



University of
Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

Mike Collins, Toby Greany, Tom Perry,
Patricia Thompson and Tom Goodacre



Contents:

About this report	2
Overview	4
1. About the Sustainable School Leadership research	10
2. Leadership and leadership development in England	12
3. The school leadership workforce in England.....	14
4. Selected findings from the survey in England	32
5. Locality case studies.....	41
Locality Case Study: England – Coast.....	42
Locality Case Study: England - Shire	75
Locality Case Study: England – City.....	108

About this report

Authors

- **Dr Mike Collins** University of Nottingham
- **Professor Toby Greany** University of Nottingham
- **Dr Thomas Perry** University of Warwick
- **Professor Pat Thomson** University of Nottingham
- **Dr Tom Goodacre** University of Nottingham

Background

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

This technical report makes the detailed findings from the various project strands relating to England available in one place - in particular the secondary data analysis and locality case studies, as these are not available elsewhere. Equivalent technical reports for Scotland and Northern Ireland are available along with a final UK-wide report. The full UK Survey findings were published in September 2025 (Perry et al, 2025). We have called this a ‘technical report’ to indicate that it is intended as a resource document, which supports the final UK report (Greany et al, 2026).

More information is available at: sustainableschoolleadership.uk

Suggested Citation

Collins, M., Greany, T., Perry, T., Thomson, P., and Goodacre, T., (2026). *Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England*. Sustainable School Leadership Project. Available: <https://sustainableschoolleadership.uk/>

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the school leaders and wider stakeholders in England who generously shared their time and insights by contributing to the two place-based case studies and associated workshops, by completing the survey, and/or by attending the national policy workshop.

We are particularly grateful to the members of the England National Advisory Group, who provided invaluable advice and support throughout the project. This group met nine times during the course of the project. Membership comprised:

- Gurpall Badesha, Deputy Head, Crofton School and ASCL Vice-President (2025-26)
- Emma Balchin, Chief Executive, National Governance Association
- Dr Jen Barker, National Director of Learning, Ormiston Academy Trust
- Stephen Betts, Chief Executive, Learn Sheffield
- James Bowen, Assistant General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

- Richard Gill, Chief Executive, Arthur Terry Learning Partnership and Chair, Teaching School Hubs Council
- Dr Amanda McKay (formerly Heffernan), Senior Lecturer, University of Manchester (to 2024)
- Dr Ian Potter, Chair, BELMAS and Chief Executive, Gosport and Fareham Academy Trust
- Carolyn Roberts, Headteacher, Thomas Tallis School (retired in 2025)
- Liz Robinson, Chief Executive, Big Education
- Margaret Simmons-Bird MBE, former Director of Education, Co-Chair, Bristol Education Race Equality Steering Group
- Sara Tanton (Deputy Director – Policy), Emma Harrison (Business Leadership Specialist) and Rob Robson (Trust Leadership Consultant), Association of School and College Leaders
- Samuel Thomas, Teaching Workforce Strategy Unit, Department for Education
- Andy Wolfe, Executive Director of Education, Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership

Overview

This national technical report is one of several outputs from the Sustainable School Leadership project, a UK-wide study which explored the training, supply, and retention of senior school leaders across the UK. The Final Report, published separately (Greany et al, 2026), synthesises the findings from each nation and sets out six UK-wide themes as well as recommendations. The research questions and methodology are described in Section 1.

In England the project explored sustainable leadership through an analysis of the leadership workforce census (Section 3), a survey of 1,001 school leaders (Section 4), and in-depth interviews with 62 leaders across three contrasting localities: Coast, a Local Authority (LA) encompassing a highly deprived coastal town and more affluent rural hinterland; Shire, a subsection of a rural LA with many dispersed villages and a few market towns; and City, an ethnically diverse urban LA characterised by above average levels of deprivation. Across these localities we visited a wide range of schools (e.g. primary/secondary/special; maintained/academy; selective/non-selective; above and below average levels of Free School Meals (FSM); higher and lower performing etc.) and spoke to a diverse range of leaders (e.g. a mix of genders, ethnicities, time in post, age bands etc.) in a range of roles (e.g. potential head, serving head, executive head, Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) leaders, LA leaders etc.).

The results offer a snapshot of a system and workforce in flux. For the past 25 years the focus of policy and practice has been on raising standards, with significant investment in leadership that drives school improvement. Today, that momentum is still apparent, but leaders are also grappling with wider societal shifts, not least since the pandemic, which require an increased focus on care, inclusion and well-being. Meanwhile, extended austerity has seen cuts to wider services and pressures on school budgets coupled with system fragmentation that leaves some schools particularly isolated.

What the Secondary Data Analysis Shows

England employs approximately 76,000 school leaders including 22,000 headteachers. The headteacher age profile has shifted markedly and is now concentrated in the 40 to 54 range, with those aged 55 to 59 falling from 25% to 15% between 2010 and 2023. The cohort in their late thirties in 2010 is now in their fifties, with modest replenishment from younger leaders. The average age of heads decreased by 1.5 years between 2010 and 2023, from 49.5 to 48 years. Gender gaps persist. Whilst women comprise 76% of classroom teachers, they account for only 68% of headteachers. In secondary schools, women make up 65% of staff but only 43% of headteachers. Ethnic minority representation declines sharply with seniority, from 15% of classroom teachers to 7% of headteachers.

Part-time work has increased, particularly among Assistant Heads in the primary sector, but remains lowest in headship. Attrition patterns reveal a workforce that is continually needing to be replenished: looking at the entire headship population in any given year, around 13% will have left a year later, 31% after three years, and three-quarters by ten years. This pattern has remained stable since 2010. Most attrition is age related: around 20% leave in their 40s, jumping to over 70% at 60 plus. Local authority variation is substantial, with three-year leaving rates ranging from 17% to 46%. Sickness absence spiked in 2022 but has partially recovered.

In this shifting landscape, leadership supply appears fragile and patchy, with some schools and localities facing greater challenges in recruiting heads.

The View from the Survey

English headteachers were notably more likely to perceive status hierarchies between schools than in Scotland or Northern Ireland. Inspections were a paradox: heads in England were more likely than their peers in Scotland to agree that inspections provide an accurate picture of their school, but much less likely to agree that they learn anything new from this.

Serving heads confirm that there are three main routes into headship: a minority (15% in England) had "always wanted to be a head"; most common (54%) is for aspiration to emerge over the course of a career, while 30% said "I never really intended to be a head – it just happened". Amongst those not yet in headship, aspiration for the role stood at 33%.

Around 44% of headteachers described themselves as sometimes or mostly thriving, a marked increase since this question was last asked in 2022, when just 26% were. Meanwhile, the proportion who said they were sometimes or mostly sinking was 22%.

Time use analysis reveals that headteachers in England spend most time on general administration and student care issues (e.g. attendance, behaviour, SEND, safeguarding and well-being). Just 5% of heads say they spend 10 hours or more per week on 'Leading teaching, learning, and curriculum', despite this being a core expectation in the headteacher standards. Interestingly, the survey found no clear differences in overall time use between heads working in MATs and their LA maintained peers.

Financial constraints topped the list of factors that leaders find draining, followed by staffing issues and poor work-life balance. Despite these challenges, leaders were clear that they are sustained by working with children and young people, by their relationships with colleagues, by the variety of the role and the satisfaction that comes from making a difference.

Coast: Fragmentation and leadership development and support within MATs

Coast encompasses stark contrasts. Schools served communities ranging from 70% Pupil Premium intakes, to communities where some children left to attend private prep school aged 7. Almost all schools are now academies within MATs, with six trusts dominating the landscape. The rapid conversion to academies since 2015 had made the LA largely irrelevant and had fundamentally altered relationships: for example, the primary heads network had stopped meeting altogether. One MAT CEO argued "there is no [Coast] anymore", just trusts working within their separate bubbles. One potential advantage of this shift was that the MATs had been able to specialise: for example, two ran schools exclusively in the deprived seaside town, while another two focussed on the more affluent and rural areas.

Interviewees described pressures from diminishing pupil numbers and (financial) resources. There was a universal view that the number and complexity of students' special needs had increased, along with more general welfare challenges, coupled with a decline in specialist services to support families and children with additional needs.

The MATs were working to differing extents to identify and grow the next generation of leaders, with a strong preference for internal appointments at headship level. Applicant pools were typically small, with some categories – higher performing schools, small schools, faith schools – facing particular challenges. Leaders worried that appetite for headship had diminished, with deputies watching principals work long pressurised days and deciding the job was not worth it. Diversity remained problematic, with MAT leaders acknowledging that despite some attempts, they had not found ways to successfully enhance ethnic diversity.

MATs provided active support and networks as well as scrutiny for heads, who generally valued the expertise and sense of being part of a larger team, although some found the audit-culture oppressive. Personal sustaining factors centered on relationships with students and staff, informal peer networks, close family relationships, and intrinsic pleasure in daily interactions.

Shire: Rurality, Community, and the Public Role of Leadership

Shire presented different challenges rooted in geography. This rural area featured market towns and villages in a widely dispersed, often isolated landscape. Well over half the schools were small, including at secondary level. Leaders were intensely aware of schools being woven into the community fabric, with the headteacher role often extending well beyond school boundaries into visible public positions. Leaders described sharp socioeconomic contrasts, with children from affluent families studying alongside those from families where grandparents had never worked. Leaders also noted change, with second homes and short-term rentals reducing local populations whilst tourism increased, affecting school rolls. Falling pupil numbers created pressure for already-small schools facing viability questions.

While stable and cohesive communities and staff rooms could be a source of strength, we also visited schools where trust was hard won and where micropolitics could sap time and energy. Raising student – and sometimes staff - aspirations in these communities could be challenging.

Governance remained more traditional than Coast, with around three quarters of primary schools still local authority maintained. The MATs that did exist tended to be smaller and to have less central capacity than those in Coast. The small but active LA team was generally well regarded by school leaders, but there was a clear sense that heads needed to be highly self-reliant. Most heads relied on established local clusters and networks for support, alongside active headteacher associations and, sometimes, committed governing bodies.

Leadership development in Shire centred on nationally funded (i.e. ‘free’) NPQs, augmented by low-cost LA-run initiatives aiming at identifying, developing and inducting new heads. In maintained schools recruitment to headship involved LA officers working with governing bodies to appoint candidates. The LA played an advisory role: seeking to ensure that this was “an appointment not an anointment”. Views on appetite and supply varied. The LA officer suggested improvement in recent years, with eight to ten applications for primary headships, but others were more downbeat, describing small fields and repeated recruitment rounds. Material incentives were seen to be weak given long travel distances between schools and a view that the headteacher salary in a small school might be less than a deputy headship in a larger school.

Most heads described their leadership identity evolving through their career. In small schools some had moved directly from classroom teacher to headteacher. Others recalled encouragement from previous headteachers as a stimulus to pursue the role.

What sustained leaders most powerfully was intrinsic pleasure in daily interactions with children, the smiles and laughter and joy. The embeddedness in community, whilst sometimes challenging, provided purpose and meaning that transcended technical demands.

City: Urban disadvantage and diversity, complex patterns of partnerships

City is a mid-sized urban Local Authority with concentrated levels of economic disadvantage. For the large majority of schools in City the proportion of children on roll eligible for Free School Meals is well above national averages. City is also very diverse ethnically, more so than around

80% of other local authority areas. Leaders were very aware of the individual character of specific areas within City. There is an industrial past which shapes some communities strongly, and in others, rapid change and urban re-development mean pupil populations are changing rapidly.

Almost all secondary schools are academies and mostly part of one of more than a dozen MATs present in the city, but a significant proportion of primary schools are LA-maintained, and around a third of schools overall have a formal religious character with affiliations to either a Church of England or Catholic Diocese. The LA sustains quite a significant school improvement team, and there is also an area-wide member-led partnership to which almost all schools subscribe, irrespective of type. The result is an overlapping, layered pattern of relationships between schools beyond formal governance arrangements, on which they draw for CPD, formal, and informal support.

Leaders were often fiercely committed to the communities their schools served and spoke of actively choosing to work in disadvantaged areas. There was a strong legacy of schools working together in City although this was by no means uniform, and increasingly disrupted MATs were growing and developing in the city.

The suite of nationally funded NPQ's was widely used for leadership development in the schools we visited, taken up through several different providers. Some were accessing the programmes through the area-wide partnership, some through the Teaching School Hub which operated separately from the partnership, and some through the arrangements larger MATs had, that were operating beyond City. There was a similar 'market' for CPD, with the LA also co-ordinating an offer with the partnership.

There was a concern about the increasing difficulty of recruiting headteachers in the city, 'the well is drying up' as the CEO of one MAT put it. Whilst posts were generally filled, fields of candidates had reduced and positions were often re-advertised before appointments were made. Headteachers spoke of a reduced appetite for the role often, they perceived, as potential candidates saw the relentless demands of the role. Most MAT leaders spoke in terms of talent spotting and developing future leaders within their group of schools, but we did not hear of a coordinated approach across City.

Most headteachers spoke of being sustained powerfully by 'making a difference' to children's lives and the impact of the work of their schools. They also spoke of the importance of strong, closely knit teams within their schools. One CEO of a MAT referred to the 'tough gig' of working in City and the importance of schools being well supported and not isolated. We heard about close support offered by some MATs, and the importance heads placed on formal support from often depleted services, and more informal networks of peers. 'Without that, I don't think heads can survive' as another leader put it.

Common Threads: What Emerges Across England

Several themes emerge. First is how the headteacher role is changing in response to wider societal shifts. Increasing poverty, reduced support from specialist services, rising SEND and mental health needs all combine to mean that schools are playing a wider set of roles, stretching well beyond what would traditionally be seen as 'education'. Schools have always had a duty of care, but it seems that this has become more central to leadership today.

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

Second is the fragmenting effect of academisation and market dynamics. England's quasi-market framework has created visible status hierarchies more pronounced than in Scotland or Northern Ireland. In Coast, this was manifested through MAT 'bubbles' replacing LA-wide collaborative structures. In Shire, traditional LA relationships and support structures were visibly eroding. The result was uneven collaborative networks alongside intensifying competition for pupils.

Third, unsurprisingly, the theme of accountability stands out in England. Ofsted inspections - and the associated frameworks for categorising school processes and outcomes - clearly shape the work and mindsets of school leaders in England. While we did hear about inspections in Scotland and Northern Ireland, it was notable that England's model exerts greater pressure and has more significant consequences for leaders. That said, inspection was by no means the only factor that makes school leadership in England feel unsustainable, or even the most important.

Fourth is the variable nature of support systems. MATs have created new infrastructures for supporting potential and serving headteachers, though their scale and effectiveness varied and there was little sense that they had reduced administrative burdens. Where LA maintained structures persisted, capacity was worryingly thin. In these latter contexts, leaders needed to be highly self-reliant, drawing on informal peer networks and their own personal resources: while this model appeared viable, if risky, for experienced heads, it was clear that many of the less experienced heads we visited were struggling.

Fifth is the issue of leadership development, supply and succession. Whilst attrition patterns have remained reasonably stable since 2010, very few heads continue working into their 60s and the average age of heads has reduced by nearly 2 years over that period. Appetite for headship appears diminished amongst potential heads who see a role that is weighed down with worries, workload and accountability pressures.

Sixth is the persistent gap between workforce composition and leadership representation. Gender gaps in secondary headship and ethnic minority underrepresentation mean that the leadership workforce does not reflect either the teaching workforce or pupil populations. Local system leaders admitted they had not found any way to address the inequity problem.

Seventh is the distinctive way in which place and community shape leadership identity and practice. For example, while schools in Shire were embedded in their communities, requiring leaders to fulfil visible public roles extending far beyond school boundaries, in Coast and City, market dynamics shaped how schools positioned themselves and how support networks operated. But these differences were equally important within localities: while two village schools might look similar on the surface, in practice, the experience of leading them was often sharply distinctive. This local distinctiveness existed in tension with national frameworks around professional qualifications, curriculum, assessment and accountability.

Finally, the role itself appears increasingly intense and unsustainable. Financial constraints, staffing challenges, special educational needs demands, and relentless workload create cumulative pressures. One in five heads say they are sometimes or mostly sinking, with many more saying they are surviving, indicating stark sustainability concerns.

The question is not whether England has capable, committed leaders. It clearly does. The question is whether the system can continue to attract and sustain them. Potential candidates can see exactly what the role demands and many are choosing different paths.

1. About the Sustainable School Leadership research

The Sustainable School Leadership project was a three-year (2023-2026) mixed methods study led by Professors Toby Greany and Pat Thomson, with Dr Tom Perry as Co-Investigator, and Dr Mike Collins as Senior Research Fellow. The comparative study focussed on England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. It received ethical approval from the University of Nottingham's School of Education Ethics Committee. In line with ethics, all individuals, schools and localities in this report are anonymised.

The research explored two questions:

- i) how does each nation recruit, train and retain school leaders, particularly headteachers?
- ii) 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?

Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all is one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4), a core justification for considering sustainable schooling and leadership. Beyond this, the project explored the sustainability of leadership itself and how this contributes to sustainable organisations which nurture staff, students and community: seeking to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The project conceptual framework explored four overlapping areas that influence individual and school-wide sustainability: leadership (e.g. Hargreaves and Fink, 2006), identity (e.g. Heffernan and Niesche, 2020), place (e.g. Thomson and Hall, 2016) and an ethic of education and care (e.g. Tronto and Fisher, 1990).

The project adopted a pragmatic and constructivist stance, inquiring into leadership through the experience of leaders. It included five strands of data collection and analysis:

- **Evidence review:** This focussed on the main programmes and policies relating to leadership and leadership development in each nation.
- **Expert interviews:** 17 international and UK experts were interviewed in 2023. The sample included: academics; policy makers; designers and providers of leadership development; and union representatives.
- **Secondary data analysis:** This drew on workforce data from England (2010-2023) and Scotland (2010-2023) and an analysis of public statistics in Northern Ireland.
- **Locality case studies:** Seven locality case studies were completed – three in England, and two each in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- **UK Survey:** The online survey ran in late 2025 and early 2025, with 1624 responses.

In addition, the work in England included three workshops, held in Spring 2025 and attended by participants in the place-based case studies, and a national policy workshop, held in autumn 2025 and attended by a range of stakeholders from policy, research and practice contexts. At

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

these events we shared and validated our findings and considered potential implications for policy and practice.

This report focuses mainly on the secondary data analysis and locality case studies for England. We also include a brief overview of the school system and leadership development landscape in England and a selection of findings from the survey. Further details on the methodology for each strand are included in the relevant sections.

2. Leadership and leadership development in England

England's school system is by far the largest of the three UK nations studied, with around 22,500 state-funded schools in total.¹ All primary schools and most secondary schools are comprehensive (with no entrance exam), although a minority of local areas allow grammar schools to select the most able children based on an 'eleven plus' exam. Around a third of state-funded schools are faith schools, usually attached to either the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church.

While most schools are located in more densely populated urban and suburban areas, around a quarter of schools are in rural areas, many of which are small. England is characterised by high levels of geographic inequality, with median household wealth in London and the South East more than twice that in the North West.² Economic inequality intersects with other forms of inequality, for example in terms of health and life expectancy as well as educational outcomes. England is also culturally diverse, particularly in its urban centres, with around two in five pupils from a minority ethnic background.

England's school system is strongly centralised, with a National Curriculum and national assessment, funding and accountability frameworks that schools must adhere to. Within this framework, schools and trusts are responsible for most operational decisions, such as staffing and appointments. Since 2014 the National Curriculum in England has had a traditional, knowledge-rich focus, with a more recent review, in 2025, largely maintaining this approach.

The school system in England has been characterised as the most neo-liberal of the three UK nations studied.³ For example, since the late 1980s England has adopted a quasi-market framework based on parental choice and high school autonomy and accountability. State-funded schools are held accountable through a combination of mechanisms, which include their performance in national tests and exams and periodic inspection visits undertaken by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Since 2010, school governance arrangements have seen significant change and fragmentation, moving from a place-based model of Local Authority (n=153) oversight to a model in which a majority of schools are now academies, which are funded and overseen by national government. Most academies are now controlled by a Multi-Academy Trust (n=c.1200): these trusts employ headteachers and are responsible for all aspects of academy operations and performance.

England Department for Education provides support for formal leadership development. The National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH) was first introduced in 1997 and has been through multiple reviews and revisions since then, reflecting changing political priorities and preferences. NPQH was previously mandatory but has been optional since 2012, although public support and funding have been sustained. The NPQH content framework is

¹ See: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25#dataBlock-d917322c-3b55-4a82-b116-365ef2e42805-tables>

² Raikes, L., Giovannini, A. and Getzel, B. (2019), 'Divided and Connected: Regional Inequalities in the North, the UK and the Developed World – State of the North Report', Manchester: IPPR.

³ Greany, T. (2024) 'An analysis of education policy and practice in England' - AERA BELMAS Symposium: A Dis-United Kingdom? A comparative analysis of the UK's four nations positions on Education Policy and Practice. AERA, Philadelphia.

determined by the DfE with input from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), a government endowed ‘what works’ agency.⁴ Eight national providers are contracted by DfE to design and deliver the programme in line with this framework, working with a national network of 87 officially designated Teaching School Hubs. The DfE also supports a wider suite of National Professional Qualifications aimed at leaders at different stages of their careers (e.g. senior leaders, executive leaders) and in specialist roles (e.g. literacy leaders), although funding for these is more limited, so most schools must pay to participate. Most leaders and schools engage in other forms of formal and informal professional learning beyond these national programmes.⁵

In the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 survey of attainment by 15-year-olds, England performed significantly above the OECD average in mathematics, reading and science.⁶ Between 2006 and 2022 England’s PISA outcomes in maths, science and reading remained relatively stable, but with declines in some areas. In PISA 2022, pupils reported significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than the OECD average.

⁴ For further details see: Greany, T. Thomson, P. Perry, T. and Collins, M. (2025) Signature pedagogies for leadership development: a comparison of headteacher preparation programmes in England and Scotland. *London Review of Education*. <https://journals.uclpress.co.uk/lre/article/pubid/LRE-23-18/>

⁵ Greany et al. (2023) ‘Local Learning Landscapes: exploring coherence, equity and quality in teacher professional development in England’, University of Nottingham. Teacher Development Trust (2025) ‘Teacher Development: the CPD Landscape in 2025’. TDT: London

⁶ See: Ingram, J. et al (2023) ‘PISA 2022: National Report for England - Research report’, DfE: London. Note: England did not fully meet the OECD PISA sampling requirements in 2022, with higher performing pupils potentially over-represented and pupils eligible for free school meals potentially under-represented.

3. The school leadership workforce in England

About the workforce data:

This section draws on two main sources of data about the school leadership workforce:

1. **Publicly available statistics** published by the Department for Education (DfE) and the Office for National Statistics (ONS). These include annual School Workforce Census (SWC) releases and official reports⁷ and statistics.⁸ These sources provide headline figures on workforce size, composition, and retention patterns. The data provided here directly draw on as well as reproduce these statistics using individual level data (see next).
2. **Individual-level School Workforce Census data (2010–2023)** accessed via the ONS Secure Research Service (SRS) under an approved Data Sharing Agreement with DfE.⁹ This dataset includes detailed information on staff characteristics and roles, enabling longitudinal analysis of leadership composition, career progression, and retention.¹⁰

Key variables requested include:

- **Personal characteristics:** sex, ethnicity, age (via date of birth), and absence data.
- **Professional details:** role codes (headteacher, deputy, assistant), pay and allowances, contract details, and working days lost.
- **Contextual linkage:** establishment identifiers (LAEstab/URN) to connect individuals to school-level data on size, governance, performance, and pupil demographics.

This work contains statistical data from ONS, which is Crown Copyright. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce Office for National Statistics aggregates. We would like to thank the Department for Education and the Office for National Statistics for making the School Workforce data available to enable our research.

Workforce Overview:

England's school workforce is large and complex, with leadership roles forming a relatively small but critical segment. In 2024/25, there were approximately 75,959 school leaders (headteachers, deputy headteachers, and assistant headteachers), including 22,255 headteachers, within a total teaching workforce of 513,435 across state-funded schools. This means senior leaders account for roughly 15% of the teaching workforce, with headteachers specifically representing about 4.4%.

⁷ E.g. *School Leadership in England: 2010 to 2020 – Characteristics and Trends* (DfE) see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-leadership-in-england-2010-to-2020-characteristics-and-trends>

⁸ *Explore Education Statistics portal* – see <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-leadership-retention/2024>

⁹ Data Access for individual-level data: Data access was arranged through the ONS SRS, with strict compliance to the *Five Safes* framework and University of Warwick's data governance policies. Analyses are conducted in a secure environment, and all outputs undergo disclosure checks before release.

¹⁰ Our ongoing analysis is using the individual-level data to go beyond the publicly available statistics, extending them through more detailed longitudinal and multivariate analyses. Here, we focus on descriptive results that can be compared with equivalent available data from Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The latest national statistics provide a detailed breakdown by phase and sector. Primary schools dominate leadership numbers, employing 16,951 headteachers, 11,500 deputy headteachers, and 13,459 assistant heads. Within this, local authority maintained primaries still account for the largest share of headteachers (9,249) and deputies (6,648), but academies now represent a significant proportion: 7,702 headteachers and 4,852 deputies across primary academies, with converter academies making up the majority.¹¹ Primary free schools remain small in number, with only 280 headteachers.

Table 3.1 – School workforce by phase and sector (24/25)

	HTs	DHTs	AHTs	DHT+AH T per HT	Classroom Teachers	Total
Total state-funded schools	22,455	19,070	34,434	2.38	437,477	513,435
State-funded nursery and primary	16,951	11,500	13,459	1.47	200,093	242,001
LA maintained nursery and primary	9,249	6,648	6,808	1.45	109,075	131,778
Primary academies	7,702	4,852	6,652	1.49	910,19	110,224
State-funded secondary	3,882	6,067	16,726	5.87	207,734	234,407
LA maintained secondary	636	1,043	3,111	6.53	38,036	42,826
Secondary academies	3,246	5,024	13,615	5.74	169,698	191,581
Secondary UTC/studio school	67	49	173	3.31	1,394	1,681
State-funded special or PRU	1,567	1,448	2,615	2.59	25,618	31,247
LA maintained special or PRU	755	825	1,405	2.95	14,261	17,244
Special and PRU academies	812	624	1,211	2.26	11,358	14,003

In secondary education, leadership is more concentrated: 3,882 headteachers and 6,067 deputies serve across the sector, with academies employing the vast majority (3,246 headteachers and 5,024 deputies), compared to just 636 headteachers in local authority maintained schools. Assistant headteachers are heavily weighted toward secondary schools (16,726), reflecting larger school sizes and multi-tiered leadership structures. Special schools and PRUs, while smaller in overall numbers, still employ 1,567 headteachers and 1,448 deputies, with a near-even split between local authority and academy provision.

A key feature of the data is the leadership team size relative to headteachers, which varies sharply by phase. In primary schools, there are on average 1.47 deputies and assistants per headteacher, reflecting smaller, more compact leadership teams. By contrast, secondary schools have far larger and more layered structures: each headteacher oversees nearly six senior leaders (5.87 deputies and assistants combined), rising to 6.53 in local authority maintained secondaries. Special schools and PRUs sit between these extremes, with 2.59 deputies and assistants per headteacher.

Workforce Composition:

Age Profile

The age profile of the school workforce shows that school leadership is concentrated in mid- and later-career stages (Table 3.2). Over half of all teachers are under 40 (54.5%), compared

¹¹ Some care is needed when comparing local authority maintained schools and academies. Many academy school leaders - particularly executive heads and trust-level leaders - are employed in central teams and are not always recorded in school-level workforce statistics. This reduces the completeness of sectoral comparisons and should be borne in mind when interpreting differences.

with only 12.2% of headteachers and 27.7% of deputy headteachers. By extension, 87.8% of headteachers are aged 40 or above, including 40.6% in their 50s and just 4.2% over 60. Deputies and assistants present a younger profile, but still skew older than classroom teachers: 38.6% of assistant heads are under 40, while nearly 20% are in their 50s.

Table 3.2 – Workforce age profile – all state-funded schools (24/25)

	Under 40	40 to 49	50 to 59	60 and over
Head teacher	12.2%	43.0%	40.6%	4.2%
Deputy head teacher	27.7%	45.1%	25.2%	2.0%
Assistant head teacher	38.6%	39.5%	19.8%	2.2%
Classroom teacher	54.5%	25.9%	16.5%	3.0%
Total	50.6%	28.3%	18.1%	3.0%

Table 3.3 – Primary workforce age profile by school type and sector (24/25)

		Under 40	40 to 49	50 to 59	60 and over
Head teacher	State-funded nursery and primary	13.0%	42.6%	40.3%	4.1%
	LA maintained nursery and primary	9.0%	40.6%	45.2%	5.2%
	LA maintained primary	9.0%	40.7%	45.2%	5.1%
	Primary academies	17.9%	44.9%	34.3%	2.9%
	Primary converter academy	16.2%	44.8%	35.8%	3.2%
	Primary sponsor led academy	22.3%	45.0%	30.8%	2.0%
	Primary free school	24.0%	45.2%	27.2%	3.5%
Deputy head teacher	State-funded nursery and primary	31.3%	42.4%	24.2%	2.1%
	LA maintained nursery and primary	27.4%	44.3%	26.1%	2.3%
	LA maintained primary	27.5%	44.3%	26.0%	2.2%
	Primary academies	36.7%	39.8%	21.7%	1.8%
	Primary converter academy	34.4%	40.4%	23.3%	1.9%
	Primary sponsor led academy	42.4%	38.0%	18.0%	1.6%
	Primary free school	47.4%	38.5%	12.8%	1.3%
Assistant head teacher	State-funded nursery and primary	43.6%	36.3%	18.2%	1.8%
	LA maintained nursery and primary	38.6%	38.5%	20.6%	2.3%
	LA maintained primary	38.7%	38.4%	20.6%	2.3%
	Primary academies	48.7%	34.1%	15.7%	1.4%
	Primary converter academy	45.6%	35.7%	17.1%	1.6%
	Primary sponsor led academy	53.6%	31.7%	13.5%	1.2%
	Primary free school	66.8%	24.9%	7.3%	1.0%
Classroom teacher	State-funded nursery and primary	57.9%	24.8%	15.0%	2.3%
	LA maintained nursery and primary	55.2%	25.8%	16.3%	2.7%
	LA maintained primary	55.4%	25.7%	16.3%	2.6%
	Primary academies	61.0%	23.6%	13.5%	1.9%
	Primary converter academy	59.4%	24.3%	14.3%	2.0%
	Primary sponsor led academy	64.0%	22.1%	12.2%	1.7%
	Primary free school	73.6%	18.5%	7.0%	0.9%

Age patterns in the primary phase show clear differences by school type and sector (Table 3.3). Overall, headteachers in state-funded nursery and primary schools are concentrated in mid- and later-career stages, with 42.6% aged 40–49 and 40.3% aged 50–59, and only 13% under 40. LA-maintained primaries skew older still, with nearly 45% of headteachers in their 50s and just

9% under 40, compared to 17.9% under 40 in academies. Sponsor-led academies and free schools have the youngest leadership profiles, with 22–24% of headteachers under 40 and fewer than one-third aged 50+. Deputies and assistants follow the same pattern: LA maintained schools lean older, while free schools have markedly younger teams, with 47% of deputies and 67% of assistants under 40.

Secondary leadership teams remain older overall, but patterns vary by school type (Table 3.4). Across all state-funded secondary schools, only 8.8% of headteachers are under 40, while 91.2% are aged 40 or above, including 42.1% in their 50s. LA-maintained secondaries skew oldest, with more than 54% of headteachers in their 50s and just 4% under 40, compared to 9.7% under 40 in academies. Sponsor-led academies and free schools have the youngest profiles, with 15–18% of headteachers under 40 and fewer than one-third aged 50+. Deputies and assistants show a similar pattern: LA maintained schools lean older, while free schools stand out with 42% of deputies and 57% of assistants under 40.

Table 3.4 – Secondary workforce age profile by school type and sector (24/25)

		Under 40	40 to 49	50 to 59	60 and over
Head teacher	State-funded secondary	8.8%	45.7%	42.1%	3.4%
	LA maintained secondary	4.4%	35.2%	54.4%	6.0%
	Secondary academies	9.7%	47.7%	39.7%	2.9%
	Secondary converter academy	5.9%	45.3%	45.4%	3.4%
	Secondary sponsor led academy	15.0%	52.4%	31.0%	1.6%
	Secondary free school	17.6%	47.9%	30.6%	3.9%
	Secondary UTC or studio school	14.5%	50.7%	33.3%	1.4%
Deputy head teacher	State-funded secondary	22.5%	50.5%	25.5%	1.5%
	LA maintained secondary	13.2%	51.3%	32.7%	2.8%
	Secondary academies	24.4%	50.3%	24.0%	1.2%
	Secondary converter academy	19.0%	51.5%	28.0%	1.5%
	Secondary sponsor led academy	30.2%	49.6%	19.3%	0.9%
	Secondary free school	42.1%	46.4%	11.0%	0.5%
	Secondary UTC or studio school	27.5%	31.4%	41.2%	0.0%
Assistant head teacher	State-funded secondary	37.5%	42.4%	18.9%	1.2%
	LA maintained secondary	30.3%	45.5%	22.4%	1.8%
	Secondary academies	39.1%	41.6%	18.2%	1.1%
	Secondary converter academy	33.8%	43.8%	21.0%	1.4%
	Secondary sponsor led academy	45.1%	39.4%	14.7%	0.7%
	Secondary free school	57.3%	33.5%	8.6%	0.6%
	Secondary UTC or studio school	39.8%	36.9%	21.6%	1.7%
Classroom teacher	State-funded secondary	52.7%	26.8%	17.3%	3.3%
	LA maintained secondary	50.1%	27.6%	18.7%	3.6%
	Secondary academies	53.3%	26.6%	17.0%	3.2%
	Secondary converter academy	49.7%	28.0%	18.7%	3.6%
	Secondary sponsor led academy	59.0%	24.4%	14.1%	2.5%
	Secondary free school	66.5%	20.8%	10.7%	2.0%
	Secondary UTC or studio school	50.0%	26.6%	19.0%	4.4%

Turning to special schools and PRUs we see a slightly different age profile, as well as some commonalities with the primary and secondary phases (Table 3.5). Among headteachers, 41.9% are aged 40–49 and 40% are in their 50s, with 11.5% under 40. LA-maintained settings skew oldest, with nearly 46% of headteachers in their 50s and 8.7% aged 60+, compared to 15.6% under 40 in academies. Deputies and assistants show a similar pattern: LA maintained

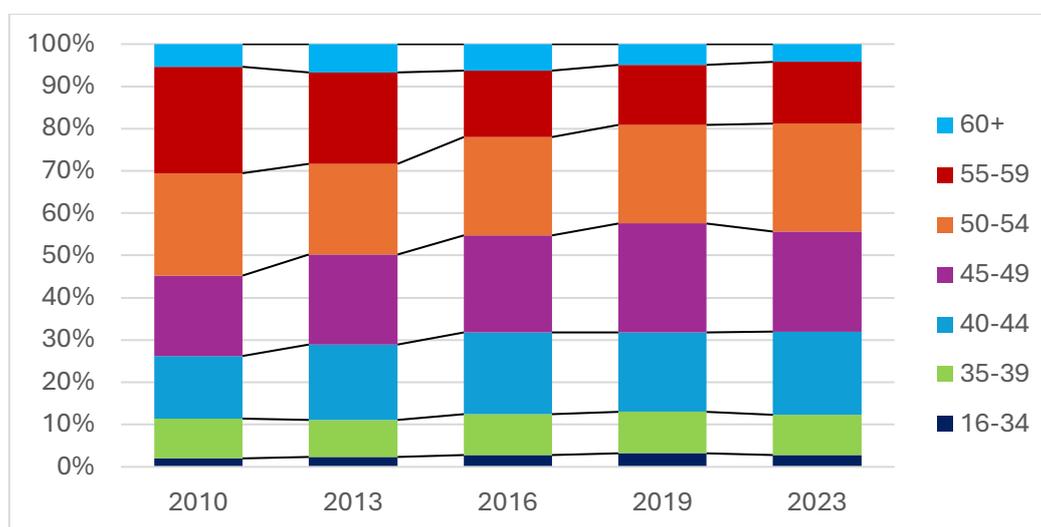
schools lean older, while academies have more leaders under 40 (25.6% of deputies and 38.6% of assistants).

