

The Sustainable School Leadership research project (2022-26)

Why Sustainable School Leadership?

School leadership is important: school leaders – and headteachers in particular – play an essential role in shaping educational experiences and securing outcomes for children.

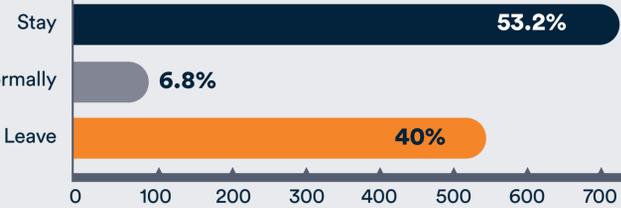
We know a lot of about successful leadership from existing research. This shapes how leaders are trained and held accountable. But the world is changing rapidly and so are children's needs, so we wanted to explore the nature of leadership today.

Our previous Leading in Lockdown research in England revealed a clear risk that we may not have enough leaders. For example, in our 2021 survey, 40% of leaders said they planned to leave the profession early, due to the pressures they faced (See Figure 1).

No-one has researched school leadership across the UK before – so there is huge scope for comparative learning.

Figure 1: England school leaders' career intentions in 2021 (n=1,478)

Select the statement that best describes your career plans



(Source: Leading in Lockdown – Greany, Thomson, Martindale and Cousin, 2021)

Methodology

Team: Professors Toby Greany & Pat Thomson, Dr Mike Collins (University of Nottingham) & Dr Tom Perry (University of Warwick)

Questions:

- How do England, Scotland and Northern Ireland recruit, train and retain school leaders, particularly headteachers?
- How well do these approaches take account of individual, local and systemic needs, in particular in relation to the sustainability of leadership supply, its diversity, equity, quality and fitness for the future?

The mixed methods comparative study had five main strands: evidence review; expert interviews (n=17); secondary analysis of workforce census data; seven locality case studies (see Figure 3 below); and a UK-wide survey (n=1,623).

Figure 2: Sustainable School Leadership Research Design



A UK-wide comparative study – focusing on England, Northern Ireland and Scotland

Education is a devolved responsibility in each of the four UK nations, with distinct approaches to school governance, reform and leadership. The three dashboards indicate some of these differences.

England system overview

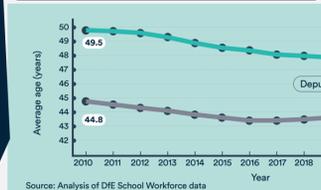
Governance: national curriculum, assessment, funding and accountability frameworks. Schools/trusts responsible for most operational decisions (e.g. staffing).

Marketised: parent choice of school – mix of academies and LA maintained, with further sub-groups, e.g. faith/secular, grammar/comprehensive etc.

Performance in PISA 2022: significantly above OECD average in mathematics, reading and science. Pupils report significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than OECD average.



Average age of school leadership workforce over time



Scotland system overview

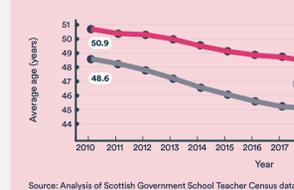
Governance: national frameworks (e.g. curriculum, assessment) with Local Authority (n=32) oversight. Limited school autonomy (e.g. LA's employ staff).

Comprehensiveness: limited parental choice, most serve local communities.

Performance in PISA 2022: above OECD average in reading, similar to OECD average in mathematics and science. Pupils report lower levels of life satisfaction than OECD average.



Average age of school leadership workforce over time

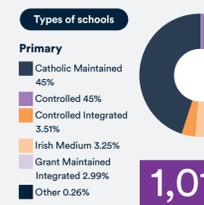


Northern Ireland system overview

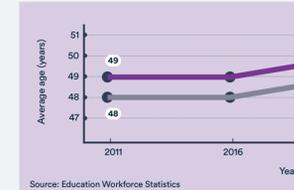
Governance: policy and administration largely centralised but with multiple arms-length bodies reflecting religious, professional and curricular interests. Levels of school autonomy depend on governance type.

Complex: school choices influenced by sectarian and cultural differences as well as academic selection at age 11. Small integrated and Irish Medium sectors offer additional choice.

Performance in PISA 2022: similar to OECD average in mathematics and science, significantly above in reading. Pupils report significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than OECD average.



Average age of school leadership workforce over time



A focus on place

We completed three locality case studies in England, and two each in Scotland and Northern Ireland. We visited a representative spread of contexts (Figure 3), interviewing local leaders, employers and school leaders each time, with 132 participants in total.

Figure 3: Seven locality case studies

Pseudonym	Key characteristics
England – City	Urban, high ethnicity
England – Coast	Other urban and rural including coastal town
England – Shire	Rural
Scotland – Rural/Coast	Outside Central Belt, city plus accessible small towns, rural and remote rural
Scotland – City	Urban and outer urban, high ethnicity
Northern Ireland – Coast	Rural, broadly contrasting socio-economic, balance of types of schools
Northern Ireland – Town/Rural	Urban including deprivation, rural and border

Key themes that emerged

- The nature of school leadership is widely seen to have changed in recent years
- Schools and leaders are often working beyond their 'education' remit
- It's not a pipeline crisis (yet) – it's a sustainability crisis
- Preparing for headship requires a broad mix of developmental experience and formal learning
- Diversity – a problem that no-one really owns
- One-size-fits-all policy does not fit all

Conceptualising sustainable school leadership

We position leadership for sustainability and the sustainability of leadership as distinct but interconnected. Our conceptual framework positions sustainable school leadership at the centre of a flower with four overlapping 'petals' (Figure 4). This challenges simplistic notions that there is 'one best way' to do leadership or that successful leaders must always prioritise instructional improvement above all else.

Figure 4: Conceptual framework with illustrative quotes

