local community, for example, strengthens over a leader's career; the proportion who 'strongly agree' with this statement rises from 26.5% for those under 35 to 48.1% for leaders aged 60 and over. A particularly stark difference is seen in views on collaboration. Leaders under 35 are far more sceptical about inter-school partnerships, with only

10.3% 'strongly agreeing' that schools collaborate regularly; this is less than half the rate of any other age group.

While leaders from majority and minority ethnic backgrounds share similar views on several items, including inter-school collaboration, some differences in perception are apparent. Leaders from an ethnic majority background are more likely to feel their school is a 'strong part of the local community', with 43.1% 'strongly agreeing' compared to 33.3% of leaders from an ethnic minority background. Conversely, leaders from an ethnic minority background are more likely to 'strongly agree' that their area faces distinctive challenges (36.6% vs 29.3% for ethnic majority leaders). There is also a modest difference in views on the inspection system, with a higher proportion of leaders from an ethnic majority background agreeing that inspections provide an accurate picture of their school.

Section 3: Wellbeing, Experience and Sustainability

3.1 How are leaders feeling - are they thriving, surviving, or sinking?

This section delves into the critical issue of school leader wellbeing, exploring how leaders are currently feeling in their professional roles.

Overall Experience

We asked all survey respondents: 'Overall, which of the following best describes your own experience of working in school over the last 12 months?' – with the options sometimes/mostly thriving, surviving, or sinking. Results, broken down by various subgroups are reported below in Table 8.

TABLE 8 – OVERALL EXPERIENCE BY VARIOUS FACTORS (%)

	Mostly sinking	Sometimes sinking	Mostly surviving	Sometimes thriving	Mostly thriving
England (HT/P/HoS)	7.2	14.7	33.9	26.5	17.7
Northern Ireland (HT/P/HoS)	4.6	14.5	38.2	27.6	15.1
Scotland (HT/P/HoS)	9.6	19.6	36.1	24.8	10.0
Primary and Pre-school	8.1	18.4	35.9	25.1	12.6
Secondary/Post-Primary	9.2	16.4	34.0	24.8	15.6
Special/ASN AP or PRU	4.4	14.0	32.4	27.2	22.1
AHT/DHT/SL/ML	11.4	19.2	32.6	22.5	14.4
HT/HoS/P	7.1	16.0	35.1	26.6	15.2
Executive and Other Senior Multi-School Role	8.5	18.5	39.2	22.8	11.1
Female	8.2	18.2	35.4	23.2	15.1
Male	8.8	14.7	33.5	29.8	13.2
under 35	14.9	17.9	22.4	26.9	17.9
35-39	10.3	18.1	25.9	31.9	13.8
40-44	9.1	17.9	39.4	24.8	8.8
45-49	10.6	18.1	30.2	26.4	14.7
50-54	7.1	18.1	38.3	22.6	13.9
55-59	6.3	14.8	38.3	24.6	16.0
60 and over	1.3	10.4	32.5	24.7	31.2
Ethnic Majority	8.0	17.1	34.8	25.3	14.9
Ethnic Minority	12.4	17.5	36.5	22.6	11.0

These overall experiences vary significantly across different demographic and professional groups. For instance, leaders in Scotland report the most challenging experiences, with a combined 29.2% describing themselves as 'mostly' or 'sometimes sinking', compared to 21.9% in England and 19.1% in Northern Ireland. Around a third of leaders in all three systems describe themselves as 'mostly surviving' (England - 33.9%; Scotland – 36.1%; Northern Ireland – 38.2%). Leaders in Scotland (34.8%) are also the least likely to describe themselves as 'sometimes' or 'mostly thriving', compared to England (44.2%) and Northern Ireland (42.7%).

By phase, leaders in Special/ASN schools report the most positive experiences; they are the least likely to be 'mostly sinking' (4.4%) and the most likely to be 'mostly thriving' (22.1%). The role a leader holds is also a factor; those in Assistant Head, Deputy Head, or Middle Leader positions are most likely to be 'mostly sinking' (11.4%), a higher proportion than for Headteachers (7.1%). A

particularly clear trend emerges with age: the youngest leaders (under 35) are the most likely to be 'mostly sinking' (14.9%), while wellbeing generally improves with experience. Leaders aged 60 and over report the most positive figures, with 31.2% 'mostly thriving'. It is likely that this to some degree reflects a 'survivorship bias', with those with lower wellbeing less likely to have remained in the profession closer to full retirement age. Furthermore, leaders from an ethnic minority background are more likely to be in the 'mostly sinking' category (12.4%) compared to their majority counterparts (8.0%).

We asked the same sinking-surviving-thriving question of school leaders in England in two separate surveys for the Leading in Lockdown research, the first in spring 2021 (Greany et al, 2021) and the second in early 2022 (Greany et al, 2022). The three surveys were conducted differently[5] so comparisons between them should be treated with caution, but the core message seems to be that fewer leaders say they are sinking and more say they are thriving now than in the peak of the lockdown period. For example, taking headteacher responses only, in 2022, 26% said they were sometimes or mostly thriving, compared to 44.2% in 2024-25. Similarly, in 2022, 45% of English headteachers said they were sometimes or mostly sinking, compared to 21.9% in 2024-25.

Turning to the open text responses to the survey Table 9, below, provides indicative quotes from leaders in each nation. We have split these quotes between respondents who replied to the sinking-surviving-thriving question as either 'Mostly Sinking' (top row) or 'Mostly Thriving' (bottom row). The quotes highlight some of the themes we explore in later sections of this report, such as the factors that drain and sustain leaders. What is most striking is the extent to which the 'Mostly Thriving' quotes grapple with the same issues raised by the 'Mostly Sinking' group (i.e. high workloads, rising need, reducing support, lack of resources etc.), but that these leaders are thriving despite these pressures. The thriving quotes also suggest some of the factors that enable this positivity, such as supportive teams and employers and a sense of professional vocation – issues that we explore in later sections.

TABLE 9 - INDICATIVE OPEN TEXT QUOTES SPLIT BY 'MOSTLY SINKING' AND 'MOSTLY THRIVING' BY NATION

	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland
Mostly Sinking	*I am burnt out, working 55-60 hours a week. I need to leave my job because of the unbearable and ever-growing challenges and pressures. I am planning to take early retirement 5 years sooner than I had planned, but I am excited at the prospect of leaving and starting to live a life, not live a job.* Primary Headteacher	*Leadership has become significantly more challenging ... The level of complex needs that mainstream schools manage is increasing however the resources are not matching this need. Accessing support from the Education Authority is very challenging.* Primary Headteacher	*Leadership is becoming impossible. We are being asked to do more with less and cure all of society's ills. It can't go on like this.* Primary headteacher
Mostly Thriving	*I say almost weekly that I have the best job in the world, for me. Headship*	*The exceptional staff team and Governor support is the greatest*	*The level of care needed for families and children from schools is significant*

[5] The 2021 survey was distributed online via the two school leader associations (Association of School and College Leaders and National Association of Head Teachers) to their members, with a total response of 1,491 (of which 914 were Headteachers). The 2022 survey was undertaken by the education polling company Teacher Tapp, with 1737 responses from school leaders (of which 427 were Headteachers).

	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland
	suits me, I have a great team, a supportive Trust and a wonderful community of young people. It is not easy. It is all I do and does not balance with a life outside of work... With this comes personal sacrifice, my family, friends, personal interests all pay a price and are pushed out to accommodate the needs of the job. Secondary Headteacher	*sustaining factor, along with almost 100% parent support and positivity ... [I] still absolutely love my job, in spite of all the challenges. SEN is hugely time consuming... The complex needs coming into mainstream schools ... [I] have seen such a deterioration in the services and support available.* Nursery Headteacher	*including food parcels, uniform and general support. Resources have reduced ... schools are doing way more with way less ... What sustains me is the hope that we are making a difference to the lives of those who live in the most challenges circumstance in society... staff go above and beyond .... there is a sense of vocation along with the professionalism that they demonstrate every day.* *Secondary Headteacher*

Wellbeing

To provide a more detailed picture of leader wellbeing, the survey included the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS), a widely recognised and validated measure. To complement this standardised scale for individual wellbeing, a set of items were developed by the project team to explore aspects of work-related wellbeing, such as leaders' sense of purpose, workload, and burnout.

TABLE 10 – WELLBEING SCALE ITEMS (ALL RESPONDENTS) (%)

		None of the time	Rarely	Some of the time	Often	All of the time
Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS)	I've been feeling optimistic about the future	4.8	25.4	41.0	24.3	4.5
	I've been feeling useful	1.1	7.6	33.6	43.6	14.2
	I've been feeling relaxed	20.0	45.9	27.2	6.3	0.7
	I've been dealing with problems well	0.8	4.0	41.3	48.7	5.2
	I've been thinking clearly	0.7	6.8	44.1	42.9	5.5
	I've been feeling close to other people	2.9	18.2	42.0	30.8	6.2
	I've been able to make up my own mind about things	0.4	4.1	26.4	54.3	14.8
Work-related wellbeing: Sustainable Leadership Items	I've felt a strong sense of purpose in my role	1.0	7.5	26.2	39.7	25.6
	I've been able to cope with the pressures of my job	1.1	7.1	40.4	40.4	11.0
	I've felt valued in my role	4.8	18.5	38.2	28.9	9.6
	I've felt burnt out from my work[1]	3.7	13.5	34.9	36.6	11.3
	I've made decisions that will have a positive impact on my school(s)	0.4	1.6	25.6	61.7	10.8
	I've felt in control of my workload	9.3	29.2	38.0	19.9	3.6

[1] This item is negatively worded. A reverse scale has been used in mean wellbeing scores below

The findings from these scales (Table 10) reveal a complex picture of professionals who feel effective and purposeful, yet are experiencing high levels of personal strain. The SWEMWBS data shows that leaders generally feel competent and useful. A majority report that they are 'often' or 'all

of the time' able to make up their own minds (69.1%), deal with problems well (53.9%), and feel useful (57.8%). However, this sense of efficacy is starkly contrasted by a widespread lack of relaxation; two-thirds of leaders (65.9%) report feeling relaxed only 'rarely' or 'none of the time'.