Table 3.5 – Workforce age profile – special or PRU (24/25)

		Under 40	40 to 49	50 to 59	60 and over
Head teacher	State-funded special or PRU	11.5%	41.9%	40.0%	6.6%
	LA maintained special or PRU	7.3%	37.9%	46.1%	8.7%
	Special and PRU academies	15.6%	45.6%	34.2%	4.7%
Deputy head teacher	State-funded special or PRU	21.9%	44.1%	30.2%	3.8%
	LA maintained special or PRU	19.1%	43.3%	33.5%	4.1%
	Special and PRU academies	25.6%	45.1%	25.9%	3.4%
Assistant head teacher	State-funded special or PRU	35.6%	41.3%	20.4%	2.7%
	LA maintained special or PRU	33.0%	42.5%	21.8%	2.8%
	Special and PRU academies	38.6%	39.9%	18.8%	2.6%
Classroom teacher	State-funded special or PRU	48.8%	27.2%	19.3%	4.7%
	LA maintained special or PRU	47.4%	27.8%	19.9%	5.0%
	Special and PRU academies	50.7%	26.4%	18.6%	4.3%

In addition to the summary of the current age profile of school leaders, reported above, we have examined individual-level data from 2010 to 2023 to identify trends and changes over time. Figure 3.1, below, shows that between 2010 and 2023, the age profile of headteachers shifted towards the 40–54 age range. The proportion aged 45–49 rose from 19.0% to a peak of 26.0% in 2020 before easing to 23.7%, while those aged 50–54 increased slightly to 25.5%, making this the largest group by 2023. In contrast, the share of headteachers aged 55–59 fell sharply from 25.1% to 14.6%, and those aged 60+ declined from 5.4% to 4.2%. Younger age groups (16–34 and 35–39) remained small, with some modest growth.

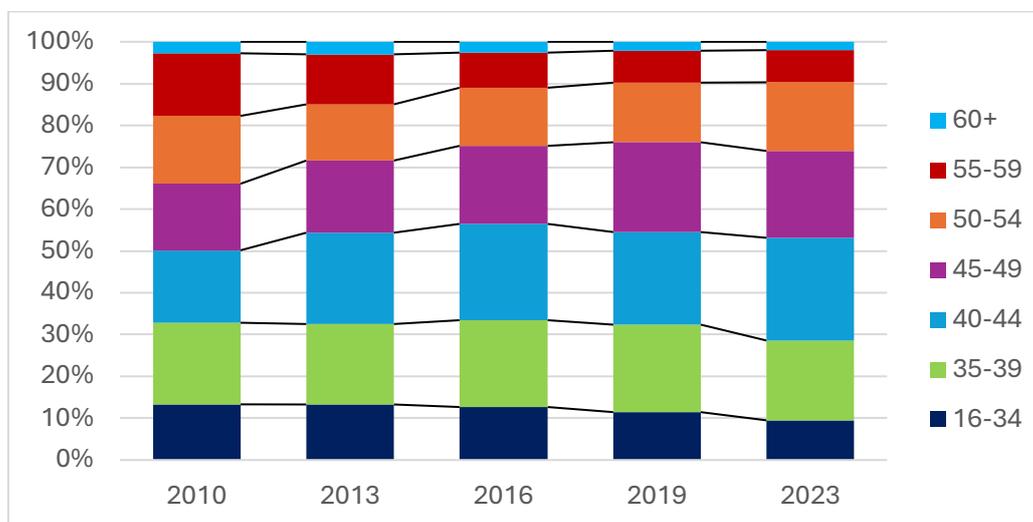
Figure 3.1 Headteacher age profile by year



The age profile of deputy headteachers has also shifted over time, with a decline in younger leaders and growth in mid-career groups (Fig. 3.2). The proportion aged 16–34 fell from 13.3% in 2010 to 9.5% in 2023, while those aged 35–39 remained relatively stable around 19–21%. The largest increase occurred among the 40–44 group, rising from 17.3% to 24.6%, and the 45–49 group also grew from 15.9% to 20.7%. Older age bands show mixed trends: 50–54 increased slightly to 16.5%, while 55–59 halved from 15.0% to 7.7%, and 60+ remained very small at

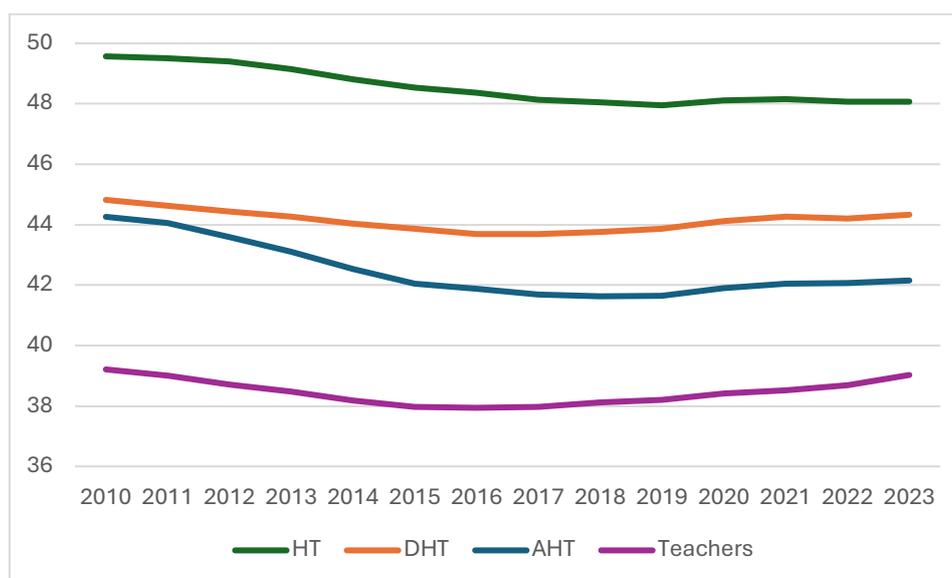
around 2%. Overall, the deputy headteacher workforce has become more concentrated in the 40–49 age range.

Figure 3.2 – Deputy headteacher age profile by year



These changes in the age profile have resulted in a decline in the mean age of school leaders in England between 2010 and 2019, followed by a flattening out for HT roles and a slight recovery for DHT and AHT roles from 2020 onwards. Headteachers remain the oldest group throughout, with their average age falling from 49.57 years in 2010 to 47.95 in 2019, before stabilizing around 48 years in recent years. Deputy Headteachers and Assistant Headteachers follow similar patterns, decreasing steadily until 2019 and then rising slightly, with DHTs averaging 44.32 years and AHTs 42.15 years by 2023. Classroom teachers dropped from 39.21 years in 2010 to a low of 37.94 in 2016, then gradually increasing to 39.03 by 2023. These trends are depicted in Figure 3.3, below.

Figure 3.3 – Mean age by role 2010-2023



Gender Profile

The teaching workforce in England remains predominantly female, though proportions vary by role and phase (Table 3.6). Overall, women make up 75.6% of staff in state-funded schools, with the highest representation among classroom teachers (76.7%) and assistant headteachers (70.0%). Leadership roles show slightly lower female representation: 67.9% of headteachers and 70.9% of deputy headteachers are women.

Breaking down these figure by phase reveals large differences, and highlights a substantial gap in female progression to leadership. Primary schools are the most female-dominated, with 86.2% of staff and 74.0% of headteachers being women, compared to secondary schools where women account for 64.6% of staff and only 43.2% of headteachers. A majority female secondary workforce is lead by majority male secondary headteachers. Special schools and PRUs sit between these extremes, with 75.6% female overall and 63.1% among headteachers.

Table 3.6 – Female proportion of workforce by phase and sector (24/25)

	Head teacher	Deputy head teacher	Assistant head teacher	Classroom teacher	Total
Total state-funded schools	67.9%	70.9%	70.0%	76.7%	75.6%
State-funded nursery and primary	74.0%	80.7%	83.3%	87.7%	86.2%
LA maintained nursery and primary	74.0%	81.0%	83.3%	87.7%	86.2%
LA maintained primary	73.3%	80.7%	83.2%	87.7%	86.1%
Primary academies	73.9%	80.3%	83.2%	87.7%	86.1%
Primary converter academy	73.4%	80.6%	83.5%	87.9%	86.3%
Primary sponsor led academy	75.3%	79.3%	83.1%	87.3%	85.8%
Primary free school	74.4%	80.0%	79.7%	86.8%	85.2%
State-funded secondary	43.2%	51.7%	57.9%	66.0%	64.6%
LA maintained secondary	42.0%	51.4%	56.9%	66.4%	65.0%
Secondary academies	43.5%	51.8%	58.1%	65.9%	64.6%
Secondary converter academy	41.3%	50.2%	57.5%	66.1%	64.8%
Secondary sponsor led academy	46.9%	54.3%	59.3%	65.7%	64.5%
Secondary free school	47.4%	55.6%	59.2%	65.2%	64.0%
Secondary UTC or studio school	44.1%	38.0%	50.0%	53.1%	52.0%
State-funded special or PRU	63.1%	73.0%	71.5%	77.0%	75.6%
LA maintained special or PRU	66.7%	75.2%	72.9%	78.4%	77.3%
Special and PRU academies	59.8%	70.2%	70.0%	75.2%	73.6%

Gender balance in the workforce has changed since 2010, with gradual shifts across roles and phases. In primary schools (Fig. 3.4), classroom teachers have consistently been around 87–89% female, with only a slight decline from 89.3% in 2010 to 87.7% in 2023. Leadership roles in primary have seen modest increases: female headteachers rose from 70.5% to 73.7%, while deputy and assistant heads have remained stable around 79–86%. In secondary schools, the trend is more pronounced (Fig. 3.5). Female classroom teachers showed a small increase from 63.8% to 65.8%, but leadership roles show steady growth: assistant heads rose from 49.9% to 56.9% female, deputies from 43.8% to 50.6%, and headteachers from 37.6% to 42.0%. These trends notwithstanding, large gaps in progression to leadership – particularly between deputy headship and headship and at secondary – remain.

Figure 3.4 – Proportion of female primary leaders

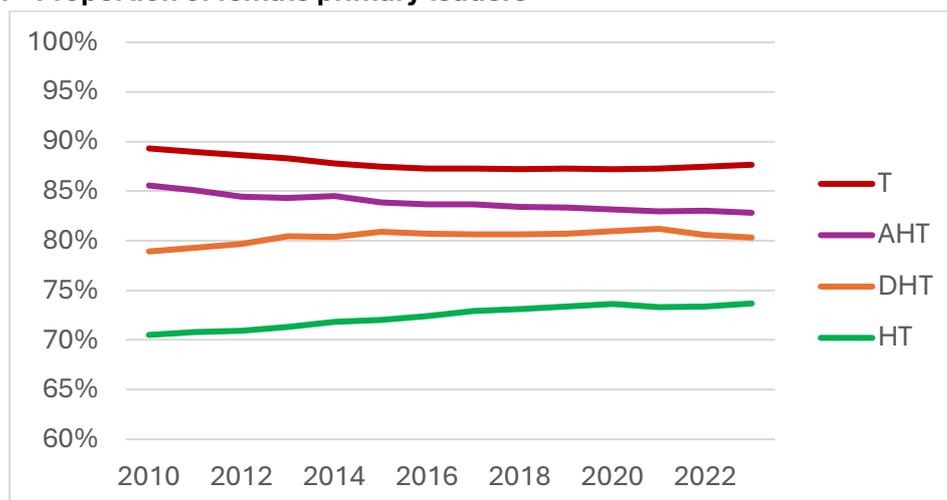
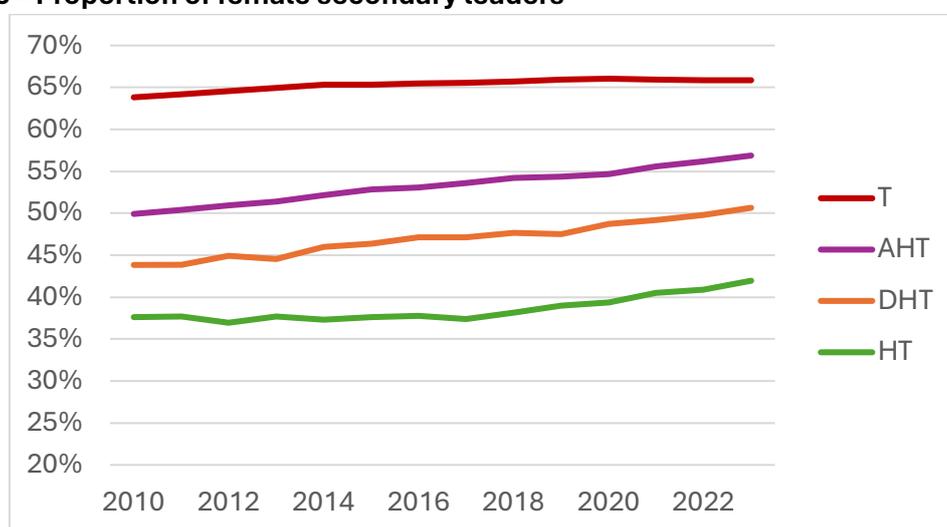


Figure 3.5 – Proportion of female secondary leaders

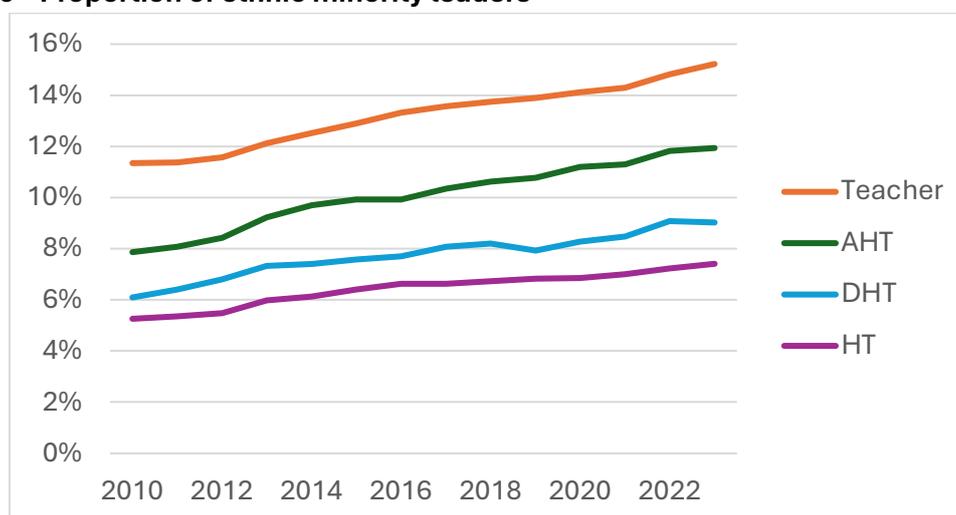


Ethnic Minority Participation

The teaching workforce in state-funded schools remains predominantly White, especially in leadership roles (Table 3.7). Across all phases, 77.1% of classroom teachers are White, rising to 86.2% among headteachers. Representation of ethnic minority groups declines sharply with seniority. For example, Black or Black British teachers make up 2.7% of classroom teachers but only 1.1% of headteachers, while Asian or Asian British teachers account for 5.5% of classroom teachers and 1.8% of headteachers. Mixed and other ethnic groups each represent around 1% or less in leadership roles. Secondary schools show slightly higher minority representation than primary, particularly among Asian teachers (6.7% of classroom teachers and 2.9% of headteachers). Special schools and PRUs follow similar patterns. Overall, these figures highlight a persistent underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in senior leadership positions compared to their presence in the wider teaching workforce.

Table 3.7 – Proportion by ethnic group by role and phase

		Total state-funded schools	State-funded nursery and primary	State-funded secondary	State-funded special or PRU
White	Classroom teacher	77.1%	80.7%	73.7%	77.8%
	Assistant head teacher	81.5%	83.1%	80.7%	82.4%
	Deputy head teacher	85.1%	87.2%	81.4%	84.1%
	Head teacher	86.2%	87.2%	82.7%	84.2%
Black or Black British	Classroom teacher	2.7%	1.7%	3.7%	2.8%
	Assistant head teacher	2.1%	1.8%	2.3%	2.1%
	Deputy head teacher	1.4%	1.0%	2.1%	1.9%
	Head teacher	1.1%	1.0%	1.3%	1.5%
Asian or Asian British	Classroom teacher	5.5%	4.6%	6.7%	2.9%
	Assistant head teacher	3.7%	3.8%	4.1%	1.8%
	Deputy head teacher	2.4%	2.2%	3.1%	1.5%
	Head teacher	1.8%	1.6%	2.9%	1.2%
Any other Mixed background	Classroom teacher	1.7%	1.5%	1.9%	1.8%
	Assistant head teacher	1.5%	1.4%	1.5%	1.9%
	Deputy head teacher	1.3%	1.1%	1.5%	1.9%
	Head teacher	1.0%	1.0%	1.3%	1.0%
Any other ethnic group	Classroom teacher	0.9%	0.8%	0.9%	1.1%
	Assistant head teacher	0.6%	0.8%	0.4%	0.8%
	Deputy head teacher	0.6%	0.6%	0.7%	1.0%
	Head teacher	0.3%	0.3%	0.2%	0.4%
Information not yet obtained or refused	Classroom teacher	12.2%	10.7%	13.1%	13.7%
	Assistant head teacher	10.6%	9.1%	11.0%	11.0%
	Deputy head teacher	9.1%	7.9%	11.2%	9.8%
	Head teacher	9.6%	8.8%	11.6%	11.9%

Figure 3.6 – Proportion of ethnic minority leaders¹²

The proportion of teachers and leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds has increased steadily across all roles since 2010, albeit from a low base (Fig 3.6). Among classroom teachers,

¹² Note that for these calculations, ethnic minority figures include all ethnic groups that are not White British, and therefore includes White Irish (approx. 1.5% of HTs) and ‘Other White background’ (approx. 1.7%). This contrasts to the figures in Table 3.7, immediately above, where the overall white ethnic group was not disaggregated to identify ethnic minority groups in this way.

representation rose from 11.3% in 2010 to 15.2% in 2023. Leadership roles show similar upward trends, though at lower levels: assistant headteachers increased from 7.9% to 11.9%, deputy headteachers from 6.1% to 9.0%, and headteachers from 5.3% to 7.4%. While progress is evident, ethnic minority participation remains significantly lower in senior leadership compared to the wider teaching workforce.

Part-time work

One indicator and factor linked to leadership sustainability is part-time and flexible work. The data shows an increasing trend towards part time work. In Tables 3.6, 3.7 and 3.8, below, are data on the proportion of the workforce on part-time contracts in primary, secondary and special schools, respectively.

Part-time working in primary schools has increased steadily across all roles since 2010 (Table 3.8). Among classroom teachers in LA-maintained schools, the proportion rose from 28.9% in 2010 to 32.8% in 2023, while assistant headteachers saw a sharper rise from 10.4% to 19.7%, and deputy heads from 8.2% to 15.4%. Headteachers remain least likely to work part-time, but their share has grown from 3.5% to 6.1%. In academy primaries, part-time rates are slightly lower for teachers (28.9% in 2023) but similar for leadership roles, with assistant heads at 19.1%, deputies at 15.1%, and headteachers at 8.7%. These trends suggest a gradual normalization of part-time work in leadership positions, and, for headship, particularly in academies.

Table 3.8 – Proportion of primary workforce on part-time contracts

	LA Maintained Primaries				Academy Primaries			
	Teachers	AHT	DHT	HT	Teachers	AHT	DHT	HT
2010	28.9%	10.4%	8.2%	3.5%				
2011	29.1%	11.2%	8.4%	4.2%				
2012	28.9%	11.2%	8.5%	4.1%				
2013	29.2%	11.8%	8.9%	4.1%				
2014	29.3%	12.3%	9.2%	3.8%	25.4%	11.1%	8.4%	5.2%
2015	30.2%	13.8%	10.9%	4.7%	25.9%	11.6%	8.6%	5.4%
2016	30.9%	14.9%	11.2%	5.0%	26.3%	12.8%	10.1%	6.4%
2017	31.1%	15.7%	12.0%	5.2%	26.7%	14.3%	11.5%	6.5%
2018	31.5%	16.7%	12.7%	5.4%	27.3%	15.7%	13.2%	6.9%
2019	32.1%	17.8%	13.4%	5.4%	28.1%	16.4%	14.0%	6.7%
2020	32.4%	18.6%	13.6%	5.5%	28.3%	17.2%	14.8%	7.2%
2021	32.5%	18.7%	14.4%	5.8%	28.3%	18.1%	14.7%	7.6%
2022	32.6%	19.5%	14.6%	5.8%	28.5%	19.0%	15.0%	8.4%
2023	32.8%	19.7%	15.4%	6.1%	28.9%	19.1%	15.1%	8.7%

Part-time working in secondary schools is less common than in primary but has increased over time, particularly among leadership roles (Table 3.9). Among classroom teachers in LA-schools, the proportion rose from 18.5% in 2010 to 21.2% in 2023, while assistant headteachers increased from 4.2% to 6.5%. Deputy heads remain low at around 3–5%, and headteachers consistently under 3%, reaching 2.5% in 2023. Academies show similar patterns, with teachers at 21.4% and assistant heads at 7.5% in 2023, while deputy heads and headteachers remain low (5.0% and 3.1% respectively).

Table 3.9 – Proportion of secondary workforce on part-time contracts

	LA Maintained Secondaries				Academy Secondaries			
	Teachers	AHT	DHT	HT	Teachers	AHT	DHT	HT
2010	18.5%	4.2%	4.4%	1.8%				
2011	18.5%	4.7%	3.7%	2.5%				
2012	17.9%	3.6%	2.5%	1.7%				
2013	18.6%	4.0%	3.1%	2.3%				
2014	18.8%	3.5%	2.7%	1.9%	18.8%	4.6%	2.9%	2.2%
2015	20.3%	4.3%	3.9%	2.6%	19.6%	5.6%	3.7%	2.6%
2016	20.8%	4.8%	3.3%	2.4%	20.2%	6.0%	3.7%	3.0%
2017	21.1%	4.7%	3.3%	2.4%	20.7%	6.2%	3.7%	3.0%
2018	21.7%	5.6%	4.3%	2.1%	21.2%	6.9%	4.3%	3.1%
2019	21.8%	6.3%	4.3%	1.7%	21.9%	7.5%	4.1%	3.2%
2020	21.8%	6.4%	4.0%	2.3%	21.5%	7.1%	4.1%	3.5%
2021	21.7%	6.2%	3.8%	1.9%	21.3%	7.0%	4.4%	3.2%
2022	21.3%	6.1%	3.9%	2.1%	21.0%	7.3%	4.6%	3.2%
2023	21.2%	6.5%	3.7%	2.5%	21.4%	7.5%	5.0%	3.1%

Part-time working in special schools is more common than in secondary but slightly less than in primary, with notable variation across roles and sectors (Table 3.10). Among classroom teachers in local authority maintained special schools, the proportion declined slightly from 24.5% in 2010 to 23.3% in 2023, while assistant headteachers increased from 7.9% to 12.2% and deputy heads from 6.5% to 10.1%. Headteachers remain least likely to work part-time, though their share rose from 3.3% to 5.1%. In special school academies, part-time rates for teachers fell from 21.7% in 2014 to 19.2% in 2023, while leadership roles fluctuated, with assistant heads at 9.1%, deputies at 9.1%, and headteachers at 4.1% in 2023. Overall, part-time work is more prevalent among teachers and assistant heads, with modest growth among senior leaders.

Table 3.10 – Proportion of special school workforce on part-time contracts

	LA Maintained Special				Academy Special			
	Teachers	AHT	DHT	HT	Teachers	AHT	DHT	HT
2010	24.5%	7.9%	6.5%	3.3%				
2011	25.4%	10.3%	6.3%	5.1%				
2012	24.2%	8.6%	6.9%	3.8%				
2013	25.2%	8.9%	7.2%	3.0%				
2014	25.6%	9.5%	7.8%	3.5%	21.7%	7.8%	10.7%	8.3%
2015	25.4%	9.9%	8.0%	4.4%	21.0%	8.9%	8.2%	4.7%
2016	25.3%	10.6%	8.4%	5.3%	20.2%	9.7%	4.5%	6.1%
2017	25.1%	11.8%	7.2%	4.4%	19.7%	9.3%	5.8%	7.0%
2018	24.9%	12.5%	7.6%	4.7%	20.9%	10.9%	8.7%	4.7%
2019	24.3%	12.7%	8.2%	4.9%	21.7%	12.2%	10.1%	5.2%
2020	24.2%	12.0%	8.1%	5.3%	22.1%	11.8%	11.9%	5.1%
2021	23.4%	12.0%	7.2%	3.8%	19.9%	9.7%	8.6%	4.6%
2022	23.2%	10.7%	8.8%	4.3%	19.6%	11.0%	10.1%	4.5%
2023	23.3%	12.2%	10.1%	5.1%	19.2%	9.1%	9.1%	4.1%

Table 3.11 – Proportion of part time contracts by sector and phase (2024/25)

	Teacher	AHT	DHT	HT	Total
Centrally employed	62.1%	47.1%	17.9%	14.0%	57.0%
LA maintained nursery and primary	33.1%	21.2%	16.8%	6.7%	29.8%
LA maintained primary	33.1%	21.1%	16.7%	6.4%	29.8%
Primary academies	29.5%	21.2%	16.0%	8.9%	27.0%
Primary converter academy	31.5%	22.5%	16.8%	9.1%	28.7%
Primary free school	20.2%	17.4%	15.6%	10.7%	19.1%
Primary sponsor led academy	24.9%	18.7%	13.7%	7.9%	22.8%
LA maintained secondary	22.0%	7.3%	4.6%	3.8%	20.2%
Secondary UTC or studio school	16.5%	8.1%	supp	4.5%	14.6%
Secondary academies	22.0%	8.3%	4.7%	3.2%	20.3%
Secondary converter academy	25.1%	8.2%	4.6%	3.4%	23.2%
Secondary free school	16.0%	10.1%	6.5%	5.9%	14.9%
Secondary sponsor led academy	15.7%	8.1%	4.7%	2.0%	14.5%
State-funded special or PRU (all)	22.4%	13.4%	9.7%	5.0%	20.2%
LA maintained special or PRU	24.3%	15.3%	9.5%	6.1%	22.1%
Special and PRU academies	20.0%	11.2%	9.9%	4.2%	17.9%
Total state-funded schools	26.7%	15.5%	12.2%	6.7%	24.6%

The latest 2024-25 figures for part-time contract status by role, by sector and phase are given in Table 3.11, above. These figures indicate that previous trends have continued into 2024/25 and also reveals that part-time working shows clear variation by phase and sector. In primary schools, part-time assistant headteachers exceed 21% in most settings, while deputy heads average around 16–17% and headteachers remain lower, though slightly higher in academies (8.9%) than LA maintained schools (6.4%). Free schools stand out with the highest headteacher part-time rate at 10.7%, despite having the lowest teacher part-time rate. In secondary schools, leadership part-time rates remain low: assistant heads average 7–8%, deputies around 4–5%, and headteachers typically under 4%, but with free schools again showing higher headteacher rates (5.9%) despite lower rates for teachers. Special schools and PRUs fall between these patterns, with assistant heads at 11-15%, deputies near 10%, and headteachers around 4–6%, with LA maintained settings higher than academies for AHTs and HTs.

Sustainability Indicators:

Leaving Rates

Table 3.12 shows the proportion of headteachers who were no longer in any headship role after a given number of years, based on the workforce in each starting year. For example, of those in headship in 2010, 12.9% had left after one year, 45.8% after five years, and 72.9% after ten years. These figures were calculated by tracking whether individuals remained in any headship position within the system, not necessarily the same school, so moves between schools count as retention. This approach reflects system-level continuity rather than tenure in a specific post, meaning school-level departure rates would be higher. It also does not measure time from the first year of headship but from the current workforce at each base year.

The data show a clear pattern of attrition from headship over time. On average, around 13% of headteachers leave headship within one year, rising to 22% after two years and 31% after three years. By five years, nearly half (46%) have exited, and by seven years, close to 60% are no longer in any headship role. After a decade, roughly three-quarters (73%) have left headship altogether.

Table 3.12 – Proportion HTs no longer in any HT post by base year and duration

Yrs	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Average
10	72.9	73.1	73.4	73.2										73.1
9	69.3	68.8	68.9	68.7	68.3									68.8
8	64.5	64.9	64.1	63.6	63.1	62.9								63.8
7	59	59.7	59.8	58.4	57.5	57.1	57.5							58.4
6	52.2	53.6	54.2	53.7	51.8	50.9	51.2	51						52.3
5	45.8	46.3	47.6	47.4	46.6	44.7	44.3	43.9	44.6					45.7
4	37.7	39.3	39.9	40.4	39.7	38.9	37.7	36.4	36.9	37.3				38.4
3	28.8	30.5	32.4	32.2	32.1	31.5	31.6	29.3	28.6	28.8	31.2			30.6
2	20.3	20.9	23	24.2	23.1	23.1	23.5	22.3	20.8	19.6	22.1	23.9		22.2
1	12.9	11.6	12.7	13.9	14.1	12.9	14	13.2	12.9	10.9	11.8	13.7	13.7	12.9

Looking across base years, the pattern of headship attrition is fairly consistent. For example, after one year, exit rates range from about 11–14% across all cohorts, and after five years, they cluster tightly around 44–48%. Even at ten years, the figures vary only slightly, between 72.9% and 73.4%. This broad stability suggests that the likelihood of leaving headship has not significantly changed over the period from 2010 to 2023. While there are minor fluctuations, the overall trend indicates a steady leaving rate. This is not to suggest that these rates are acceptable, only that – despite policy changes and system reforms during this period – the high rate of headship leaving at the whole-system level appears to have remained broadly unchanged. Below we provide a break down of the 3-year leaving rate as this reveals an uneven picture in terms of rates of leaving.

Variation in 3-Year Leaving Rates

With access to individual-level data, we can examine rates of leaving headship and how these vary across the system and workforce. This section focuses on major differences in three-year survival rates, exploring variation by local authority, gender, full-time or part-time status, academy status, age band, ethnicity, and phase. In all cases, figures are based on the leave rate from the 2020/21 to 2023/24 academic years. We also analyse combined factors to understand intersectional patterns, including gender with phase, FT/PT status, age band, sector, and ethnicity; age with phase, sector, FT/PT status, and ethnicity; FT/PT status with sector, phase, and ethnicity; and sector with phase. These subgroup analyses provide a detailed picture of where retention challenges are most pronounced and how they differ across roles and contexts. Given the number of subgroups examined, we selectively report areas with the most marked variation, and only briefly report other results in summary. Age is a key factor for attrition rates and is interacted with many of the groups.

Local Authority

Three-year leaving rates for headteachers vary substantially across LAs, ranging from 17.1% in North Tyneside to 46.0% in Plymouth. Most LAs fall between 25% and 40%, but there are notable LAs with high and low rates of attrition:

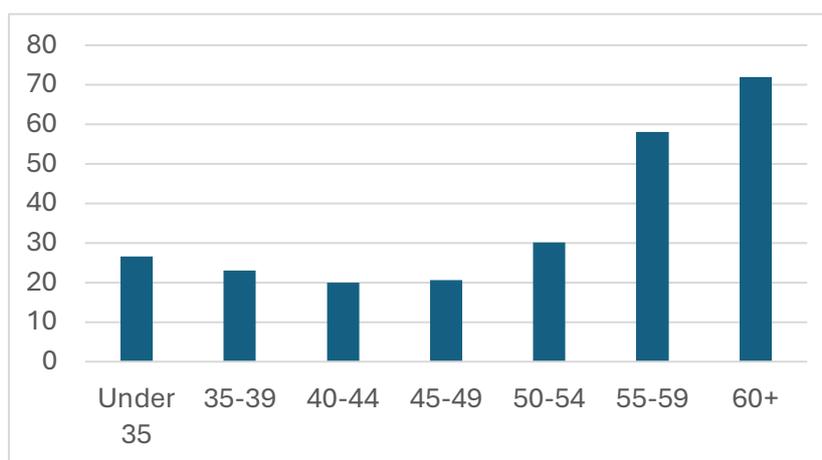
Table 3.13 – 3-year HT attrition rate by local authority (2020 to 2023)

High 35-46%	32-35%	29-32%	25-29%	Low 17-25%
- Plymouth	- Central Bedfordshire	- Blackpool	- Newham	- Hackney
- Bexley	- Portsmouth	- Telford and Wrekin	- Stoke-on-Trent	- Milton Keynes
- Medway	- Sandwell	- West Sussex	- Dudley	- Greenwich
- Calderdale	- Doncaster	- Newcastle upon Tyne	- Hampshire	- Slough
- Devon	- Hartlepool	- Cumbria	- Sunderland	- Camden
- Richmond upon Thames	- Northamptonshire	- Oxfordshire	- Thurrock	- Manchester
- Croydon	- Gloucestershire	- Cheshire West and Chester	- Westminster	- Bournemouth , Christchurch and Poole
- Torbay	- Somerset	- Coventry	- Surrey	- Worcestershire
- North Yorkshire	- North Somerset	- Kirklees	- Worcestershire	- Sefton
- Bradford	- Bath and NE Somerset	- Knowsley	- County Durham	- Havering
- Redbridge	- Haringey	- Lincolnshire	- Leicester	- Wandsworth
- Rotherham	- Kingston upon Hull, City	- Derbyshire	- Islington	- South Tyneside
- Halton	- Buckinghamshire	- Rochdale	- Oldham	- Hounslow
- Suffolk	- Southwark	- Solihull	- Brent	- Liverpool
- Darlington	- Sutton	- Tameside	- Kingston upon Thames	- Warrington
- Bristol, City of	- Swindon	- Luton	- Lancashire	- Salford
- Wiltshire	- Norfolk	- Southampton	- Ealing	- Lewisham
- Bromley	- Warwickshire	- Northumberland	- Staffordshire	- Barking and Dagenham
- S Gloucestershire	- Bury	- Kent	- North Lincolnshire	- North Tyneside
- Isle of Wight	- Essex	- Leicestershire	- Bolton	
- Stockton-on-Tees	- Shropshire	- Wakefield	- Barnet	
- NE Lincolnshire	- West Berkshire	- Wakefield	- St. Helens	
- Bedford	- Cambridgeshire	- Windsor and Maidenhead	- Walsall	
- Peterborough	- Hammersmith and Fulham	- Barnsley	- Reading	
- Waltham Forest	- Merton	- Derby	- Harrow	
- Cornwall	- Hillingdon	- Sheffield	- Wirral	
- Middlesbrough	- Southend-on-Sea	- Wokingham	- York	
- Brighton & Hove	- Gateshead	- Cheshire East	- Trafford	
- Nottingham	- Lambeth	- Enfield	- Wigan	
- East Sussex	- Redcar and Cleveland	- Bracknell Forest	- East Riding of Yorkshire	
	- Stockport	- Nottinghamshire	- Blackburn with Darwen	
	- Wolverhampton	- Dorset	- Herefordshire, County	
	- Birmingham	- Hertfordshire		
	- Tower Hamlets	- Leeds		

Nb. Order within each band is high to low (with Plymouth the highest rate, and North Tyneside the lowest).

Gender and Age

Figure 3.7, below, shows age as the most significant factor influencing headteacher attrition. Rates increase markedly as leaders enter their early 50s and rise sharply into the late 50s and beyond, coinciding with retirement and early retirement ages. There is also evidence of elevated attrition among younger leaders under 40, suggesting that both ends of the age spectrum present retention challenges, while mid-career headteachers experience the lowest rates of leaving – though still high at around 20%.

Figure 3.7 – 3-year HT attrition rate by age (%)

There are also some gender differences. Table 3.14 reports gender interacted with age. Among younger headteachers (16–34), attrition is 28.5% for women and 23.8% for men. Rates remain low through mid-career (≈19–24% for ages 35–49), but rise steeply after 50.

