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Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Northern Ireland

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About this report

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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 Northern Ireland available in one place - in particular the secondary data analysis and locality case studies, as these are not available elsewhere. Equivalent technical reports for England and Scotland 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

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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.

The research in Northern Ireland included an analysis of public statistics on the leadership workforce (Section 3), a survey of 240 school leaders (Section 4), and in-depth interviews with 37 leaders across two contrasting localities (Section 5): Town-Rural, a large town surrounded by rural communities, and Coast, a coastal region stretching from affluent towns to isolated villages. We visited everything from small teaching principal primaries to large post-primaries and selective grammar schools, from Controlled, Maintained and Voluntary schools to Integrated and Irish Medium ones. The results offer a snapshot of leadership enmeshed with complex community identities, commitment shadowed by sustainability concerns, and a profession navigating unique challenges, including political instability and prolonged industrial action.

An Ageing Leadership Workforce

The workforce numbers indicate clear sustainability challenges. Northern Ireland employs approximately 1,875 principals and vice-principals across just over 1,000 schools. The headteacher age profile is ageing, with the average age of principals increasing from 49 in 2010 to 50 by 2024. The 50 to 54 age band has become the single largest group, with worryingly few younger leaders behind them. Whilst women comprise 77% of teachers, they account for just 61% of principals. No official workforce statistics on ethnicity are published, but it seems that representation of minority ethnic groups in leadership roles is negligible. Around 30 to 35% of advertised leadership posts remain unfilled annually. Primary principalships showed wild volatility, with fill rates dropping to 48% in 2020 (reflecting a pause in recruitment during the lockdowns) to 70% in 2024. Vice-principal posts were even more problematic. Leadership churn remained high, with 9.2% leaving compared to 7.8% joining most recently.

Putting this evidence together with insights from the survey and case studies, it seems that leadership careers are hampered by restrictive promotion processes which limit opportunities to move between schools and sectors. School budgets are hugely stretched, with historic levels of funding well below the wider UK, while pupil numbers continue to decline. These issues are often compounded by small pay differentials, relentless demands, a lack of structured professional development opportunities, and watching current principals struggle, all of which can make the step up to principalship unappealing for many. Headteacher recruitment and appointment processes sometimes lack balance and rigour, although the Catholic sector has been working to address these issues, offering learning for the wider system.

The View from the Survey

When asked how they were faring, around 43% of headteachers in Northern Ireland said they were thriving. Meanwhile, nearly one in five leaders described themselves as sometimes or mostly sinking, indicating a stark sustainability challenge.

Time use analysis reveals that, like their peers in England and Scotland, headteachers in Northern Ireland spend most time on general administration and student care issues (e.g.

attendance, behaviour, SEND, safeguarding and well-being). They spend slightly more time on ‘Leading teaching, learning, and curriculum’ than their peers in England and Scotland, with around 19% reporting over 10 hours weekly.

Poor work-life balance topped the list of factors that drain leaders, followed by the weight of leadership and operational burdens. Operational issues stand out as particularly challenging in Northern Ireland, with many respondents describing a “broken system”. The word relentless appeared in almost every case study interview.

Despite these challenges, leaders were clear that they are sustained by working with children and young people and by their relationships with colleagues and communities. Community engagement and relationships with governors and parents featured more strongly in Northern Ireland than elsewhere.

Amongst those not yet in headship, aspiration for the role was lowest in Northern Ireland at 24%, compared with 39% in Scotland and 33% in England.

Town-Rural Case Study: Community Identity and Pastoral Pressures

Town-Rural shows stark contrasts and deep complexity. The area includes a large urban centre with pockets of significant deprivation and surrounding rural areas hiding poverty in scattered communities. All school types are present, with school rolls falling.

Selection for grammar schools and religious identity continue to pattern school intakes in complex ways. Some schools have become integrated in practice, perhaps indicating an easing of historic sectarian differences, but we also heard that school choices can be firmly based on maintaining cultural and religious identities. These considerations interacted with demographics and bus routes, creating competition for students to maintain viability whilst collaboration was constrained by falling rolls.