This pattern is reinforced by the additional work-specific items. Leaders express a very strong sense of purpose (65.3% 'often' or 'all of the time') and feel their decisions have a positive impact on their school (72.5% 'often' or 'all of the time'). Yet, this is accompanied by a significant struggle with workload and burnout. Nearly half of all leaders (47.9%) feel burnt out 'often' or 'all of the time', and a combined 38.5% feel in control of their workload only 'rarely' or 'none of the time'.

To allow for comparison, mean scores were calculated for the SWEMWBS items. In the wider UK general population, the average SWEMWBS score is 23.5 (with a standard deviation of 3.9). As shown in Figure 2, the mean wellbeing score for school leaders in our sample is consistently slightly lower than the population average across most groups.

FIGURE 2 – MEAN SWEMWBS SCORE BY VARIOUS FACTORS
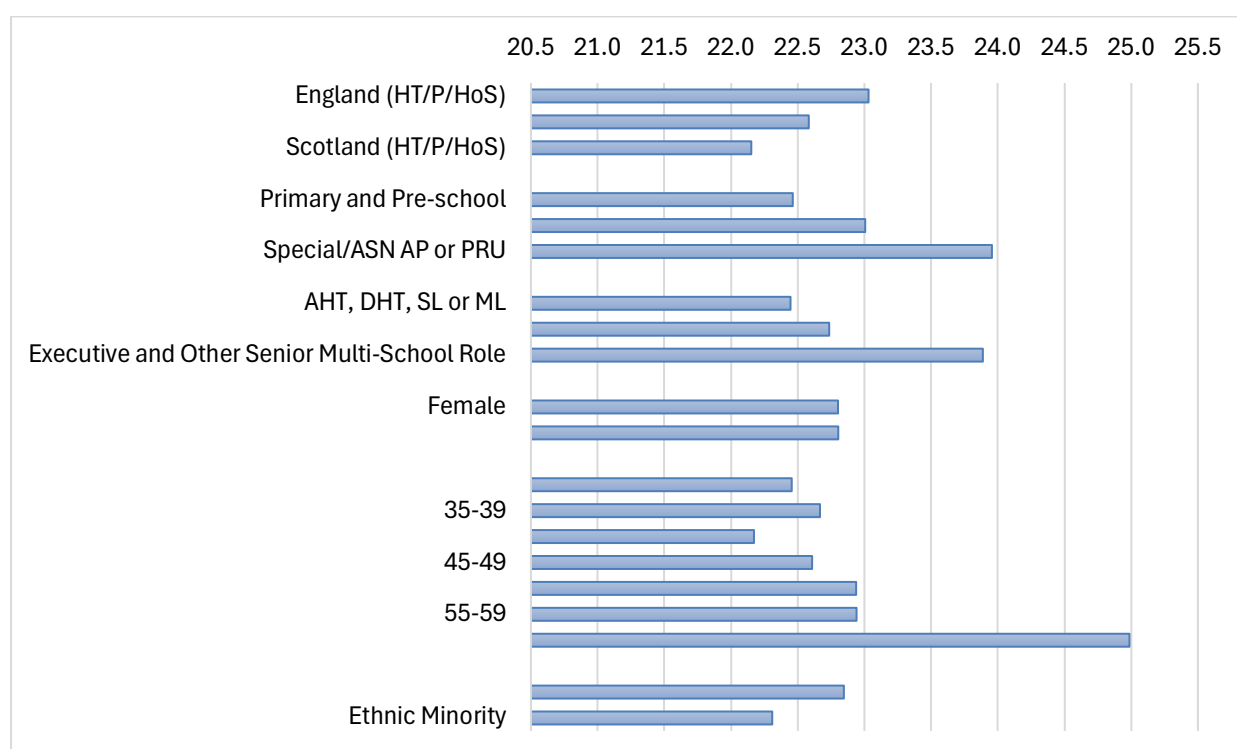
Figure 2 highlights some important variations in wellbeing across the leadership population. Leaders in Scotland report the lowest mean wellbeing score (22.2), while those in special school settings report the highest (24.0), which is above the general population average. There is also a small but notable difference by role, with Assistant Heads, Deputy Heads and Middle Leaders reporting the lowest average wellbeing (22.4), and Executive Leaders and other senior leaders working across schools reporting the highest (23.9).

Trends are also apparent in relation to age and experience, although with caveats given some small cell sizes. Wellbeing scores are lowest for those in the 40-44 age bracket (22.2) and rise steadily thereafter, reaching a high of 25.0 for leaders aged 60 and over. For the under 35 and 60+ age groups, the number of respondents was smaller, at 66 and 77, respectively. We are less confident, therefore, whether the apparent modest decrease in wellbeing for leaders under 40 compared to their early 40s would hold more generally in the population. Similarly, care is needed with the precise estimate of the mean for those age 60 and over, other than to say that it is relatively high.

3.2 What drains leaders in their roles?

This section investigates the specific factors that leaders identify as draining them in their work, while the following section focuses on sustaining factors. Survey respondents were asked: 'Which of the following are the most draining for you in your current role?' Respondents select 3-5 from a list of common drains which (like the 'sustaining' items in the next section) had been identified from an analysis of the 131 interviews conducted across seven localities in the wider Sustainable School Leadership study.[6] Table 11 shows the results broken down by various subgroups.

TABLE 11 – DRAIN FACTORS (% SELECTING IN TOP 3-5)

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l
England (HT/P/HoS)	45.1	54.6	61.8	5.9	49.6	27.0	36.5	28.9	57.3	26.0	25.5	3.1
Northern Ireland (HT/P/HoS)	58.1	61.9	42.6	10.3	46.5	13.5	31.0	39.4	33.5	22.6	50.3	5.2
Scotland (HT/P/HoS)	56.5	42.2	49.6	7.3	58.2	21.1	20.7	23.7	59.1	43.5	40.1	3.4
Primary and Pre-school	49.6	48.2	55.2	8.0	46.5	23.1	34.7	26.2	60.9	33.9	33.4	3.1
Secondary/Post-Primary	59.1	45.5	37.9	16.2	56.1	23.9	32.2	22.3	31.2	37.2	25.9	6.9
Special/ASN AP or PRU	47.9	42.9	52.1	7.1	68.6	21.4	26.4	39.3	24.3	19.3	35.7	8.6
AHT, DHT, SL or ML	61.4	34.9	27.2	20.6	50.1	16.9	28.8	20.4	34.7	39.1	31.1	8.4
Executive and Other Senior Multi-School Role	47.2	42.5	60.1	11.4	60.6	33.7	43.5	22.8	39.4	31.6	18.7	8.8
HT, Principal or HoS	49.6	52.4	56.4	6.9	50.9	23.3	32.4	29.5	53.1	30.3	32.9	3.7
Female	53.8	45.8	48.9	11.5	50.9	21.2	31.6	24.9	49.6	33.1	33.2	5.3
Male	49.4	49.8	48.7	11.0	55.0	26.7	35.0	29.6	40.2	32.5	25.2	6.2
under 35	55.9	47.1	22.1	13.2	60.3	22.1	26.5	22.1	30.9	36.8	25.0	8.8
35-39	56.4	43.6	44.4	10.3	56.4	17.1	33.3	22.2	45.3	30.8	29.9	8.5
40-44	48.4	43.4	44.8	14.7	55.6	20.8	28.0	28.0	44.4	40.1	27.2	4.7
45-49	53.1	50.3	50.0	13.1	54.3	23.3	31.2	27.0	46.9	29.8	31.0	6.0
50-54	50.5	49.0	53.8	8.9	48.4	24.5	35.1	23.6	49.9	34.5	32.3	4.3
55-59	58.2	45.3	53.1	10.2	46.5	23.0	36.7	30.1	48.0	28.9	30.9	5.9
60 and over	48.1	34.2	49.4	3.8	51.9	27.8	36.7	27.8	44.3	25.3	36.7	6.3
Ethnic Majority	51.9	46.9	49.6	10.8	51.7	23.1	33.2	26.0	47.3	33.8	30.3	5.2
Ethnic Minority	55.8	42.9	42.9	12.9	53.1	19.7	27.9	28.6	38.1	22.4	35.4	8.8

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[6] Importantly, respondents selected 3-5 of the items but did not rank them – meaning this is not a definitive list and that just because an item did not score highly does not mean it is not draining.

a: Poor work-life balance
b: The weight of leadership (e.g., complexity, responsibility, decision-making)
c: Financial and resource constraints
d: Negative workplace culture and relationships
e: Staffing issues (e.g., recruitment, performance issues, absence)
f: Parental and community relations
g: External pressures and accountability (e.g., inspections, exam results)
h: Lack of support from higher authorities (e.g., politicians, local authority or trust)
i: Special educational needs and inclusion challenges
j: Behaviour challenges
k: Operational/administrative burdens (e.g., paperwork, compliance)
l: Strategic and developmental concerns (e.g., lack of autonomy, misalignment of values)

Table 11 indicates several factors that are consistently draining for school leaders. Across most groups, five issues emerge:

- poor work-life balance (a, selected by 53.8% of female leaders for example)

- the weight of leadership responsibility (b, 45.8% of female leaders)

- financial constraints (c, 48.9% of female leaders)

- staffing issues (e, 50.9% of female leaders)

- special educational needs and inclusion challenges (i., 49.6% of female leaders).