Table 3.14 – 3-year HT attrition rate by gender and age (%)

	Female	Male
16-34	28.5	23.8
35-39	22.2	24.2
40-44	19.2	21.6
45-49	20.4	21.3
50-54	29.4	32
55-59	57.5	59.8
60+	70.9	75.3

Overall, age is the dominant factor, with attrition jumping from ~20% in the 40s to over 70% at 60+, while gender differences are modest except at extremes.

Age and Part-time Status

Leaving rates rise sharply with age and are consistently higher for part-time heads.

- **Under 40:** Attrition is modest for full-time (22–25%) but much higher for part-time (37–43%).
- **40s:** Lowest rates overall for full-time (19–20%), but part-time still higher (30–35%).
- **50s:** Big jump in attrition: full-time from 30% to 57%, part-time from 50% to 78%.
- **60+:** Very high for both, but part-time peaks at 80% vs 70% for full-time.

Overall, age is the main driver, but part-time status amplifies exits, especially after 50.

Sector, Phase and Age

Table 3.15, below, shows that 3-year attrition rates for headteachers increase sharply with age across all sectors and phases. It also suggests that sectoral differences are most pronounced in mid-career groups.

Reminder: When comparing local authority maintained schools and academies, note that many academy leaders – especially executive heads and trust-level roles – are employed centrally and may not appear in school-level workforce data. This limits these sectoral comparisons.

Table 3.15 indicates that headteacher attrition is somewhat higher among younger leaders, particularly those under 35, across all phases and sectors. Rates decline through the late 30s and 40s, reaching their lowest point in the mid to late 40s, before rising sharply from the early 50s onwards and peaking among those aged 60 and above. While this pattern is broadly consistent, sectoral differences are evident: academy schools generally exhibit higher attrition rates at every age group compared to LA maintained schools. This suggests greater volatility in academy leadership, though comparisons should be interpreted with caution, as noted above, about centrally employed academy leaders who may not appear in school-level workforce data.

Table 3.15 – 3-year HT attrition rate by sector, phase and age (%)

Age	LA Maintained		Academy	
	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
16-34	24.6	supp	24.5	35.5
35-39	15.8	supp	26.2	29.9
40-44	15.3	21.9	21.8	29.7
45-49	14.8	15.3	26.5	26.7
50-54	26.3	24.7	35.3	37.1
55-59	55.4	51	60.8	65.4
60+	72.5	77.8	72.4	70.4

Age-Ethnic Minority Status

Table 3.16 suggests that age interacts significantly with ethnicity in shaping headteacher attrition patterns. Among younger leaders, particularly those under 40, ethnic minority headteachers exhibit higher leaving rates than their White British counterparts. However, from the mid-40s onwards, this trend reverses, with ethnic minority attrition rates becoming substantially lower. This difference is not apparent in overall comparisons that ignore age breakdowns. One possible explanation is survivorship bias: those who remain in post into later career stages are the ‘survivors’, who have experienced the role as sustainable in contrast to others who have left. There may also be generational effects at play.

Table 3.16 – 3-year HT attrition rate by age and ethnic minority status (%)

	Ethnic Minority	Not obtained or refused	White British
16-34	32.6	40.7	24.8
35-39	28.8	21.6	22.6
40-44	21.8	24.9	19.5
45-49	19.1	23.2	20.6
50-54	19.7	32.8	30.7
55-59	46.6	59	59
60+	65.1	74.5	72.5

Sickness Rates

One final sustainability indicator reported here is the rates of sickness in the workforce over time. Tables 3.17 and 3.18 give the mean number of sickness days per year by post for the primary and secondary phases, respectively.

Table 3.17 – Mean number of sickness days per year by role – Primary

	Teachers	AHT	DHT	HT
2010	4.26	4.16	3.89	3.35
2011	4.07	3.57	3.83	3.44
2012	3.92	3.72	3.48	3.23
2013	3.90	3.45	3.44	3.18
2014	3.54	3.27	3.12	3.00
2015	3.70	3.51	3.19	3.02
2016	3.58	3.13	3.03	2.87
2017	3.52	3.35	3.11	2.72
2018	3.55	3.31	3.09	2.70
2019	3.60	3.19	3.33	2.78
2020	-	-	-	-
2021	3.79	3.30	3.00	2.39
2022	6.27	5.29	5.43	4.42
2023	4.99	3.77	3.77	3.24

Table 3.17 – Mean number of sickness days per year by role – Secondary

	Teachers	AHT	DHT	HT
2010	4.89	3.56	3.03	2.45
2011	3.85	3.10	2.05	1.93
2012	4.10	2.92	2.25	1.68
2013	4.34	3.03	2.78	2.04
2014	4.07	2.94	2.39	1.66
2015	4.28	2.98	2.51	1.53
2016	4.05	2.89	2.32	1.41
2017	4.06	2.97	2.28	1.18
2018	4.03	2.92	2.54	1.13
2019	4.12	2.93	2.39	1.30
2020	-	-	-	-
2021	3.83	2.72	2.38	1.28
2022	6.50	5.01	4.38	2.61
2023	5.96	4.04	3.43	1.95

Across all years, leadership roles – especially headteachers – consistently show lower sickness absence than classroom teachers, suggesting differences in working patterns, responsibilities, or absence reporting. From 2010 to 2019, sickness absence gradually declined for all roles, with primary headteachers dropping from 3.35 days in 2010 to 2.78 in 2019, and secondary headteachers from 2.45 to 1.30 over the same period. However, there is a sharp spike in 2022, likely reflecting pandemic-related impacts, with teachers averaging 6.27 days in primary and 6.50 in secondary, and headteachers rising to 4.42 and 2.61 respectively. By 2023, figures partially recover but remain above pre-pandemic levels.

These data are most clearly seen graphically, as presented in Figures 3.7 and 3.8. Note that there was no data for the 2020/21 academic year due to the Covid19 pandemic.

Figure 3.8 – Mean number of sickness days per year by role – Primary

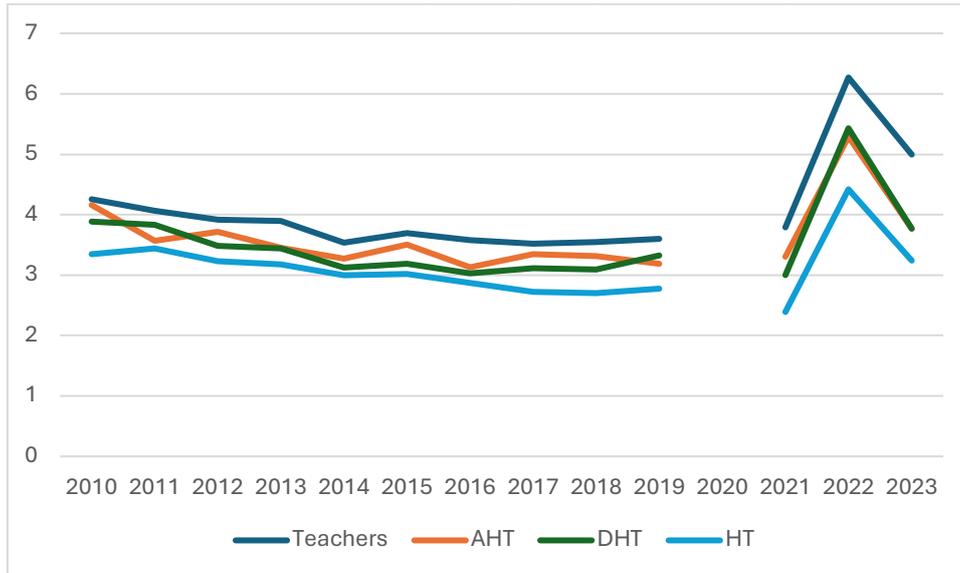
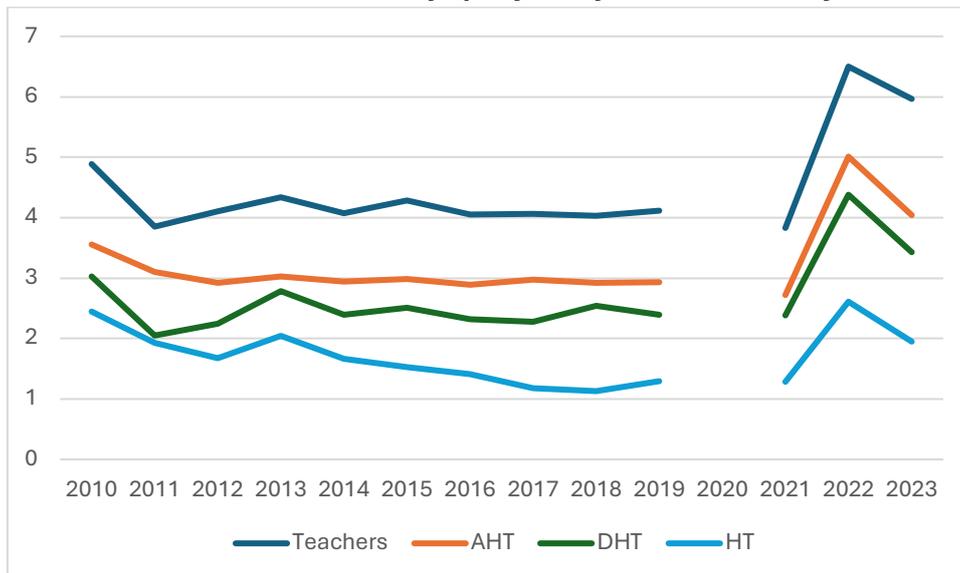


Figure 3.9 – Mean number of sickness days per year by role – Secondary



4. Selected findings from the survey in England

About the survey:

In this section we draw together a selection of responses to the UK survey. Our aim in doing so is to provide a short backdrop which sets the scene for the locality case studies, rather than a comprehensive review of findings. The full UK survey report, published separately,¹³ provides significantly more detail on the methodology and findings, including on many areas not covered here.

The online survey was designed and distributed to all schools in the UK between November 2024 and February 2025. The survey included a mix of closed and open-response items and was completed by 1,624 leaders, reflecting a representative spread of school phases, sectors and roles across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. 1001 leaders from England responded to the survey, including 581 headteachers (including principals and heads of school) as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Survey responses

	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

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

Leaders' views on the school system

Table 4.2, below, shows headteacher responses from each nation to a set of items in the survey that sought to capture views on their national and local systems.

Responses to the first item ('Schools in my area face distinctive challenges, compared to other areas') are similar across all three nations, with most leaders (68.6%) agreeing.

The next two items reveal some interesting differences. The second item asked whether leaders agreed or disagreed with the statement: 'There is a clear local hierarchy of schools in my area, in terms of their status and popularity with parents.' This question is designed to assess the

¹³ For details see: Perry, T., Greany, T., Collins, M., Thomson, P., & Goodacre, T. (2025). *Sustainable School Leadership: UK Survey Report 2025*. Sustainable School Leadership Project. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/crelm/documents/sustainable-school-leadership.pdf>

extent to which school leaders perceive local status hierarchies to exist, for example as a result of historic and current attitudes around prestige and/or performance. 72.2% of headteachers in England agreed with this statement (and only 11.2% disagreed): this level of agreement was notably higher than either Scotland (57.5%) and Northern Ireland (64.9%). The third item asked whether leaders agreed or disagreed with the statement: ‘Our school primarily serves students from the immediate local neighbourhood.’ Levels of agreement with this statement were lower in England (67.5%) than Scotland (85.7%) or Northern Ireland (79.8%). Taken together, these items indicate that school leaders in England are more likely to perceive parental choice and status hierarchies between schools than their peers in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Leaders in all three nations generally agreed with the fourth item (‘Our school feels like a strong part of the local community’), but school leaders in Northern Ireland were notably more likely to strongly agree (73.7%) compared with their peers in Scotland (49.1%) or England (41.8%). On the fifth item, heads in England (68%) were less to report regular collaboration with other local schools than heads in Scotland (85.2%) and Northern Ireland (82.2%).

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 Ireland¹⁴) 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.

TABLE 4.2 – 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

¹⁴ Note – due to an extended period of Action Short of Strike (ASOS) by the teacher unions in Northern Ireland, the Education and Training Inspectorate there has not been able to conduct full school inspections for significant periods in the last decade.

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
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

Views on school culture and practices

Table 4.3, below, shows headteacher responses in each nation to a set of questions around school culture and practices as well as an item on the impact of the Covid pandemic.

While leadership cultures are perceived positively by headteachers in all three nations (notably more so than their middle and senior leader peers), there are some variations between the nations. Headteachers in Northern Ireland, for example, are 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%). Perceptions of trust and collaboration are strongest among headteachers in England, where 58.1% 'strongly agree' this is the case, compared 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 4.3: 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

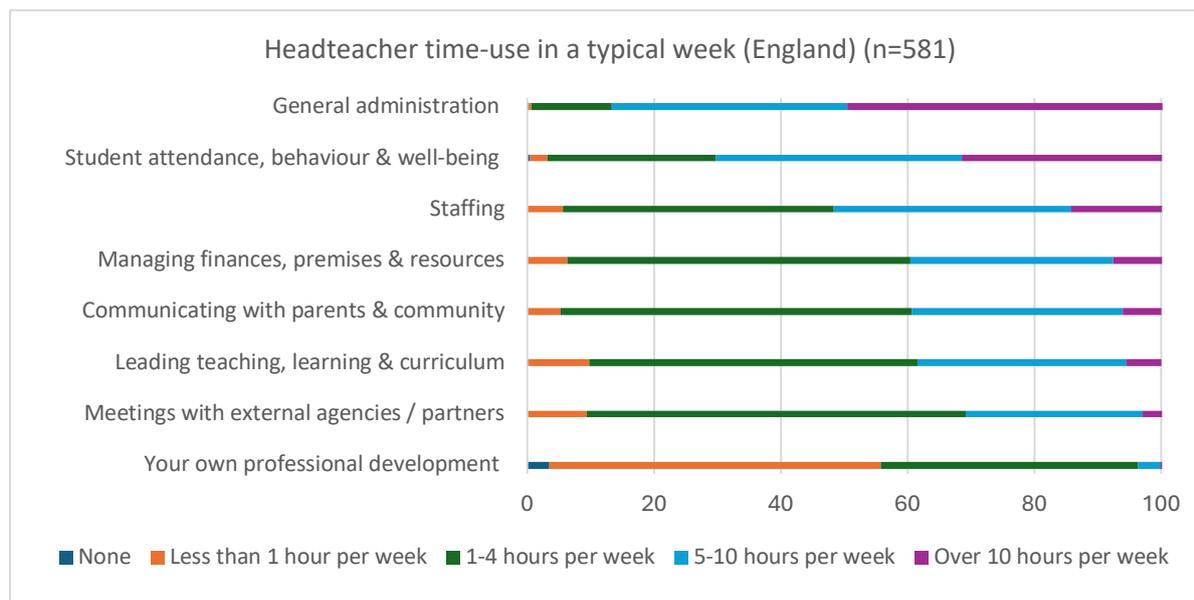
Headteacher time use

In the survey we asked how much time leaders spent in a typical week on a list of activities we had derived from the qualitative interviews in the locality case studies. Chart 4.1, below, shows the responses from headteachers in England.¹⁵ The responses show that English leaders' time is stretched across all these areas of internal and external organisational work. 'General administration' followed by 'Student attendance, behaviour and well-being' come top as the two most time-consuming categories (as in Scotland and Northern Ireland). 'Your own professional development' comes bottom (as it does in all three nations). In between, we see that Staffing, Managing finance, premises and resources, Communicating with parents/community; leading teaching, learning and curriculum, and Meetings with external agencies/partners are all significant areas. What is notable is that leaders in England (like Scotland and Northern Ireland) are spending relatively limited time on 'Leading teaching, learning and curriculum', despite this being seen as the core of instructional leadership and key to school improvement.

Interestingly, when we break down these responses to distinguish between leaders in academies and Local Authority maintained schools at primary level, we find very small differences in all these areas. This suggests that Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) are not managing to reduce the burden of admin or managing finances and resources on heads: similarly, it seems they are not enabling heads to spend more time on the leadership of teaching, learning and curriculum.

¹⁵ In the survey, the wording of some of these categories provided more detail than is shown here – e.g. 'Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing (including SEND and inclusion, safeguarding)' - reduced for reasons of space. See Perry et al, 2025 for full versions.

Chart 4.1: Headteacher time use in a typical week in England



How are leaders feeling – what drains and sustains them?

We asked 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.

Table 4.4 shows the results for headteachers in each nation. It shows that a combined 21.9% of leaders in England describe themselves as ‘mostly’ or ‘sometimes sinking’, compared to 29.2% in Scotland 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 the least likely to describe themselves as ‘sometimes’ or ‘mostly thriving’, compared to England (44.2%)¹⁶ and Northern Ireland (42.7%).

Table 4.4: OVERALL EXPERIENCE OF HEADTEACHERS BY NATION (%)

	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

¹⁶ We asked the same sinking-surviving-thriving question of school leaders in England in two previous surveys in 2021 and 2022. The three surveys were conducted differently 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 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.

Survey respondents were asked: ‘Which of the following are the most draining for you in your current role?’ Respondents selected 3-5 responses from a list of common drains which we had identified from our analysis of the qualitative interviews in the locality case studies.¹⁷

Responses for all leaders in each nation are shown in Table 4.5. This shows that the ‘drains’ in England are similar, but slightly different, to the drains in Scotland and Northern Ireland. ‘Financial and resource constraints’ come top in England, followed by ‘Staffing issues’ and ‘Poor work-life balance’, with ‘Special educational needs and inclusion challenges’ and ‘The weight of leadership’ also important.

Table 4.5: MOST COMMON DRAINS FOR ALL LEADERS BY NATION (%)

What drains you in leadership? (Select 3-5)	England (n=1004)	Northern Ireland (n=242)	Scotland (n=333)	All UK (n=1625)
Poor work-life balance	50.8%	57.0%	53.2%	52.2%
Staffing issues	51.4%	45.0%	58.9%	51.8%
Financial and resource constraints	53.5%	35.5%	42.3%	48.9%
The weight of leadership	47.4%	51.7%	40.8%	46.5%
Special educational needs and inclusion challenges	48.9%	29.8%	53.2%	46.4%
External pressures and accountability	36.4%	28.1%	22.8%	32.7%
Behaviour challenges	29.2%	26.4%	45.3%	32.7%
Operational/administrative burdens	25.1%	47.1%	36.3%	30.7%
Lack of support from higher authorities (e.g. politicians, LA, MAT)	24.8%	34.3%	23.7%	26.2%
Parental and community relations	26.5%	14.5%	18.6%	22.8%
Negative workplace culture and relationships	10.1%	16.9%	10.5%	11.0%
Strategic and developmental concerns (e.g., lack of autonomy, misalignment of values)	6.0%	5.0%	4.2%	5.5%

¹⁷ 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.

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

Finally, 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 responses are shown in Table 4.6, below. This shows that the most powerful sustaining factors for school leaders in all three nations are relational and altruistic. Relationships with students and their success and growth and collaboration with colleagues within school are the top two sustainers, by a clear margin in all three nations. Unlike the drains, the differences between the sustains in all three nations are relatively marginal.

Table 4.6: MOST COMMON SUSTAINS FOR ALL LEADERS BY NATION (%)

What Sustains you in leadership? (Select 3-5)	England (n=1004)	Northern Ireland (n=242)	Scotland (n=333)	All UK (n=1625)
Students' relationships, learning, growth and success	72.6%	76.4%	79.0%	74.5%
Relationships / collaboration with colleagues within school	68.8%	65.7%	68.8%	68.1%
Making a difference – a sense of autonomy and responsibility	42.9%	31.4%	39.6%	40.6%
Work fulfilment and enjoyment (e.g., job variety, participation in school life, professional interests)	40.0%	39.7%	30.6%	38.0%
My/their core values and moral purpose	37.6%	37.2%	38.1%	37.5%
Supporting others to develop and grow	34.7%	27.3%	33.6%	33.0%
Relationships/collaboration with colleagues outside school (inc. peer networks)	28.4%	28.1%	35.1%	30.0%
Positive feedback, encouragement and recognition	24.6%	22.3%	17.7%	22.8%
Material benefits and job security (e.g., salary, pension, holidays)	20.0%	17.4%	15.0%	18.6%
Community engagement and relationships (inc. governors, parents)	13.8%	24.8%	14.7%	15.8%
Extended or 'off-the-job' opportunities for professional development.	11.0%	7.0%	11.4%	10.3%
'On-the-job' opportunities for professional development and growth.	7.1%	5.4%	7.8%	6.8%
My life/their lives outside work (e.g., exercise, family, hobbies)	3.0%	0.0%	1.8%	2.2%

Leadership development and careers

The survey asked various questions around motivations for – and barriers to – applying for more senior leadership roles as well as qualifications and attitudes towards leadership development, which we do not cover here for reasons of space, but which are included in the full survey report.

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 research. Table 4.7, below, shows the three options and responses, broken down by nation. The most common pathway into headship in all three nations (54.3% in England) is one where the aspiration for the role emerges over the course of a career in schools. In contrast, a much smaller proportion (15.1% in England) stated that they had "always wanted to be a head" since starting their careers. Meanwhile, a surprisingly large proportion of heads (30.7% in England) described their route as more accidental, agreeing with the statement "I never really intended to be a head – it just happened".

TABLE 4.7 – ROUTE TO HEADSHIP/EXECUTIVE HEADSHIP BY NATION (%)

	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

To understand the future leadership pipeline, the survey asked respondents who were not yet in a headship role about their career aspirations. Table 4.8, below, shows the responses to the question, 'Would you like to be a headteacher/principal yourself one day?' Encouragingly, 33.1% in England say 'Yes, perhaps' or 'Yes, definitely'.

TABLE 4.8 – ASPIRATION FOR HEADSHIP (NON-HEADS) BY VARIOUS FACTORS (%)

	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

Finally, we asked leaders to select the statement that best described their career plans, from a list of options. In Table 4.9, their responses are consolidated into four categories to 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. 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.

TABLE 4.9 – HEADTEACHERS’ FUTURE CAREER INTENTIONS BY NATION (%)

	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

5. Locality case studies

This section includes the three locality case studies completed in England – City, Coast and Shire. Each case study focuses on recruitment, training and retention for a sample of schools and individual leaders, together with an exploration of wider needs, provision and sustainability across the locality. We explored how people had become headteachers in each locality, how they characterised and understood the area, how leaders and schools are supported, and what drains and sustains them. We also wanted to understand how leadership development works in the area, if and how schools work together and leaders support each other, and who takes on what roles.

Methodology:

Seven locality case studies were completed in total - three in England and two each in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The localities (Table 5.1) were selected based on an analysis of national data and informed by discussions with three national project advisory groups. Our aim was to visit a reasonably representative spread of contexts, considering factors such as geography (e.g. urban/coastal/rural), socio economic and demographic factors (e.g. above and below average levels of deprivation) and the nature and performance of local educational provision.

In each locality we interviewed a small number of local system leaders (e.g. Local Authority, MAT CEOs, leadership development providers) and employers (e.g. Chair of Governing Body, MAT HT Directors) and visited a locally representative spread of primary and secondary schools, where we interviewed potential or serving heads – usually individually but sometimes in small groups. Each interview lasted 1.5 hours, following a semi-structured schedule. In advance, interviewees were asked to complete a short proforma, setting out what drains and sustains them in leadership. We also reviewed publicly available documents and websites, for example describing local partnership arrangements.

In terms of analysis, cleaned interview transcripts were coded in NVivo by three members of the research team using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A set of codes was developed both deductively (i.e. reflecting the project research questions) and inductively.

As explained above, following the qualitative analysis phase, we ran a workshop in each of the localities, attended by our original interviewees. At each workshop we shared and sense-checked the findings and explored potential recommendations and implications.

Each locality case study was subsequently written up into the detailed reports included here. These were then used as the basis for national and cross-national analyses using a framework developed by Bartlett and Vavrus (2017).

Table 5.1: The seven localities

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 – Urban/Rural	Urban including deprivation, rural and border

Locality Case Study: England – Coast

This case study begins with an overview of the locality and interviewee sample.¹⁸ It then outlines how interviewees perceived and understood Coast as a place and follows with an account of the collective and individual professional and personal identities they articulated. The main focus is then on leadership. We describe how school leaders are recruited and developed, the nature of the role, the experience of leading that was reported, including what school leaders say drains and sustains them and how they are supported.

Introduction

England Coast is a smaller-than-average Local Authority (LA) that includes a large seaside town which has areas of significant deprivation. Beyond the seaside town are rural areas with market towns and villages and, on average, a relatively affluent population. A large urban area borders Coast within easy commuting distance. There are also some large planned and recent housing developments across the Coast. The result is sharp contrasts across the area in the impact on schools and nature of pupil cohorts

Almost all schools in Coast are academies. More than 12 Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) operate in Coast, however nearly two-thirds of the academies are in a handful of trusts, all of which are based either in Coast itself or in one of its neighbouring LAs. The MATs have different profiles; some focus mainly in the deprived seaside town, others across the rural and less deprived areas, while one or two have some in each area. A complex pattern of relationships has emerged as a result, with the LA having limited formal accountability for school performance.

There are generally falling rolls in primary schools across the area. A bulge in the pupil population is now entering and passing through secondary school. Falling primary rolls are felt very acutely in some small rural schools, threatening viability in some cases. Elsewhere, schools are opening, and more are planned to serve new housing developments. In some secondary schools, proximity to the urban area combined with the recent population bulge means pressure on available places.

MATs now provide the main structure for collaborative work and improvement efforts between schools. Area partnerships and networks continue, with variable levels of engagement. There is a Local Area Partnership, convened by the LA with an independent chair; an annual conference for primary headteachers; active local network for SEND and the Secondary Headteacher's

¹⁸ The visits and interviews in England Coast took place in Spring 2024.

Association continues. Increasingly, collaboration between schools and arrangements for formal Continuing Professional Development (CPD) are organised within MATs.

Interviewees

Table 5.2: Breakdown of interviewees by role

	DHT	Employer	HT	Local Leader	Grand Total
England Coast	2	4	8	6	20

Table 5.3: List of Interviewees

Name	Gender	Role	School/Organisation	Type	Time In post (Years)	Time in role (Years)
Alice	F	Executive Director	Vicarage MAT	MAT	1	7
Arlo	M	CEO	Laurels MAT	MAT	7	7
William	M	CEO	Thornfield MAT	MAT	6	6
Emilia	F	Executive Director	Vicarage MAT	MAT	0	0
Lucas	M	Consultant	Consultant #3	Independent	4	4
Ruby	F	HT	Hillcrest Secondary	School-Secondary	1	6
Luna	F	EHT	Barn Primary	School-Primary	6	14
Roman	M	HT	Firs Primary	School-Primary	0.5	14
Tommy	M	HT	Cottage Primary	School-Primary	7	9
Isaac	M	EHT	Nook Secondary	School-Secondary	10	10
Maisie	F	DHT	Coach House Primary	School-Primary	1	1
Aria	F	Director of HR	Laurels MAT	MAT	3	3
Penelope	F	Director of Learning	Laurels MAT	MAT	0.5	0.5
Teddy	M	CEO	Clarence MAT	MAT	6	6
Delilah	F	Area Lead	Eng-Central-1	Govt Agency	0.5	0.5
Chloe	F	HT	Tranquil Primary	School-Primary	6	6
Joshua	M	Trustee	Clarence MAT	MAT	6	6

Elijah	M	HT	Pinecrest Secondary	School-Secondary	7	7
Margot	F	DHT	Fairhaven Primary	School-Primary	6	6
Sebastian	M	DHT	Lavender Secondary	School-Secondary	4	4

Place

Schools and Communities

The mixture of affluence and deprivation in England-Coast was frequently raised by interviewees. The area’s varied demographics and social inequality were linked to approaches to education by William:

“It’s a very disparate authority in terms of haves and have nots. So, there’s a lot of inequalities, social inequalities, but also different views around education”
 William, CEO, Thornfield MAT

Ruby was very aware of the proximity of affluence and deprivation around her school:

“The financial backgrounds of our families are so broad. You know, this from my perspective, there’s some real pockets of deprivation or you know, all families really, really struggling. And then, you know, you’ve got people who moved in, let’s say...[affluent] area, which is like, you know, houses worth millions. So, it’s it’s a real kind of mix” Ruby, HT, Hillcrest Secondary

Differences between some areas were stark. At one primary school the headteacher explained that many children only stayed until they were old enough to attend a (private) prep school:

“Obviously it’s a quite a wealthy catchment. But [School name] is probably more mixed and historically this was almost seen as a pre prep ... when I first came here a few children did leave in year four, which is typical of a of a pre prep school ... generally speaking, a large proportion of the children would consider independent schools here, much larger than proportion over there for secondary and sometimes at year 4” Luna, HT, Barn Primary

William on the other hand highlighted the nature of the schools in his MAT:

“[The MAT runs] nine schools, all in [Coast] and we serve the most disadvantaged in [Town]. So, one of them at [Town], 70% pupil premium, but IMD index is really high, so, you know comparable with and actually if you look at the Super Output Areas, they’re in the top one per cent in the country ... [But] we also work in a, you know, obviously we’ve got a mixed MAT.” William, CEO, Thornfield MAT

Delilah, giving an overview, suggested that socioeconomic factors were a significant factor in differences between schools and in the strategies employed by the Multi Academy Trusts that were increasingly important in the area:

“You've got some areas of real social deprivation, like areas of [Town] and then areas of reasonable affluence ... And that does really influence the types of schools and what's happening in the MAT landscape, what we've seen is that some of the MATs are ending up taking more of the deprived, disadvantaged students.” Delilah, Area Lead, DfE

Emilia suggested that the differences influenced parental choice with some parts of the locality seen as desirable because of their relative prosperity:

“The bigger picture of [Coast] is there are some quite affluent towns on the edge of [Nearby Urban Area] that people move out toto get children into more preferable schools in more rural areas. So, it's interesting because that's quite a dichotomy I suppose.” Emilia, Executive Director, Vicarage MAT

Changing pupil demographics also presented challenges for some schools. There are generally falling rolls in primary schools across the area, as a bulge in the pupil population enters secondary school.

“[England-Coast] in particular has got a real reduction in numbers and admissions. It's really affecting quite a few of our schools. We're gonna have to think as we go forwards and make, you know, we are already reducing staffing and partly because of reduced birth rates and partly with the area and [Town], the families that would have normally served the schools well, those children have come through. They've gone, but the families are still living around the schools.” Teddy, CEO, Clarence MAT

The effect on schools has not been uniform, however, with some schools seen as desirable and in other areas new housing developments changing the patterns of choice:

“They're building a housing development ... it has caused some controversy in the local area because there are some schools that have really low numbers and numbers across [Town] in general are dropping. ... Why couldn't the LA pay for transport to some of those existing schools that have falling rolls rather than putting all this money into building a brand-new school.” Delilah, Area Lead, DfE

A leader in one established primary school located near a large new-build estate described sophisticated marketing efforts as one of the school's main priorities for the year ahead:

“There's a lot more about marketing the school now ... we did a lot of school tours, and we do open afternoons so that anyone who wants to come and look round can look round, ask those questions and then we do things like stay and play. So, yeah, that whole growth of the school thing is really changing.” Maisie, DHT, Coach house Primary

Meanwhile, in some secondary schools, proximity to the nearby urban area combined with the recent population bulge means a particular pressure on available places and, with that, additional operational challenges:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“If you look at Year Nine, I've got 390 students in Year Nine, you know that's like twice the size of any other year group in any school. And I think there's pros and cons to that really in terms of capacity. It's a big school. ... that's really challenging at the moment as you can imagine with recruitment.” Ruby, HT, Hill Crest Secondary

In other areas, very local effects meant growing roll numbers place, despite overall trends, added additional pressure to local infrastructure:

“I think the village has found it quite difficult that we have expanded in size, because it is very difficult, the parking as you probably experienced can be quite a challenge. Most of the children who come to this school do not live in the village because it's so small and they come, and they traditionally came because it had very high results.” Luna, HT, Barn Primary

There was a nuanced and varied pattern across England-Coast. with fierce competition for pupils in some places.

School, Governance and Relationships

Almost all schools across all phases in England-Coast are academies. The majority are part of one of the more than a dozen multi-academy trusts (MATs) operating in Coast. Nearly two-thirds of the academies are in a handful of larger MATs, all of which are based either in England-Coast itself or in one of the neighbouring LAs. According to leaders' accounts, the conversion of schools to academies in England-Coast had accelerated since 2015 and the resultant large number of MATs have significantly changed the nature of relationships between schools and the LA in England-Coast. Lucas had previously worked for the LA:

“[England-Coast] historically you know definitely when I was working there, relatively small local authority and actually relationships between heads you know it's quite a good size authority for heads to have relationships with each other in primary and secondary.” Lucas, Local Leader

His recollection was echoed by a number of headteachers. Teddy, now CEO of a MAT reflected:

“I think [Coast] was a very collaborative local authority. The way it worked, heads were very worked together and and we're used to that way of working. I think the trust landscape has changed things and has fragmented our approaches.” Teddy, CEO, Clarence MAT

Most leaders spoke of the ‘fragmentation’ of school communities and the uneven networks which have emerged in their place. Elijah spoke about the secondary heads network:

“I think that's a real challenge for the MAT system. Hmm, because [Headteachers group based in [Coast] has really fragmented and broken down as a network... It's really interesting because ... there's 10 secondary schools I think, you got 5 MATs represented so it it's really fragmented in terms of cohesive network.” Elijah, HT, Pinecrest Secondary

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

Arlo, a CEO, suggested that networks existed within the group of schools forming a MAT, although he actively supported the heads of schools in his trust to meet with peers outside their group of schools:

“There is absolutely no network for heads or teachers to participate in, in [Coast] other than that provided by the Multi Academy trusts themselves. The one exception, a couple of exceptions ... are the government hubs ... So the primary heads [group] has completely ceased to exist ... They still have an annual conference for head teachers, which we support as a trust we get our heads to go ... to meet people from outside the trust.” Arlo, Chief Executive, Laurels MAT

William summed the situation up, referring pithily to ‘bubbles’:

“There is no [Coast] anymore. Now there's the local authority, but they have no power and it's just trusts here now. So, you're looking at trusts and therefore we work within our big bubbles.” William, CEO, Thornfield MAT

The academisation of schools in England-Coast has been accompanied by a reduction in active support of schools by the LA. Some headteachers offered this as a reason for their schools becoming part of MATs:

“So, we were basically, on our own as a maintained school, the local authority had had a lot of stuff changing, it was getting smaller and smaller and and I think ultimately that's what why we went to become part of the Multi Academy Trust because I mean if anything COVID just showed how difficult it is when you're when you're on your own.” Luna, Headteacher, Barn Primary

There were other services, important to schools, for which the LA retains statutory responsibility that were also under strain:

“The local authority, which had lost schools to the academy system, had been left with some significant responsibilities, which it was very hard for them to deliver and hadn't really put the budget into maintaining service(s) ... until a year ago there was only one person working in educational welfare ... the SEND function was in Ofsted special measures, as was social care.” Arlo, CEO, Laurels MAT

Alice described a pattern in which MATs and the LA worked together when needed, indicating that new, practical collaborations had become established:

“We have positive working relationships with the local authority, but they are ... quite limited in terms of their capacity ... we've found ourselves in meetings or arrangements that have meant we've needed to work very closely with either other trusts, other schools or the local authority. And every time we've done that, it's been broadly positive, although not always easy.” Alice, Executive Director, Vicarage MAT

Other leaders spoke of a Local Area Partnership, which included the CEOs of the main MATs, convened by the LA with an independent chair. There were also references to an active local network for leaders of SEND in schools.

Identity

Local Identities and Schools

Leaders were very aware of the specific characteristics of the communities around schools and often articulated distinctive identities connecting schools to those communities. Chloe, for example, was very clear about the importance of her school to the daily life of the community, reflected in her response to a critical moment:

“When we had that Strep A thing ... Everybody was like, oh my God, here we go again. I was like no, no, no, we're absolutely not doing that, I said. I can tell you now, we're not doing any of that. This school will not be closing. There will be no way this school is closing because we couldn't possibly do that again to this community and to these families” Chloe, HT, Tranquil Primary

Tommy's school was in a new community on a housing development, and he saw his school as a key institution binding the wider, newly forming community, together:

“This (School) had to be the centre in the hub. So, the work with the other community that the voluntary group has been really important to promote their either baby groups or crib club class or you know, all these things we've had to help them promote and promote because this has to be the centre of the community.” Tommy, HT, Cottage Primary

The conversion of schools to academies and their oversight by MATs was something some leaders feared would challenge the close identification with a community if the MAT was not locally based:

“There's a big difference between a local MAT like ours, which is still local schools, and schools joining a MAT that might be run from [nonadjacent locale] or, you know from elsewhere there. There's no longer that great sense of community,” Joshua, Trustee, Clarence MAT

For some leaders, the characteristics of the community were closely linked to their professional identity and motivations. Isaac articulated very strongly a commitment to working in schools serving disadvantaged communities:

“And but isn't it awful that some people get the opportunity I had, and some people don't. And so, my mission has always been that that's what I will do. I will work in schools of high disadvantage, high levels of need and do everything I can to try and secure a school for every community. That means that those children regardless of their backgrounds can come and fly” Isaac, Headteacher, Nook Secondary.

Evolving identities as leaders

Headteachers in England-Coast described different ways in which their identities as leaders evolved during their careers. Some leaders had aspired to headship for an extended period of time. Luna's was a striking account:

“When I was 10 years old, the head [of the school] changed ... and overnight.. it gave me a different experience, which was a negative one actually, at that point (I) decided that being head teacher could make a real change to someone's educational experience. So, I wanted to be a head teacher.... It's a slightly bonkers now and I look back on it so, there was always that intention of wanting to be a head, but then I've always wanted to. I mean it was always, that was the game plan” Luna, Headteacher, Barn Primary

For other leaders, the understanding of themselves as leaders and as potential headteachers developed as they gained experience:

“I've always wanted to be a principal since I became a head of science and realised that, you know, you can make a real difference there and actually just imagine the difference you can make if you ” Isaac, HT, Nook Secondary

Some headteachers were clear they had not aspired to leadership, but having developed the necessary experience, took the opportunity when it arose:

“So I've been here 25 years. Wow. Not all as head... sort of done different roles on the journey here. I never thought I wanted to be a head. It was never a goal, so I sometimes call myself the accidental head... the step from deputy to headship. So [Name] was executive head and we had two deputies and one of the deputies went off for headship. And so it was like, OK Elijah, this is this is your moment” Elijah, Headteacher, Pine Crest Secondary

Leadership identities rarely developed in a uniform way and often elements of each path into leadership were evident in interviewees' narratives:

“I really went into leadership because of the national strategies I got depressed about having to work on Sunday afternoons, planning things... So, I became a leader. I thought leadership was easy because I've trained as a manager... And so leading schools and systems and finance and HR ... it was hard, but it wasn't hard for me. It was just adapting what I already knew” William, CEO, Thornfield MAT

Leadership

Recruitment

Process, applications and selection

With the majority of schools part of MATs, recruitment of headteachers was either managed directly by the central trust organisation or led by a school's local governing body with support from the relevant trust.

There were differences between different MATs in the arrangements described for interviewing and selection, but leaders generally described multi-day selection processes for headship positions, with tasks designed to test candidates' fit with the organisation and ability to undertake strategic aspects of the role. Penelope offered a detailed breakdown of a two-day interview process in her MAT:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“So, the panel is usually three of the (school’s) Governing Body, a member of the (Trust) school improvement or education team, and then a trustee representative; they work really tightly together on the shortlisting before we even get the candidates in. And then we would do day one. And then hopefully we’ve got candidates down to two people or perhaps three... And then day two, we would do a presentation and a more formal interview... it’s normally the chair of governors will actually make that decision with input from the diocese [if a church school] and if they need it, guidance from the trust.” Penelope, Local Leader, Laurels MAT

Penelope described a number of different tasks candidates would be required to carry out on day one. The overall pattern she described was similar across all the trusts. William’s account of recruiting to a school in his MAT highlighted some additional points:

“The field was small. I think we had six applications, and we interviewed four, we had one drop out on the day, [they] got a job elsewhere and wasn’t our favourite. So, we went in with three and we were confident we got rid of two at the end of day one because they didn’t have the strategic overview, we were left with the final one, which is always a worry. So, to negate that, we brought in another interviewer who didn’t know that person ... so that they could give us a clean view for day two” William, CEO, Thornfield MAT

In William’s MAT, the decision-making was firmly with the central MAT team. He highlighted an issue raised repeatedly, that the number of applicants for posts was quite small.

Leaders’ reflections on experiencing the process were mixed:

“You have the awful procedure of going for the job and the two-day interview process, which was hell on earth, can I say that? Deputy Headteacher, Coach House Primary

While Masie found the experience gruelling, Ruby was more upbeat:

“It’s a really rigorous few days. It’s just because I’m, as I said, because I’ve had that experience across most areas in school leadership. It was a quite enjoyable (experience)” Ruby, Headteacher, Hillcrest Secondary

The challenging nature of headship recruitment process was clearly intended to ensure that the best possible candidate for the position was employed, but as we’ve noted, leaders were concerned that there often small numbers of candidates. William’s account above related to appointing a headteacher in a primary school, Emilia reported a similar situation in secondary schools in her trust:

“We just ran a recruitment process for the England-Coast Secondary and there was only one strong candidate that came through for the principal role, whereas in the [Town] School there were three through.” Emilia, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

Leaders in trusts talked about looking at potential headteachers within their group of schools as an approach to appointing headteachers:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“At the moment we have 3 headships vacant, and I've opened up a fortnight of internal applications only before we go external. With the aim of doing some movement inside the trust. Our thinking on that is, well, we have struggled in the past sometimes to get the right calibre of people through the door.” Arlo, CEO, Laurels MAT

Arlo's reference to 'internal' candidates was to applicants from schools within the trust. When it came to candidates, some leaders talked about specific qualities and candidates being able to 'fit' with the trust's schools:

“I think from certainly from our MAT ... they've got to work with, not just with their schools, but across, so that how they fit and we'll be able to work with a wider group of heads .. and it's being able to work within that” Teddy, CEO, Clarence MAT

Elsewhere, we heard of leaders moving within a trust to become a headteacher. Masie described the appointment of her headteacher:

“She was from the Trust, so she was at another school in the trust, and she had been deputy head and SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) at that school for a long time and was kind of ready for a headship, so she came across...because her previous school was part of the MAT, they'd already worked out like a release plan... so she was already able to kind of get to know the school and how things worked and all of that before we kind of hit the ground running in September” Masie, Deputy Headteacher, Coach House Primary

Some headteachers reported a perception that other trusts only appointed from within, albeit those trusts themselves reported limited fields:

“So, I would say like [MAT] are very into creating their own heads. You know, a number of colleagues have been to interviews and you know, at [MAT] schools, you know, they like their own, they grow their own. There's a certain flavour, their mentality.” Elijah, Headteacher, Pinecrest Secondary

Elijah went on to note that a school in the same trust as his own school had attracted only applicants from within the trust:

“You know [School name] which is one of ours, no external applicants, right. You know. So again, you got very low numbers coming through ... I still think assistant heads probably the hottest ticket in town.” Elijah, Headteacher, Pinecrest Secondary

Elijah again highlights the relatively small numbers of applicants and suggests a greater appetite for other leadership posts. We now consider the appetite for headship roles further.

Diminishing Appetite for Headship

There was a broad consensus that the appetite of junior colleagues for leadership has diminished:

“I think there's probably less of an appetite for headship than anything else possibly. You know, I know there's we've got some headship vacancies in the

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

Trust at primary level, and I think at least one of these, they've really struggled to post, they've really struggled to recruit for” Ruby, HT, Hill Crest Secondary

A range of reasons were offered to explain the diminished appetite for headship. Increased workloads associated with leadership were a common factor mentioned:

“I think people in schools see the heads struggling, see they are working there at 12, 14 hours a day and think ‘well is this really what I want to do?’, you know ... and having that that responsibility that comes with it and it is, then it's a work life balance” Joshua, Trustee, Clarence MAT

A specific factor referred to was that the financial reward was not seen as commensurate with the increased responsibility:

“You know, you have this situation where a deputy in one of our largest schools is actually paid more than a head by in one of our smallest schools just because of the scale and the factors applying” Joshua, Trustee, Clarence MAT

More generally, there was a feeling that the challenges and burdens potential headteachers observed leaders to be managing were sufficient to discourage them. Isaac identified the importance of feeling valued:

“I don't think it is about massive salaries. ... It's about feeling valued and feeling professional and feeling like society sees your purpose and the value that you add to their children... certain groups of people that will say, well, stick on the flak jacket ... And some who are in the front line say that there easier ways to earn a living” Isaac, HT, Nook Secondary

Emilia suggested that observing the perceived impact on leaders was a factor:

“I think that's one of the reasons why people are feeling disillusioned with the job and people are saying, ‘oh, I wouldn't wanna go into headship’ ... (they) are looking at those leaders and not seeing joy. They're not seeing people going in and out of classrooms all day and congratulating teachers and learners on the great job that they're doing” Emilia, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

Ruby's reflections suggested that some heads understood and sympathised with the hesitancy some potential headteachers felt:

“You know, if I would, if I was going to go back and do this all again, I'm not sure I would have ended up being a head necessarily.” Ruby, HT, Hill Crest Secondary

Diversity

Discussion about recruitment of headteachers included reflections on the diversity of headteachers and the range of applicants for roles. Thinking about gender, Penelope's description of how she saw the situation in her trust closely reflected the national picture:

“Apart from my secondaries, which are three male heads and one female, we're actually probably a little bit more female dominated in our primaries (headteachers)... All of our staff, we are definitely female-dominated across all of our staff. I suppose the proportion of male head teachers is out of kilter with

the, particularly in primary around the number of male teachers.” Penelope, Local Leader, Laurels MAT

The points she highlighted of a majority female workforce and smaller proportion of women in leadership reflects a national position. Arlo, CEO in the same trust, highlighted a longstanding effort to prepare and encourage women into leadership:

“We continue to run a women into leadership program and that started it was actually a government funded program at one at one point” Arlo, CEO, Laurels MAT

Penelope reflected further on what she perceived to be factors in the differences in the way women sought leadership positions:

“I've seen lots of male young teachers that their ambition is to get to headship as quickly as possible. It sometimes feels you know and it's a generalisation sometimes feel different for female colleagues... you know, maybe you have a few years off for children and things and then come back part time. And so, it may be a more gradual process.” Penelope, Local Leader, Laurels MAT

In another trust, Emilia considered the same issues, but was slightly more optimistic about the position in that trust:

“I know for a fact that in our trust, our workforce is about 75% female and so it wouldn't be surprising if every one of our leadership groups has got more females than males. Now the question would be then, are there a disproportionate number of males in some of those leadership groups? I don't think so actually. So, I think probably we're fairly representative around gender.” Emilia, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

She recognised a different position in relation to ethnic diversity:

“The education workforce in [Coast] is very white and not at all diverse, I would say as a massive generalization... there's more diversity in the pupil communities than in the communities of teachers, I would say.” Emilia, Local Leader Vicarage MAT

Arlo made the same point, and acknowledged that they had not succeeded in changing the situation:

“So we are aware and do and doing things, but I wouldn't say we're having traction yet in in creating more ethnically diverse workforce.” Arlo, CEO, Laurels Trust

Another leader in Vicarage MAT highlighted proactive steps being taken and the stated intentions of the trust:

“I mentioned EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) strategy and the whole host of staff, EDI networks and lots of other things.... what we're trying to do is make sure that we've got children, leaders, teachers who reflect the national population.” Alice, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

Emilia however, was very aware of some of the challenges and how successful the strategy was:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“How you address that at leadership level is difficult if you don't have people as a pipeline coming into the profession from a broader range of different backgrounds... so I think it's really quite a difficult challenge to deliberately try to introduce more diversity into a place. I don't think that we found anything that's been very successful.” Emilia, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

Some leaders reflected on a wider range of experience and backgrounds that cut across other types of diversity:

“I don't know the stats, but imagine the stats of heads from working class backgrounds is pretty probably a bit better than from ethnic minority backgrounds, but possibly not a lot better.” Lucas, Local Leader

It was a point Emilia also made quite forcefully:

“We don't count class, do we? We don't. We don't explore whether we've got representativeness around people who've come from poverty or from the disadvantage of our kind of pupil cohorts.” Emilia, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

Recruitment of Staff Teaching and Support Staff

Recruitment at all levels was described as challenging by a number of leaders. A mixture of points were made, suggesting a lack of high-quality candidates, numbers of applicants more generally and lack of aspiration amongst junior staff to get into leadership positions:

“So, there's a real we've sort of lack of, you know, and talking to other MATs as well and some of them have advertised and readvertised and readvertised and some of them are then appointed and then those people have left within a short period of time. And so, a common discussion we will have is a state of recruitment and people coming in externally and being able to do that” Teddy, CEO, Clarence MAT

William suggested the point applied to teachers more generally:

“It's becoming increasingly difficult to recruit teachers, especially in year, and I would say that the standard of teachers that were applying for work is not as high as it used to be. The resilience of teachers is not as high as it used to be. The adaptability of teachers is not as high as it used to be, and many of them have been trained to use specific schemes and teach by number” William, CEO, Thornfield MAT

The difficulty of hiring of teaching assistants and non-teaching staff was also raised repeatedly. Margot made a specific comparison between the apparent unattractiveness of the role and supermarket checkout work:

“The fact recruiting lunchtime staff for less than, it comes down to money again, doesn't it? Less than they'd get paid sitting on the till in Tesco's. But actually, to come into a lunchtime where you've got, year six is being gobby or children doing whatever, telling on each other, and they don't have those skills to deal with that. And why would you come and put yourself through that for an hour a day?” Margot, Deputy Headteacher, Fairhaven Primary

Succession Planning

A number of leaders spoke about succession planning in terms of actively preparing staff for more senior leadership roles, developing their capabilities in their existing roles, and sometimes proactively identifying staff with potential. These practices were most often spoken of in terms of groups of schools in a MAT.

Alice reinforced a point we have already highlighted, that there was a sense that headteacher appointments were frequently candidates already within a particular MAT.

“There’s a little bit of Inter-trust leadership crossing over, but inside the [Vicarage MAT] good succession routes through.” Alice, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

Alice refers to the ‘succession routes’ within Vicarage MAT. Emilia describes some elements of that succession planning approach, part of which involved thinking in terms of potential successors for specific posts:

“...behind every leadership post we have a big tracker of who, if they moved on, who would be able to step up” Emilia, Local Leader, Vicarage.” MAT

She also described a more expansive approach:

“We do have a succession planning approach. Umm, it’s quite variable. Sometimes it’s a good meeting with a spreadsheet that we all contribute into through conversations, and sometimes it’s a big whiteboard with magnets on and not everyone who needs to be in the conversation is in the conversation” Emilia, Vicarage MAT

The spreadsheets and ‘magnets’ refer to lists of potential leaders and individuals identified as priorities for opportunities. She also referred to some of the activities organised for senior leaders:

“We have a network for VP’s and AP’s, so that’s kind of the next tier and we share with them quite a lot of the stuff we also share with their Principals” Emilia, Vicarage MAT

Both Alice and Emilia indicated that the leaders on the lists and in the networks were often invited to ‘step in’ if needed.

William, CEO of another MAT, described similar thinking. He articulated a quite instrumental motivation, reflecting on small numbers of applicants generally and especially small numbers of those he perceived to have the capabilities required:

“We almost totally now rely on our own people. So, we grow people up.” William, CEO, Thornhill MAT

William also described an overt process of identifying individuals and inviting some to take on interim roles, as both support for schools and personal development opportunities:

“We have the people that are on the succession planning. And therefore, when maybe when vacancies or opportunities arise, will move those people into it. So the deputy head that’s currently the head interim ... one of our schools was

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

ready for this. And so we phoned him and said ‘you’ve got this opportunity. Do you want it?’” William, CEO, Thornhill MAT

In Penelope’s trust, there was similar thinking about creating opportunities for school staff to lead work and gain experience in other schools:

“It’s opportunities to lead. In terms of subjects, we have our lead and consultant teachers that we appoint with within trust... to give people the opportunity to work beyond their school as well because we know that’s really valuable and what we’re trying to build up is that culture of movement between our schools ... that movement within schools is really I think beneficial for us” Penelope, Local Leader, Laurels MAT

The activities described in the different trusts were in addition to more formal training and development programmes which are discussed in the next section. In many MATs in England Coast, it was clear that there were planned and varied strategies within those trusts to ensure that leadership positions were not left unfilled and that potential successors were well prepared. These strategies notwithstanding, filling headship posts was often difficult, albeit usually successful. We also did not hear of concerted area-wide strategies that extended beyond or between individual trusts.

Training

Leaders discussed the various ways in which they had personally been prepared for leadership and the different opportunities and strategies pursued in England Coast for future and current leaders.

National Programmes

The nationally designed and funded suite of development programmes, including the (non-mandatory) headship qualification NPQH (National Professional Qualification for Headship), were available through ‘Teaching School Hubs’. Emilia, who had a lead role in one the hubs, outlined their role:

“The Teaching School Hubs, as you know have the DfE remit to deliver the golden thread, so that is to provide initiatives, training early career framework programs, appropriate body service and NPQs for leaders at all levels for the people in the area that the designated hub serves. Emilia, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

Lucas, who chaired the local partnership in Coast, suggested that almost all schools, irrespective of whether they were academies of LA maintained, had staff who were pursuing one of the programmes (although not necessarily NPQH):

“Overall it was a very high percentage take up in you know if you take any NPQ program and you know the vast majority of schools were engaged in something.” Lucas, Local Leader

In the previous section we highlighted some of the approaches MATs took to succession planning, and formal training programmes were part of the planned activities intended to develop and prepare leaders. William explained that individuals identified in his trust would be encouraged to do the programmes:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

There'll be training will be put in there as part of that, whatever it will be. So it's it's it's tailored for them and that's that's how we do it, which is easy at the moment with all the with all the free NPQ's. But that may, if they stop being free, then we may be in a bit of a different situation, I guess William, CEO, Thornhill MAT

William noted that the programmes were free for all participants for undertaking NPQs as the DfE were meeting costs. That position changed some time after our visits as William had anticipated. During our visits, we heard repeatedly of school staff being encouraged to undertake the programmes:

“NPQs we've really promoted NPQs and as a MAT and we've had a really good uptake of them.” Teddy, CEO, Clarence MAT

Emilia had long experience of running leadership programmes and of different versions of the NPQs. She reflected on the current model that presented more material online than hitherto:

“(Previously) they would have been in a group, probably with people from [Town] as well, and then (currently) quite a lot of the delivery has been online, so it wouldn't necessarily feel that it was connecting into the place. That's a bit of a criticism of the current NPQs I would say.” Emilia, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

She observed that those responsible for delivering the programme might address some of the perceived limitations:

“I don't think that the new NPQs have got it all right. I don't think the old ones had either. I think it's the intelligence of the people who then deliver them and work around the edge of them.” Emilia, Local Leader

A final observation of Emilia's was frequently echoed by other leaders:

“I often hear it said they didn't teach me this on my NPQH, that's a very, very commonly spoken phrase” Emilia

Programmes other than NPQ

We heard of a several leadership programmes being taken up, offered by MATs, not-for-profit independent organisations and commercial organisations. Arlo's MAT had chosen two that he saw as valuable alongside NPQs:

“We're much more deliberately working with the [not-for-profit organisation] and the [local] program because we think that that ... a much more immersive leadership development program. And we've got, I think it's six of our uh potential heads are working at the moment and we're also investing in the something called the exemplary leadership program, which again we think is a good adjunct to NPQ.” Arlo, CEO, Laurels MAT

Some leaders referred to development with a more specific focus, in Roman's case another national, subsidies programme:

“Last year, myself and the deputy, signed up to do the National Behaviour Programme through the Behaviour Hubs. So, we did that and that allowed us to go and visit sort of four or five schools across the country, and I think you've got...

some some amazing CPD online. But the behaviour stuff was great” Roman, Headteacher, Firs Primary

More generally, there was typically a wide range of CPD arranged for schools within MATs by the trusts themselves:

“We have some lead and consultant teachers that deliver CPD for us, but we do quite a lot in-house within the education team as well, but things like subject networks, we have lead teachers from across our schools. We will say buy in quite a lot of external CPD and that’s something that we really pride of ourselves on that.” Penelope, Laurels MAT

Another type of development that was very widespread was the use of individual support, either coaching, mentoring or sometimes supervision.

I was given the opportunity to have some coaching and was able to talk about literally what you’ve asked. Why do I want to go for it? Do I? Are you sure you wanna do that? Margot, Deputy Headteacher, Fairhaven Primary

As Margot implied, there was often a systematic approach within MATs:

“We haven’t managed to succeed in getting every one of our heads to have external coaching, but we pay for it, we promote it, you know we’ve got a number of coaches that we signpost to, so there’s a dialogue stream which is outside the line management, a place that they can actually talk about, you know, some of the pressures of the job, how they’re changing in the, in the role, the satisfactions of the of the job” Penelope, Local Leader, Laurels MAT

Access to CPD was offered by Luna as a strong benefit of her school having become part of a MAT :

“To have access. To feel not alone has been fantastic. The CPD is incredibly powerful, and I feel absolutely made the right choice ... The opportunities we’ve had both for me individually and the school as a whole the schools have been really inspiring, and it has really shown how the local authority wasn’t able to provide that support in the way that it used to” Luna, Headteacher, Barn Primary

Informal Development and Experience

Returning to Emilia’s point, that leaders often observed that NPQH was not a full preparation for the headteacher role, headteachers often went on to highlight the importance of experience.

In Ruby’s case, she observed that she had gained the necessary experience through the range of positions she had held:

“You know, it wasn’t a requirement when I applied for headship here to have an NPQH, and I think it’s really important to get out to other schools. But I think I’ve done it, but I’ve just done it in different ways... I didn’t do the NPQ because I was doing so much network stuff through the teaching school or through the training school before that that I’ve had so many opportunities to go into other schools.” Ruby, Headteacher, Hillcrest Secondary

Ruby was in the second year of her second headship and was clear that experience had prepared her:

“I feel like what I've had to do is really draw on experiences that I've had and expertise of others. I'm never afraid.” Ruby, Hillcrest Secondary

The idea that experience was important was built into the way many leaders thought about developing their staff:

“We thought we have got to grow our leaders, give them the opportunities because we keep talking about experience. You only get that through doing or seeing. You know you can learn a lot from courses, but you actually know the job until you do it.” Teddy, CEO, Clarence MAT

Emilia contrasted the NPQH programme, currently very dependent on course materials without planned practical placements, with the activity based in schools:

“I think it also relies quite heavily on that individual's engagement with the material and sense-making of the material. And that's different from going and walking alongside an experienced head in their setting and seeing what they do, you know, day to day in the course of the day.” Emilia, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

Learning from other leaders and observing them was another frequently mentioned feature of experience even when, as Tommy suggests, the learning may be how not to do something:

“... and really actually, my Head there in many ways taught me how not to be a Head. Like there was lots of things that she did. I was like...” Tommy, Cottage Primary

Practices

Headteachers spoke about the priorities for their schools and the activities and relationships involved.

School Improvement, Attainment & Progress

The idea of the headteachers' role being to improve schools was a consistent theme and linked by almost all directly to teaching and students' learning. We heard this articulated very clearly by leaders of MATs with an overview of groups of schools:

“I would want to say that, uh, heads in the Multi Academy Trust era need to continue to be absolute experts on teaching and learning. Umm and one of the experiences that I've got is that some of the heads on joining us had had left out a bit behind.” Arlo, CEO, Laurels Trust

Alice suggested that the same focus on students' learning was necessary for leaders like herself as well as headteachers and leaders in schools:

“An intention that as leaders in our trust, we will still be in schools looking at learning alongside leaders, teachers, children talking with children about their experiences in our school.” Alice, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

Chloe asserted the priority in relation to her school, after having discussed the very high levels of special needs of children attending her school and the additional support they needed:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“We're a mainstream primary school and our priorities are teaching and learning, providing really high-quality education for our children to make the best progress they can at whatever stage they are in their learning.” Chloe, Headteacher, Tranquil Primary

Elijah, in a large secondary school expressed the same point but framing it in terms of a balance of time:

“I would say a lot more time is spent talking curriculum, teaching and learning than it is around pastoral.” Elijah, Headteacher, Pinecrest Secondary

Headteachers were also clear about the ways in which they understood improvement was evaluated by others. The first was the attainment of their students in external tests in comparison to other schools, particularly those schools that appeared to be similar:

“The results which are you know published were ... 8 percent lower than the national, right. And yet our demographics are saying that we, you know, they don't reflect the national averages [are above national averages]. So, that's presented some challenges for me as a head, for the, for the staff.” Roman, Headteacher, Firs Primary.

A second way that improvement was evaluated, was in terms of the judgements given by external inspections. Elijah, whose school was in a MAT that had merged with another larger MAT, reflected on the focus and the comparison with other schools:

“[Old MAT] Learning Trust as a culture was not really Ofsted focused... [New MAT] had a lot more access to resources and people who were current practising Ofsted inspectors. So it very much was a filter through how they saw school improvement ... you think you're doing school improvement, you think you're making progress. But if you don't know what the measures are. Yeah, you can fool yourself.” Elijah, Headteacher, Pinecrest Secondary

Leaders spoke about some of the activities they considered to be ‘school improvement’ and who might be involved. Whilst they spoke often about the roles of staff within their school, they commonly also included staff from centrally managed teams of the trust.

“Early reading and phonics. And so, she's actually erm written the phonics programme that we use in our MATs schools. So, she leads on all the phonics training and early reading training, which is brilliant for us.” Maisie Deputy Headteacher, Coach House Primary

Maisie refers to training, and developing the knowledge and capabilities of teachers was a frequently spoken of focus. A second was the curriculum of schools. The approach to developing schools’ curriculums varied between MATs:

“Our schools have their own curriculum within our [Clarence MAT] principles. One of the things we wanted to develop was having, yes, they got their own curriculums, but they're set milestones ... by those key milestones, children will have, will be able to do certain, you know what knowledge, skills, the vocabulary will be expected for each of the subjects.” Teddy, CEO, Clarence MAT

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

In Maisie’s MAT, a curriculum resource purchased by the MAT’Ss central team was made available for schools, although its use was optional for the school:

“They found the [Learning partnership curriculum], which was a curriculum that had actually been written by experts in the field. So, [Name] wrote all of the history units right from, you know, Year 2 up to Year 6. But the great thing about those... every unit has its own book, PowerPoint, cuts down on workload.”
Maisie Deputy Headteacher, Coach House Primary

Tommy, in another MAT, had adapted their curriculum in response to how they understood their community:

“The reason why we do a bit of that earthy sort of work is because you’ll find that the gardens of the homes here are either astroturfed or they’re just not in a good way, ... So, we have families that have not been to the beach, they’ve not been beyond [the local] parks ... so the element of nature in the curriculum and there’s been quite, quite good for us to sort of expose and give children a chance”
Tommy, Headteacher, Cottage Primary

Curriculum planning, and the development of teaching and learning were generally taking place at school level. The various MATs across England-Coast, however, adopted different approaches to curriculum development and staff development, and collaboration largely took place between schools of the same MAT rather than across different MATs.

Accountability

Inspection

Headteachers were keenly aware of the different way in which they were held accountable. External inspection by OFSTED was one the first reference points for accountability and, as we noted in the previous section, one of the ways in which improvement of schools was evaluated.

“It’s high-stakes accountability. I think Ofsted has had a major impact on people and I think obviously it’s prime media coverage at the moment as well and certainly heads, you know and always used to call it the Ofsted Twitch, where if you’re in the window Monday to Wednesday, you’re waiting for that call at 12:00 o’clock you every time the phone goes.” Joshua, Trustee, Clarence MAT

At the time of our visits, judgements were still summarised as a single word or phrase. The ‘high stakes’ of the outcome of inspections were experienced as pressure by leaders:

“[School name] had gone [into] RI (Requires Improvement) I think about two months after I joined and had that pressure of ‘we can’t get another one’.”
Margot, Deputy Headteacher, Fairhaven

The consequences of judgements were likened to the experience of football managers by some leaders:

“You know if you’re a Premier League [Manager] it’ll be millions of pounds paid off the rest of your contract and then you can probably get sacked another two or three times before you can’t be a football manager anymore... in headships there aren’t a lot of heads [whose] schools have gone into special measures or

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

*whatever and then they're working in another school as a head.” Roman,
Headteacher, Firs Primary*

Trust Level Accountability and Audit

Where schools we visited were part of MATs, heads also described accountability and oversight by the trusts, usually involving varying forms of review and audit processes.

In William’s view was that working closely with schools and challenging them was part of being a good trust:

“When we were maintained, you didn't see the local authority very often as long as you had a good Ofsted, they leave you alone. Well, good trusts don't do that. Good trust that have accountability. They challenge their schools; they're working with their schools”

One strategy that was widely reported by schools was the use of audits of practices and procedures related to all aspects of school, management and operations as well as teaching and learning:

*“There's not an area of this trust where there isn't an audit, alright.” Tommy,
Headteacher, Cottage Primary*

Luna’s school had become part of a different trust and, as we reported in the section on Training, had found the CPD available to staff invaluable. She found audit of other areas of work more burdensome:

“We had a bursar that worked at the school. The work that she has to do now ... What she is expected to do in that time, audit after audit after audit! ... I would say that the level of doesn't even feel like accountability. It feels like just a sort of micro analysis of what each school is doing” Luna, Headteacher, Barn Primary

Arlo described the way that his trust exercised oversight of headteachers:

“And then we have one termly line management meeting....we will structure some questions that we're going to address. And we work through and we and we don't ask them to present anything that hasn't gone to governors already. So we try to make sure it's not labour intensive, but that is that termly line management meeting is around accountability” Arlo, CEO, Laurels MAT

Alice described a similar arrangement in her trust:

“So, working directly during the line, leadership and management with the principals that lead their schools. So we have a ‘principals who lead their schools’ model, rather than ‘heads of school’ model.” Alice, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

Alice emphasised that in their trust, the principal was the legally designated headteacher and not a ‘head of school’ where an executive headteacher is the legally designated headteacher. Whilst the latter set of arrangements were referred to by headteachers and trust leaders, we did not speak to trusts or headteachers who were working in that way.

Tommy, reflecting on the interaction with leaders from his trust was positive:

“It's very supportive, but I still have to produce the evidence and sit with my safeguarding lead and the chap from the Trust [Name], he's brilliant.” Tommy, Headteacher, Cottage Primary

Tommy captures a dual aspect of the relationship, being both intended to support him but also to challenge and hold him to account.

A Local Leader who had experience as an LA officer and as a MAT trustee captured the mixed feelings as:

“If you're part of a multi-academy trust and I think in a good trust, you are more supported but also it's a complicated relationship, isn't it?” Lucas, Local Leader

Care

Leaders spoke of areas of their work we characterise as care, that were demanding and involved a wide range practices, often extending beyond the school.

Families and Support

Many of the interviewees described how they developed their school's relationship with the local community. This was often framed in a reciprocal manner in terms of the relationships and benefits:

“I have really grafted here to build a culture that we understand our community really well and we understand the needs of this community and we have adapted and moulded this school to meet that need ... we need to adapt the way that we're working with our families and our pupils to meet those needs effectively...But I think that this is a school at the heart of a community who is, you know, we're there to make a cup of tea if they just need a, you know, on the reflection with somebody.” Chloe, Headteacher, Tranquil Primary

Chloe refers to understanding the lives of pupils' families and responding to them accordingly. Her school served an estate in the coastal town that had high levels deprivation. Maisie describes a similar mindset and approach in a different context:

“We do credits for like gas and electric for some of our needy parents and and I think that would surprise some people because they think lovely Village. I think you can have a perception, but I think with the cost-of-living crisis, some families that were kind of just OK are now really, really struggling” Maisie, DHT, Coach House Primary

Isaac described some of the groups within the community his school served:

“In a predominantly white British town with white working class people and where you're not white working class British, you're white Eastern European, that's really hard ... And we've got unaccompanied asylum seekers on roll, we've got refugee families resettled, Afghanistani families ... So, that, that kind of fighting for access to public services.” Isaac, Headteacher, Nook Secondary

He too saw the school's role as to some degree enabling families to access services, not necessarily those directly related to school and education. More generally, the impact of

trends and events in wider society were felt in schools. Teddy spoke of it in terms the time leaders spent in response:

“A lot of our time it is supporting families cost of living but also post COVID definitely there's a real gap in arising mental health and all of those needs. So, I think all of our all of our leaders are talking about that as they're being their big thing that's taking up the time.” Teddy, CEO, Clarence MAT

Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Students with SEND were understood has a central feature of all schools' regular work, and the number of students and complexity of their needs was universally seen to have increased significantly in recent years.

“We are seeing a rapid growth in students with educational, healthcare plans, EHCP's. So we've gone from 10 to 47 in two years.... So predominantly round sort of specific learning needs or SEMH (Social Emotional and Mental Health)”
Elijah, Headteacher, Pinecrest Secondary

A number of leaders also observed larger numbers of children beginning school without being able to meet the basic requirements of self-care such as being able to use a knife and fork, being toilet trained, and able to interact at a developmentally appropriate level. William made the point quite broadly:

“The biggest issue that primary schools are facing in [Town] at the moment, is the lack of input before they reach school and the lack of services that can support families and the knock on from that. So at the moment that is mental health, that's behaviour that's learning it's resilience.” William

William linked the challenge for schools both to the pupils' behaviour in schools, and to the availability of services and resources beyond the school.

“And you know, getting an EHCP and the process of getting that. These are highly disadvantaged youngsters, often from families with multiple highly disadvantaged themselves, including learning needs. And then you've got this absolutely onerous virtually unnavigable system that they have to do... if the schools don't step in ...then they're not getting what they should be having because they can't navigate the system and that's the problem.” Isaac,
Headteacher, Nook Secondary

Well-Being

Alongside broader issues of welfare and the more specific focus of SEND, headteachers and leaders were very aware of well-being more generally. Ruby's attention to the emotional climate in her school was an example:

The kids just seemed really angry. And so, you know, when I say about the warmth, hmm, there was no warmth... And I'm like ‘we need to shift this. These kids need to feel loved and regarded and that's what we're going to do.’ So, that's what we've been doing ... all we've spoken about since September is what does kindness look like? ... we've just done nothing but talk about kindness and just reminding them of those behaviours”. Ruby, Headteacher, Hillcrest Secondary

The consideration of well-being included staff. This was often expressed in terms of the cumulative pressure teachers were experiencing as well as the impact of specific incidents:

“I’m trying to check in with all staff before they go home on a Friday, right? That checkout is really important because it doesn’t just affect us, but they’re on the ground and they might have had a really tough day because of something that’s happened and it’s that touch base is really important. And also, them knowing that we’ve got their back, and you know [Name] and I have been, I mean we are reactive say for behaviour and things like that. We’re, we don’t have pastoral support anymore” Maisie, Deputy Headteacher, Coach House Primary

Workload and the volume of correspondence was an example of some of the pressures seen to have an effect on well-being.