In contrast, 'negative workplace culture' (d) and 'strategic or developmental concerns' (l) were selected far less often, although we know from the qualitative research that these can be significant issues for some leaders. 'Parental and community relations' (f) were highlighted by between 13.5% (Northern Ireland) and 27% (England) of headteachers. Interestingly, in the open-text responses parental relations were raised by multiple respondents, often reflecting a widespread view that complaints have become more commonplace and, often, more confrontational in recent years, often fuelled by social media:

> *The most draining thing I find is parental intransigence and short-termism. Often one has to deal with a parent who cannot see the impact of their position/complaint/child's mistakes etc. That they feel they can attack one's personality when they don't like a decision is hard.*
> Headteacher, Primary, England)

Table 11 indicates that these draining pressures are experienced very differently in terms of priority depending on the national and school context.[7] There are stark national variations among headteachers; for instance, SEND and inclusion challenges (i) are a major drain in England (57.3%) and Scotland (59.1%), but less so in Northern Ireland (33.5%). Headteachers in Scotland report behaviour challenges (j) as a particularly acute pressure (43.5%), while those in Northern Ireland are more likely to be drained by operational and administrative burdens (k, 50.3%).

Table 12, below, illustrates these findings by providing indicative quotes about drains from open text responses in each nation. The quotes reference several of the issues highlighted in the survey, such as the weight of leadership, the impact of rising SEND/ASN needs, and the lack of resources. They also begin to indicate how these issues play out differently in each nation: for example, the reference to the Education Authority in Northern Ireland is to the body which provides back-office and school improvement support to most schools. We will explore these comparative differences further in the national and final reports.

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[7] Recall that the question asked was to select 3-5 priorities, rather than whether or not the factor was draining

TABLE 12 - INDICATIVE OPEN TEXT QUOTES FOR 'DRAINS' BY NATION

	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland
Drains	*This job is heavy - it weighs you down every day and on many days, the weight of it crushes you completely.* Headteacher, Primary *There are so many draining things – the emotional investment and the weight of the financial pressures and accountability are huge. … A completely broken Children's Services both in terms of the social care system and the system for pupils with special educational needs … Parental engagement, botheredness and respect for the profession and children's education have all declined massively.* Headteacher, Primary	*One word would sum up the feeling I experience for the most of my day every day and that is frustration. Frustration at a lack of priority support for schools from government, at unsupportive parents, at the situation whereby pupils are placed in mainstream when they need specialised support, at staff who do not see 'the big picture' and most of all at society who is quick to shift the responsibility for solving its ills onto schools.* Headteacher, Primary *The demands of school leaders in Northern Ireland are unsustainable. We are expected to be experts in everything, with no training. Our Education Authority is not supportive, nor do they seem to understand the needs of school leaders … The SEN challenges in our school are frightening.* Headteacher, Primary	*The weight of dealing with additional support needs is becoming overwhelming. The percentage of children who have ASN, or parents who are looking for a diagnosis is increasing by the week. This is having a massive impact on school resources and staff wellbeing.* Headteacher, Primary *We are a very nurturing and inclusive school and we truly understand that all behaviour is communication but some of our children are telling us mainstream is not for them. Our authority has nowhere for these pupils to go so their views are just ignored. This is very frustrating.* Principal Teacher, Secondary

Returning to the items in Table 11, the phase of schooling also presents different challenges. School leaders in primary schools are most likely to cite financial constraints (c, 55.2%) and challenges around SEND and inclusion (i, 60.9%), while staffing issues (e) are the single greatest drain for leaders in special schools, cited by 68.6% of this group.

A leader's role is also a key determinant of the pressures they face. For those in assistant and deputy headship or middle leadership roles, poor work-life balance (a) is the most significant draining factor, cited by 61.4% of this group. For Headteachers and Executive Leaders, the pressures shift towards strategic and external responsibilities. Financial constraints (c) are a major concern for both Headteachers (56.4%) and Executive Leaders (60.1%), while the latter group is most likely to report being drained by external pressures and accountability (g, 43.5%).

Demographic factors also show some variations, though often more modest. The pressures felt by leaders appear to shift with age; challenges with student behaviour (j), for example, are more prominent for younger leaders (cited by 40.1% of the 40-44 age group), while concerns about financial constraints (c) tend to peak for those aged 50-59. Differences by sex are not large, though female leaders are slightly more likely to cite SEND and inclusion (i) as a drain (49.6% vs 40.2% for men). Similarly, differences by ethnicity are generally small, although leaders from an ethnic minority background are somewhat less likely to report being drained by behaviour challenges (j, 22.4%) compared to their majority counterparts (33.8%).

3.3 What sustains leaders in their roles?

Leaders were asked to select the 3-5 factors they find most sustaining in their current role from a given list, also derived from the qualitative interviews. The most commonly selected factors are presented in Table 13, below.

TABLE 13 – SUSTAIN FACTORS (% SELECTING IN TOP 3-5)

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m
England (HT/P/HoS)	75.9	72.3	31.2	16.0	37.3	4.8	7.7	20.3	0.0	37.5	22.2	43.2	40.8
Northern Ireland (HT/P/HoS)	80.6	68.4	32.9	32.3	34.8	2.6	5.2	16.1	0.0	29.0	21.9	34.2	41.9
Scotland (HT/P/HoS)	80.6	71.6	40.5	17.2	28.4	7.3	9.5	14.7	1.7	32.8	14.2	38.4	41.4
Primary and Pre-school	75.4	70.1	33.7	21.3	34.5	6.0	9.5	18.9	1.8	32.6	22.2	38.7	36.6
Secondary/Post-Primary	76.3	66.4	22.9	8.1	43.3	6.7	9.7	19.0	1.2	33.4	22.7	41.1	41.5
Special/ASN AP or PRU	71.4	67.1	30.7	10.7	44.3	11.4	15.0	19.3	5.7	35.0	27.1	51.4	35.0
AHT, DHT, SL or ML	73.1	62.3	16.9	9.8	42.9	10.5	15.5	21.1	0.7	31.4	26.2	36.5	33.0
HT, Principal or HoS	77.8	71.2	34.0	18.7	34.9	4.9	7.7	18.4	0.4	34.7	20.4	40.7	40.7
Executive and Other Senior Multi-School Role	62.2	66.8	39.9	14.0	43.5	8.3	12.4	15.0	14.5	29.5	28.5	48.7	31.6
Female	75.0	68.5	30.8	15.2	37.8	7.6	11.7	17.6	1.9	33.2	23.7	39.9	38.2
Male	74.4	69.6	29.2	16.3	39.4	4.8	6.9	21.2	3.1	33.3	21.5	42.3	36.7
under 35	77.9	63.2	16.2	14.7	39.7	8.8	17.6	22.1	2.9	38.2	33.8	30.9	30.9
35-39	73.5	67.5	24.8	17.9	35.9	12.0	17.1	15.4	1.7	37.6	32.5	43.6	30.8
40-44	72.8	60.9	28.3	12.2	39.8	5.0	6.8	24.0	2.2	22.6	25.1	41.2	35.5
45-49	77.3	69.9	30.1	15.9	39.2	8.2	11.1	17.6	1.7	32.1	21.6	39.2	41.5
50-54	75.9	71.4	33.8	15.6	33.8	6.5	9.5	18.7	2.6	33.6	21.9	40.6	39.5
55-59	75.8	69.9	31.2	17.2	36.3	5.1	10.5	16.4	2.3	41.4	19.5	41.8	39.1
60 and over	58.2	72.2	32.9	21.5	58.2	5.1	7.6	13.9	2.5	35.4	15.2	43.0	30.4
Ethnic Majority	74.7	68.9	29.7	16.2	38.3	6.7	10.0	18.8	2.1	33.4	23.0	41.2	37.7
Ethnic Minority	72.8	60.5	33.3	11.6	34.7	8.2	13.6	17.7	3.4	29.9	21.8	34.7	36.1

a: *Students' relationships, learning, growth and success*
b: *Relationships / collaboration with colleagues within school*
c: *Relationships / collaboration with colleagues outside school (inc. peer networks)*
d: *Community engagement and relationships (inc. governors, parents)*
e: *Work fulfilment and enjoyment (e.g., job variety, participation in school life, professional interests)*
f: *'On-the-job' opportunities for professional development and growth (formal/informal and ongoing/occasional).*
g: *Extended or 'off-the-job' opportunities for professional development and growth (e.g., sabbaticals, placements, 'acting up' or shadowing opportunities, extended courses).*
h: *Material benefits and job security (e.g., salary, pension, holidays)*
i: *My life/their lives outside work (e.g., exercise, family, hobbies)*
j: *Supporting others to develop and grow*
k: *Positive feedback, encouragement and recognition*
l: *Making a difference – a sense of autonomy and responsibility*
m: *My/their core values and moral purpose*

The most powerful sustaining factors for school leaders are consistently relational and altruistic. Relationships with students and their success and growth (a, cited by 75.9% of Headteachers in England for example) and collaboration with colleagues within school (b, 71.6% in Scotland) are the top two sustainers for almost all groups. This is typically followed by factors such as pursuing values

and having a sense of moral purpose (m) and making a difference (l). Table 14, below, includes quotes from leaders in each nation which illustrate these core sustaining factors.