“So, that was one of the issues that staff raised with us in terms of workload. They felt a huge amount of pressure to respond to these parent issues and they could be really, really small things. But I guess when you’re getting emails from 30 parents all through the day and night ... I think that’s the thing with mobile technology, that you can just send an e-mail from your phone really quickly.” Roman, Headteacher, Firs Primary

Leadership, Values and Professional Beliefs

In discussing practices and priorities, leaders sometimes implied, sometimes spoke explicitly about values and beliefs related to leadership. The purposes and goals they spoke of were typically focussed on children and young people:

“We want them to be able to you know, rally alongside their peers and compete in a world which is competitive you know, and not fall into this you know self-perpetuating cycle which we so often see.” Chloe, Headteacher, Tranquil Primary

Chloe’s expression of her intentions were framed by the particular community her school served. Roman spoke in more general terms about underlying attitudes:

“I think you’ve got you’ve got to believe in children. You’ve got to really really like children and believing in them you know and what their what they can offer you, and it’s about championing their achievement building, building community” Roman, Headteacher, Firs Primary

There were also references to how the nature of leadership was understood and beliefs and attitudes towards it. Elijah reflected on both COVID, and a later crisis when his school buildings were found to have faulty concrete:

“It really felt like genuine leadership with very little guidance and what guidance so was was contrary and you know, ill thought out. It felt like when I was writing to the community, I felt as if I was leading the community and having to reassure, you know, give clarity, big decisions about how we were having students in and, you know, the full gamut of leadership.” Elijah, Headteacher, Pinecrest Secondary

Tommy spoke of his approach in terms of thinking beyond his period of headship:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“You know, I largely run off a custodian of the role type position.... At some point I'm leaving someone'll take over and do a better job. You know this school's gotta be brilliant for a long time.” Tommy, Headteacher, Cottage Primary

More generally when reflecting on the qualities required of headteachers able to sustain themselves in the role, Teddy's offered a typical list:

*“They've got to be self-aware and evaluative and reflect. So I think those are sort of key qualities. He's obviously people who have high aspirations High expectations and really passionate, I think it's that passion as well and drive”
Teddy, CEO, Clarence MAT*

Chloe referred to the way headship has changed and emphasised resilience:

“You need to be resilient. You've got to be resilient. You've got to be adaptable, you've got to be able to understand the changes and they come quickly sometimes and be able to have that childhood image of a head teacher is definitely not what the job looks like now.” Chloe, Headteacher, Tranquil Primary

The idea of resilience was mentioned repeatedly:

“Resilience. Absolutely. Gotta be so resilient and brave, you know, head teachers. Good head teachers gotta be brave. They gotta make decisions. They've gotta stand. They've gotta do their research and then stand with it, even in the face of adversity.” William, CEO, Thornhill MAT

Drains

Leaders reflected on the experience of performing their roles, one aspect of this was the aspects they found draining.

Finance, Resources

Finance, material resources, and resources in terms of people and services were mentioned repeatedly, often linked to specific issues that were exacerbated by lack of resource:

“There is a real lack of money in the system, especially with the changing needs of students, with growth of EHCP's and social emotional, you know, attendance. School refusers. There is a, you know, there's a lack of money... ultimately there's not enough money, in the system or we're not smart enough with the money that we have in the system” Elijah, HT, Pinecrest Secondary

Elijah links lack of money to the capacity to address specific issues, but also expressed a more general concern about budgets. School budgets were a widespread area concern for heads. Historically England-Coast has received lower funding than other areas, and, in conjunction with rising costs, demands and, for some schools, falling pupil numbers, combine to make balancing budgets difficult, frequently requiring cuts and reductions in staffing:

“Last year we had to make £400,000 worth of budget cuts ... I know there's not an everlasting pot of money. I just sometimes feel like it's like knitting spaghetti, you know, that's what it feels like. We're just we spend a lot of time robbing Peter to pay Paul and that's that's what I literally feel like on a day-to-day basis.” Chloe, HT, Tranquil Primary

William also emphasised the implications of cuts and also the weight of decision making and the burden felt by headteachers:

“There’s not a lot of money, so we’re making cuts. You’re not employing people. You’re probably making people redundant, and that’s gonna be happening more and more. You’ve got the issues with behaviour. You’ve got the issues about parents. You’ve got people, mental health, you’ve got lack of support from the local authority. All of that falls heavily on head teachers because first and foremost, head teachers are moral people, and a good head teacher takes responsibility.” William, CEO, Thornfield MAT

SEND and Resources

There was a particular focus on lack of resources for SEND in schools.

“Recently, I would say there’s been increasing issues with funding for SEND. Umm, that is a real drain. So, we’re trying to you know it’s and you get pressure from parents with the you get pressure from staff because they can’t cope with the children.” Luna, Headteacher, Barn Primary HT

Maisie spelt it out in more detail, recognising that the limited resources affected schools across the area as funding for SEND remains within the remit of the Local Authority:

“We know there’s issues with budgets and SEND. Another big problem in [Coast], right? SEND resources and hence more and more schools having resource bases and hubs being built. So, specialist places are non-existent. Umm, and funding for children with high need has been lessened and lessened...the funding that comes with a child very often, well, hardly ever covers the cost of having an adult to support that child, even if they’re EHCP says that they need that to be able to cope. That puts a huge stress, huge stress on everyone in school.” Maisie, Deputy Headteacher, Coach House Primary

Behaviour and Inclusion

Other leaders spoke about the pressure not from the point of view of resources, but of the nature of challenges:

“It’s not always about numbers of pupils it’s about the specifics of the needs, and then have yeah, the intensity of it and how you get that support and the length of time it takes and quite often those children are then generating challenges.” Roman, Headteacher, Firs Primary

Roman alludes to the work and process of securing support and appropriate provision for individual children. Chloe made this point and spelt out the range of relationships involved, identifying how her role in sustaining these relationships as ‘the biggest drain’:

“...collective ‘we’ that’s not just ‘we’ in school, it’s ‘we’ at home. It’s ‘we’ in the community. It’s ‘we’ in health. We have to do something to help this child and meet their need at this time. And I just, I find the whole thing these days. I mean it’s the, it’s the biggest drain.” Chloe, Headteacher, Tranquil Primary

Margot suggested that the headteachers’ time was increasingly spent on the kind of activities and issues that Roman and Chloe describe.

“The head teachers I work with are spending so much more time now dealing with behaviour and parents than they were a few years ago.” Margot, Deputy Headteacher,

Complaints and Disputes

The volume and nature of complaints and disputes was an area that most leaders spoke about. The relative ease of electronic communication was one factor that was described, but often associated with very assertive expression:

“Parental vitriol and aggressive complaints. So last year last academic year actually had a petition against me you know it was getting to the proportions of becoming a real a real sort of sort of sort of stress and yes so highly aggressive complaints, social media and you know, WhatsApp groups, parent and WhatsApp groups and vile comments written on some of them and which are sometimes shared with me.” Luna, Headteacher, Barn Primary

Ruby emphasised the amount of time individual formal complaints absorbed:

“When it comes to formal complaints, I'm normally deal with it myself because it's the easiest way of getting, actually getting it. We've had five formal complaints this year, ... I would honestly say every single one of them is totally unfounded. And so, each one of those has taken me probably the best part of a week's headspace to be able to respond.” Ruby, Headteacher, Hillcrest Secondary

Arlo saw it as part of his role as a leader in a MAT to be involved in responding to complaints where headteachers need help:

“I'm routinely involved in handling complaints. I can't believe how complaining they are, the public are sometimes. Sometimes obsessively and unfairly so. And I know it has a, it has a very, very demoralising and draining effect on on heads.” Arlo, CEO, Laurels MAT

Weight of leadership, relentlessness and headteacher well being

When leaders reflected on what drained them, it was often an accumulation of factors rather than single issues or events. Sebastian enumerated a number of simultaneous challenges:

“The pressures on the delivery of the curriculum, pressures on staff, mental health and wellbeing, not being able to get supply teachers not being able to release people to go on professional development.” Sebastian, Deputy Headteacher, Lavender Secondary

Maisie explicitly linked the ‘juggling’ to not being able to switch off and to mental well-being:

“It's that constantly juggling resources and school to make things work based on factors outside of school that we don't have control over. That's tricky and you can't switch off from that and I think I've got better at it. Friday night's tricky” Maisie, Deputy Headteacher, Coach House Primary

Ruby spoke of the cumulative effect in terms of long working hours and the difficulty of having some ‘space’, by which she implied, time to herself:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“But there are days where you do just sit there and think, I need just some space because it's, you know, as we'll talk about no doubt, it's the hours per day that make it really challenging at the moment, umm, there is not enough hours in the day.” Ruby, Headteacher, Hillcrest Secondary

Elijah too referred to working long hours and also the burden or weight of being responsible:

“Sometimes I can sit in my office here and do something - still working, but the more mindless end of day work. But it's long [days], like the mental strain of what you're carrying is huge.” Elijah, Headteacher Pinecrest Secondary

Reflections on whether it was possible to sustain themselves in the role were common. Roman, like many leaders, knew people who had decided to leave:

“I've got a I've got a couple of friends in [Town] that have just you know in July they've left headship because of the workload and the stress of it. And I, you know, I've definitely had, I would be lying if I said that there aren't times where I've felt, you know, like overwhelmed with it.” Roman, Headteacher, Firs Primary

Chloe, who had given an account of some particularly stressful episodes, was similarly reflective:

“I don't necessarily think I want to be a head teacher in another school. I sometimes wonder if I can continue being a head teacher here forever because it's not, I think it might finish me off sometimes and it's felt like that very much recently.” Chloe, Headteacher, Tranquil Primary

Sustains

Moral Purpose

Alongside the pressures and strains of leading, headteachers were all able to articulate very clearly what sustained them in the role. Seeing students and pupils' success was foremost amongst the things they spoke of. Luna described it as ‘the big things’:

“The big things, you know, that's what keeps me doing it. Positive difference making a change.” Luna, Headteacher, Barn Primary

Having responsibility for a school, some headteachers expressed the idea in terms of opportunities created for groups of students as well as individual success:

“(We) always had decent academic results but it's it's a lot more than that. There's a lot of wider curriculum opportunities there that we, you know, we really focused on, and then a lot of individual kind of success stories with children that flourished.” Roman, Headteacher, Firs Primary

William's described the sustained commitment of some headteachers as a moral imperative:

“I think the issue we've got is that for certainly four of our schools in high deprivation, that's a different world that is hard, hard graft and funny enough, they've got quite a low turnover because you get people that want to put the graft in that have got very much a moral imperative” William, CEO, Thornfield MAT

Isaac articulated his sustaining values in terms of the character of the school and the nature of the young people who were enabled to succeed:

“Some of the kind of inclusivity markers ... you know how many EHCPs have you got in the school, how many young people with identified SEND, how many young people who are willing to be open who are, gay, trans, whatever. And some of those inclusivity things are a big deal for me. They sustain me. They allow me to walk around the building and feel proud.” Isaac, Headteacher, Nook Secondary

Relationships

Headteachers spoke about their motivations and sustaining values, but were unambiguous about the collective nature of success and the importance of relationships to their roles. One focus of this were the relationships within a school:

“The team, the team, the team, the relationships. This is a family here. This school is a family. Me and my DSL just keep hugging each other saying please don't leave, please don't leave.” Chloe, Headteacher, Tranquil Primary

Chloe was emphasising the collective and collaborative nature of teams. Elijah emphasised the personal qualities of staff colleagues expressing the point bluntly:

“It is about people. You need policies and processes But you just need bloody good people.” Elijah, Headteacher, Pinecrest Secondary

Tommy, who had opened a new school as the Headteacher, saw the development of people in his team has rewarding in itself, but also as developing capacity in his school to share leadership:

“What sustains you then is like people like growing and doing well, and then suddenly like ohh I can actually have a bit of a life you know...and if you have a bit more of a balance you know I don't have to do all these decision making” Tommy, Headteacher, Cottage Primary

Another type of relationship was the more informal, trusting relationships, often fellow professionals. Roman refers to a network of people including those that could offer emotional support:

“I do think you need a network of people around you. So, because when in the times when it is when you're on that difficult part of the journey and you're not getting a lot of positive feedback. You need people around you that that you know can give you a bit of that emotional support and remind you that is a [journey] you know all those things that you know you sometimes”. Roman, Headteacher, Firs Primary

Chole spoke in similar terms of having people with whom confidential, trusting conversations were possible. She related it to discussing professional issues:

“That person who can sense check that and go absolutely ridiculous response. You know that you are totally on the right track and stand your ground and you

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

know do what needs to be done. And it's those kind of having those people around you.” Chloe, Headteacher, Tranquil Primary

Ruby described an informal network of peers with whom she could

“Other heads in the secondary schools. [Name]. Well because we've known each other for so long. He's so helpful for me because I can just pick up the phone and moan [Name's] the same. It's quite, you know, it's always really nice, isn't it, to have those professional conversations with people who know what it's like to do the job. I've got really good relationship with [Name] at [School Name] as well. You know, he would always be one that I'd pick up the phone too.” Ruby, Headteacher, Hillcrest Secondary

Close personal relationships, often family, important sustaining relationships for many leaders:

“Totally personal thing for me, but makes a massive difference. Is family and friends, but family. My husband's a teacher as well, and so we can just sit there and, you know, we get it from both points of view. Sebastian, Deputy Headteacher, Lavender Secondary

Tommy too identified close family relationships as important to sustaining his well-being:

“That's all in the balance of my wife brings... you know, I got two brothers, so you know really strong with me” Tommy, Cottage Primary

Pleasure in the job

There were also things intrinsic to the job that were important and sustaining. The interaction with children and staff was typically discussed:

“It's just it's just all the little simple things the smiles the laughter the joy you know that that's what really drives you... some of it is that, you know, when I'm with people with a lot of energy and a lot of positivity I can really absorb that.” Roman, Headteacher, Firs Primary

Maisie described day to day to interactions:

“Just that being on the gate greeting everyone in the morning and. Knowing their names and their parents, you know, greeting you with a smile and yeah, and the buzz in the staff room. And that's what makes it. That is what makes it.” Maisie, Deputy Headteacher, Coach House Secondary

Sebastian referred to the stimulation of challenges his role presented.

“I love the variety of it. And what it throws up for you to think about, I guess it like being kept on my toes a bit.” Sebastian, Deputy Headteacher, Lavender Secondary

Material Benefits

Whilst no headteachers viewed the material benefits of the job as being prime motivators, there were references to them. For Tommy there was an element of recognition and being valued in an increase in pay:

“I think sometimes people think that pay will sustain you.. it's definitely it's helped more recently when they lifted the salary more recently to reflect the work I was doing beyond [the school].” Tommy, Headteacher, Cottage Primary

More directly, Sebastian saw holidays as being a benefit in their own right and welcomed for that:

“I do want to throw in the whole holidays... you know, workload when you go home and you've got the emails you, you've got meetings and if you accept that and then can give yourself Saturday and Sunday, I think that's much more manageable, isn't it? And then the holidays are bonus.” Sebastian, Deputy Headteacher, Lavender

Support

Leaders' accounts of their experiences make clear both that the headteacher role in England Coast is an intense and demanding one, but also that leaders are sustained both by personal values and networks of relationships and also, more systematic arrangements to support schools and leaders themselves.

Maisie described one set of arrangements in her school for supporting individuals:

“So, we have to have supervision for our EYFS staff that statutory and and then really, it's good practise I think for people in a leadership position to have supervision. So, we have it three times a year. It's somebody that we buy in” Maisie, Deputy Headteacher, Coach House Primary

Heads and Local leaders in MATs, some of whom were CEOs, described various forms of support. In addition to the individual support Maisie described in terms of supervision, she also referred to mentors:

“She's got her mentor, which is a head at another school. I have my mentor, which was [Name]. If I wanted to just go, oh my God, I can go in and talk. And we also have supervision. So, all our leadership team have supervisions.” Maisie, Deputy Headteacher, Coach House Primary

Arranging mentors, especially for newly appointed headteachers was mentioned widely. The role of a school's local governing body varied a little between trusts, but most considered them to have a role in supporting the headteacher directly:

“Our local governors are on the grounds they they're working closely, and they have got their key areas in which they are involved in monitoring and supporting. they're role is to support their head teachers and challenge in traditional role but also work within their remit the other, supporting role” Teddy, CEO, Clarence MAT

In Elijah's case, he was very clear about the value he placed on the relationship:

“I think I've got phenomenal governors, phenomenal chair of governors. So yeah, I feel professionally and personally supported and challenged in equal measure. So that's been really good. I use governors a lot. I meet with the chair of governors fortnightly for two hours.” Elija, Headteacher, Pinecrest Secondary

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

Although the arrangements varied, all of the trusts maintained central teams of staff that worked across all the schools in different ways. Administrative and organisational functions were an example:

“We look after the recruitment. And our systems, HR systems, we support our schools, so we support all of our schools and obviously the central team. And we look after sort of policies, HR policies and make sure that those up to date, you know, things, things to do with sort of staffing. Anything that affects sort of staffing.” Teddy, CEO, Clarence MAT

In the section on recruitment above, we outlined some of the specific ways in which a central trust team worked with a school to appoint a headteacher. Other types were of interaction, considered as support as well as the accountability discussed above, were the regular meetings with a central school improvement team

“Other meetings are around liaison and support, you know, so you know, typically the fortnightly liaison meeting, you know, I physically travel to the heads, heads, office and say your list, my list sort of conversation and or and also considering the well-being and my and my my warm relationship with the with the head teacher.” Penelope, Local Leader, Laurels MAT

Another form of support was staff from schools within the trust working in another school. Tommy alluded to this above when he referred to his work being recognized with additional pay:

“I've spent my time in school in [Town] that's just joined the trust working with their middle leaders. So, the head head hasn't really got a lot of capacity.” Tommy Cottage, Headteacher, Cottage Primary

Alice summarized the thinking, that the personal responsibility notwithstanding, the role was one that require a planned, systematic and shared approach to leading schools:

“I think that it's a doable job as long as you've got really good support mechanisms.... I don't think the jobs doable unless you're working in a system with other strong heads”. Alice, Local Leader, Vicarage MAT

While the local authority's role in providing support has reduced significantly as a result of academisation, Sebastian sounded a positive note in the support he received in relation to the LAs remaining responsibilities such as children's social care and SEND:

“We have really nice levels of support from our local authority; I've got a great local authority. I pick up the phone and get advice from them. Will come into school if I want them to” Sebastian, Deputy Headteacher, Lavender Secondary

Networks and Peers

As we referred to in the 'Sustains' section, most leader reported making use of a mixture of formal and informal peer support networks.

“The head of [School Name], which is the nearest trust school I know really well. So, he lives where I live as well. So, I might give him a phone and have a quick chat to him. My my old deputy is now the head of she's the acting head of my old

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

school, so I might chat to her and ask what she would do. So, I've got a network of other heads that I know through the trust” Roman, Headteacher, Firs Primary

We also quoted Ruby in the Sustains section, describing her network of peers. She described them as her ‘biggest supportive factor’:

“The support, the biggest supportive factor for me or the other heads in the secondary schools.” Ruby, Headteacher, Hillcrest Secondary

The pattern of support for schools and headteachers in England Coast has been referred to throughout this report with mixed response from headteachers, usually very positive, sometimes finding audit and scrutiny overbearing and bureaucratic. We quoted Lucas, an independent local leader, who also captured the balance between the support and the role trusts took with accountability:

“If you're part of a multi academy trust and I think in a good in a good trust you are more supported but also it's as complicated relationship isn't it?” Lucas, Local Leader

Locality Case Study: England - Shire

Following a brief introduction and overview of the locality and sample¹⁹, this case study outlines how interviewees perceived and understood Shire as a place. It then provides an account of the collective and individual professional and personal identities they articulated. The main focus is then on leadership. We describe how school leaders are recruited and developed, the nature of the role, the experience of leading that was reported, including what school leaders say drains and sustains them and how they are supported.

Introduction

England Shire locality is a predominantly rural area within a larger county. Beyond the locality are some reasonably large towns, one coastal, that have some significant industry and employers. Shire itself has several moderately sized market towns in the otherwise widely dispersed rural area. It is a popular holiday destination and has a substantial tourist industry. On average the population is fairly affluent with some areas with notably significant wealth, but there are also pockets of quite intense deprivation, often dispersed and consequently less visible. Overall the population is less diverse than average for an English LA, although the tourist industry, with its seasonal work needs, has brought increasing diversity in some localities. There are also discernible differences between communities within different parts of Shire, with some areas much less visited by tourists. Travelling around Shire is difficult without a car and the distances between schools can be significant. Shire has about the average number of schools for an English Local Authority area, but well over half of them, both primary and secondary schools, are considered small. There is nevertheless a wide range of school sizes, with generally larger schools in the larger towns and smaller schools in rural villages and smaller towns.

Interviewees

Table 5.4: Breakdown of interviewees by role

Employer	Headteacher	Headteacher-Local Leader	Local Leader	Total
1	9	3	2	15

Table 5.5: List of Interviewees

Name	Gender	Role	School/Organisation	Type	Time In post (Years)	Time in role (Years)
Rory	M	Local Leader	Shire LA	Local Authority	6	6
Mabel	F	Local Leader	Emerald MAT	MAT	3	3
Jude	M	HT, Local Leader	Sound Shores Primary	School-Primary	15	7
Erin	F	Governor	Admiral Primary School	School-Primary	26	26

¹⁹ The visits and interviews in England Shire took place in July 2024.

Name	Gender	Role	School/Organisation	Type	Time In post (Years)	Time in role (Years)
Emma	F	HT, Local Leader	Cloud Academy	School-Secondary	6	6
Benjamin	M	HT, Local Leader	Cardingham Primary	School-Primary	5	5
Harriet	F	HT	Alberta Primary	School-Primary	0.5	0.5
Hugo	M	HT	South Primary	School-Primary	17	21
Iris	F	HT	Harmony Primary	School-Primary	0.5	1.5
Robyn	F	HT	Grange Primary	School-Primary	9	9
Molly	F	HT	Clearwater Primary	School-Primary	0.5	0.5
Olive	F	HT	Maple Grove Secondary	School-Secondary	5	5
Ronnie	M	HT	Meadowgrove Secondary	School-Secondary	9	13
Reggie	M	HT	Amberwood Secondary	School-Secondary	2	2
Maria	F	HT	Sapphire Secondary	School-Secondary	2	2

Place

Schools and communities

The nature of Shire as a rural area was central to the way leaders spoke about schools and the communities of which they were a part. The physical location, economic and social activity were all spoken of:

“Well, it's, it is a rural area, there's no two ways about it. We take, we've got a lot of farming families here, so we've got a lot of families whose parents are involved in the tourist industry and that can be seasonal, can't it?” Olive, Headteacher, Maple Grove Secondary

Parents' employment, which was particular to the area, influences schools directly, but the nature of villages and small towns also meant that headteachers were very aware of connections to the wider life in that specific community:

“And you'd have parents ... who had local businesses literally on the doorstep and were really closely connected with the school. ... in the smaller schools, They [parents], you, they know so much. The school is woven into the community and all the events that happen in that community.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

Leaders also spoke of the strong influence felt by sections of the local population that had longstanding connections to the place:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“Most children and the remaining staff who were here when I got here are related. And they're not related as in they're 'that's my cousin', or 'that's my aunt' or 'that's my grandfather' ... if you are third, fourth, fifth, sixth generation or whatever removed, you know, you've got a link somewhere...everybody knows everybody else.” Robyn, Headteacher, Grange Primary

The sense of school-community links extended in some places to events and annual cycles beyond the school:

“[School]... when it comes to the [Event], for example, or potato picking season, is decimated and there's nothing the head can do about it because that's the way it's always been done.” Mabel, Local Leader

Communities were not described as being uniform and undifferentiated however. There was a strong emphasis on socio-economic contrasts. There was considerable wealth in the area, but leaders repeatedly stressed the range of circumstances in which students lived:

“We have kids that get dropped off in Porsches and we have kids whose parents and grandparents haven't worked and have no carpets and all that kind of stuff. So we are truly comprehensive.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

“Got 64 on roll. So you know, at one end we've got family, the family living ... in really quite a wealthy sort of set up, you know, right through to social housing and you know, and your pupil premium sort of end of things. So it's hugely diverse.” Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

In some places those contrasts were associated with locations and with particular towns or villages:

“[Town] isn't necessarily indicative of our catchment area. It's the whole of this [Area]. So there are areas of rural deprivation. [Town] ... is a real destination, a real destination place. And, you know, at weekends it's full of very expensive Ferraris and Porsches.” Olive, Headteacher, Maple Grove Secondary

In other sometimes smaller communities, as Molly described, they were living in close proximity:

“There are people like myself who haven't grown up here. And there are other people whose families have been here for absolutely generations and, and they're really from and of the village. There are families that have quite professional backgrounds. There are farming families here. There are some families where parents are students as well, and some of the families where they may not be working.” Molly, HT Clearwater Primary

More generally, heads spoke of the communities their schools served confounding perceptions of a uniformly settled, affluent population, speaking of pockets of diversity, and of change:

“You might imagine leafy, beautiful [Town], nestled in the Shire is all of that. But our community is extremely interesting... this is a town that functions on tourism and the holiday industry. So a lot of our parents are working in that industry and we have a broad spectrum of children with English as an additional language.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

Further implications of rurality were expressed as potential disadvantages by some heads. They spoke in terms of isolation and a tendency to focus inwards. Robyn spoke in this way about the community her school served:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“I felt that I was almost ostracised before they even got to know me. But ... I've really got to know these families and parents and they'll do anything for anybody, but they'll want to sus you out firstit's a very working class village. It's very close. It's very insular. It's not very culturally diverse” (Robyn, Headteacher Grange Primary)

Mabel made a similar point but about groups of headteachers in the locality, referring especially to secondary headteachers

“I think they've become quite, as I've said, quite isolated and quite insular.” Mabel, Local Leader

Finally, Marie made a point, echoed by others, of changes in the nature of local communities, often affected by events and policies well beyond the locality:

“I've been here a long time and it's changed quite a lot in that time in that there's the community that, actually our local community has reduced. So we've got a lot of holiday homes, a lot of second homes, a lot of Airbnbs, that sort of thing. So there's a lot of tourism obviously in the area. And I think especially from COVID times, it has increased even more. So what we're seeing is a population of local people that's dropping.” Marie, Headteacher Sapphire Secondary

Marie's observation about the falling local population also had a direct bearing on schools, their interactions and future plans.

Schools, Governance, Relationships

The governance of schools in Shire continues to evolve. At the time of the visits, quite a low proportion of schools had converted to academy status compared to the national average, and around half of those that had were in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). The remaining standalone academies were mostly secondaries. There were just a handful of MATs with schools in Shire, including two formed of exclusively church schools (Diocesan MATs), and these had all been formed from local groupings of schools, albeit one or two MATs had some schools in neighbouring authorities. The implication of these arrangements was that the vast majority of primary schools were LA maintained, most but not all secondaries were academies and one of the special schools was an academy.

The LA maintained a small team of officers who worked directly with maintained schools, but sustained relationships with all schools.

“But like I say for the secondaries where you've got maintained, you've got standalone, you've got MAT secondaries all in a room regularly. I go and meet with them with the clusters.” Rory, Local Leader

Headteachers' reflections suggested that the governance arrangements of schools would continue to evolve with a variety of motivations:

“in the landscape of schools, especially small schools, to be able to survive I think, in terms of resources, you need to be part of something bigger. And the local authority are good... So there's hope there for things from the local authority. But at the same time, I think we all understand that, you know, MATs are what are going to happen.” Maria, Headteacher, Sapphire School

Maria, whose school was LA maintained, articulated considerations primarily about resources, principally material and financial. Olive was also aware of less direct considerations and the impact in shifts in policy:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“[Trust] is a, is a MAT of primary schools. So we, we’ve been quite resistant to the whole situation because we felt we’re OK. But in the last year or so that that’s changed because as, as a Single Academy Trust, politically we’ve become more vulnerable.” Olive, Headteacher, Maple Grove Secondary

In day-to-day terms, schools were likely to be working together in ways which reflected the physical geography of the area:

“Now the geographical aspect of that, meant ... they naturally over time set themselves up in clusters because you’ve got very rural areas.” Rory, Local Leader

These local clusters had become established in previous years, encouraged by the LA, and often reflected long-standing relationships between school leaders:

“Schools are somewhat grouped together in clusters within the local authority. Therefore, we meet on a half-termly basis, and they’re also geographically organised. Thus, you build relationships within that cluster.” Hugo, HT South Primary

We also heard about some local partnerships that had formed without the initiative of the LA as well as active phase-focussed headteacher associations that extended across the whole of Shire:

“So there’s an organisation called [Acronym], which is [Town] Collaborative Partnership and that’s the primaries and the two secondaries and [Special School]. So we all meet together regularly...and then we have [Area Secondary Heads Association] meetings...I go to some of them, I don’t go to all of them.” Ronnie Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

“The Primary Heads Association is an association set up that all, well all primary head teachers or schools can buy into. I think there’s about six across [Area] that don’t. And it’s a pretty, it’s a very good representative body. So that provides training for head teachers, annual conference, day conferences, termly day conferences with, you know, invited guests.” Jude, Headteacher and Local Leader

There was also a longstanding, formalised partnership comprising of a number of secondary schools spread across a significant part of Shire:

“It’s a group of nine secondary schools, [College], and [University] and it started way before my time in [Area]. It’s been going a long, long time...we buy in. So we contribute based on pupil numbers... we’ve then employed some strategic leads so that they’re able then to push forward. So it’s not just down to the heads to run the [partnership].” Emma, Headteacher and Local Leader

These partnerships and collaborations embraced all types of schools and several of the leaders we interviewed saw them as their school’s main source of support in terms of school improvement, professional development and networking. However, the fact that several schools were considering forming or joining MATs indicated how some of these long-standing relationships were changing and realigning.

Another feature of the geography was that some leaders described a sense of remoteness from some nationally coordinated opportunities like hubs for professional development. Benjamin captured the point:

“I think the reduction in Teaching School Hubs, or teaching schools, has been a problem for us because our teaching school is up on the [Area], so the geography of people engaging with them is really challenging.” Benjamin, Headteacher and Local Leader

Finally, falling pupil numbers and attendant pressures on schools, particularly when they are already small, was noted in all phases. Ronnie, based in a market town observed competition, albeit friendly:

“Yeah. There's not enough young people, the demographic's getting older and older ...so there is quite a bit of competition for numbers. I think it's reasonably friendly competition.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

Iris, in a smaller town with nearby villages observed parents' choices and perceptions having an effect:

“..the community seems to be dividing itself socially. There is a school down the road...in the village ... mostly the children that go to the school do not live there. And they take children from [Town] and they are marketed in such a way that they attract aspirational parents.” Iris, Harmony Primary

More generally, physical geography and dispersal of the population, leading to the tendency of schools to be relatively small, had implications, as we will illustrate, for school leadership, for teaching and for developing the curriculum.

Identity

Shire Leaders

When leaders in Shire spoke about their own roles and identities in those roles, the significance of the school in villages and small towns was very often a central feature of that identity. In the section on Place, we quote Iris as saying that in small communities, “The school is woven into the community and all the events that happen in that community”. The consequence of that observation was that, very often, the headteacher's position was a very public role in the community extending beyond the boundaries of the school:

“He's [Olive's husband] got the keys to so many houses doing, he does jobs for them ... And that was because of me, because they were like, oh, that's the head. You know what I mean? It's that sort of community that she must be trustworthy because she's the head.” Olive, Headteacher, Maple Grove Secondary

Olive had moved to the area to take up the role of Headteacher having previously worked in a city, finding that inhabiting the role in a remote village community meant that she and her family were perceived in a particular way. Molly's reflections were typical of how a number of heads understood the active role a headteacher might play in the community beyond their school:

“There's a hugely strong community yeah, it is ... the school is really at the centre of that or at least one of the central points of that. There's such a lot of potential as well in terms of the leadership role, recognising the community value and the place in the community of a school like this is I think is a vital part of being a leader here and something to always bear in mind because it could go either way as well.” Molly, Headteacher, Clearwater Primary

Her caution that ‘it could go either way’ was an awareness that disputes and conflicts could have negative consequences just as constructive relationships could have positive ones.

The visible and significant role of headteacher was associated in these discussions, with schools, whether primary or secondary, being small and the relatively isolated nature of rural towns and villages. For a number of the heads, that extended to living in the communities their

schools served and their identity in their life beyond work. Reggie's observations were characteristic:

“Living in the town and not having a commute, but also being part of the community. There's an integrity that comes to that. There's a pressure that comes with that. Like if someone doesn't like it, I'll find out about it at football practise for the kids, you know, whatever it might be.” Reggie, HT Amberwood Secondary

Hugo was conscious of tensions in the position as well what he gained:

“But also being part of that community in this, in this place, it gives you an identity, doesn't it? And that again, can be a double-edged sword, can't it. You know, very clearly I am the head. People talk about the heads of village schools as if they're some sort of possession of the village. And that can be hard at times.” Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

Some heads, while talking about the position of the school and the role of the head in a similar way, wished to establish a separation:

“I don't live in the area. I live down near [Town], so I drive in every day. But I quite like that because I, I like, I love the community, but I wouldn't want to be too close in the community. I think having that distance helps just as well.” Maria, Headteacher, Sapphire Secondary

Heads and senior leaders were very aware of the wider networks of leaders across the locality, but the awareness of themselves as leaders in particular communities was the identity that was most often expressed when talking about schools.

Evolving Identities

“I always wanted to be a teacher. I never ever thought about becoming a Headteacher.” Harriet, Headteacher, Alberta Primary

Most heads, like Harriet, found their idea of themselves and identity as leaders evolving as they progressed through their career. There were different experiences and reflections about how that occurred. Some described themselves as being 'not ambitious', but willing to take opportunities when they appeared.

“(I) would like to sum my career up as basically potentially falling into promotions because things happened. I wouldn't describe myself as ambitious... I never intended to, to go onto the senior leadership team, but the opportunity presented itself and I took it.” Olive, Headteacher, Maple Grove Secondary

Jude gave a similar account:

“I'll be honest, I was into rock climbing and I got a job in Shire and I was a teacher, so that was great. Took on more and more responsibility and sort of found myself looking at headship. I did NPQH back in the day and so I found myself looking at headship and sort of went from there and took I, I guess took opportunities when they arrived rather than went looking for opportunities would probably be a good way of describing my career progression.” Jude, Headteacher Soundshores Primary and Local Leader

Jude's account of 'taking more responsibility and ...looking at headship' was a feature of small schools described by heads and local leaders where individuals may move directly from being a teacher to headteacher. Jude described some headteachers for whom the opportunities had not been welcome:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“Of the local heads, at least two of those were deputy head teachers who had no real aspiration to be a head teacher and they were in schools with falling rolls. Their head teachers would go, and then the governors look at them and say ‘well, we can't afford a head teacher and a deputy head. So do you want it or we'll have to make you redundant to appoint a head’. So, you know, they've literally found themselves head teachers having not really had any aspiration to do it. And they're both doing very, very well, but it's not always umm, yeah, choice.” Jude, Headteacher, Soundshores Primary

Other heads recalled very direct encouragement as being the stimulus to move into a leadership or headteacher role:

“I'm internally quite ambitious in a different way. I find it a bit difficult to explain, but I wouldn't have gone “right, I need to get a headship in this school and then go to a bigger school and a bigger school”. That isn't really what my ambition is ... So I wouldn't have just, without a bit of a push, I wouldn't have done the NPQH. She [previous Headteacher] did ask me if I wanted to do it. Which was great because actually it wouldn't in a funny way, I probably wouldn't have gone to do it. I needed that encouragement to sign up for it because otherwise I wouldn't have done it.” Molly, Headteacher, Clearwater Primary

In Robyn's case, LA officers had approached her, and eventually directly asked her to step into a temporary role:

“And it was, we're looking at you for headship and, and I didn't do anything about that for quite a while. And then so, and then I was approached again by the local authority to ask whether I go into a school probably not very far from here.” Robyn, Headteacher, Grange Primary

Other heads described either long standing intentions or active planning and steps towards becoming a headteacher.

“I wanted to be promoted. So I wanted to, to look around and I was prepared to move schools.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

Iris capitalised on the practice of the LA to place interim leaders in, usually primary, schools when there were unfilled headship vacancies:

“And then I went into the acting headship route and I did a couple of acting headships for [LA Officer Name]... And, and then last year I, I, I secured a permanent headship here.” (Iris, Headteacher Harmony Primary)

Another aspect of leaders' identities, more generally spoken about in relation to their sense of themselves in their roles, were life and family associations.

For Harriet, her personal history was something that sharpened her motivation and sense of purpose:

“My dad grew up in a council estate and didn't have a dad and his younger siblings went into care and my mum's dad died when she was young... and they, my dad, I think he'd always, he always said he'd wanted to be a teacher but didn't get the opportunity.” Harriet, Headteacher, Alberta Primary

Olive recounted a strong family association with teaching:

“My mother was a head. I tried for years to avoid being a teacher because of her. She was so well respected. But she was primary. My daughter's a teacher. My son-in-law's a teacher”. Olive, HT Maple Grove Secondary

Leadership

In this section we explore leadership in Shire's schools, beginning with what we heard about recruiting headteachers, developing leaders and then the experience of leading in Shire's schools.

Recruitment

Process, applications and selection

Most schools in Shire were LA maintained, meaning that the Local Authority maintained an oversight of the process of appointing headteachers and worked directly with each school's Governing Body:

"They [schools] have a duty to inform us of a headteacher resignation. Once that happens, we then work with the Chair of Governors, to have an initial meeting with the governing body, where we make sure they are aware of every option open to them, which might be join a MAT, you know, federate whatever, we'll tell them all that. If they want to go for their head, like their sole head, which generally if I'm being honest, they do ...then we would work with a panel from the governing body on the recruitment and we ... we work with them on that as advisers." Rory, Local Leader

Rory's account made clear that the change of a headteacher was a significant moment for schools, prompting discussion not just about the appointment, but also the future of the school. As many of the schools in Shire are small, there was a clear implication that one of the considerations was whether or not a school might become part of a group, either a MAT or a Federation of maintained schools.

"I mean we looked before we actually went down the headteacher recruitment route. We sat and talked about academy, the academy, joining a Multi-Academy Trust... but we said no we don't, that's not the route that we want to go down for the school at the moment." Erin, School Governor, Admiral Primary

Erin – a very experienced governor who had been involved in several headteacher recruitment processes for the school over the years - went on to describe some of the steps the governors took to articulate what they were looking for from a headteacher:

"And and then we put, we are looking for headteacher and these are the things we would like, these were the things and that this was something, that was, it was a combination of children's words, teachers, school staff and Governors. So it was things like, we would like to see someone who is curious and inclusive." Erin, School Governor, Admiral Primary

The assessment and interview process described by Harriet was very typical of what leaders described:

"If you can survive that, you can survive anything. Two days. So basically it was a, an assembly, a lesson, a pack of, of questions, of scenarios, school council interviews, meet all the staff. We did a, a school improvement plan for, for, for this. And then the next day was a presentation, a ten-minute presentation and then the interview." Harriet, HT Alberta Primary

The precise details of the tasks varied, but the extended and varied two day process that Harriet experienced was described for primaries, secondaries and all types of schools both maintained and academies.

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

Whilst individual school governing bodies were making decisions about appointments in LA maintained schools, Rory described a proactive role taken by LA officers:

“so we don't make the decision, but we can be very clear in our questioning as to... remember this is an appointment not an anointment.” Rory, Local Leader

Rory's reference to 'anointing' suggested that appointment panels may favour an internal applicant known to them. Erin described the challenge of 'keeping an open mind' and also made clear that there was consideration of someone the panel thought would 'fit':

“I had in my head the person we needed... and one of them was the person that I thought we needed... she would just have most of the staff running for the hills... just too much, for us... we actually got what we wanted, but before, if you think about; 'this is what I need', we would have gone for a completely different person.” Erin, School Governor, Admiral Primary

Mabel articulated colourfully the individuality of some places and that the 'fit', in the minds of those appointing may go beyond their technical skills and capabilities:

“But some of our schools are really individual, which is something to celebrate. But it's also you've got to be the right person that wants to go to [School] for example, you know it's a weird place and you have to be the right kind of person that preferably likes cycling in order to get that.” Mabel, Local Leader

Supply

More generally, there were a range of views expressed about how easy it was to attract and appoint to headteacher posts.

Rory's view was that there had been an improvement locally with slightly larger numbers applying for headships, which he attributed to the LA's focus on identifying and developing future leaders in recent years:

“We're getting to the point now where we have been like ten, eight, ten applications for headship jobs. And when I started it'd be two, maybe one, maybe none.” Rory, Local Leader

Rory was speaking mainly about maintained primary school headteacher appointments. Mabel, a leader in a MAT, was more downbeat:

“It's a struggle. And I know a lot of a lot of headships or fields of headships are really small, you know, could be two ... for one of those [more accessible] primaries there were three applicants... one school I know, primary school, at the moment that's on its third round of headship recruitment processes.” Mabel, Local Leader

Erin's account was closer to Rory's description, whilst expressing a view that it was noteworthy compared to other schools' experience:

“I mean, we had nine or ten applications, which was, or were in double numbers. So unheard of really for this area.” Erin, School Governor, Admiral Primary

More generally, the descriptions suggested that schools were usually able to appoint headteachers, but that numbers of applicants were often quite small. Several interviewees described being asked by the LA to take on acting headships, suggesting that continuity and succession could be challenging for a subset of schools in such a large authority. Furthermore, several leaders discussed a diminished appetite for headship.

Diminishing Appetite for Headship

One theme was that senior leaders, seeing the demands of headship, were reluctant to take on the role:

*“I think head teachers probably you know laugh about it, but probably do a pretty s**t job at making head teacher - head teaching - look attractive, because nobody seems to be wanting to be one.” Jude, Headteacher Soundshores Primary – Local Leader*

Talking about Deputy Headteachers, Jude went on to say:

“They've got no aspiration for the stress. They've got no aspiration for the leadership role. They're, in inverted commas, ‘quite happy’ where they are, so they're staying where they are.” Jude, Headteacher Soundshores Primary – Local Leader

Mabel, a former secondary headteacher, described a similar conversation with her deputy headteachers:

“.. ‘OK, I'm succession planning here and I want to put you both through NPQs’. Two really, really professional, effective, intelligent young men and they both said ‘No, thank you. Why would we want to do your job?’ ” Mabel, Local leader

An observation expressed in different ways, was that the material incentives to become a headteacher may not be very strong in a locality where school sizes varied significantly. Maria's explanation was typical:

“Also in terms of like leadership roles, you know, you've got my role as a headteacher would be on the same pay as a deputy head in a slightly larger school. So you have a, you struggle with that...who's going to want to take on a headship role on the same wage or even maybe a lower wage than a deputy head role in a slightly larger school?” Maria, Headteacher, Sapphire Secondary

Rory also perceived other employment opportunities with more favourable benefits, available outside Shire but within travelling distance, as affecting the school workforce generally, but also potential leaders:

“The other big bit for us, which has a draw across the whole area ... We have had teachers leave schools because they can go and earn same money, nine to five in the [industry], lots of TAs going, um because of the jobs that they're going into and it's just become a huge sort of vacuum for for the workforce.” Rory, Local Leader

There were, nevertheless, as we have noted, reports that generally there were sufficient applicants in most cases to enable new headteachers to be appointed when needed.

Individual stories reinforced Rory's view that, in the primary sector, applicants tended to be from within or near the area:

“Majority of I would say primaries are people who are known in the system. Some people from outside. I recruited the other year, we got some from [Town].” Rory, Local Leader

By contrast, he suggested, Secondary appointments often came from further afield:

“Secondary, they'll just go national, global whoever they want to get, you know, people move from all over the place for those.” Rory, Local Leader.

Some secondary headteachers had career long affiliations with Shire, and others, as Rory suggested had moved from other parts of the country.

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“And then it, it was a case of, my wife and I just needed a change.... we talked and said ‘well, if you say yes, if they offer it to you. Then we go. We do it’ ... Took it up and moved the whole family up ... And, and so, yeah, so, so moved up ... [Wife] came with no job to go to and that was part of that life rebalancing.” Reggie, Headteacher, Amberwood Secondary

Olive too, had moved from another part of the country:

“One very wet, rainy November night, on a Friday night, I was reading the TES because I used to dabble. And I saw this job and this is the place that I've spent my entire childhood [visiting on family holidays]... I did apply... And then they offered me the job. So obviously we had to relocate... You know, we'd both got family ... parents still alive. My daughter was married but living nearby ... So it was a big, it was a big thing.” Olive, Headteacher, Maple Grove Secondary

The accounts of Reggie and Olive speak of a commitment to living in the area and a weaving together of personal and professional identities, not just considerations of the role. The theme was reflected in other aspects of leaders' discussions. Jude related it to a relatively low turnover of staff more generally:

“People don't really go... they're either young and they're into the outdoors and they've got a job in Shire so they're staying, or they're like me, they're middle class, they're middle aged, they've got families in Shire and they're staying, you know, there isn't a big turnover of staff.” Jude, Headteacher, Soundshores Primary - Local Leader

Rory had a similar understanding

“We were in a school in [Town] and they were saying their big issue was staff turnover and our heads were laughing saying our big issue is a lack of staff turnover... Everyone's on UPS ... and they won't move on, you know, ‘cause I live in the village.” Rory, Local Leader

Diversity

Leaders spoke about diversity in a number of ways. There was wide agreement that teachers generally, including leaders, in the area were not ethnically diverse.

“I think the school staff probably reflects the local area, but not the national area”.
Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

There was desire to change that picture expressed, but as Reggie articulates, no clear sense of how to act on the desire:

“I think it's a real challenge in an area like this where there is far less diversity genuinely in the population. My general feeling is it's really positive to have diversity on your team. ... but it's, it's always that balancing act of when you're in that appointment and recruitment process, getting the best person for the job... How do you find opportunities to diversify the leadership team or the school workforce or whatever in terms of broader society ... It's a real challenge, isn't it?” Reggie, Headteacher, Amberwood School

Maria perceived change over time in terms of the proportion of women in leadership positions:

“I think just looking at local schools even, I think that I can see a difference in that it used to all be male heads. It's like in the secondaries there were no female headteachers at all and very few even in the senior leadership teams. And there are definitely, I think

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

*there are maybe more female headteachers in the area now than male headteachers.”
Maria, Headteacher, Sapphire Secondary*

Leaders presented a mix of perceptions in terms of other types of diversity. Ronnie was positive about the culture in his school:

“We certainly have a number of staff who are gay and lesbian and quite openly so, and run our LGBTQ club, and you know.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

Whereas another leader observed, when discussing diversity more generally, *‘I haven't come across (a) gay leader in schools in Shire.’* We also heard accounts of explicit homophobia and some indirect accounts of reticence in applying for posts because of the perceived implications of completing monitoring forms accompanying applications.

More generally, some leaders reflected on and regarded as important the idea that diversity should be visibly represented in the workforce and leadership. Ben was very clear on the point:

“For example, certainly Eastern European presence within the community, that's not necessarily represented either in leadership or or in the school workforce at all... So for me that... does speak to a problem that I'm not sure how seriously we're taking EDI within Shire as a council.” Ben, Local Leader

Succession Planning

We noted in the section on Supply that - mixed perceptions notwithstanding - Rory's view was that in the primary sector, initiatives undertaken by the LA had influenced both serving and potential headteachers:

“There would be heads going off sick, long term, finished, acting heads here, all sorts and and just we just don't see that now and I think it's all the different things we've done have kept stability, kept people in post.” Rory, Local Leader

Rory described two programmes that were in place, one for leaders considering headship:

“A course to address all the things on people's minds about going into headship... we're on our fifth cohort.” Rory, Local Leader

Rory described the course as addressing leaders who were actively considering headship and seeking to strengthen confidence and preparedness for the role. Another course was aimed at headteachers new in post or in acting posts:

“When they start, they then join another course ... It's really just the new head teachers' course, but it was always also for acting heads.” Rory, Local Leader

These initiatives were necessarily quite focused on particular groups of leaders. The limited resources available to the LA was mentioned frequently by headteachers and LA officials.

Individual schools and leaders also considered their own school's continuity of leadership. Olive's reflections were typical:

“At some point I'm going to need to start seriously to think about retirement, I am. And it's about succession planning, isn't it? And leaving things in a place that you feel that you could walk away from.” Olive

There was also general discussion of professional development as we will set out in the next session. Nevertheless, we did not hear of a coordinated or concerted initiative that sought to take an overview of schools' needs in the area in terms of leadership, or one that sought systematically to anticipate the need to appoint headteachers. The LA's focused initiatives

supported some senior leaders ready to apply for headship in maintained primaries and where needed, the LA ensured there were acting heads in post. We did not hear of systematic or co-ordinated efforts by the relatively small and dispersed MATs in the area.

Training

Leadership Programmes and CPD

Discussions about preparing people for and developing them in leadership positions invariably referenced the suite of nationally managed and funded National Professional Qualifications. It was notable that these ‘free’ programmes played a more central role in Shire than in England Coast and City, where most schools and trusts appeared able to engage with a wider range of opportunities.

Mabel’s organisation – a Teaching School Hub - had a lead role in delivering the programmes, working with a national provider. She remarked on the numbers signing up:

“The take-up every cohort... for NPQH and NPQSL has been really strong, consistently 20–25.” Mabel, Local Leader

At the time we visited, the programmes had been fully funded by the Department for Education (DfE), meaning there was no charge for participating:

“NPQs are free. So whilst they’re free, let’s get people booked up on and given it was virtual, I’d have signed up with Best Practice Network, for example, based somewhere else in the country for good quality free CPD.” Ben, Headteacher, Cardingham Primary – Local Leader

Ben named a different national provider to the one with which Mabel’s Hub worked, indicating that there were multiple providers being used by Shire Headteachers.

Local Leader Mabel had, nevertheless, noticed a difference between secondary and primary schools in the take-up of the NPQ programmes:

“Where you’ve got small, lots and lots of small rural primary schools, for the head to send anybody other than themselves, and sometimes it’s only them, is trickier, so the impact is less easy to see in the primary sector.” Mabel, Local Leader

Emma, headteacher of a small secondary school, spelt out the cost of the NPQH programme in terms of time and the requirement to be absent from school (although the current version of NPQH does not include the placement she refers to):

“I didn’t continue [the NPQH]... I couldn’t do that nine days to go out and do that project... I then did a master’s in educational leadership — I think that stepped my leadership up again.” Emma, Headteacher, Cloud Secondary – Local Leader

In terms of the programmes themselves, there was a recognition of the coherent approach across the whole suite of programmes:

“I’ve put two well-established teachers on the NPQ programmes. I’ve got an ECT (Early Career Teacher) at the moment. We have, we host initial teacher training students. The exciting thing for me, genuinely, is that the same messages are coming through in all those different programmes, you know, dare I say it, I don’t remember that before.” Hugo, South Primary

Local Authority programmes were mentioned in the previous section on Recruitment and Supply of headteachers. Rory outlined some of the thinking about the programme:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

"A course to address all the things on people's minds about going into headship. 'I'm scared about... I don't know about budget, I don't know about this'. We put this course together, but it's all about wisdom... Our course is very much not NPQ. It's very much wisdom..." Rory, Local Leader

Former participants and current heads understood the programme in the same way, seeing this as a valuable approach. Ben's reflections were an example as well as referring to other efforts to coordinate professional development.

"There's a local leadership course... about how we prepare people for the practicalities of leadership... Now there's action learning for more existing heads and there's conversations about how do we develop that for the next layer, [unclear] in terms of SENCOs, middle leaders, aspiring senior leaders." Ben, Cardingham Primary - Local Leader

A large proportion of schools in Shire have a religious affiliation, and we heard also about programmes run by the diocese.

"I did my Christian leadership course coming out of COVID because the diocese runs, a Christian leadership course". Olive, Headteacher, Maple Grove Secondary

Another significant feature of the area was, as we noted in the section on Place, partnerships of schools working together and to enable events and professional development not achievable as individual schools. Ben described one example of a number of similar instances described by headteachers:

"One was we set up a shared INSET day where we used the brokering power of small schools, to kind of combine our finances to bring in a better quality CPD and and to just strengthen networks. And from that, we've established termly subject leader networks, which take place online. They're pretty well attended." Ben, Headteacher Cardingham Primary – Local Leader

There were a range of experiences and views about the programmes as preparation for headship:

Harriet and Molly were both in their first year of headship and shared a view that the NPQH had dealt with 'nuts and bolts', practical issues:

"My MA gave me the education, the knowledge, and the NPQH gave me the practical skills to deal with your Governors... performance management in school." Harriet, Alberta Primary

"NPQH has been good too. It's felt a bit more bite size at times just in a fun way because it's been quite a more of a prescribed course than maybe the other ones ... but really useful as well. And I think lots of just very useful content that we needed to deal with the nuts and bolts of headship." Molly, Headteacher, Clearwater Primary

There were headteachers with a wide range of experience in headship and they had encountered different models of the NPQH programme and undertaken it with different motivations:

"I did do the NPQH, but I was already in post because ... I guess it was relatively early on in its evolution as a course. I'm not sure I found it particularly useful." Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

“I'd done my NPQH in 2015 as an assistant head, really more as a CPD opportunity and because my head at the time thought it was a good idea. So I'd done my NPQH. Very different to, to as it is now.” Olive, Maple Grove Secondary

Reggie pointed to a particular aspect of the programme as being useful which is no longer part of the current model:

“So, I did do NPQH. I'll be honest, I didn't find it helpful at all really. But it was also, I was doing it through COVID. So, we didn't have a single face-to-face session. And that was fine. It was fine, but it wasn't helpful. The most helpful thing actually was doing the placement in school that I found really helpful.” Reggie, Headteacher, Amberwood Secondary

A number of heads had not completed NPQH before taking up their posts, almost all had had some formal preparation and induction however, and they too had a range of views:

“I'd say that the course for new heads has been really interesting because it's been people that are doing the job now in Shire, they may be acting heads, they may be new substantive heads, but they're in the, they have that responsible position at the moment.” Molly, Clearwater Primary

Molly's observations about the value of learning with and from peers was echoed by many leaders. Robyn was less persuaded of the benefits of the programme:

“I did two leadership courses through the local authority. I didn't do NPQH, but I did the two, one year's back-to-back aspiring heads and another one ... and I did those. I didn't think they prepared me one iota.” Robyn, Headteacher, Grange Primary

A common thread was that it was technical and legal elements of the role for which heads had felt unprepared. Ronnie spelt it out clearly:

“As a head teacher, you never get formal training on the finance... And then things like HR as well. And again, you can't cover those things in an NPQH. But that's the bit that everybody I think is most worried about.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

Informal Development and Experience

Leaders repeatedly referred to specific opportunities, experience more generally and individual role models and mentors as contributing to development and preparation:

For Harriet, it had been an opportunity to take on an acting role:

“I had a half a term in post [Acting Headship] and that's what inspired me to kind of move forward and do training to become a head myself.” Harriet, Headteacher, Albert Primary

Hugo was clear that his most important learning had been 'on the job':

“So I probably had, it's years ago, I had a bit of an idea or perhaps I thought I did at the time... But the rest of it's on the job. No two ways about it... I sort of learned by doing as much as I can, that's my learning style rather than doing loads of courses.” Hugo, HT South Primary

Ben also suggesting learning in role had been important, but also emphasised learning from more experienced peers:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“I did work for an effective head and there was no SLT structure... So when I then formed an SLT, I had conversations with other heads.” Ben, Headteacher, Cardingham Primary – Local Leader

Rory had been a headteacher prior to taking up an LA role, but had consciously sought out learning experiences in order to prepare:

“I want[ed] to do acting headships for a number of years to learn, and ...just learn and learn.” Rory, Local Leader.

Ronnie summed up the importance of positive (and negative) role models:

“So I've worked with some really bad head teachers, I've worked with some really good head teachers, I've worked with some really inspirational deputy heads who've really had the kids at the heart of what they do.... So yes, I think there's been, as you would expect, there's been some really fantastic people you've thought, yeah, I like, I like the way they do that.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

Practices

Headteachers spoke about the priorities for their schools and the activities and relationships which were involved.

School Improvement, Attainment & Progress

The attainment and achievements of children was a central thread in every conversation with headteachers, there was nevertheless a nuanced and complex picture presented.

Accountabilities

In all headteachers' discussions there was a keen awareness of different layers of accountability and the relationships involved, but all in some way acknowledged the significance of external inspection by OFSTED.

Iris' school was part of MAT and the oversight was direct and accompanied by detailed advice:

“I've got 20 odd pages of rapid improvement plan from the Academy Trust... I'd had my 20-odd pages, which I don't read, I just ignore them. But when Ofsted came, I just pinged it to Ofsted, like yeah, we've got a plan, there we go. But I know what I'm doing ... but I know what I'm doing. But I can only do one thing at a time” Iris, Headteacher Harmony Primary

Ronnie's school was also part of a MAT, but it was to his Governing Body that he perceived his principal accountability:

“...really good chair called [Name], who's brilliant. And the Governing Body now I think are far better at asking the right questions, putting the questions forward before the meeting.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

In maintained schools, Governing Bodies are accountable for schools with Local Authorities having formal oversight. Rory described the LAs approach to the oversight.

“We have got accountability processes, but I would say we don't really need them because we know what's going on in our schools cause our heads have good relationships and phone us, we chat with them and they're no surprises... I suppose our role really, although it is about holding to account and challenge, we do do that, but they would, we would probably be seen in some ways as a sort of like consultancy type body” Rory, Local Leader

Hugo characterised his experience of the approach as ‘light touch’

“I could call him up and he'd, he'd make time as soon as he possibly could. But there's no, there is no, there is no LA mechanism for sort of very, you know, it's a heads down challenging conversation once a year or anything like that. There's a, there's a form you fill in, but it's, it's like very light touch.” Hugo, South Primary

Heads also spoke of a self-awareness and working with their peers to evaluate their schools:

“At the moment it's we've, we've always had our school improvement through the [Local Partnership]. So we operate this trio, the heads work together and we operate a trio situation where we go into each of the schools and we look at paperwork, we look at development plans, we do learning walks etcetera.” Olive, Headteacher, Maple Grove Secondary

Inspection

A keen awareness of the requirements of external inspection pervaded discussions about accountability and the process of external inspection itself was a significant features of leaders’ work:

“I'm literally waiting for Ofsted to phone, you know, that's how it feels at the moment and have done for a little while.” Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

We visited before there were changes to OFSTED inspections in September 2024, and at the time, the outcomes of OFSTED inspections were still being expressed in single word judgements. There were a number of similar accounts to the one Ronnie gave:

“And then we've been through the journey of RI and we got Good two years ago. So yeah, I don't think we were Outstanding when we were passed Outstanding. I don't think by the time they came in we were actually Special Measures.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary.

He was clear about the emotional toll some inspections could take:

“The behaviour of the Ofsted team in those was it's quite traumatic. And I think some staff still talk about, you know, PTSD as a result of how the team treated us.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

Iris made clear that, like many heads, she evaluated her school using OFSTED’s inspection framework. She also alluded to the extent to which the judgement was felt as being woven into the headteacher role and responsibility:

“I've not been here that long so it felt like it wasn't really my Ofsted... she downgraded us to Requires Improvement, but in a very lovely way. I genuinely mean that. And I wholeheartedly agree that it's Requires, I actually thought it was Inadequate.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

The implication of Iris’ remark was that future OFSTED inspection judgements would be ‘her’ OFSTED. More generally, the spirit of Maria’s sentiments were widely shared:

“Ofsted are Ofsted, you know they they're the thing that every headteacher probably dreads. Well, I think every teacher dreads and they and they've become such a, I don't know like a a stick that's used to beat people with that I think it's not very healthy way of doing accountability.” Maria, Headteacher, Sapphire Secondary

A further aspect of accountability, and the impact of inspection judgements, albeit not a formal one, was the relationship with stakeholders, whether parents of current pupils, or members of

the wider community with a concern for and interest in the school. Robyn captured the point, when discussing a difficult period in the history of the village school during which she joined as headteacher:

“We’d lost the confidence of the community and staff were exhausted.”

The loss of confidence centred around disputes and staff conduct and she described an extended period when staff worked to regain the confidence and trust.

Leading Improvement

Robyn’s account emphasised the uncertain and many-sided nature of leading improvement. Reggie, who had moved from another part of the country, perceived a different expectation amongst his staff compared to what he was used to:

“My deputy head at the time said, you’ve got to understand that the children here aren’t as bright [compared to similar schools] ... And I pushed back straight away and said, well, it’s the same profile as my current school.” Reggie, Headteacher, Amberwood Secondary

Reggie reported recruiting new members of his governing board and spoke approvingly of the challenge offered by one of them:

“He was very good at reminding the board that it’s about expecting the best of our children against a national expectation. Not saying ‘this is this is excellent for [Shire]’ it’s about saying ‘we want to be the best across the country... We should be getting better results’. And, and, and that’s the line I have to keep pushing against and feeding.. And it’s about having high aspirations for our kids and not trying to make excuses for them.” Reggie, Headteacher, Amberwood Secondary

Reggie was clear firstly that ‘results should be better’ and that the school should not simply compare itself with other local schools.

Hugo also spoke about expectations, but in terms of what he understood to be the priorities of families:

“I think I think for some of them, children being happy probably is a higher priority than their education at times. You know, sometimes as a staff, we might talk about the laid-back [Area] attitude, you know, not referring to us, but referring to the, to the, you know, which is, which is lovely in some ways, but also you want to try and find that aspiration and that sort of. But then there’s families here that are, there’s many families that are generations have lived here, worked here. They live a, a fulfilling life.” Hugo, Headteacher South Primary

Ronnie gave an account of working on improvement, centred on the achievement and attainment of pupils, that had taken place over a long period of time starting when he joined the school:

“...results were terrible, behaviour was appalling, teaching wasn’t great. So there was a lot of change that needed to be done from the position of quite a lot of people saying well, well, it’s Outstanding, why do you need to change anything?... And I think about 12 months after I started, they [OfSTED] came back in and they slated us ... Inadequate.” Ronnie, Headteacher Meadowgrove Secondary

He described working with staff and the challenges that brought:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“So there was quite a lot of staff turnover and that was challenging because in some instances when you increase the expectation...it causes a lot of stress.” Ronnie, Headteacher Meadowgrove Secondary

Like Robyn, he described the importance of having the confidence of the school’s community of parents:

“We had probably two or three years of battles with parents. But again, with very few exceptions, those things are now dealt with.” Ronnie, Headteacher Meadowgrove Secondary

Ronnie described the various roles that other staff took in the journey and the direct steps related to improving teaching and curriculum. He also mentioned less direct aspects of leadership which were, in his view, essential:

“There was some research that I found about how stable leadership is the key to school improvement.... I think if you want sustainable school improvement, where I could fall under a bus, then you have to start with the culture. “Culture eats strategy for breakfast” is the saying, isn't it? And I think it's right. And I think once, once you get a critical mass of staff that have bought into it and a critical mass of students, then the rest of it sort of follows.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

Iris, headteacher of a small primary, also used the language of expectations whilst also referring to broader considerations:

“So I, I want to put across how high my expectations are academically, but also how much we care about the fact that they are children.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

Iris, like a number of headteachers we spoke to, identified the curriculum as a focus of improvement.

Planning the Curriculum

Most of the heads discussed the curriculum and how the pupils’ time was structured, but there were different emphases.

In Iris’ case she’d identified it as a priority as a new Headteacher:

“It was just the most bland curriculum I've ever, I could actually say ever seen. I was really, I felt really sad that that's what they'd been doing.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

In her case, as a small school, renewing and developing the curriculum was difficult as there were very few staff. They purchased the materials to support a new approach:

“I wanted a new curriculum... So immediately I purchased a new curriculum... (the) Trust advised me on it because they've got other schools using it and you know, so I kind of leant a little bit on well, the Trust are advising, even though I loved it... but I did sell it with the staff.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

Reggie, also a relatively new headteacher had been aware that the curriculum subjects available to students did not suit all his cohort:

“Just trying to tell people that actually you can change, and it is better. And do you know what? Maybe we do need to rethink the curriculum model, or the timings of the day and

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

the number of GCSEs the children do and all these types of things.” Reggie, Headteacher, Amberwood Secondary

Other heads also spoke about responding to and being aware of the circumstances of children and the school, especially in village schools:

“Yes, there is the national curriculum and that's statutory and that's what we do. But really our curriculum is based on the needs of the community, the needs of the pupils and the opportunities are very much place based.” Robyn, Grange Primary

Ronnie, alongside the longstanding priority on academic improvement he described, also emphasised activities beyond the subject-based curriculum:

“So every single child in school, I think bar about three in Year 11 this year, has been involved in something extracurricular of some form and we're trying to extend that out now.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove School

Finance

Most Headteachers spoke of organisational management activities that were often a less visible side of the role. Planning and managing material and financial resources for example was a strategic issue for a school:

“Trying to think short term, long term, medium term, how do we change the financial position because the school has lurched from being on the edge constantly.” Reggie, Headteacher, Amberwood Secondary

Emma described also a day to day operational responsibility in the context of being the headteacher of a standalone academy:

“I'd moved from a local authority school and while our head had done a lot through the leadership team meetings about budget, I then went into an Academy and the financial requirements on what you need to do and becoming accounting officer meant that you have to learn very, very quickly about how it all works.” Emma, Headteacher, Cloud Secondary

Care

There were important areas of schools' work that headteachers described and suggested had increased in scale and complexity in recent years.

Safeguarding and Family Support

“There's a lot of work that we do to support families with attendance, with social, social support with, again, crime. There is there are certain families that drugs, do you know what I mean? There's drugs related (issues)...” Harriet, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

Harriet highlighted support for families that include directly school related issues such as attendance, but extends into wider areas.

Iris highlighted the demand of dealing with roles which schools have a formal part in, but are nevertheless time consuming:

“We've had a couple of high-profile issues with things that have happened outside of school, in children's family lives, nothing connected to us that has had a huge impact on us....And it's the amount of time that it takes to make sure that you are fulfilling your role as a safeguarding lead, making sure you're recording everything, making sure you've had all the right conversations with people.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

Rory spelt out the particular challenge that such issues may offer in a small community:

“Just safeguarding aspects or concerns they’ve got about pupils and and if you’re in a small community, a lot of this stuff can become a bit like a pressure cooker because you’re, you might be the head of the school in a small village, isolated from other villages and then you know what goes on in the community quite often just spreads out.” Rory, Local Leader

Ronnie echoed other leaders in talking about the intensity of support that some young people and families needed and speculated about ways in which schools and other professions might work more closely in the area:

“The head of year is spending 80% of their time with 24 kids. I think that it does drag us away. It would be really good to use schools more as a hub for things because we’re the universal service. Why is the social worker not here? Why is the school nurse not here? Why is the community police officer not here?” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

A second area that was discussed at length was children with SEND. Mabel’s assertion was widely echoed:

“We’re also seeing and you’ll be aware of this as well, an increasing number of complex and chaotic children in all of those schools who’ve got nowhere else to go because there is no alternative provision in Shire.” Mabel, Local Leader

There are some special schools in Shire, but Mabel was pressing the idea that some of the children attending mainstreams may need to work with staff with additional skills:

“The pressure that it puts on both primary and secondary, but secondaries in particular, is immense and they don’t have the specialist training.” Mabel Local Leader

Elsewhere, Robyn for example, described being accustomed to planning for the learning of children with specifically identified issues:

“We’ve always got a lot of children who are coming in with learning difficulties, mainly autism and ADHD. So, there’ll be a focus on particular learning styles for those children as well. And a curriculum that isn’t probably not just a, you know, they need to get up and move.” Robyn, Headteacher, Grange Primary

Robyn too noted changes in the needs of children attending her school, in her case those with Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs:

“We have a lot of children here with a lot of SEMH difficulties and, and it’s becoming more and more and more. I’ve never made a referral to children in mental health services up until this last week and I’ve made three and they’re for real, real issues for our children.” Robyn, Headteacher, Grange Primary

Inclusion

Reggie spoke more generally about inclusion embracing both special needs and wider groups of students:

“And then my SENDco is now, I’ve made him an inclusion lead. So, taking on far more ... the social emotional mental health, school refusers, anyone on an alternative pathway and part-time timetable.” Reggie, Headteacher, Amberwood Secondary

Maria spoke in expansive terms about inclusion, relating to all students and ways of acting which they intended to be the norm:

“I think the school is much more inclusive school than it used to be... So I think in terms of our values for the students in respect and tolerance of each other... So teaching for learning and behaviour for learning, where very much those two things go together, and we are very much about relationships.” Maria, Headteacher, Sapphire Secondary

Well-Being

A further area that had come into sharp focus was the well-being of staff. Iris reported being ‘in constant dialogue’ with staff and workload being one the issues.

“That’s the dialogue. Well-being. Workload, well-being is the dialogue of my staff all the time. And that certainly wasn’t the case before. So we’re constantly having to work to support workload and well-being.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

Ronnie too observed the prevalence of the issue:

“Almost exclusively now, it’s what will you do to support my well-being... And I worry that sometimes people come in not quite prepared for the realities of, it is bloody hard.” Ronnie, Meadowgrove Secondary

His reservation highlighted significant pressures on all staff which, his comment suggests, he views as difficult to ameliorate.

Leadership, Values and Professional Beliefs

As they spoke about their experiences, leaders articulated values underlying their decisions and choices, and views and beliefs about leadership.

Professional Values and dispositions

A lot of the leaders spoke about individual qualities like open-ness, honesty and treating people with respect in the way they conducted themselves. For Maria that translated into being clear and straightforward with staff and children:

“Kids need that and adults, staff need that as well. They need to know exactly where they stand and they need to not be given like false promises to people and all of that, that, you know, that maybe happened in the past with other leaders in the school, that they’ve always known with me where they stand and things.” Maria, Headteacher, Sapphire Secondary

Emma picked up a similar theme of honesty and openness:

“It does require, I think, though as a leader that you need to be open about the fact that sometimes you don’t know it all, you know, and it’s alright to go, actually I don’t have a clue what’s going on.” Emma, Headteacher, Cloud Secondary

Rory, reflecting on a period as a leader in a school during a period of upheaval spoke of how he worked with staff:

“We did it ethically and the staff were on board... we looked after their wellbeing. Some people, they weren’t in the right job and sensitive conversations with them helped them move.” Rory, Local Leader

Some leaders spoke of very personal values that informed their work as leaders

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“I’ve got a strong idea of what my personal values are and when I’d probably nailed down what they were in my mid 30s life all became a bit easier really,...I want to be as good a husband as I can, as good a parent as I can.” Jude, Soundshores Primary – Local Leader

“I feel like the outdoors has, outdoor education or education outdoors ... just being in the natural world is a really important part of growing up.” Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

Moral Purpose

Purpose and moral or ethical fundamental motivations were most often framed as ‘putting children first’ and considering the whole child:

“We talk a lot about the whole child, developing the whole child. Yeah, you’ll get great exam results if you come here, fine. But you’ll also have a child who’s confident, articulate, kind, thoughtful, self-reliant, those and has had lots of experiences.” Ronnie, Meadowgrove Secondary

Ronnie’s school was a secondary school in a town, Hugo spoke in similar terms about his village primary school and articulated a holistic philosophy about the place of the school:

“I like to think we put the children and the, the growth and the development of the whole child at the centre of what we do. Obviously there’s a sort of academic and educational side, but also growing that child in as a, as a person in all those, those widest senses. We try to maximise the opportunities of living where we live and at the same time to address the, the challenges of where we live. And one key part of that is, is the community because we believe that a community really brings up the child as much as any one individual. And I think if the child can feel safe and secure, then that’s when they can thrive. And being part, feeling identity in a community is really important.” Hugo, Headteacher South Primary

Reggie reflected on the idea that the same fundamental values may nevertheless result in very different ways of being a leader:

“I like both of them. But with [Name], it was very black and white, and [Name] sees the shades of grey but sees them in a similar way to me. And again, it’s both of them always put the children first.” Reggie, Headteacher Amberwood Secondary

Drains

We discussed with leaders the aspects of their roles which they found draining in some way.

Workload and Weight of Leadership

The accumulated burden and volume of work associated with school leadership was something that all leaders talked about at length.