TABLE 14 - INDICATIVE OPEN TEXT QUOTES FOR 'SUSTAINS' BY NATION

	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland
Sustains	*The mission of education, which is inherently optimistic and positive sustains me. So does working with others who hold the same values ... I have deliberately re-balanced my own role so that I am more involved in staff CPD, partly to lift my own job satisfaction and work diet.* Trust CEO, England *Sustains – amazing staff, always prepared to do whatever it takes to support students. Students – always funny! Management who care, treat people as individuals and value every single person in their community.* Middle leader, Secondary	*This is the best job in the world most days. I have an amazing, young and dynamic team who work hard and have the best interests of the children at heart. I take great pride in my school and great solace from the progress we have made as a team and community together.* Headteacher, Primary *I have benefitted from coaching sessions and I'm part of principal associations. It is these networks which sustain me, in what can be a lonely and isolated position.* Headteacher, Primary	*What sustains me, it's seeing the way in which our young people grow and mature across their time with us ... I also have an absolutely excellent leadership team ... It also helps to laugh a lot!* Headteacher, Secondary *Relationships sustain me as a leader. It's the ability to make a positive difference for others that is my guiding purpose, and this is best done through the formation of relationships ... The notion that I am able to create a culture of professional learning and collegiality is one that drives me.* Headteacher, Primary

The importance of other sustaining factors varies by context. Community engagement (d), for instance, is a much stronger sustainer in Northern Ireland (32.3%) than elsewhere, while leaders in Scotland are most likely to be sustained by collaboration with external colleagues (c, 40.5%). School phase also shapes what leaders value; 'community engagement' (d) is more prominent for primary leaders (21.3%), whereas 'work fulfilment' (e) is more of a driver in secondary (43.3%) and special schools (44.3%). For leaders in special schools, 'making a difference' (l) is a particularly powerful motivator, cited by 51.4%.

A leader's role influences their sources of professional sustenance, reflecting their different responsibilities. For Assistant and Deputy Heads, and middle leaders, opportunities for professional development (f and g) and receiving positive feedback (k) are more important sustaining factors compared to headteachers. For Headteachers, executive leaders and senior cross-school roles, the focus shifts outwards, with collaboration with external colleagues (c) becoming a much more important sustainer (34.0% and 39.9%, respectively) than for their deputies, senior and middle leaders (16.9%). The profile of Executive Leaders and senior cross-school roles is distinct again; they are the most likely to be sustained by 'making a difference' (l, 48.7%) and are unique in citing their 'life outside work' as a key factor (i, 14.5%), a figure dramatically higher than for any other group.

Demographic characteristics also reveal different patterns of motivation. Age is a factor; the youngest leaders (under 35) are most sustained by supporting others (j, 38.2%) and receiving positive feedback (k, 33.8%), while leaders aged 60 and over are uniquely motivated by a sense of work fulfilment and enjoyment (e, 58.2%). Differences by sex are modest, though male leaders are slightly more likely to be sustained by material benefits (h, 21.2% vs 17.6% for women). Similarly, while many factors are shared, leaders from an ethnic majority background are more likely to be sustained by relationships with in-school colleagues (b, 68.9%) than leaders from an ethnic minority background (60.5%).

Section 4: Career Pathways and Development

4.1 What are the typical routes to headship?

This section explores the professional experience profile of respondents, including their years working in schools, their time in leadership, and their tenure in their current post. It also investigates three typical routes to headship.

The school leaders responding to the survey represent a highly experienced group. Most have worked in education for a considerable time; 64% have been working in schools for more than 20 years, with 40% having over 25 years of experience working in education. This depth of experience is also reflected in their time in leadership positions. Almost half of respondents (45%) have been in a school leadership role (whether as a middle leader, senior leader, or executive role) for 16 years or more, while a further 43% have between 6 and 15 years of leadership experience. That said, many leaders are relatively new to their current post. Over half of the sample (51.4%) have been in their current role for five years or less, with almost a quarter (22.7%) having been in post for two years or fewer.

To understand the different routes into headship, the survey asked headteachers and executive leaders to select one of three options that we had identified as most common from the qualitative Sustainable School Leadership research. Table 15, below, shows the three options and responses, broken down by nation, school phase, and leader demographics.

TABLE 15 – ROUTE TO HEADSHIP/EXECUTIVE HEADSHIP BY VARIOUS FACTORS (%)

	I have always wanted to be a head, ever since I started teaching/working in schools	I never really intended to be a head – it just happened	My aspiration for headship emerged during my career in schools
England	15.1	30.7	54.3
Northern Ireland	12.2	23.7	64.2
Scotland	9.9	31.1	59.0
Primary and Pre-school	13.6	30.7	55.7
Secondary/Post-Primary	14.4	22.8	62.9
Special/ASN AP or PRU	12.0	40.2	47.8
Female	10.8	36.1	53.1
Male	21.1	15.5	63.5
under 35	36.4	9.1	54.6
35-39	24.1	25.9	50.0
40-44	11.5	28.2	60.3
45-49	13.2	29.6	57.2
50-54	13.6	30.9	55.5
55-59	12.9	33.5	53.6
60 and over	9.4	28.1	62.5
Ethnic Majority	14.4	28.4	57.2
Ethnic Minority	8.1	47.7	44.2

The most common pathway into headship is one where the aspiration for the role emerges over the course of a career in schools. Across the whole sample of headteachers, a majority (57%) reported that their ambition to lead a school developed over time. In contrast, a much smaller proportion (14%) stated that they had "always wanted to be a head" since starting their careers. Meanwhile, a surprisingly large proportion of heads (29%) described their route as more accidental, agreeing with the statement "I never really intended to be a head – it just happened".

This general picture, however, masks some important variations across different groups. Male leaders were almost twice as likely as female leaders to report always wanting to be a head (21% vs 11%), while female leaders were more than twice as likely to say their route was accidental (36% vs 16%). In Table 16, below, we include quotes from open-text responses, split by the respondent's route to headship and their gender. These quotes indicate a nuanced and individual picture, with no sense that either the route followed to headship or the gender of the leader will necessarily determine someone's level of confidence, commitment, or sense of sustainability in role.

TABLE 16 – ROUTE TO HEADSHIP/EXECUTIVE HEADSHIP BY VARIOUS FACTORS (%)

	Men	Women
I always wanted to be a head	*Leaders MUST focus on the opportunity to effect positive cultural change. I am driven by this and have nothing but positive experience which sustains me. Tackling negative culture and regard is an opportunity, and one which I thrive on.* Headteacher, Special, England	*I always wanted to be a Head but didn't think I had the skills and confidence. I only did it when the previous head left and I had to act up. I think more opportunities to trial headship/leadership with less pressure and/or with a mentor in other schools would encourage a more diverse range of people to become leaders and would sustain them in their role.* Headteacher, Special, England
My aspiration for headship emerged during my career	*I am enjoying my second headship far more than my first and finding it more fulfilling. The most significant differences that underpin this are:* *- My school is more closely aligned with my values and in a community I love* *- My school is not part of a Trust and I therefore have more autonomy* *- I am more experienced (experience is the single most impactful element on resilience in my opinion).* Headteacher, Primary, England	*I have absolutely loved being a teacher and a Headteacher and still believe that it is a fantastic job. Working with young people and the teachers who want to support them is a privilege. I chose to give up being the HT of an outstanding school and a big salary to go to a school which would and did fall into Special Measures because I enjoy school improvement work and find it exciting ... I have been lucky to work with people who have a strong moral purpose and who are great fun.* Headteacher, Secondary, England
I never really intended to be a head - it just happened	*I love my job, but the longer I am in the role, the more challenging this has become. Post Covid, industrial action, at times unrealistic expectations of all stakeholders has been draining and I would have to say that it is impacting my health.* Headteacher, Primary, Northern Ireland	*Creating a team and growing a school has been wonderful. I never intended to be a head but it is the most satisfying job I have ever done. I rarely don't want to go to school but the job is hard and I am constantly exhausted.* Headteacher, Primary, England

Returning to the survey breakdown, leaders from an ethnic minority background were far more likely to report an accidental route into headship (48%) compared to their ethnic majority peers (28%). Age is also a key factor, with younger leaders (under 35) being much more likely to have always wanted the role (36%) than any other age group. Finally, the school context also matters; leaders in special schools reported the highest proportion of 'accidental' headships (40%), a figure considerably higher than in primary (31%) or secondary (23%) schools.