“I would say sometimes feeling overwhelmed with all the different hats that you have to wear.” Molly, Headteacher, Clearwater Primary

The ‘many hat’s’, whether experienced as demands from different constituencies or different types of task, were spelt out in some detail by Iris, who was quite new to her permanent role:

“So I get a lot from my Governors asking me to do things. I get a lot from the Trust asking me to do things. I get a lot from the staff ... the many hats. So, yeah, the building, the budget, you know...you’ve got ‘Ofsted ready’. You’re on, you know, you’re on a list somewhere and you’re thinking ‘I need to be, I need to be in class’. But at the same time,

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

you need to learn how your budget works and where all your pots of money are.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary School

Olive identified the burden of being, on occasions, the ultimate decision maker or only person who could take on certain tasks:

‘It’s a very isolating, even though I’ve got a fantastic senior leadership team, it’s a very isolating role because ultimately you, I have to do things that I would never ask them to do.’ Olive, Headteacher Maple Grove Secondary

Many heads used the word ‘weight’ to capture the experience of being responsible:

“I think it’s that weight of that total responsibility is on my shoulders. And I found that more and more weighty in recent years.” Robyn, Headteacher, Grange Primary

A point that Robyn alludes to was that for some heads, the ‘weight’ was both the accumulated burden of many responsibilities, but also draining in that continuing to hold responsibility over time become increasingly burdensome:

“Cumulative’s the word... And you need a certain resilience to keep going. And I’m probably a bit fatigued.” Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

Finance, Resources

A second area that all heads were finding challenging was limited resources. The resources were both financial in terms of limited budgets, but also availability of people or services, albeit they could also be linked to limited financial resources:

“I think the most significant bit for me is the lack of funding that there is. It’s, and I think that that just drains everything.” Maria, Headteacher, Sapphire

Maria was referring directly to schools’ funding. Ronnie highlighted the impact when there was perceived to be limited funding elsewhere:

“And there’s no funding there. That’s the problem is there’s not enough money. So it’s always a battle. It’s a battle to try and get the stuff that the kids need. And the LA, I’m sure if they had an infinite pot of money, it would be like no problem, there you go. But they don’t.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

Harriet identified falling rolls as a key factor for her school and the accompanying pressure it placed on her:

“When your pupil numbers are falling and your budgets and it’s, and you’re knowing that you’re going to have to make staff members redundant, that that’s a pressure for you as a head teacher.” Harriet, Headteacher, Alberta Primary

Olive discussed how the challenges of limited and reducing budgets were concentrated in a small school where there were limited opportunities for ‘economies of scale’ and small changes, for example a small reduction in the number of pupils, could have a proportionately large impact on the budget:

“I think as a head of a small school, I think the challenges are in trying to keep the balls up in the air with, you know, because everything has an economy of scale to it, doesn’t it? So we’re working with an economy of scale that is challenging in a small school in terms of funding.” Olive, Headteacher, Maple Grove Secondary

Complaints and Disputes

Disputes and conflict were acknowledged as challenging to manage and as potentially having a significant personal impact on leaders:

“And then parents are draining. You know, you get, there's a lot of mental health in the community and a huge amount of anxiety and, and they're either putting that onto their children and then they come to you via worries or they just, you know, there's just social problems and it all lands on your, your doorstep.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

Iris spoke of the effect on children and directly on the school of social challenges generally. Others spoke of the impact of disputes directly with the school. Reggie's experience was fairly common where a complaint or grievance was taken up in formal legal way:

“Things that just drain in capacity is, and I'm going to word this carefully, unrealistic or litigious parent complaints... I've had a parent who was unsuccessful at independent appeal who's given us pre judicial review paperwork.” Reggie, Headteacher, Amberwood School

Reggie's experience of a very formal, time-consuming legal process was by no means unique. More generally, another aspect discussed of the challenge with complaints was the large increase in the volume and the nature of them. Ronnie linked the changes to a shift in attitudes since COVID, as well as being exacerbated by the use of social media:

“The whole COVID stuff, it's become far more challenging just in terms of the relationship between, the relationship [with parents]... the social media side of it. So I lose track of the amount of time that my heads of year spend on something that happened at two o'clock last night on social media.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

For Olive, the continual flow and sense of conflict was the aspect that contributed to the accumulating burden:

“It's constant, you know, I find it quite, what's draining is that constant, you feel like you're in battle all the time with everybody and it shouldn't be like that.” Olive, Headteacher, Maple Grove Secondary

Olive also alluded to an internal conflict that was very stressful, in this instance with Governors:

“I had a very difficult twelve months where the Governing Body ... they were talking to staff behind my back. They were meeting as a group of Governors behind the head of the Chair of Governor's back... it was very difficult.” Olive, Maple Grove Secondary

Reggie identified a struggle with staff that was also not overt, but experienced as draining over time as he sought to introduce changes:

“It's not been deliberate necessarily, but there were a number of people on my original team ... I got the sense (they) were trying to subvert things sometimes, or ... didn't necessarily go out with the same collective argument ... they would kind of engage it [disagreement] and feed it a little bit more than was helpful. So that is a drain.” Reggie

Staff resilience and HR challenges

A slightly different reflection on challenges with staff was the view that attitudes and expectations had shifted since the COVID-19 pandemic. Olive's account of the issue articulates quite a widespread view:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“But I think staff are different coming out of the pandemic. I think that they are wanting more of a work-life balance than perhaps when I entered the profession you knew what you were going into. You knew you were going into long days, long nights, you know, and I don't, I think people have re-evaluated and I think they want a work life balance.” Olive, Headteacher, Maple Grove Secondary

Mabel expressed a similar point more sharply:

“Post COVID and I'd be interested to know if this is what you hear elsewhere, the resilience of the staff in my schools has definitely decreased. I think teaching is a hard job. Umm. And people have forgotten.” Mabel, Local Leader

The emotional and cumulative demand of dealing with issues with staff was expressed, aside from any changes post-COVID. Molly expresses the point clearly:

“I'd say anything where there's been like staffing issues, I've found draining, just things to do with personnel and those issues I think I've found, I've found draining.” Molly, Headteacher, Clearwater Primary

Robyn found herself cast in a potentially challenging and draining role:

“The staff, gosh, they tell me things I would never have told my mum, but I'm Mum. I suppose. That's how they that's how it's become, you know, they, they will tell me everything you know, and spend time they need, and I give them that time.” Robyn, Headteacher, Grange Primary

SEND and Inclusion

In the section on Care, we described in more detail some schools' work on SEND and inclusion. It was frequently spoken of as a significant drain. Ronnie identified the limited resource from beyond the school as being a source of stress and draining:

“So you'll no doubt hear from everyone that social services are overstretched, CAMHS are hopeless - and that one you can minute. And there's, we're getting children with really complex and multiple issues, problems and it's trying to find the right people to work with them.... sometimes it's because they're there, but they're overstretched and sometimes it's because these people don't exist. There isn't a service there to support particular children.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

He also echoed the point made in the section on Care, that the volume and complexity of students' needs had intensified over time. Hugo, as one of the longest serving headteachers we spoke to, was very clear that the demands of SEND and Inclusion were significantly greater and took up much of his time:

“In my time as head we've definitely, the things on our agenda have definitely widened... you know, we're dealing with a lot of things day-to-day that are way outside what I'd call education. You know, health, social care, all that. And that takes up a huge amount of admin time.” Hugo, South Primary

Sustains

We asked about things that sustain leaders in their roles as well as what drained them.

Children, Making a Difference, Moral Purpose

All headteachers spoke in some measure about purposes and ethical underpinnings for their role.

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

At its simplest, and usually spontaneously, the response to what sustained people in their roles was working with children in schools.

“Ah, the children, the children, the children in school... them showing you what they're doing. I, I just love the children. I just think life is magical through the eyes of the children. And that makes your life magical.” Harriet, Headteacher, Alberta Primary

Harriet, headteacher of a primary school, expressed the motivation in terms of the delight and satisfaction gained from the interaction. Olive, headteacher in a secondary school, spoke in similar terms:

“I think that after five years they've realised that that's what my ethos is, that it's the children that sustain you. It's the daft conversations you have on the corridor...I've just taken eight, eight of them to Wimbledon...And it's just that whole like banter you can have with children.” Olive, Headteacher, Maple Grove Secondary

Maria, like many leaders, expressed the same motivation and additionally saw it through the lens of making a contribution and affecting pupils' lives positively:

“The biggest thing, I suppose, I've put pupils... it's because, to me it's the most important job in the world and it's and that's because of them. And I think that is what sustains me in knowing that actually you can make even just a small difference in someone's life.” Maria, Headteacher, Sapphire Secondary

Olive again expressed a point that others made, that a sense of service and a feeling of responsibility were powerful motivating factors.

“The responsibility that I feel to the school and to the community and to the staff and to the kids and to the parents is why I try not to let the balls drop even when it's really difficult... my innate sense of responsibility towards this school and this job and this and to and to our children is what makes me get up.” Olive, Headteacher Maple Grove Secondary

Molly too expressed a sense of service very strongly, but also linked it very directly to the specific village community of which she felt a part.

“Being part of the community as well. So I think I because the, the school and the children and the parents and the community mean a lot to me... I feel the responsibility and the importance of what I've taken on. I have absolutely held at the heart of my leadership that I'm going to do the best for school and for the community. And that has been, has really sustained me in what I'm doing because I feel the very strong sense of purpose.” Molly, Headteacher, Clearwater Primary

Relationships

In terms of actually carrying out their roles, relationships of various types were spoken of universally:

“The staff, the partnerships, the networks and the wider community, you know, they, they can all be, come under the big umbrella of relationships. If you don't have those relationships. I mean, it's the relationships that sustain you.” Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

Relationships with peers was a significant theme:

“And I've got a cluster heads ... all of us around here, we just get together and we just really got each other's backs. Yeah. And it's just lovely. And when you've got a stupid, I'm

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

learning, you know, it doesn't matter how stupid your question is, just pick up the phone and ask somebody.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

Hugo went on to identify the team in his own school with whom he worked directly as one crucial group:

“But I put staff team down to something that sustains me, it really does. And I think I couldn't do this job without them being who they are and what they're doing.” Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

The idea that the headteacher role is not possible without in school teams and networks was expressed by most headteachers:

“The fact that we're a team, you know, the, the, the senior team are a team. And in fact, staff are generally fantastic and a team and everyone steps in and helps out you know drives mini buses at weekends or whatever it might be because we serve the children.” Reggie, Headteacher, Amberwood School

There were also invariably personal relationships beyond the professional environment that were important”

“My husband is brilliant. He is, I am so lucky, I really am.” Harriet, Headteacher, Alberta Primary

Leadership Opportunity and Autonomy

A strong thread in discussions was the satisfaction gained from being in a significant leadership role and being able to exercise influence:

“Being a head's been the best I've had of all the roles I've had in school, and it's definitely the one that I've enjoyed most. I like being the boss. I like being in control of things. Even though, as I said, I delegate a lot and I give a lot of autonomy to my staff. It's earned autonomy.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadgrove Secondary

Ronnie recognised the satisfaction derived from the role itself. Hugo recognised that, and connected it to where the influence was exercised:

“It's the best job in the world, isn't it? And that ownership that, you know, that it's a real privilege to be able to to to steer and have that influence on a community really.” Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

Robyn reflected on being excited and energised by the potential and process of being able to take initiative:

“I get excited about new things happening. I'm thinking, oh, we're gonna be a part of that and that's gonna look like this is gonna be great and I'm all oh, this and everything and this stuff.” Robyn, Headteacher, Grange Primary

Material Benefits and Life Beyond School

There was a whole range of indirect features that leaders were clear sustained them.

Not all expressed it as baldly as Ronnie, but material benefits and some of the working conditions of leaders were acknowledged:

“That's the whole joke about why you go into teaching. You finish at 3:20 and you get loads of holidays. Well, you don't finish at 3:20, but you do get loads of holidays. And

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

however much you work in those holidays, I have friends who are not teachers and they don't have that.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

“That's why you have long holidays, so you can get your breath back.” Mabel, Local Leader

Leaders also made clear the importance of how they spent their time outside the school.

“I've got my own stuff out of school. Umm. And you know, my own life is going on out of school.” Jude, Headteacher, Soundshores Primary – Local Leader

“So I've spent the time at home with the dog, painting and hanging out, and that's been what I've needed to do.” Molly, Headteacher, Clearwater Primary

“I get out for a 5K run once or twice a week at seven o'clock in the morning with my friends on a Saturday, that do you know what I mean? That's the, it's a real challenge ... to keep your identity.” Harriet, Headteacher

Hugo characterised the need being fulfilled as 'headspace':

“I think, you know, obviously you've got your, your family, your own personal family and all that, that that drives you on and keeps you going, doesn't it? All that, that stuff. For me having, having, you know, being able to go for a run on a Friday night or go on a bike around Shire at the weekend. That's my headspace. You know, we've all got our fishing, whatever it is, haven't we, you know. So it, I, I definitely need that.” Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

Support

In the discussions about what sustains them, leaders made clear that support in their roles for its many aspects was essential. A quite complex mosaic was described.

Support Structures

Most of the schools in Shire are LA maintained as we set out in the section on Place. The LA as an organisation has some legally set out duties, but also a discretionary role in how it supported headteachers. Rory described how he understood it:

“I would say ... the first people heads would go to would be their colleague heads and now that will be probably the ones within their cluster that they've got a really good relationship with... Then beyond that, there would probably be the formal cluster where they might send an email out to everybody, 'has anyone got a supply teacher for a week?' They would come to us, which we would probably be seen... as a sort of like consultancy type body, where they ring us and we're gonna help you out, whatever it is.” Rory, Local Leader

His expectation was clear that there would not routinely be close involvement of LA officers with schools, albeit they would be responsive. The LAs proactive involvement in school in any one year was quite limited:

“We provide them with a package of, you know, up to three half days. But to be honest, some people don't need it, and some schools we're in all the time ... And if it's an Academy, we do get Academies buying us in and we charge out.” Rory, Local Leader

There was also, as we noted in the sections on Recruitment and Training, an LA programme offered to potential headteachers and another to those who were newly appointed or acting.

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

Headteachers spoke about their perception of support from the LA and largely echoed the pattern that Rory laid out. They saw little proactive interaction with schools unless leaders solicited advice or help, and their principal sources of support were local partnerships and networks of peers:

“The local authority in my time as a head, it's been amazing to sort of look back on... we're now, we're now at a situation where it's getting closer and closer to, I feel only able to deliver its core functions, the statutory core functions.” Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

Hugo's view of the changes over time linked diminished support with significantly reduced resources of the LA:

“So if, if largely, unless you're causing them a problem, you're left to your own devices.” Hugo, South Primary

Molly was an acting headteacher relatively recently appointed. She spoke positively about programmes she had been able to attend, including the new heads programme:

“The [Pre-Headship/Acting Heads] course has been fabulous, absolutely great.... I'd say that the course for new heads has been really interesting because it's been people that are doing the job now in [Area], they may be acting heads, they may be new substantive heads, but they're in the, they have that responsible position at the moment” Molly, Headteacher, Clearwater Primary

Her comments about continuing support however echoed the 'light touch' model that Hugo had described. Despite being relatively inexperienced and new in post, she needed to be highly self-reliant:

“In terms of local authority, we've had some contact with the advisor. He hasn't been out [i.e. to visit]. We have had some contact we've had, we have had a head teacher mentor, but ... we've only just had that for this term.” Molly, Headteacher, Clearwater Primary

Jude suggested that relatively strong local partnerships of schools had arisen as a consequence:

“So yeah, so Shire LA, hands off. So as a result there's a lot of support among schools. So I, until very recently, chaired the local group which, which is [Town] collaborative partnership ... So that's quite a strong group.” Jude, Headteacher, Soundshores Primary

Some headteachers spoke of school Governors as important support for them individually, in some cases directly through the relationship with the Chair:

“They're very supportive. My Chair of Governors is always at the end of a phone. If I've got a tricky situation, I'll contact him.” Harriet, Headteacher, Alberta Primary

In Molly's case, she referred to the group as a whole:

“(I) worked closely with Governors and they're a fantastic supportive Governing Body and they, I felt very personally supported by Governors in the role that I've taken on.” Molly, Headteacher, Clearwater Primary.

Headteachers whose schools were part of MATs referred also to the structures of the trust, although Iris' observation was fairly typical in highlighting that academies were not generally isolated from other schools in their locality:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“The Trust are very good. I think I've kind of got the best of both worlds that I can dip into the LA because my Trust are really happy for their head teachers to work with the LA... They want us to go to the Primary Heads Association meetings. They want us to go to our local cluster meetings, but they also want us to engage with things that the Trust have. So I feel that I've got so many people if I need them. So I know I can phone the CEO.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

Leading and managing schools in isolation was regarded as challenging by a number of heads and was behind discussions about either forming or joining groups, spoken of most often in terms of being part of a MAT. We referred earlier to Olive weighing that decision up, Hugo talked about considering the change:

“You know, there's several reasons, but but one of them is, is that I, I feel that I really need, I would benefit and the school would benefit from being part of something a little bit larger or certainly being part of a leadership team, if you see what I mean. It's what, what's, because we're all small schools. It's sort of a challenging that, that isolation because if you're even as a Year 6 teacher, you, you feel isolated just the same way as I do as a head.” Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

Hugo's reflections were prompted by a discussion about the support for him as headteacher.

Networks and Peers

More generally, networks and relationships with peers were important elements of support that headteachers spoke about.

Clusters of schools were orchestrated by the LA, but were widely spoken of as active groups that organised themselves, on occasions sharing resources:

“As a cluster, we have the bigger schools in our cluster, we finance things for the smaller clusters to be able to ensure that those heads could get to different events. And PHA [Primary Heads Association] have a small schools [fund], you can claim back some money.” Harriet, Headteacher, Alberta Primary.

The partnership Ronnie referred to in the section on Place was based around a specific area, a town;

“So we've had lots of conversations about what does [Collaborative Partnership] want to be? And I think we've hopefully got the idea that [unclear] it's the voice of [Town]. So if there is a [Town]-based issue, you've got a louder voice when you've got 15 schools than when you've got one.” Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary

The more formal, long-standing partnership Emma referred to in Place was in her case active in supporting her when she was a new headteacher in a stand-alone Academy:

“Think the big support came from the [Area] Federation. So in terms of when when I was appointed, the [Area] Federation appointed me a mentor within the group of heads from the consortia and that was really helpful just to be able to pick the phone up to someone...” Emma, Headteacher, Cloud Secondary

Individual relationships, alongside networks were routinely spoken of as important informal sources of mutual support, often groups established based on proximity or shared experiences. Iris described the relationship with a group with whom she attended the new heads programme:

“We're just, like, having great conversations with each other and like, one of them was having a really tough time with a complaint. And yeah, we were just all there for her. And

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

I know they'd do the same for me. So I, I feel really well supported, actually.” Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary

As a long-established head, Hugo too spoke of peer heads, in his case trusting relationships established over time:

“My first port of call would be, you know, my peers in, heads in other schools. So you know, that network of, that you build up over time” Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary

Ben was unequivocal about the importance to him in his role:

“I don't think I would have survived headship this far without the support of my colleagues, particularly in those early days.” Ben, Headteacher, Cardingham Primary – Local Leader

Reggie's reflection was also common, of drawing on a more diffuse network of relationships built up through a career:

“And again, it's, I think if I ever got to a point of, I don't know what to do and I don't know how to manage this situation, and I can't seek that support from the trust. I'd phoned [Name], I'd phone an ex colleague up and say, right, come on, here's the problem.” Reggie, Headteacher, Amberwood Secondary

However, we also interviewed several heads who were less well networked, essentially because they were younger and newer in post so had not had the same opportunities to build up relationships. While the local clusters and partnerships remained significant in Shire, it was clear that they were at risk of fragmenting, in particular as some schools were considering putting their energy into forming or joining MATs. In this context it was unclear whether the newly appointed heads would have opportunities to form the kinds of strong bonds that had supported the more experienced heads through their careers.

Locality Case Study: England – City

This case study begins with an overview of the locality and interviewee sample.²⁰ It then outlines how interviewees perceived and understood City as a place and follows with an account of the collective and individual professional and personal identities they articulated. The main focus is then on leadership. We describe how school leaders are recruited and developed, the nature of the role, the experience of leading that was reported, including what school leaders say drains and sustains them and how they are supported.

Introduction

England City is a mid-sized urban Local Authority with 100-120 schools. Economically, its population is typically significantly less well-off than national averages. For most schools in City for example, the proportion of children eligible for Free School Meals is higher than national averages. City is more diverse ethnically than most other local authority areas. Specific areas within City have their own character. There is an industrial past which shapes some communities strongly, while in others rapid change and migration patterns are affecting the nature of pupil populations.

In common with other LAs in England, there is a complex mix of school types and governance arrangements. Just over half of schools are academies, including around half of primary and special schools and almost all secondary schools. Most of the academies are in one of more than a dozen Multi Academy Trusts (MATs). The MATs are a mixture of medium and large-sized regional or national MATs with some schools in England-City, and smaller MATs focused entirely or mainly in City. In addition, just under one-third of schools have a formal religious character, either CofE or Roman Catholic.

There is a complex and overlapping range of education partnerships and networks of schools. The majority of schools in the locality (academies and maintained) are members of a local school partnership (Holly Partnership) to which they pay a membership fee. The partnership offers CPD including access to NPQs; school improvement advice; practical business support, and collaborative initiatives. The LA maintains a service with Improvement Advisors and Advisory Teachers and also provides CPD. The LA and the partnership seek to coordinate their offers. There is also a Teaching School Hub offering NPQs, while the MATs have their own internal CPD arrangements. Finally, there are various headteacher networks and Diocesan networks.

Interviewees

Table 5.6: Breakdown of interviewees by role

	DHT	Employer	HT	HT/Local Leader	Local Leader	Grand Total
England City	5	8	7	1	6	27

²⁰ The visits and interviews in England City took place in Autumn 23/ Spring 24

Table 5.7: List of Interviewees

Name	Gender	Role	School/Organisation	Type	Time In post (Years)	Time in role (Years)
Mia	F	DHT	Oak Primary School	School-Primary	1	1.5
Thea	F	AHT	Silverbrook Secondary	School-Secondary	6	6
Albie	M	DHT	Golden Primary	School-Primary	6	6
Sophie	F	HT	Haven Secondary	School-Secondary	7	7
Ivy	F	Strategic Primary Lead	Holly Partnership	Local Partnership	15	15
Rosie	F	HT	Sunnyside Primary School	School-Primary	15	15
Elizabeth	F	HT	Willow Primary School	School-Primary	16	16
Eleanor	F	DHT	Sunflower Primary	School-Primary	16	16
Isabella	F	CEO	Highfield MAT	MAT	10	10
Olivia	F	School Improvement Advisor	City LA	Local Authority	3	3
Freya	F	Partnership Manager	Holly Partnership	Local Partnership	13	13
Oliver	M	HT	Springfield Secondary	School-Secondary	4	4
Maya	F	Chief Learning Officer	Stables MAT	MAT	7	7
Harper	F	Executive Leader	Highfield MAT	MAT	7	7
Matilda	F	CEO	Stables MAT	MAT	7	7
George	M	EHT	Corner Special School	School-Special	3	3
Charlotte	F	Trustee	Highfield MAT	MAT	10	10
Arthur	M	HT	Primrose Secondary	School-Secondary	1	1
Jacob	M	Executive Leader	Highfield MAT	MAT	5	5
Florence	F	HT	Oak Primary School	School-Primary	1	2.5
Ava	F	CEO	Rose MAT	MAT	9	9

Thomas	M	Chief People Officer	Stables MAT	MAT	2	2
Lily	F	Business Director	Holly Partnership	Local Partnership	13	13
Finley	M	HT	Fairview Secondary	School-Secondary	0.5	0.5
Sophia	F	DHT	Sunnyside Primary School	School-Primary	15	15
Isla	F	CEO	Meadow MAT	MAT	3	3
Mark	M	Director of HR	Highfield MAT	MAT	2	2

Place

Schools and Communities

Leaders in England City had a detailed and nuanced view of the city and the communities who live there. Olivia was typical in highlighting the economic and social circumstances of many of the city’s residents:

“We know that City is a very deprived local authority... there are some pockets of more affluence within City, kind of very much on the [shire] border. But what we do know is the number of children with Pupil Premium Grant (PPG) is rising and... we know there's a big shift in the number of children who are eligible for PPG.” Olivia, Local Leader, City LA

As well as differences in material wealth between areas of the city, headteachers were keenly aware of the character of communities from which their students came and how their schools were shaped as a result. Rosie described the changes when her school moved a short distance into a new building:

“We were very much white British, non-working class. Generations of unemployment... when we moved here, that's completely changed because we've now got 38 languages. We've got some more affluent parents who are feeding from private housing there. ... We've got very, very different demographics to what we had three years ago. We're still 50% Free School Meals. So we're still deprived. We're not some leafy area of the city.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

Rosie’s school served multiple communities. Oliver’s secondary school was similarly shaped by the area of the city in which it was located:

“This is inner city [City] and straightforward as that really... there are leafier parts of [City] around us as well... the demographic of the school is 60% disadvantaged... The area is challenging, I guess like someone was stabbed outside the school gates six months ago, there was a shooting down the road... but nevertheless this is a really cool place and a bit of a haven for children.” Oliver, Headteacher, Springfield Secondary

In other schools, students travelled across the city. Sophie’s school had a religious character and its community of parents was not immediately local to the school:

“This is the nice wealthy part of City... But most of our children come from the other side of town and that is typical of a Catholic school because Catholic schools will - it's not

the locals that come to it, it's the Catholics who will come to it...this is a wealthy area but the kids aren't wealthy.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

George's school was a special school and some students travelled from outside the city.

“The locality. So you know you would say [City], but that spreads out quite far ... So we have people from [Town], from [Town], from [Town]... you know, it's SEMH, SEMH it seems to be mixed in with post codes and sort of like social deprivation, so here we've got 70% of students are on Free School Meals and then we've got another 13% who are Looked After Children (LAC) ... a lot higher than national average and a lot higher for [City] as a whole.” George, Headteacher, Corner Special

School, Governance and Relationships

The governance and administrative arrangements around schools were important in shaping many aspects of schools' work and there was a complex pattern across City. Around half of the locality's primary schools were LA Maintained, with a significant proportion having a religious character. Maintained schools' governing bodies were the most direct source of oversight and formal accountability and, as Rosie enumerated, were relied upon for expertise in some areas:

“We've got a more professional governing body as well... We've got - our chair of Governors is a senior tax consultant... We've got a health and safety consultant who's one of our governors. We run a tea time provision and before school provision, the Managing Director of that is on our governing board. So we've got quite an eclectic mix. ... we've got a full governing body, we've got parent governors.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

As indicated above, over half of all schools were academies and most were part of MATs. Headteachers and local leaders reported the MATs working in different ways with schools. For example, one MAT had removed the equivalent of Local Governing Bodies and oversaw schools very directly, drawing on the MAT's board of trustees:

“We don't have local governing boards anymore. Instead, we have school advocates... one of our directors, so she is linked to (us) ... and we will meet once a term to talk about all things generally. ... We also then have a termly progress Board meeting where the advocate attends along with the CEO and Deputy CEO.” Florence, HT, Oak Primary

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of another MAT described a different approach with Local Governing Bodies operating in a similar way to that described by Rosie, but with significant input from the MAT's central organisation which attempted to standardise the way they worked across schools:

“The central team provides standardisation doesn't it if you think about it? Standardisation of HR, standardisation of expectations for health and safety, standardisation [...] you know, in reporting formats in terms of raising purchase orders, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. But woven within that is the scheme of delegation... they produce leadership reports to their local governing body and we attend every local governing body”. Isabella, CEO, Highfield MAT

Another headteacher described a high degree of autonomy in the way the school operated whilst still being part of a MAT:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“It works well for me in the sense that our CEO lets me run the school. I know that's not always the case in MATs... I am very aware, talking to other heads, how trusts can work in very different ways.” Sophie, Haven Secondary

Alongside varied formal management and governance arrangements, there was an array of formal and less formal partnerships. The Local Authority, although much diminished, did maintain a team of officers working with schools. There was also, separate from the LA, a significant area-wide partnership. Ivy described how she saw its origins:

“In 2012, when the government started to withdraw funding from local authorities, schools still wanted to do something that would enable them to work in partnership with each other. And so they formed... decided to form a school company... we've got academy trusts, maintained special, free schools... We've got 114 schools altogether in the partnership ... the majority of those are [City] schools.” Ivy, Local Leader, Holly Partnership

The partnership was controlled by a board comprising headteachers, Elizabeth was a member and spoke of the relationship between the partnership and the LA:

“The local authority and the partnership working together ... at the beginning there was a lot of overlapping of activity, whereas now it's very distinct what people provide... schools [that] are not in the network fall into two MATs.” Elizabeth, Headteacher, Willow Primary

The provision referred to included professional development and leadership development programmes while the partnership also co-ordinated some Initial Teacher Training. Other leaders spoke of more localised collaboration between schools based on local clusters:

“Three of the schools are part of an Academy trust, so part of the [Name] Trust. But we all work together. And then [Name], isn't in a trust, we're not in a trust. [Name] is a Catholic school.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

The overlapping networks and grouping of schools were generally referred to by local leaders and headteachers as an indication of an outward looking and collaborative culture between schools in the city, the different types of schools notwithstanding. Some leaders however perceived a tendency for schools to work more tightly in academy groups when they were part of MATs. Isla, herself a MAT leader, described a pattern which other leaders also referred to:

“Academisation agenda really is a fragmentation that's very difficult to now reconcile. You know, you've got neighbouring schools and different arrangements that are naturally now competing there was a tentative approach to try and start to do some work around alternative provision... there was a real appetite to do this on behalf of those young children... but individual trusts were then going to go away and they were going to find solutions on their site for their children in their settings... the academisation move has been quite damaging across City. I definitely think there is a sense of schools moving into their own arrangements and then working exclusively within them.” Isla, CEO, Meadows MAT

Identity

Local Identities and Schools

City, deprivation and making a difference

Leaders' personal and professional identities were often closely linked to the nature of City as a place in their discussions, very often in relation to more deprived communities and the importance of schools. Rosie made a connection to her own background and biography:

"I've always felt that identity with City because it's very similar to where I grew up... I love working in a deprived area. I love feeling that I've made a difference. That's really important to me." Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

Mia's experience in different schools had confirmed her general preference for working in schools serving disadvantaged communities and being that 'kind of person' as she put it:

"I did a bit of supply and I did it in quite affluent areas and I found I didn't like it if I'm honest. This, where we are now, is a deprived area. ... I feel it takes a certain kind of person". Mia, Deputy Head, Oak Primary

Ava, now a CEO and having previously been a headteacher in one area spoke of a long-term commitment to a particular community:

"I think I know our community, having worked in this community for 20, this particular community for 26 years, very, very well." CEO, Ava, Rose MAT

Personal Identities

Individual stories and personal identities more generally were an important part of how leaders experienced their roles. Sophie was very conscious of her background in relation to the position she now held:

"From a very deprived background... first in my family to go to university." Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

Aspects of individual stories and identities were formed by personal characteristics and changed over time. Gender was one significant theme. For Florence being a parent and the age of her children was important:

"So my children are older now, so they're 16 and 15, so you can give more to come in and doing this role." Florence, Headteacher, Oak Primary

Rose reflected on the impact of the menopause and the impact on her in the role:

"I'm a lady of a certain age now and so I did genuinely worry I've got dementia. I don't think I've got dementia. I think I've got, I can say the word menopause because I can say it's fine. It's really affected me, really affected me as a leader. But I just think you need energy. You need energy and enthusiasm and I feel lost a little bit and I don't like that." Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

Finley was aware of the significance for others of seeing him in the role:

"I might be a black teacher, but you know, I am there for all children, but just so people understand that people who look like me do teach and do want to make a difference." Finley, Headteacher, Fairview Secondary

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

George was aware that his neurodivergence gave him a different perspective compared to many other leaders, and saw it as a benefit in his role:

“I’m on the autistic spectrum... see things slightly differently... works well for leading in schools.” George, Headteacher, Corner Special School

Evolving identities as leaders

Alongside the individual biographies and personal identities that leaders brought to their professional roles, they also described ideas of themselves as leaders that evolved in different ways. Some, like Sophie, has always been clear that they wished to be a headteacher:

“I always wanted to be a leader... you had to write on a card what your ambition was, and I just wrote down ‘I want to be principal.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

More often, leaders described gaining confidence through taking on roles, or being given opportunities to experience significant leadership positions:

“The head teacher at the time sort of wheeled a chair over in the office and said, ‘would you be willing to step into another school again?’ So I said, ‘go on, I’ll, I’ll do it’ ... It feels like the only reason I have ended up being in this role is because the opportunities have been there, and then I’ve sort of just said ‘yeah, let’s do it.’” Florence, Headteacher, Oak Primary

It was often the case that a particular leader or leaders had provided a role model:

“[Name] is a very inspirational person and someone who I’d loved working for, and I went from assistant principal, vice principal, senior vice principal in that 7 years working with [Name]” Oliver, Headteacher, Springfield Secondary

In Mia’s case, she had been actively encouraged to take on a role, despite her own hesitancy:

“I was in a predominantly white area where I dealt with a lot of racism, which I hadn’t dealt with when I was in London... because it was so diverse, it didn’t ever even seem like an issue. So I was a bit anxious and I said ‘[Name], I really don’t think this is the place for me to do that’. He went, ‘it really is. Do that’. And 12 years on, he really did support me along the way.” Mia, Deputy Headteacher, Oak Primary

There were some headteachers who had not aspired to become a headteacher, but for whom circumstance had arisen in which they’d felt compelled to step up. In Rosie’s case, her commitment to the school in which she’d been a deputy was the motivating factor when there was a change of headteacher:

“I loved being a deputy, loved it, loved being like still teaching, still being part of that team... I loved the responsibility but I didn’t want to be ultimately responsible... my husband said ‘well, if somebody comes in and they’re taking your school away from you, what you’ve worked for? How will you feel?’ ‘Well, I won’t like it’. So then, [I] got the headship.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside, Primary

Leadership

Recruitment

Leaders spoke about recruitment generally and for leadership and headteacher roles in particular as being very difficult with very few applicants for jobs:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“So there's one vacancy in the city at the minute - there's an acting head because the deputy's stepped up, but that job's been advertised three times and there's been no applications.” Olivia, Local Leader, Local Authority

Olivia's account was repeated in relation to academies as well as maintained schools:

“I didn't get anybody for the primary one - went twice. No applications at all. And for the secondary, like I said, we had to go and head hunt and we paid way above what you know you would have expected.” Isla, CEO, Meadow MAT

Isabella summarised the experience colourfully as ‘the well drying up’:

“The well's drying up with leaders... we can't recruit... Gone are the days when you put an advert out ... for a teacher you get a minimum of 20 applications.... put an advert out a couple of weeks ago ... it hasn't even got one.” Isabella, CEO, Highfield MAT

Leaders, even though they were giving examples of vacancies that attracted very few or no applications, usually went on to describe posts being filled, sometimes with temporary appointments as Olivia referred to above, sometimes by appointing individuals who needed a lot of support:

“I recruited a head that I knew that had left and gone on supply, a failed head right. We've had to put a lot of support and training in, loads of support and training. But she's done it. She's stayed with us, right? And actually, she's now. I'd say, she's stabilised the school, but it's not taken her to do that. It's taken all of us to do that.” Isabella, CEO Highfield MAT

Diminishing Appetite for Headship

The difficulty of recruiting headteachers was reflected in discussions about the ‘appetite’ for headship amongst potential headteachers in senior leadership and deputy head positions:

“I think there's less of an appetite for being the lead, for being the head teacher generally”. Oliver Headteacher, Springfield Secondary

Oliver spoke generally about less appetite for taking on the lead role, and Florence echoed this talking specifically about her own deputies who were clear they didn't want to step beyond that role:

“The two deputies, when you talk about headship, they're just like, ‘no not for me’ ... it is just interesting, isn't it, of what is putting people (off)” Florence, Headteacher, Oak Primary

A number of different explanations were offered. Harper highlighted the increased pressures on headteachers:

“We're widening people's roles, adding more to it, hence why the actual sustainability of it isn't there. They see what's happening to their heads above them and they see how much more difficult it is and they're just saying I can't do that.” Harper, Executive Headteacher, Highfield MAT

Olivia reported senior leaders referring to inspections and accountability pressures:

“I've had people who've said to me informally if Ofsted wasn't around, I would apply for headship... So I think Ofsted has its part to play in the challenges of appointing school

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

leaders... with Ofsted it's your name above the door and I think that can be really scary. It shouldn't be that. It shouldn't be that.” Olivia, Local Leader, City LA

Sophie made clear the link to the consequences of poor inspections or lack of improvement acting as a deterrent:

“The other vice principal that was here went to another, a non-Catholic MAT and he was gone within, like the results didn't move. They didn't move in two years. And so he was gone and that frightened a lot of ours, I think, as well because they know him... When you've got personal stories of people not thriving in the role, again I think that makes people a little bit more wary.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

Oliver made a connection between the material reward being relatively modest compared to the perceived additional 'weight' of being the headteacher:

“The financial reward isn't that great in comparison. If you're a vice principal and you have the weight, to use my phrase, I can see why lots of people would be put off by that.” Oliver, Headteacher, Springfield Secondary

Process, applications and selection

Smaller fields of applicants and a perception of a reduced appetite for headteacher roles notwithstanding, schools and trusts were recruiting and making appointments, usually with rigorous and often exacting processes. Finley reflected on his relatively recent experience of being interviewed for his current post, and described an extended set of tasks and experiences:

“It was a two-day process. The first day task, or the first morning task, was to conduct a subject review, so yeah, I think I've done a few of those... talking to students, book scrutiny and then also had to give feedback to who is now my line manager and also the School Improvement Partner ... So I had a data task; again that was typical using two lots of data and comparative data... and then there was a goldfish bowl thing I had to lead a conversation with the two other heads and with my line manager around a school improvement issue. And then I had an interview with the governors and exec head and CEO.” Finley, Headteacher, Fairview Secondary

Finley had applied for his post from outside the area in response to an advert. Other heads described recruitment processes that had been more targeted, some taking place within a MAT's group of schools:

“The sort of dynamics of the school, they didn't want a brand new head coming in to be here. So there was an internal post, yeah amongst the group of heads [in the trust].” Florence, Headteacher, Oak Primary

Other examples of targeted or ad hoc approaches to recruitment were noted above. For example, Isla said they 'had to go and head hunt' for a secondary headteacher, while Isabella had offered a post to a headteacher who had 'left and gone on supply.'

In terms of selection, some leaders spoke of being seen to 'fit' as a factor in selection. Finley reported an explicit conversation which had resulted in him withdrawing from a recruitment process:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“Probably around leadership, but there was a compatibility issue... the head teacher and I agreed that I probably didn't suit his team because his team interviewed me broadly speaking. And there was a compatibility issue.” Finley, Headteacher, Fairview Secondary

Mia had a similar perception of needing to fit in:

“My current CEOs knows my old CEO. So when I moved across here there was a lot of animosity between them, and so your name can quickly be tarnished if you do one thing wrong. Luckily mine is still all right.” Mia, Deputy Head, Oak Primary

Diversity

Leaders had a range of views and reflections on the diversity of people in leadership positions. Sophie, focussing on gender suggested her leadership team in a secondary school was unusual in being predominantly female:

“We're unusually, we're very female heavy apart from two in the assistant associate principals and two AP's. It is majority - the top level is all female, which again is unusual for City, which is nearly all, as I say, white male in its profile.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

There were mixed views on the extent to which the proportions of women in leadership positions had increased, with the consensus being that it had improved over time, albeit Sophie's observation was considered accurate.

There was wide agreement that minority ethnic leaders were significantly under-represented in leadership positions:

“At an attendance meeting with the DFE, and they were saying oh, ‘we need to get more ethnic minority in our school workforce so that the children of ethnic minorities could identify with them’. And I went, ‘yeah, we do, but they don't apply.’ We don't get the applications.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

Rosie's reflection was a common one, with leaders often, as Elizabeth states, stressing appointing the best candidate at the stage of interviews:

“I won't appoint somebody just because they're ethnically the right person, if they're not the best teacher, because ultimately I want the best teaching. So I think it's about making sure you train people before they get to the point of being appointed.” Elizabeth, Headteacher, Willow Primary

Other leaders identified barriers in the recruitment and selection process:

“As a governor I remember at one point they were recruiting a head and I saw some very - I don't even want to say it was covert, it was quite overt racism in the shortlisting process where just from the name of some candidates it was like ‘no, not going to shortlist.’” Finley, Headteacher, Fairview Secondary

Finley's example was very stark and overt, other leaders also suggested more systemic barriers such as socio-economic status and the 'pipeline' of potential candidates:

“There's a massive problem because quite often the route through depends on a degree of privilege... you need considerable means to be able to do that [training], and therefore

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

I don't think it's any surprise that there's under representation of particular groups. I think it's designed into a system.” Isla, Meadows MAT

George reinforced the idea that representation in senior positions was an important motivation for people and to support greater diversity:

“I think identity would be a big one because I don't see myself, like I was saying before ... Because I - at school I never saw a leader, there was no one [who was] neurodiverse, if that makes sense. So I understand if you're from an ethnic minority and if you don't see - it's the usual thing if you don't see people.” George, Headteacher, Corner Special School

Succession Planning

We did not hear anyone talk about a coordinated plan for succession planning for headteachers across the area. Leaders did however discuss the idea in terms of individual schools, or within groups of schools like a MAT.

Olivia, talking about maintained schools in City talked about how some individual schools thought about the issue:

“In terms of succession planning, I would suspect informally, some governors will say, ‘we know the school is good, we know it's doing what it needs to do’... if a head is going to leave, [and] the deputy likes the school , ...there will be an anticipation the deputy would apply.” Olivia, Local Leader, City LA

Leaders in MATs spoke of more deliberate approaches and ‘talent spotting’:

“Whenever we interview, because we get involved in most parts of the interviews anyway, most levels, right. We will talent spot... Our talent spotting has been focused on people's ability and skills.” Isabella, CEO, Highfield MAT

Isabella was suggesting that individuals identified in this way would then be encouraged and offered opportunities for development and experience. Florence described similar initiatives in the MAT in which she worked:

“One of the things in the trust that does happen is similar to my own experience, there are secondments to other schools... we do have conversations about, you know, this school needs a deputy or this school's going to need this. And you can then have conversations about who's ready for that next step if the opportunity isn't available in the current school.” Florence, Headteacher, Oak Primary

Matilda, CEO of a large MAT with a small number of schools in City described a clear intention for schools within the group:

“Aspirationally want to get to 50% of all of our leadership roles are filled internally and they're done through talent processes etcetera that we've developed those people. And then obviously we'll have the 50% externally.” Matilda, CEO, Stable MAT

Training

Leaders were consistent in valuing professional development, both their own and also seeing it as important for all staff. The suite of National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) licensed by DfE were frequently mentioned.

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

National Programmes

One of the trusts in City held the official Teaching School Hub status and through this ran the DfE licensed NPQ programmes:

“[I] think we've been very successful as a Teaching School and then a Teaching School Hub at engaging schools in City, in our ECT (Early Career Teacher) programs and our NPQ suites.” Ava, CEO, Rose MAT

In addition, the area wide local partnership – Holly Partnership - was facilitating access to the same NPQ programmes:

“Uptake has been very good. But I'll have to admit that's mainly because of the DfE scholarships.” Freya, Local Leader, Holly Partnership

At the time of the interviews, the course fees for all participants were met by the DfE scholarships. Harper described how they were offered to staff in her MAT:

“Teachers who want to be middle leaders or subject leaders, right? We've, we've got training, support, the NPQSL and ML, all those we do.” Harper, Executive Leader, Highfield MAT

Most headteachers had taken the NPQ for headteachers, NPQH, and like George, most valued the experience of taking the programme:

“The NPQH gave me confidence that I knew what I was doing, not just the course but also meeting other people, But I really enjoyed the NPQH because you were out of school and you had time to think.” George, Headteacher, Corner Special

Most also observed that NPQH notwithstanding, they had felt unprepared for many of the practical realities of headship:

“I landed as the head and thought, well, what do I do now? I'd done NPQH. It's a bit of an academic, you know, you sit there the first day and what do I do, how do I deal with that then?” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

“I can honestly say it did not prepare me for headship. ... it talks about vision and values and stakeholders and all these things. Nobody would disagree with that, but when you've got a parent kicking off, or you've got asbestos in your boiler house and it's got to come out, or you've got a half-million-pound deficit, NPQH doesn't prepare you for that.” Olivia, Local Leader, LA

Programmes other than NPQs

Leaders were clear that professional development programmes were not restricted to NPQs:

“What's really key is a very strong CPD program in place to ensure our teachers and leaders are getting what they need and it's ensuring you talent spot and you give the right opportunities to people when they're ready. So that you are growing your next layer of AHTs, deputies, heads.” Ava CEO, Rose MAT

Elizabeth described a range of programmes offered by the area-wide partnership, which she was closely involved with, that were intended for teachers at all stages of their careers:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“From Holly Partnership’s point of view, we’ve got this sort of pathway from - that actually goes from ITT [Initial Teacher Training] all the way through to NPQEL [NPQ Executive Leadership]. So there is this pathway of opportunity.” Elizabeth, Headteacher, Willow Primary

The Local Authority also offered courses and development opportunities including a Headteacher induction programme that was open to all school types and to which they also invited some Deputy Headteachers who were intending to apply for headships:

“So as part of that I’m doing the head teacher induction which City set up. So the new head teachers that have come into post since the pandemic I think really, and I believe there’s three of us that are aspiring on the course.” Sophia, Deputy Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

More generally, in addition to accessing the LA and/or Holly Partnership provision, leaders described a diverse market of CPD and leadership development programmes, including other government funded hubs (such as Maths Hubs and English Hubs) and various non-local (including online) providers. Most trusts both provided their own training programmes and also drew on other providers, sometimes based on wider sectoral affiliations:

“So within our trust cause we’re Church of England, our NPQ suite is via the Church, the National Church of England.” Isla, CEO, Meadows MAT

Informal Development and Experience

When talking about professional development and preparation for headship, all leaders emphasised the importance of experience of opportunities to take on roles, often talking about important role models and mentors during their career:

“[Name] focused a lot on the development of leaders, and I am an example of that... in terms of mentors, he was definitely one of, if not the biggest mentor that I’ve had, and I grew up as a leader under his leadership.” Oliver, Headteacher, Springfield Secondary

George made a similar point, but also emphasised negative role models:

“I’ve been lucky to work under several heads who, you know, to me, who had proper morals and stuck to them. And then I’ve worked for a couple who didn’t. So you learn some things about what to do and some things that [you don’t want to do]” George, Headteacher, Corner Special

Sophie, like a number of other headteachers, explained how she was explicit about encouraging and supporting potential leaders:

“I also make a point of making sure everybody I think will be a leader in the future knows that. I think that right from the start, because people did that to me. So I always make a point I say ‘I just think you will be capable of doing it and there is leadership in you and you should always have that little thought in your head’” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

As well as mentors and role models, leaders spoke of the importance of direct experience and learning from it. Rosie described that as continuing during headship:

“Learning it as you go along really. And learning from your mistakes. Speaking to your colleagues.” Rosie Headteacher Sunnyside Primary

Again, a number of leaders spoke of being deliberate and proactive in creating opportunities for younger staff to gain experience. Ava suggested that having a group of schools in a MAT facilitated such an approach:

“[She] became an AHT and [I] gave her an opportunity to go across to another one of our schools to be a deputy.... And you've got an infrastructure where you've got opportunities for them to go to another school to grow and do projects with other schools.” Ava, CEO, Rose MAT

Practices

School leaders discussed priorities for their schools and identified a range of practices.

School Improvement, Attainment & Progress

The broad idea of improvement was central and linked very firmly to students' progress and attainment in external tests and results. Oliver was very clear:

“I've had to raise standards. For a long time, people were so content with it being better like ‘ohh, no one's, like, shouting at me’... But that doesn't get results. Does that make sense? So now I'm in a process of driving results.” Oliver, Headteacher, Springfield Secondary

Finley echoed Oliver's point and reflected on maintaining and continuing improvement, using Ofsted's categorisation of schools to justify this:

“Remaining the same is not necessarily good enough. I think to remain Good you have to keep improving. So it's around identifying what we need to do to improve.” Finley, Headteacher, Fairview Secondary

Leaders also reflected on the pressure of meeting expectations regarding standards, particularly in different contexts:

“As times have gone on, the expectations are so much harder to achieve certain things and our cohort coming in is quite low. So to try and get them, it's not about... It should be about progress, but often it's about attainment and that gap is sometimes really hard.” Mia, Deputy Headteacher, Oak Primary

Many headteachers also spoke about other aspects of schools that were priorities, with culture and values frequently referred to:

“Year by year, bit by bit, I think we really shifted the culture and brought in a set of values that I think work really well for us.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

Leaders also spoke about some of the important elements of bringing about improvements. Developing staff was a consistent thread, and the practices described in the section on Training above were linked directly to improvement:

“The priorities are in terms of middle leaders and so I've invested time in that, but also through doing that I knew that I would build the confidence of the staff through the middle leaders.” Finley, Headteacher, Fairview Secondary

Rosie, in a Primary school, had similar priorities and thinking:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“We're also working with [Name] on developing the leaders in school because everybody's a leader of something aren't they in a primary school. So we're working on subject leadership trying to develop that.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

Rosie's focus on subject leaders also reflected another consistent theme, curriculum:

“We do need schemes because we need what's best academically what experts have seen, and we can't expect teachers to plan everything, there's just - in a primary school you've got 13 subjects... We're currently running a project for curriculum development.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

Indeed, focusing on curriculum and assessment was a priority articulated by most leaders, perhaps reflecting Ofsted's focus on the curriculum in recent years:

“We're quite progressive in our thinking and we have partnered with ventures like Rethinking Assessment to the Edge Foundation, we are constantly looking at curriculum reviews.” Isla, CEO, Meadows, MAT

Accountability

Accountability through formal, hierarchical relationships and also external inspection were part of all leaders' conversations.

Inspection

Olivia spelt out the high stakes external inspections were perceived to carry:

“I think one of the big challenges is Ofsted. Because Ofsted is, it's the thing that heads dread and I've been on the other side of the fence many, many times, as well as the 'Ofsted side of the fence' because it can... It is perceived as your name's above the door, if you get it wrong, you can basically kiss goodbye to your career.” Olivia, Local Leader, City LA

Rosie described her feelings connected with anticipating inspection:

“I've got Ofsted in probably March. So it's not just Ofsted, it's the lead up to it. That's a big - that's just scary and your whole time is 'Is that phone going to ring? Is that phone going to ring?' and you get to Wednesday and it hasn't rung and it's, I think that's crippling schools. It's not enabling them. It's crippling me.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

Accountability and Audit

Leaders described various additional processes for reviewing and quality assuring schools, usually using students' outcomes in tests and/or OFSTED's inspection criteria as a framework. For example, Olivia described the LA's approach in relation to maintained schools:

“All our schools, we categorize them every summer. That category is based upon intelligence about the school; whether they've got a new head coming on board; if it's a new head who's an experienced head; what outcomes are like. And we categorize them as a team. Because all of us are school improvement advisors, we have an allocation of schools.” Olivia, Local Leader, City LA

Within MATs, similar practices were described:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“How the trust works, is the sort of health check is not done by your school improvement partner because obviously your school improvement partner works quite closely with you.” George, Headteacher, Corner Special

Oliver, whose school was in a different MAT, described regular, formal reviews:

“There’s something called a Strategic Progress Board within [Name Trust] and that’s led by an education director and they come in once a term, once one every half term something like that.” Oliver, Headteacher, Springfield MAT

Mia spoke about how the scrutiny and monitoring was relayed within her school, and what she perceived to be the impact on the headteacher:

“And so, you know, [Name-HT] gets a lot of the probably flack - is that the word - from them. And then she probably has to cushion it to tell me and [Name-DHT]. But what we know is you can tell when she’s had a meeting with them. You can definitely tell.” Mia, Deputy Headteacher, Oak Primary

Care

Leaders described a range of priorities and practices that, in different ways, can be described as care.

Families, Support and Inclusions

A consistent theme was the recognition that many of the issues that were priorities for schools had their origin in pupils and students’ lives beyond the school:

“If you look at the statistics around you know exclusions and suspensions and so on, you will see that, you know, behaviour remains a really difficult thing to manage and some of that - and in fact most of that - will be the spill from what’s going on beyond the school gates.” Isla, CEO, Meadow MAT

Isla highlighted behaviour within schools as a challenge having its roots beyond the school. Schools were also frequently involved in more basic support for families. Sophie’s description was a kind of activity reported by a number of leaders in both secondary and primary schools:

“We do a lot of support for families, a lot of food support food parcels - parents coming in, we’ve got a larder downstairs, just grabbing bags of food and taking them with them.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

More generally, leaders frequently articulated an expansive idea of inclusion and what their intention was in terms of what their school could make available for children:

“One of the things we commit to is that for our children, regardless of their starting points or their experiences, ... if they’ve got not much going on at home for them, (once) they walk in.. they’ve got this calm and organised learning environment and that we ensure that every child has the opportunities.” Mia, Deputy Headteacher, Oak Primary

There were also aspects of schools’ statutory roles that were perceived to have significantly changed over time:

“The number of safeguarding issues that we have post-Pandemic and the ability for someone to be able to dip in and dip out of that, it’s really unmanageable in terms of like workload.” Arthur, Headteacher, Primrose Secondary

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

Arthur went on to explain he had reorganised his leadership team to accommodate the additional work with someone taking a full-time safeguarding role. Isabella suggested that schools' roles had expanded in this respect and had effectively become a formal part of organised social care:

“Now as a school, already we are... (we have) become an arm of social care. You could argue, a well-trained arm of social care.” Isabella, CEO, Highfield MAT

SEND and Mental Health

There was also a consistent view about the specific challenges and needs that leaders suggested schools had to address. SEND was often the first of these that was mentioned:

“We've seen an increase probably nationally and you probably have come across this on your research, of more SEND children in mainstream schools and that puts a real pressure on finances, on heads, on provision.” Elizabeth, Headteacher, Willow Primary

Also widely discussed was a more general challenge of students' mental health:

“Biggest themes I'd say of the school now is mental health. You know, so you've got right up to sixth form children's mental health being really, really poor and from all types of children feeling that they can't - they haven't got the resilience to cope with just ordinary day-to-day life, just coming to school, going to lessons etc.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

Leaders saw a need to work with staff capabilities:

“Lots of staff are thinking, I'm not sure how to support this child in the best way that I can because they've got new conditions; it might be global delay, it might be different levels of autism. So therefore that creates challenges in teaching and learning.” Olivia, Local Leader, City LA

There was also a strong view that additional services beyond schools, needed to support children with SEND, were not available. Ava's view was typical:

“Yeah, the SEND issue. The city does not have enough provision for their SEN children, the services are, they're not there, they're very, very, very overstretched. The provision is not there. They are responding. They are trying very hard.” Ava, CEO, Rose MAT

Well-Being

Another aspect of care that leaders referred to was considering the well-being of staff, both teaching staff and headteachers themselves. Harper described the pressures on a headteacher:

“She sent that parent away with a solution that she (headteacher) was given, she didn't sleep all night until she knew she (a pupil) was OK today. And that for a head, that isn't why she signed up to be a head teacher. She signed up for school improvement and making sure the children have the opportunities for education.” Harper, Executive Leader, Highfield MAT

Harper related some of the tension to the changing role. Mia, reflecting on similar pressures on teaching staff also related pressure to a professional commitment felt by teachers:

“An ECT (Early Career Teacher) and she said, ‘I feel guilty. I’ve got children at home, but I’m constantly, constantly working and when I’m not working, I’m thinking about work’. I just don’t think that’s right ... But in this job ...when we’ve said ‘don’t do that, ... leave that out or maybe reduce that’, they don’t want to. So it’s their own pressures they’re putting on themselves.” Mia, Deputy Headteacher, Oak Primary

Leadership, Values and Professional Beliefs

Headteachers and leaders were very consistent in some of the values and beliefs they articulated:

*“You know what, what is important? Who is the most important thing; the children.”
Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary*

Rosie’s positioning of children as central to leaders’ sense of purpose was widely echoed. Finley connected the idea directly to leadership:

*“So, and my perception is that you just, you know, as long as you’re child focussed when you’re [thinking] in terms of leadership then that’s the most important thing for me.”
Finley, Headteacher, Fairview Secondary*

Isla related the focus to ambitions and expectations for children and young people:

“It’s about providing, you know, keeping the bar really high, providing opportunities and being really aspirant on behalf of children.” Isla, CEO, Meadows MAT

Some leaders related personal values and beliefs to aspects of schools and leadership they considered important:

“The thing I got from my parents was that - and my father particularly - was that old fashioned, you know, behaviour and respect and politeness and manners and all of those things.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

Arthur reflected on the way he chose to work with his teams:

“What I tend to do within my leadership make it more invitational. So sometimes it’s kind of not always being that autocratic person who’s like, ‘this is the agenda... this what we’re talking about’, and just try and get a range of views and then make decisions quite quickly.” Arthur, Headteacher, Primrose Secondary

Drains

Leaders discussed those aspects of their roles that were emotionally challenging or less satisfying.

Weight of leadership, relentlessness

The unrelenting demands on headteachers and the feeling of responsibility was articulated very clearly:

“It’s the weight, it’s definitely the weight of it that’s the thing that I struggle with ... You can’t ever switch off from it. And like now I’ve gone from like 690 kids to 1000 kids, you know... And the weight of that is very big. And sometimes I can just do it and I don’t have to think about it, and sometimes I can’t. And I think that that’s the biggest drain... It’s like

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

a hydra, you know? There's like lots of different faces to it... It's all of those things at the same time. right. So, like the relentlessness.” Oliver, Headteacher, Springfield Secondary

Oliver described the weight of responsibility, and the sense of relentlessness arising from the cumulative nature of the pressures. Rosie was reflecting on colleagues who had faced the implications of schools being perceived to have failed in some way:

“You feel as the leader that you've let people down because ultimately it's your, it's on your head... it's you. And rightly so. You're the leader, you're the leader and you fall on your sword, don't you, rightly so. But I don't know it just seems, this just doesn't seem right and particularly when [there is not] support to put it right.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

Florence too reflected on being responsible and she expressed the self-doubt that sometimes accompanied the position:

“I've used the word imposter syndrome. ... I do have these waves where I just think, have people actually trusted me to do this job and having this role and then having those waves of doubt of can I actually do this, am I the right person to be here - that gets draining.” Florence, Headteacher, Oak Primary

Behaviour and Inclusion, SEND and Resources

We referred to students' behaviour, inclusion and SEND in the section on Practices, reflecting an expanding and changing role. Leaders also identified these features as draining. Oliver suggested that there had been a significant change following the COVID pandemic in both the way parents related to schools and also in students' behaviour:

“The challenge from parents is greater, And I think post COVID, not in this school, but behaviour has got worse and so the challenge of educational leadership is much harder.” Oliver, Headteacher, Springfield Secondary

Isabella echoed the point in relation to the schools in her trust, which were predominantly primary schools, and also connected it to relationships with parents:

“Behaviours within school. COVID has had a major impact on that and that respect element within the behaviour. So, and that comes a lot from the parenting and that parents' respect of the school as well.” Isabella, CEO, Highfield MAT

Speaking about mental health, Sophie described the challenge of recognising limits and negotiating boundaries for the school in terms of what they could provide:

“We're not, you know, clinical professionals, we don't know anything about... I struggle with that, we have to as a school, have to establish boundaries that are a bit uncomfortable sometimes for parents to accept, because we just can't do it. We don't have the staff skill.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

A significant aspect of dealing with SEND that headteachers spoke about was administrative processes and disputes:

“SEND tribunals because we've had a lot more parental requests for the EHCPs [Education, Health and Care Plan] ... they can't afford all the EHCPs and then all the referrals to CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service] – there's like a two year waiting list.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

Rosie referred to formal quasi-legal processes such as appeals to SEND tribunals as well as administrative processes involved in accessing services like CAMHS. This both strained relationships but was also discussed in terms of workload. Harper described a situation in which demands were placed on a school from parents for support for children, and the impact on a headteacher:

“It's nearly took him under you know those letters, those emails, those demands to see him right away... You know that whole thing, ‘Well your budget states this. Why can't you afford to put an additional TA [Teaching Assistant] in that class.’ ... they're relentless.”
Harper, Executive Leader, Highfield MAT

The administrative burden and thus workload challenge related to these issues and processes was a consistent thread:

“Three kids have an argument or a fight... everyone has to write it up. It all has to be put on CPOMS [an administrative system], even the smallest detail. So the admin now side of teaching.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

George referred to it in relation to a serious incident:

“There's some stuff that takes up more of my time than I would like, a lot like that paperwork. So I've done one permanent exclusion in three years and the amount of paperwork and you know, for something that was quite straightforward.” George, Headteacher, Corner Special School

Accountability

Leaders' experience of accountability was also described in the section on Practices, and some indication given of the resulting pressure. Whilst there was understanding and acceptance of the accountability associated with the headteacher role, most leaders also described current external inspection and audit processes as draining. Isla, speaking at a time when the inspection framework was being revised, linked the pressure to the consequences for leaders of the outcomes of inspection:

“Still got an Ofsted regime, although there's a hiatus and we don't know what might happen, we've got the pressure of a very high stakes, very punitive system there.” Isla, CEO, Meadows MAT

Isabella described the intensity and emotional impact for headteachers of the experience of inspection:

“We've had seven inspections last year, alright. And actually they've all been where we thought they were, so that's not a problem. But at the end of that every head has had a cry, and it's not the outcome it's the release of all the work and the efforts of that drive for improvement.” Isabella, CEO, Highfield MAT

Elizabeth's talking about the anticipation of inspection, expressed similar sentiments to Rosie's comments cited in the section on Practices:

“I've written ‘the fear of Ofsted’ and I wrote that because ... I got ‘Outstanding’ in my last inspection, and that puts me in a really hard place and I'm trying to show to my staff that I'm not worried. But a bit of me is, because it depends who you get. It totally depends on who you get.” Elizabeth, Headteacher, Willow Primary

Headteacher well-being

Well-being was another consistent thread in conversations both as a consequence of other drains, but also potentially as a drain itself, in terms of seeking to maintain positive well-being:

“Being able to compartmentalize things because otherwise you could easily make yourself ill. This job could make you ill and I understand that.” Finley, Headteacher, Fairview Secondary

Sophia, similarly, reflected on the potential physical impact of the role for her and her headteacher:

“We both suffer from migraines, which I don't know whether it's just part of the job, I don't know.” Sophia, Deputy Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

Sustains

Leaders also discussed those aspects of their roles that were satisfying and emotionally rewarding

Moral Purpose

Leaders were often, as we described above, very clear about values and beliefs and these were also described, almost universally, as sustaining:

“The children and the purpose of being in education. That's what sustains me, particularly at a time where, you know, it's hugely underfunded.” Finley, Headteacher, Fairview Secondary

“The kids. Making a difference.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

George extended the idea of impact and making a difference beyond children:

“It's about the impact you can have, you know, and it's not just the impact on the kids. It's the impact you have on the staff and the families, if you know what I mean.” George, Corner Special School

Isla referred to ‘vocation’ in terms of an intrinsic motivation for many teachers and leaders:

“We talk about it being a vocation, we talk about it being part of somebody's DNA and you know them feeling the heartbeat of, you know, the school and what the work they do on behalf of young people. And that is absolutely there.” Isla, CEO, Meadows MAT

Elizabeth also captured a slightly different point, which was the intrinsic satisfaction and reward of working with children and young people:

“We've got really lovely children. I didn't know how to write that, but what sustains me is I like them and they like me.” Elizabeth, Headteacher, Willow Primary

Relationships

Another very consistent theme was the importance of relationships to sustaining leaders. There were many different sets of relationships; teams within schools were often the first ones spoken about:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“What sustains me, ... is the team around me. Because you build the right team, you come to work to work with a group of people, and I love the people I work with. We know each other well, we all have very different skills.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

The warmth with which Sophie spoke was echoed by other leaders:

“I've got people that I work with that I love literally mean that word. I love them. They're great. They work really hard. They tell me that they like working with me. They're like 'we're doing the impossible'. So, when you do the impossible with people like, you have this amazing connection with them.” Oliver, Springfield Secondary

Elizabeth, albeit in a smaller school, spoke about her whole staff body in similar terms:

“I've got excellent leadership team and quality staff... But my staff are - they are so lovely. They're a real team, real team.” Elizabeth, Headteacher, Willow Primary

Olivia suggested such teams were a feature of being an effective leader:

“But I think really effective leaders... you've got to have a good team around you.” Olivia, Local Leader, City LA

Other types of relationships were also important. We describe professionally supportive relationships in the section on Support below. Close personal relationships were also often mentioned:

“I've also had support because I've been lucky cause I had my mum and other people who are quite prominent in education who have supported me in my journey.” Finley, Headteacher, Fairview Secondary

Finley described family members who had professional knowledge, Elizabeth made clear the importance to her of more general support as well:

“I suppose my family are really supportive. So my husband is really supportive and always has been and I think if that wasn't so that would be really hard.” Elizabeth, Headteacher, Willow Primary

Pleasure in the job

Leaders also described pleasure they gained from the nature of the job. For Oliver, the satisfaction of achievements was intertwined with the challenge of the role:

“I tell my staff that this is the greatest thing I've ever done. It's the hardest thing I've ever done. Both of those things were right in equal measure.” Oliver, Headteacher, Springfield Secondary

Sophie also valued the opportunities the role presented working beyond the school:

“All the things I do outside as well. So for example, chairing the City heads... I sit on the Fair Access Panel, which is a local authority panel.... And so that just sustains me because at this point now where I am, the school is actually working very well.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

For Arthur, the essence of the role, working with people, was intrinsically rewarding:

“I would say my own kind of thought is that I like working with people, I like working with different people.” Arthur, Headteacher, Primrose Secondary

Support

We have described the importance of support that leaders drew from relationships and teams within their schools. For many, Florence’s observation held true:

“I think most of my support does come from within the school.” Florence, Headteacher, Oak Primary

There were also complex, layered formal and informal patterns of support that leaders described.

Support Structures

MAT and Local Authority leaders viewed some of the organisational structures in place as forms of support for leaders. In MATs, while there were some variations, the typical arrangement was for many administrative functions to be managed outside the school by a central team with the intention of allowing headteachers more time to focus more directly on staff, students and instructional improvement:

“So we have stripped out what I feel is the unnecessary administrative burden that would prevent those leaders from being, if you like, to have the sort of, the freedoms to create and to be present in those academies.” Isla, Meadows MAT

Isla described the intention in broad terms. Isabella, CEO of a different MAT detailed specific ways in which the central team of administrators and her executive team worked with headteachers:

“We do the budgets. If there's an exclusion, we walk them through it. If there's a tricky HR issue, we deal with it right. Their focus is teaching and learning alright. And then we'll take also the extreme tricky parents that we have. When the schools ... the heads are going 'I can't, I can't do this anymore', we say 'right, we'll take that'.” Isabella, CEO, Highfield MAT

Isabella described close involvement of the MATs team in individual schools. Some leaders described less involvement:

“I have as much autonomy as I need in the way it works ... in that I run the school very much so, but I have someone there who I can actually very much work with to run the school... So for example, finances, so that's absorbed - the trust kind of deal with finances, which makes it easier. And I just can then go with. I'm aware of the finances and I see them regularly, but I can just go with what I want and ask for what I feel is needed.” Finley, Headteacher, Fairview Secondary

Oliver described support as being 'at the end of a phone':

“I have people at the end of the phone if I need to. I have people come in and visit when they come in and visit... that's a challenging process. And that's good, That's helpful.” Oliver, Headteacher, Springfield Secondary

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

Oliver's reflection captures the close connection between the formal hierarchy and accountability arrangements and the support structures. Mathilda spells this out in the arrangements in place in her trust:

“So those teams around the schools are of equal measure to hold each other to a really good standard and also to focus as well on it from a people perspective... I will hold the people team to account ... and then equally the head teacher might say ‘I've got a problem with this, or I've got a challenge with XY and Z’ and how can we collectively come to a resolution to help and support you.” Mathilda, CEO, Stable MAT

LA maintained schools were responsible for managing their own budgets, staffing and operational areas, such as estates, with generally less access to expert support from central teams than academies in MATs. In terms of school improvement, as we noted in the Practices section, the LA maintained an overview and categorised schools' support needs. Olivia, an LA leader, explained:

“And then obviously all our schools have an allocated SIA (School Improvement Adviser). So if a new head has got concerns or they're unhappy or there are things they are really struggling with, they contact their School Improvement Advisor and we are on hand, you know. They even have our own personal mobiles.” Olivia, Local Leader, City LA

Olivia focused particularly on supporting new heads. However, while Rosie, an experienced head, was positive about the LA, she recognised that in many areas its services were significantly diminished:

“City (LA) have been really supportive.... Now, services are going, it's not as good as it was. It's not. But the education part... And we've got... they run - so there's like head teacher school improvement days that we can go to, and that's really good.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

The area wide partnership, to which most schools subscribed, was also a source of support for some schools:

“They can pick up the phone if there's anything, basically because we have got that. And that's the key. And that's, I think that's very important to know really about [City] schools.” Ivy, Local Leader, Holly Partnership

Elizabeth suggested that the partnership also arranged support for school improvement orientated work:

“There's also, within Holly Partnership, school-to-school support. So there is always the opportunity - you just go to them and say ‘I need some help with’ and they will find somebody with that expertise to help you from another school”. Elizabeth, Headteacher, Willow Primary

Networks and Peers

Another important source of support described by leaders was networks of peers both formally orchestrated and more informal, personal professional networks.

Most MATs facilitated networks and collaboration between the schools in the group:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

“We have network meetings for staff, right all the way through, don't we? For subject leaders, for family support workers, for heads, for deputies. SENCOs. So they all have networks.” Isabella, CEO, Highfield MAT

Florence, a headteacher in a different MAT described how she experienced a similar pattern of networks, some quite informal:

“I think being part of a trust of schools is a real positive... So our French lead, for example, she's gone over to [Name] Primary this afternoon to meet with their French lead, to actually just talk through what we're doing with our curriculum to ask for some ideas. So knowing there's people out there who you've got that connection with, I found a real... lots of support from that angle because you've obviously got other head teachers who you get to know well.” Florence, Headteacher, Oak Primary

Rosie referred to the local clusters which included all types of schools:

“(We) have what's called Learning Communities. So geographically the heads in the [Name] North meet every half term and we moan because that's really good... it's not just me finding this difficult.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

She also summarised the kind of informal networks that most heads described and often characterising them as their first ‘port-of-call’:

“You make those human connections with people and then they're the people that you call on. And because they share your identity, they kind of share your values, don't they? ... I would contact [Name] because I trained with him ... it's all about personal relationships isn't it. And another head [Name], because we became heads at the same time. So it's all about personal connections, isn't it?” Rosie, Sunnyside Primary

Sophie described a similar dynamic that developed alongside the network of Secondary Headteachers:

“We have the City secondary heads meeting which we were all there ... And it's just again, get them around the table to talk to each other. It doesn't really matter what the issues are. The issues are the issues. Then we sit around and we have bacon sandwiches and coffee and we sit there and they all just then join up together and have a chat.” Sophie, Headteacher, Haven Secondary

Coaching and Mentoring

Another type of support that a number of leaders mentioned was organised coaching, usually outside of ordinary management arrangements in schools:

“So I have a coach. So that, yes, we have a coaching session once a term.” Florence, Headteacher, Oak Primary

Florence described a personal arrangement. Rose again summarised an approach within her schools that others also referred to:

“We're doing a pure coaching thing.... So we heard about this from another school. So it's not directive coaching and it's not to do with the performance management. So yeah, so we have a coach come in and works with us.” Rosie, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – England

Olivia described an organised mentoring programme for new headteachers. The mentors were drawn from experienced headteachers within the city:

“All our heads accessing that (New Heads) content have a mentor, so it means they have somebody they can vent and get advice... So it is a group of leaders in the city who are well established, who step forward as mentors.” Olivia. Local Leader, City LA.

More generally, Isabella summarised an idea that was widely held, whether implicitly or explicitly stated, that the headteacher role required network support for an individual to successfully sustain it:

“If you're within a trust because there's lots of heads together, you've got that collaboration and that's the whole point of a trust, isn't it? That whole working collaboratively. However, outside of the community, in the Community School (i.e. LA maintained schools), it's having that collaboration with local schools. Without that, I don't think heads can survive.” Isabella, CEO, Highfield MAT