4.2 Do middle and senior leaders aspire to headship?

The survey sought to understand the future leadership pipeline by asking respondents who were not yet in a headship role about their career aspirations. Table 17, below, shows the responses to the question, 'Would you like to be a headteacher/principal yourself one day?', providing an insight into the ambitions of the next generation of potential school leaders.[8]

TABLE 17 – ASPIRATION FOR HEADSHIP (NON-HEADS) BY VARIOUS FACTORS (%)[9]

	Definitely not	Probably not	Yes, perhaps	Yes, definitely
England	40.2	26.8	23.6	9.5
Northern Ireland	46.7	29.3	16.0	8.0
Scotland	40.3	20.8	26.0	13.0
AHT, SL or ML	47.4	26.9	18.1	7.6
DHT or VP	21.4	26.2	37.3	15.1
Primary and Pre-school	41.7	21.7	29.2	7.5
Secondary/Post-Primary	42.1	27.7	20.9	9.4
Special/ASN AP or PRU	43.8	28.1	12.5	15.6
Female	41.7	28	21.3	9.0
Male	39.3	20.6	27.1	13.1
under 35	28.3	32.1	24.5	15.1
35-39	20.4	27.8	33.3	18.5
40-44	32.7	30.8	29.9	6.5
45-49	44.4	19.8	24.7	11.1
50-54	58.4	23.4	13.0	5.2
Ethnic Majority	40.9	26.5	23.5	9.1
Ethnic Minority	40.5	21.4	21.4	16.7

The findings reveal a potential challenge for the headship pipeline, given that a substantial majority of potential heads express little appetite for headship. Aspiration is highest in Scotland, where 39% say 'Yes, perhaps' or 'Yes, definitely', compared to 33.1% in England and 24% in Northern Ireland. Leaders in Northern Ireland appear the most hesitant about pursuing headship, with 46.7% saying 'definitely not', compared to around 40% in England and Scotland.

Aspiration for headship is clearly divided by role, age and by other personal characteristics. Table 17 splits responses between i) Deputy Heads (DHT) and Vice-Principals (VP), and ii) Assistant Heads (AHT) and other senior and middle leadership roles within schools. Encouragingly, 52.4% of DHTs and VPs say they would definitely or perhaps consider applying for headship, compared to 25.7% of those in less senior roles. When considering age, ambition is strongest among younger leaders, peaking for those aged 35-39, where 18.5% state they would 'definitely' want to be a head. Male leaders are more likely to say they would 'definitely' want the role than their female colleagues (13.1% vs 9.0%). Leaders from an ethnic minority background show a strong level of definite aspiration, with 16.7% stating they would 'definitely' like to be a head, compared to 9.1% of their ethnic majority counterparts.

4.3 What motivates or deters people from becoming leaders?

To better understand the drivers behind leadership career progression, the survey asked respondents to identify the most important motivations when they were applying for their current role. Participants were asked to select between three and five key factors from a list of options.

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[8] This question was first asked by Teacher Tapp. In the second Leading in Lockdown study (Greany et al, 2022), we re-analysed earlier responses to this question and commissioned Teacher Tapp to repeat it.
[9] We have omitted responses for age bands 55-60 and 60+ in this table due to small cell sizes.

Table 18, below, presents the percentage of leaders who selected each motivation, broken down by different characteristics.

TABLE 18 – KEY MOTIVATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP (% SELECTING IN TOP 3-5)

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h
England (HT/P/HoS)	69.4	34.9	34.6	44.4	74.0	11.9	55.4	20.3
Northern Ireland (HT/P/HoS)	66.5	43.9	34.2	54.2	69.0	12.3	50.3	34.2
Scotland (HT/P/HoS)	66.4	29.3	43.1	41.4	68.5	12.9	59.9	18.1
Primary and Pre-school	66.7	36.7	35.2	49.6	64.4	11.3	54.0	23.2
Secondary/Post-Primary	69.0	43.9	32.6	50.8	69.4	11.7	40.7	26.3
Special/ASN AP or PRU	68.6	33.6	28.6	42.9	73.6	27.9	52.1	22.1
AHT/DHT/SL/ML	68.9	46.8	30.0	59.3	54.6	10.8	36.5	30.7
HT/HoS/P	68.3	35.3	36.6	45.7	71.6	12.3	55.0	22.2
Executive and Other Senior Multi-School Role	59.1	44.0	20.7	49.2	66.8	26.4	46.1	19.2
Female	67.4	37.5	36.6	47.4	64.1	14.1	49.7	20.6
Male	67.7	45.0	25.4	56.0	72.5	12.5	47.9	31.9
under 35	75.0	58.8	26.5	73.5	67.6	17.6	32.4	38.2
35-39	65.8	45.3	43.6	63.2	64.1	9.4	42.7	31.6
40-44	63.4	42.3	33.3	54.5	59.9	10.8	47.3	31.2
45-49	70.7	40.1	36.6	49.1	68.8	13.6	52.8	19.6
50-54	66.4	35.8	33.8	47.3	67.0	14.1	48.2	21.5
55-59	67.2	33.2	27.0	41.8	70.3	15.2	54.3	20.7
60 and over	69.6	38.0	22.8	34.2	69.6	19.0	49.4	21.5
Ethnic Majority	67.8	39.5	33.2	50.3	67.2	13.1	49.2	24.0
Ethnic Minority	60.5	36.7	29.9	42.2	59.9	17.7	46.9	24.5

a: Having greater impact on student learning and development
b: Ambition to take on greater responsibilities and authority
c: Encouragement or inspiration from a mentor, role model, or colleague
d: Opportunity for career growth and professional advancement
e: Interest in shaping the strategic vision and direction of the school(s)
f: Ability to influence educational policies and practices beyond my school(s)
g: Opportunity to build and lead a collaborative team
h: Financial – better pay incentives and reward packages

Table 18 shows that leaders are primarily motivated by a desire to make a positive difference and to shape the direction of their school. The most frequently selected motivations across all groups were 'having greater impact on student learning and development' (a) and an 'interest in shaping the strategic vision and direction of the school(s)' (e); for example, 74% of headteachers in England cited shaping strategic vision as a key factor. The opportunity to 'build and lead a collaborative team' (g) and for 'career growth and professional advancement' (d) were also commonly cited drivers. In contrast, extrinsic factors tended to be less prominent. For instance, only 11.9% of headteachers in England were motivated by the ability to influence policy beyond the school (f), while 20.3% cited better pay and reward packages (h) as a key factor.

These motivations vary depending on a leader's role, career stage, and personal characteristics. For assistant and deputy heads, motivations are strongly linked to career progression; this group was the most likely to be driven by the 'opportunity for career growth' (d, 59.3%) and 'better pay' (h, 30.7%). For headteachers and executive leaders, the focus shifts towards strategic influence (e), a factor selected by 71.6% and 66.8% of these groups respectively. A clear pattern is also visible by age; younger leaders under 35 are far more likely to be motivated by career advancement (d, 73.5%) and ambition for greater responsibility (b, 58.8%) than their older colleagues. There are also notable

differences by gender, with male leaders more likely to select ambition (b, 45.0% vs 37.5%), career growth (d, 56.0% vs 47.4%), and better pay (h, 31.9% vs 20.6%) as key drivers. Conversely, female leaders were more likely to cite 'encouragement or inspiration from a mentor' (c, 36.6% vs 25.4% for men).

Alongside understanding motivations, the survey asked leaders to identify the disincentives or barriers they believe most reduce the attractiveness of leadership positions in schools. Respondents were asked to select between three and five significant factors from a given list. Table 19, below, presents the results, showing the most commonly cited deterrents across the profession.

TABLE 19 – KEY DETERRENTS FROM SCHOOL LEADERSHIP (% SELECTING IN TOP 3-5)

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i
England (HT/P/HoS)	87.6	29.8	92.8	5.5	5.5	14.6	9.3	22.5	52.3
Northern Ireland (HT/P/HoS)	92.9	40.0	91.6	5.2	7.1	8.4	28.4	16.1	65.8
Scotland (HT/P/HoS)	89.2	43.1	92.2	4.7	9.9	11.6	6.9	29.7	46.1
Primary and Pre-school	87.8	36.3	92.8	5.0	8.1	11.0	12.3	19.5	55.4
Secondary/Post-Primary	87.9	34.0	88.1	7.1	5.7	20.2	11.9	25.1	48.0
Special/ASN AP or PRU	81.4	34.3	86.4	10.7	10.0	21.4	12.1	25.0	43.6
AHT/DHT/SL/ML	84.3	37.7	86.2	7.7	10.5	18.3	14.5	20.6	51.8
HT/HoS/P	89.0	34.9	92.6	5.2	6.8	13.2	11.5	23.0	52.8
Executive and Other Senior Multi-School Role	78.8	26.9	85.0	10.9	7.8	21.8	12.4	22.8	45.6
Female	86.9	38.1	89.9	6.0	9.0	14.8	11.8	19.5	50.6
Male	85.6	27.3	91.0	7.9	5.2	17.3	13.5	29.2	54.6
under 35	85.3	39.7	88.2	11.8	13.2	22.1	16.2	19.1	54.4
35-39	88.0	45.3	94.0	6.8	11.1	11.1	6.0	23.9	48.7
40-44	85.3	44.4	87.1	6.5	7.5	16.8	14.7	16.5	51.6
45-49	87.2	37.8	91.2	5.7	7.4	15.3	12.2	21.6	53.1
50-54	87.2	28.9	91.3	5.4	5.9	13.2	11.9	25.6	55.1
55-59	87.9	29.3	89.8	7.4	9.4	16.8	11.3	24.6	47.3
60 and over	79.7	16.5	84.8	8.9	8.9	22.8	19.0	21.5	41.8
Ethnic Majority	86.8	34.5	90.2	5.9	7.0	15.0	12.9	22.2	52.0
Ethnic Minority	81.6	34.7	85.7	12.9	16.3	20.4	6.8	24.5	46.3

a: *Lack of work-life balance and long working hours*
b: *Lack of opportunities for flexible working*
c: *Increased stress, pressure or emotional toll*
d: *Lack of representation or role models in leadership positions*
e: *Concerns about unfairness or discrimination in the selection process*
f: *Leadership culture that is unpleasant or not inclusive*
g: *Insufficient professional development or training opportunities*
h: *Insufficient autonomy or decision-making power*
i: *Inadequate compensation or benefits compared to the increased workload*

The findings paint a clear and consistent picture of the factors that make school leadership unattractive, with issues of workload and wellbeing being the most significant barriers by a considerable margin. The 'increased stress, pressure or emotional toll' (c) of the job and a 'lack of work-life balance and long working hours' (a) are overwhelmingly seen as the primary deterrents. Across almost all groups, these factors were selected by a vast majority of leaders; for instance, 92.8% of headteachers in England cited increased stress and 87.6% cited the lack of work-life balance. Interestingly, although we noted above that relatively small proportions of leaders chose 'Better pay incentives and reward packages' as a key motivation for applying for their role, we see that 'Inadequate compensation or benefits compared to the increased workload' (i) is widely seen

as a deterrent, selected by over half of leaders (52.3% of England headteachers). The issue of (lack of) pay and rewards was raised in the open-text responses as well:

> *Headship is increasingly being avoided by those people who you want leading our schools into the next generation. Those staff see the demands, see the toll it takes and see the lack of value – none of my superb staff want to lead a school – 'it is not worth it' financially nor personally is the oft repeated phrase*.
>
> Headteacher, Primary, England

Other barriers, such as a 'lack of representation' (5.5%) (d) or 'concerns about unfairness or discrimination' (5.5%) (e), were still significant factors for some, although selected far less frequently by the sample as a whole.

While there is broad agreement on these top-level barriers, some deterrents are felt more acutely by specific groups of leaders. Leaders from an ethnic minority background, for example, are more likely to be deterred by a 'lack of representation or role models' (d, 12.9% vs 5.9% for the ethnic majority) and 'concerns about unfairness or discrimination in the selection process' (e, 16.3% vs 7.0%). Two ethnic minority leaders referred to these issues in their open text responses, for example:

> *My pathway to success, as a mixed heritage individual, was not an easy one (primarily because of institutional barriers) but I was determined to succeed. I never stop learning and I am currently completing my NPQEL qualification*.
>
> Headteacher, Secondary, England

The issue of 'lack of opportunities for flexible working' (b) is felt more sharply by female leaders (38.1%) than their male colleagues (27.3%). Whereas men were more likely to highlight 'Insufficient autonomy or decision-making power' – 29.2% vs 19.5% for women. Open text responses from women brought the issue of flexible working and career progression to light:

> *The maternity system in education is terrible compared to other state industries. Men get 2 weeks off only, women only a few weeks at full pay before it cascades down to statutory only at month 3. It forced my hand to go back to work after 4 months, as my husband is also a teacher, and I thoroughly believe this caused mental health issues I won't ever recover from. I was not ready to return ... The whole experience was scarring but we had no choice*.
>
> Deputy Head, Secondary, England

> *There is a glaring hole. Opportunities for teachers who are also mothers. I have worked part time for most of my career and it took a very, very long time for me to get the opportunity to take my career in the leadership direction that I wanted. My experience was not recognised*.
>
> Deputy Head, Nursery, England

4.4 What are leaders planning to do next in their careers?

The Leading in Lockdown surveys conducted in England indicated that 40% of headteachers were planning to leave the profession early in 2021, when the pressures were most intense, but that this had reduced to 30% of headteachers by 2022 (Greany et al, 2021, 2022). In the Sustainable School Leadership survey we asked leaders to select the statement that best described their career plans, from a list of options.[10] In Table 20, their responses have been consolidated into four categories to

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[10] This question was worded slightly differently to the Leading in Lockdown version, with a simplified set of options to choose from, removing options to indicate plans for 3 and 5 years in the future. In Table 20, the column 'Leave the profession or take early retirement' combines responses to two items: i) I plan to leave the profession (for reasons other than retirement) in the coming year; ii) I plan to take early retirement in the next year or two. The column 'Retire

provide a clear overview of retention risks: i) leaders who intend to leave the profession or take early retirement; ii) leaders who plan to retire normally; iii) leaders who plan to stay in the profession (whether remaining in their current role or seeking promotion); iv) leaders who are unsure or did not respond.

TABLE 20 – FUTURE CAREER INTENTIONS BY VARIOUS FACTORS (%)[11]

	Leave the profession or take early retirement	Retire normally	Stay in the profession	Not sure / not disclosed / other (e.g., retrain, part-time, step down)
England (HT/P/HoS)	15.4	5.9	72.7	5.9
Northern Ireland (HT/P/HoS)	14.5	7.2	71.1	7.2
Scotland (HT/P/HoS)	15.4	4.4	74.5	5.7
Primary and Pre-school	16.6	4.9	72.0	6.5
Secondary/Post-Primary	11.3	3.9	79.4	5.4
Special/ASN AP or PRU	6.6	4.4	86.1	2.9
AHT/DHT/SL/ML	9.5	2.1	82.9	5.5
HT/HoS/P	15.1	5.6	73.3	6.0
Exec&Other	17.7	3.2	72.6	6.5
Female	14.1	4.7	74.9	6.2
Male	12.8	3.8	78.7	4.6
35-39	3.5	0.0	87.9	8.6
40-44	4.8	0.4	88.3	6.6
45-49	5.8	0.0	86.7	7.5
50-54	16.6	2.7	75.2	5.5
55-59	35.8	16.1	44.9	3.2
60 and over	9.2	22.4	61.8	6.6
Ethnic Majority	13.5	4.5	76.2	5.9
Ethnic Minority	18.5	4.4	71.1	5.9

Table 20 indicates that a large majority of leaders intend to remain in the profession for the immediate future in all three nations. For example, just under three-quarters of headteachers in England (72.7%), Northern Ireland (71.1%), and Scotland (74.5%) plan to stay in their role or seek promotion in their own or another organization in the coming year. Meanwhile, the proportion of headteachers that plan to leave the profession or retire early in the next year or two is around 15% in all three nations, while between 4.4-7.2% plan to retire normally. The proportion in England that plan to leave early (15.4%) is substantially lower than when a similar question was asked in 2022 (30%), although the wording of that question was different (see footnote) so the two results are not comparable.

There are some notable differences in terms of plans to leave or stay by role and school phase. Leaders in special schools report the highest intention to stay (86.1%), while primary leaders (16.6%) and executive leaders are the most likely to be planning to leave early (17.7%). Leaders from an ethnic minority background report a slightly higher intention to leave early than their ethnic majority counterparts (18.5% vs 13.5%).

normally' contains responses to one item: I am nearly at retirement age and will retire then. The column 'Stay in the profession' combines responses to three options: i) I plan to continue working in my current role for at least the coming year; ii) I plan to apply for a promotion in my current organisation (e.g., school, college, trust) in the coming year; iii) I plan to apply for a job in another organisation (e.g., school, college, trust) in the coming year.
[11] We have removed responses from leaders aged under 35 from this table due to low cell counts. Several other cells in this table have small counts (e.g. for 'Retire normally') so should be treated with caution.

These career intentions are heavily influenced by a leader's age. The intention to leave early is most pronounced among older leaders who plan to take early retirement (e.g. 50-54 – 16.6%; 55-59 – 35.8%). In contrast, retention is strongest among those in their mid-career, with leaders aged 35-49 least likely to be planning an early exit. Given this finding that a leader's age influences their decision to leave or stay in the profession, Table 21, below, includes indicative quotes from leaders who are over or under 50, split between leavers and stayers.

TABLE 21 – INDICATIVE QUOTES ON PLANS TO LEAVE OR STAY BY AGE

	Under 50	Over 50
Leave early i.e., I plan to leave the profession (for reasons other than retirement) in the coming year	*The system does not take into account context of schools. It rewards those that are already in a privileged position and thriving and does not support those with more difficult challenges, both in terms of local area, intake, specific student challenges etc. Funding is not distributed to support those schools in the most need ... I have decided to move away from headship and from leading schools completely, at least for now, as I no longer feel that I can continue to work under the pressures that I currently work under and maintain my physical and mental health.* Headteacher, Secondary, England Age: 45-49	*I wish I'd not been 'pushed' into leadership so early as I had no idea it would be so relentless. When you're in your twenties and you've only been teaching a few year, it feels like you've been doing it for ages but then you get to your 40s and realise how far you've still got to go and why oh why did you have to make decisions so early! Why isn't it okay for teachers to fully develop and become really good strong teachers – enjoying being in the classroom – and just be teachers. They're named as lacking aspiration if they don't go for roles as soon as they're through ECT years. Ridiculous.....* Headteacher, Special, England Age: 50-54
Stay i.e. I plan to continue working in my current role for at least the coming year	*My sense of purpose sustains me. I feel very strongly that I was selected for this school at this time, and, no matter what the challenges, I am the person who can find a way through this. Times can be very hard and it is imperative that you can reflect on your why. Strong networks really help to hold me up when this is the way.* Headteacher, Secondary, Scotland Age – 40-44.	*I am sustained because my Chair of Governors is a skilled systems thinker. He understands that schools are not machines. They are made up of people, not parts. When we think like this and teach our teams this, people know that they are part of something bigger than themselves ... I am sustained by refusing to let fear into our school. We pursue our clear purpose for education. We say no to initiatives that don't align and a big yes to new ideas that deepen our vision and values. I love my role and want more leaders to feel the way I do.* Headteacher, Primary, England Age – 50-54.

4.5 How confident do leaders feel?

A key indicator of leadership readiness is the self-assurance a leader feels at the beginning of their tenure. Table 22, below, presents headteachers' responses to the statement: 'When I first started in headship I felt confident that I had the leadership skills, knowledge and qualities required to undertake my role successfully'.

TABLE 22 – CONFIDENCE WHEN FIRST STARTING IN HEADSHIP (HEADS ONLY) BY VARIOUS FACTORS (%)

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
England	7.7	22.5	13.5	46.7	9.6
Northern Ireland	8.3	20.5	12.8	47.4	10.9
Scotland	7.1	14.6	12.1	56.1	10.0
Primary and Pre-school	7.3	22.2	13.0	48.2	9.3
Secondary/Post-Primary	8.8	14.6	10.0	56.1	10.5
Special/ASN AP or PRU	7.6	20.7	14.1	44.6	13.0
Female	8.0	20.6	11.1	50.0	10.4
Male	6.8	19.7	15.8	49.3	8.5
under 35	9.1	9.1	27.3	54.6	0.0
35-39	3.5	24.1	20.7	48.3	3.5
40-44	10.2	23.6	15.3	44.0	7.0
45-49	8.6	20.3	11.3	49.2	10.6
50-54	7.3	18.4	12.7	52.5	9.0
55-59	6.7	21.2	10.6	49.0	12.5
60 and over	6.3	21.9	9.4	48.4	14.1
Ethnic Majority	7.7	21.4	12.6	48.5	9.8
Ethnic Minority	6.7	9.0	15.7	58.4	10.1

The findings suggest that while a majority of leaders felt at least somewhat prepared when starting headship, this confidence was often tentative, and a significant minority felt ill-equipped for the role. While most headteachers agreed they had the necessary skills, knowledge, and qualities, this confidence was rarely strong; only one in 10 (~10%) in all three nations chose 'strongly agree'. Meanwhile, a substantial proportion began their headship journey lacking confidence. In England, for example, 30.2% of headteachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Initial confidence levels vary by other characteristics, with some of the most notable differences seen by ethnicity and nation. Leaders from an ethnic minority background reported feeling more confident when starting their headship (68.5% agreeing) compared to their ethnic majority peers (58.3%). There were also differences in initial confidence between the UK nations, with figures ranging from 56.3% in England to 66.1% in Scotland. Confidence also varied by phase, with leaders in the secondary sector (66.6%) feeling more prepared at the outset than their counterparts in primary schools (57.5%).

We turn now to the self-perceived readiness of the future leadership pipeline. The survey asked all senior and middle leaders (i.e., those not currently in headship or executive roles) to rate their self-assurance about taking the next step in their career. Table 23, below, shows their responses to the statement: 'I would feel confident taking on a more senior role in education – I have the leadership skills, knowledge and qualities required'.

TABLE 23 – CONFIDENCE IN TAKING ON A MORE SENIOR ROLE (NON-HEADS) BY VARIOUS FACTORS (%)

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
England	3.8	13.1	15.5	41.4	26.2
Northern Ireland	5.3	7.9	30.3	29.0	27.6
Scotland	5.0	18.8	12.5	35.0	28.8
Primary and Pre-school	6.6	17.7	22.1	27.9	25.7
Secondary/Post-Primary	3.7	13.2	16.1	40.5	26.5
Special/ASN AP or PRU	4.8	4.8	11.9	42.9	35.7

AHT/DHT/SL/ML	4.2	14.3	17.2	38.8	25.6
Executive and Other Senior Multi-School Role	5.6	9.9	18.3	33.8	32.4
Female	4.5	13.0	17.8	35.8	28.9
Male	3.5	15.5	15.5	43.1	22.4
under 35	7.4	18.5	11.1	40.7	22.2
35-39	0.0	12.7	12.7	45.5	29.1
40-44	4.4	14.9	14.9	43.9	21.9
45-49	8.0	14.8	12.5	38.6	26.1
50-54	3.3	9.8	19.6	33.7	33.7
55-59	2.3	9.3	32.6	20.9	34.9
60 and over	0.0	8.3	50.0	8.3	33.3
Ethnic Majority	4.4	13.6	16.5	38.5	27.1
Ethnic Minority	4.4	11.1	24.4	28.9	31.1

The findings indicate that a clear majority of senior and middle leaders feel ready to take on a more senior role. Across the UK, around two-thirds of leaders not currently in a headship role expressed confidence in their ability to progress. The proportion of leaders who actively lacked confidence for progression was relatively small, for example with only 16.9% in England disagreeing with the statement.

This confidence for progression varies by school phase, career stage, and ethnicity. The difference is most stark by phase; leaders in special schools report exceptionally high levels of confidence, with 78.6% feeling ready for a more senior role, whereas leaders in primary schools are the least confident (53.6%). Confidence is also linked to career stage, peaking for those in their mid-career (e.g., 74.6% for those aged 35-39) before declining as leaders get closer to retirement. Interestingly, and in contrast to their high confidence when starting headship, leaders from an ethnic minority background reported slightly lower levels of confidence about progressing to a more senior role (60.0%) compared to their ethnic majority colleagues (65.6%).

4.6 What forms of development do leaders value - and what are they asking for?

This section turns to professional development, examining the training leaders have undertaken and the types of development they find most valuable.

Preparing leaders for headship

Professional development is widely valued by school leaders, with 76.6% of headteachers across the UK holding at least one national leadership qualification. However, uptake varies significantly by nation: while 88.1% of Scottish headteachers hold such qualifications – primarily through the (mandatory) "Into Headship" programme – only 66.0% do so in Northern Ireland (where the Professional Qualification for Headship – PQHNI - was paused in 2017). England shows the broadest spread of qualifications, with 64.4% of headteachers holding the NPQH (National Professional Qualification for Headship) and smaller proportions engaging with newer NPQs such as NPQEL (Executive Leadership - 11.5%) and NPQLT (Learning and Teaching - 0.7%).

Across the UK, a substantial proportion of headteachers responding to the survey hold a master's or doctoral degree, though this varies by nation. In Northern Ireland, 48.7% of headteachers reported holding such a qualification, compared to 29.0% in England and 25.2% in Scotland.

The survey asked respondents to select, from a list, the types of professional development they see as most valuable in preparing for headship (Table 24, below).

Overall, the findings suggest that school leaders place a high value on experiential and relational forms of development, ahead of formal qualifications. The most widely endorsed approaches to developing leaders for headship were 'learning on the job and reflecting on experience' (b), 'coaching and mentoring' (c) and 'learning from positive role models' (d), all selected by around two thirds to three quarters of headteachers across the UK. 'Gaining experience across different areas throughout one's career' (g) was typically selected by about 50-60% of respondents across the various groups, while 'learning from peers and through networks' (e) by a third to a half. Formal training, such as '(national) leadership qualifications' (a) was selected by about a third to a half of respondent groups. Just 11% selected self-study (h) as effective.

While the overall patterns were consistent, there were notable differences across leadership roles and national contexts. Assistant and deputy heads were more likely than headteachers to value 'Gaining experience across different areas throughout their career' (g, 64% vs 55%) while headteachers were more likely to value 'learning on the job and reflecting on experience' (b, 72% vs 66%). These results suggest that leaders at all career stages see a need for building up experience, but with a slight emphasis on breadth for those at an earlier stage and on 'learning within the role' when reaching headship. Nationally, headteachers in England were less likely to select formal qualifications (37%) compared to their counterparts in Northern Ireland (50%) and Scotland (49%), perhaps reflecting differences in national leadership development frameworks. In contrast, English heads (78.3%) were notably more likely to rate 'coaching and mentoring' than their peers in Scotland (66.8%) and Northern Ireland (60.6%).

TABLE 24 – PERCEIVED MOST EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO DEVELOPING LEADERS FOR HEADSHIP (% SELECTING IN TOP 3–5)

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i
England (HT/P/HoS)	37.0	72.6	78.3	71.6	21.5	41.0	58.7	10.7	1.5
Northern Ireland (HT/P/HoS)	50.3	71.6	60.6	74.2	20.6	47.7	51.0	8.4	0.6
Scotland (HT/P/HoS)	49.1	69.8	66.8	72.0	16.8	50.0	46.6	9.5	0.9
Primary and Pre-school	40.8	71.6	75.6	72.8	17.4	43.6	48.8	10.1	1.5
Secondary/Post-Primary	41.5	65.2	69.2	67.6	17.2	33.8	65.8	12.1	1.8
Special/ASN AP or PRU	37.9	75.7	76.4	72.9	20.7	45.0	62.9	11.4	2.1
AHT/DHT/SL/ML	39.1	66.7	72.4	68.1	13.3	33.0	64.4	15.0	1.4
HT/HoS/P	41.5	71.9	72.7	72.0	20.3	44.2	54.6	10.2	1.2
Executive and Other Senior Multi-School Role	42.0	62.7	80.8	65.3	13.0	35.8	45.6	10.9	4.1
Female	40.8	68.7	73.2	71.6	17.0	39.4	56.7	10.9	1.7
Male	40.8	72.5	75.0	67.9	19.8	42.1	55.2	12.9	1.3
under 35	36.8	67.6	79.4	63.2	13.2	45.6	57.4	23.5	0.0
35-39	45.3	74.4	79.5	72.6	11.1	35.0	64.1	14.5	0.0
40-44	33.7	69.2	70.6	73.8	17.6	37.6	60.2	9.3	2.2
45-49	36.1	71.6	78.4	70.7	19.6	37.2	56.5	11.4	2.6
50-54	42.3	70.1	70.3	69.0	19.7	44.3	53.4	11.9	1.1
55-59	49.2	66.4	70.7	70.7	15.6	41.8	53.9	10.2	1.6
60 and over	49.4	62.0	79.7	64.6	15.2	39.2	50.6	8.9	2.5
Ethnic Majority	41.1	69.9	74.2	70.8	17.8	40.5	56.3	11.3	1.6
Ethnic Minority	38.1	63.9	65.3	63.3	15.0	36.7	54.4	13.6	2.0

a: *Undertaking formal (e.g. national) leadership programmes and qualifications*
b: *Learning on the job and reflecting on experience*
c: *Through coaching and mentoring*
d: *Learning from positive role models*
e: *Learning from negative role models (e.g. how not to do it)*
f: *Learning from peers and through networks*
g: *Gaining experience across different areas throughout your career (e.g. pastoral, teaching and learning, timetabling etc.)*
h: *Through self-study*
i: *Other*

Priority Areas for Leadership Development

The survey asked respondents to select 3-5 items, from a list, representing areas of leadership that they had needed most help to learn about in their current role. The results are shown in Table 25, below.

TABLE 25 – AREAS OF LEADERSHIP WHERE SUPPORT WAS MOST NEEDED (% SELECTING IN TOP 3–5)

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j
England (HT/P/HoS)	27.4	13.1	7.4	7.9	8.8	77.8	48.9	79.7	35.3	2.9
Northern Ireland (HT/P/HoS)	26.5	24.5	12.3	15.5	11.6	71.6	64.5	69.0	34.2	3.2
Scotland (HT/P/HoS)	4.7	25.0	9.5	15.5	10.8	62.5	47.8	65.5	29.3	2.2
Primary and Pre-school	17.4	19.0	9.0	13.4	7.7	66.6	51.7	67.2	29.9	2.0
Secondary/Post-Primary	22.9	22.1	9.5	13.0	12.6	59.9	47.0	52.8	34.8	3.4
Special/ASN AP or PRU	22.9	17.9	7.1	8.6	5.7	50.7	32.9	51.4	15.7	2.9
AHT/DHT/SL/ML	21.8	31.1	12.4	20.4	11.2	57.4	55.7	45.9	31.4	2.6
HT/HoS/P	21.6	17.7	8.5	10.8	9.9	73.5	51.2	74.6	33.7	2.7
Executive and Other Senior Multi-School Role	5.7	5.7	3.1	2.6	2.6	13.0	9.8	13.5	4.7	1.0
Female	19.2	19.5	7.9	12.2	8.7	63.0	47.4	61.8	29.2	2.6
Male	21.0	20.8	11.3	13.5	11.5	60.2	48.5	55.4	31.7	1.9
under 35	22.1	36.8	14.7	20.6	10.3	44.1	58.8	44.1	29.4	0.0
35-39	25.6	21.4	13.7	11.1	4.3	66.7	50.4	64.1	26.5	0.9
40-44	22.2	23.7	9.7	13.6	7.9	62.7	47.7	57.3	31.9	2.9
45-49	20.2	16.2	7.1	13.4	11.6	68.2	53.1	65.9	28.4	2.6
50-54	19.1	19.5	9.3	13.0	10.8	61.6	43.0	57.9	32.3	3.5
55-59	16.4	18.8	7.4	9.0	7.8	59.4	43.8	64.1	27.0	2.0
60 and over	15.2	11.4	3.8	5.1	7.6	54.4	46.8	48.1	25.3	0.0
Ethnic Majority	19.6	19.6	8.9	12.5	9.5	62.6	48.1	60.5	30.1	2.4
Ethnic Minority	21.1	21.8	8.8	10.2	7.5	54.4	40.1	51.0	23.1	3.4

a: *Working with governors and external agencies*
b: *Leading school improvement and change*
c: *Developing school values/ethos and culture*
d: *Leading teaching, learning and curriculum development*
e: *Promoting equity and diversity*
f: *Legal, regulatory and managerial aspects of leadership*
g: *Dealing with staff, including poor performance*
h: *Financial, premises and resource management*
i: *Parents, public/community relations and dealing with complaints*
j: *Other*

The findings suggest that leaders feel least prepared for the operational and compliance-related aspects of their roles. The most commonly cited area where school leaders needed support was 'financial, premises, and resource management' (h), typically selected by two thirds to three quarters of respondents. This was followed by dealing with 'legal, regulatory, and managerial aspects of leadership' (f, around two thirds) and 'dealing with staff, including poor performance' (g, approx. 50-60%).

Working with 'parents, public/community relations and dealing with complaints' was selected by about a quarter to a third of respondents, seeming to corroborate the point made above that parental complaints have grown in both number and levels of aggressiveness.

In contrast, areas that are often prioritised in headship preparation programmes (such as 'Leading school improvement and change' and 'Leading teaching, learning and curriculum development') were selected less frequently. For example, in most groups less than 10% of respondents identified 'developing school values, ethos, and culture' as a key area of need.

There were some notable differences in the areas of need depending on respondents' roles and contexts. Assistant and deputy heads were more likely to report needing help with 'leading school improvement and change' (b, 31.1%) and 'working with governors and external agencies' (a, 21.8%), reflecting their transitional position into more senior responsibilities. Headteachers, by contrast, were more likely to cite 'financial management' (h, 74.6%) and 'staff performance issues' (g, 51.2%) as key challenges. Leaders in special schools were less likely to select most categories overall, but still reported high need in 'financial, premises resource management' (h, 51.4%) and 'staffing' (g, 32.9%).

In addition to the structured options, respondents identified a range of leadership challenges that fall outside of, or were more specific than, the options provided. The most frequently mentioned theme was external relations, including difficulties working with local authorities, academy trusts, and navigating national policy expectations (12 mentions). Safeguarding, HR, and SEND were also prominent, each cited by 7 respondents, highlighting the complexity of managing child protection, staff issues, and inclusion needs. Other common areas included data and evaluation (4 mentions), premises and estates management (4), IT and cybersecurity (5), and curriculum planning, especially timetabling (4). A smaller but significant group raised concerns about workload and burnout, pointing to the relentless demands of leadership and the need for better support structures.

Section 5: Conclusion

This survey offers a comprehensive and unique picture of school leadership across the UK, informed by responses from 1,624 leaders across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales.

The findings highlight the complexity of leadership today, particularly the extent to which leaders struggle to find time to focus on their core remit – the leadership of teaching, learning and improvement – because they are constantly pulled into supporting wider areas of student wellbeing, inclusion and care.

The survey highlights significant variations in terms of how different groups of leaders experience the role and the support available to them. These differences exist not only at national level, but also within each jurisdiction: for example, with important differences in many areas between school phases, between younger and older leaders, between men and women, and between ethnic minority and ethnic majority responses.

Wellbeing emerges as a major concern. Around two in five headteachers (England - 44.2%; Northern Ireland - 42.7%; Scotland - 34.8%) describe themselves as 'sometimes' or 'mostly thriving'. However, around a third describe themselves as 'mostly surviving' (England - 33.9%; Scotland – 36.1%; Northern Ireland – 38.2%) and around one in five describe themselves as 'mostly' or 'sometimes sinking'
(Scotland 29.2%; England - 21.9%; Northern Ireland - 19.1%).

The report includes multiple quotes and analyses from the open text responses provided by many participants, which help to bring the findings to life and illustrate some of the contextual issues. When we look at quotes split between leaders who are 'mostly thriving' and those that are 'mostly sinking' (Table 9), we are struck that both groups face the same challenges, but while some feel stretched and empowered, others feel overwhelmed.

While almost two thirds of leaders (65.3%) agree that they feel a strong sense of purpose in their role, nearly half (47.9%) say they feel burnt out 'often' or 'all of the time'. The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) scores for leaders are consistently below the UK population average. The most draining factors are poor work-life balance, the weight of leadership responsibility, and financial/resource constraints.

Despite these pressures, leaders are sustained by deeply relational and moral drivers. The most commonly cited sustaining factors are students' learning and success, collaboration with colleagues, and a sense of moral purpose.

Around 15% of headteachers in all three nations say they plan to leave the profession before full retirement age. Meanwhile, aspiration for headship among senior and middle leaders differs between the three nations: in Scotland, 39% would consider applying for headship one day, compared to 33.1% in England and 24% in Northern Ireland.

The survey also reveals many important insights into leadership career pathways, aspirations, confidence, views on professional development and much more.

The picture that emerges is of a profession under significant strain, with some strong messages for policymakers, employers and practitioners themselves. We will be exploring these implications and potential recommendations in the final stages of the project.

Next Steps for the Sustainable School Leadership project

This report is the first main output from the Sustainable School Leadership project. Future work will extend the findings presented here, in particular by matching responses to existing national datasets where respondents gave permission for this.

In addition, the survey findings will be integrated with the project's wider strands, including the seven place-based case studies and our analysis of secondary data in each nation. This mixed-methods approach will allow for a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of school leaders and the systemic factors that shape their work and careers.

In autumn 2025 we will be running three national policy workshops to explore implications and potential recommendations.

From this work we will produce:

- **National Case Study Reports** – due in Autumn 2025
- **Sustainable School Leadership Final Report** – due in Spring 2026.

Follow the Project

For the latest updates on the project and to access all publications, including the further analysis and reports mentioned above, please visit the Sustainable School Leadership project website at sustainableschoolleadership.uk.

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