Our visits to Town-Rural took place in autumn 2024, a year later than Coast, when the Assembly was back in session and a prolonged period of industrial action – Action Short of Strike (ASOS) - had been paused. New policies were being developed at pace, with leaders receiving weekly emails from the Department and frequent invites to consultation events. Leaders in both localities felt that the prolonged industrial action had both hampered school development and limited the opportunities available to middle leaders to develop their skills and identities as leaders. During the ASOS period, school inspections by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) had effectively been paused, but these were now resuming with a new framework. This created both a sense of (sometimes weary) optimism and a new pressure on leaders.

School leadership in both Town-Rural and Coast had a distinctive quality when compared with England and Scotland. Principals emphasised pastoral dimensions strongly, often characterising themselves as essentially pastoral leaders working with families facing poverty and trauma. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) dominated many conversations, with more children coming into mainstream schools but support not being there. Some described children who should have been in special schools but for whom no places existed.

The drains were cumulative and relentless. Administrative burdens drained energy. The lack of support was a constant frustration, with leaders feeling on their own when problems arose. School budgets couldn't keep pace with rising costs whilst staffing consumed 90% or more of available money in some schools. Parental complaints had intensified. Staff resilience seemed

diminished since COVID. The cumulative effect manifested in poor principal wellbeing. Yet they persisted, sustained by children and relationships. Peer networks where principals could be honest were lifelines, essential infrastructure preventing complete burnout.

We heard that applicant numbers for principalships had declined over time. Vice-principal posts might attract 20 to 30 applicants, but principalships were commonly down to single figures. The absence of the Professional Qualification for Headship since 2015 meant individualised development paths, with many unable to afford fee-paying masters programmes. What mattered more was experience and mentoring, with almost everyone identifying influential mentors.

Coast Case Study: Geography, Selection, and Shifting Demographics

Coast combined a scattering of coastal towns with a large rural hinterland. The area ranged from affluent to deprived. Selection and community identities continued to shape patterns, though attitudes were changing and several of the (non-selective) post-primary schools we visited were over-subscribed. Religious identity remained significant but was evolving, with quite mixed intakes at many schools. Demographic decline created pressures, with some schools facing tough choices to stay viable: for example, one small rural primary had opted to open a SPiM (Specialist Provision in Mainstream), creating significant disruptions in staffing profile and skillsets. Teaching heads in very small rural primaries appeared particularly vulnerable.

Practices in Coast echoed Town-Rural. Principals were committed to standards but pastoral dimensions remained central. SEND issues often dominated, with pastoral needs having exploded and children coming into mainstream without adequate support. The drains were also familiar: workload, administrative burdens, lack of support with services slashed, tight finances, intensified complaints, diminished staff resilience. With no school inspections happening at that time, due to ASOS, several school leaders expressed frustration that they could not easily validate or address important improvement challenges. Nevertheless, leaders kept going, sustained by children, leadership autonomy, and relationships within schools and peer networks.

As in Town-Rural recruitment showed leadership applicants shrinking dramatically - from the high 20s two decades ago to perhaps fewer than 10 now. Internal recruitment practices appeared to make career progression difficult, dependent on luck as much as skills and capabilities. Several interviewees suggested governing bodies, particularly old boys' networks, tended to favour male candidates. Experience and mentoring proved crucial, with leaders learning most through doing the job. One grammar school had created associate positions for succession planning, but such approaches were not widespread.

Common Threads: What Emerges Across Northern Ireland

Several themes emerge. First is the distinctive embeddedness of schools and leaders in their communities. In Northern Ireland you are always principal of your school, everyone knows who you are. Leaders occupied social roles in communities, often a place where they had grown up or returned to. This created both pressure and purpose. The pastoral orientation was lived reality, not rhetoric. At a time when the leadership of care – i.e. inclusion, well-being and a sense of belonging – appears far more central, this embedded community and pastoral commitment appears important and valuable.

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Second is the complexity layered by sectarian histories and selection structures. School choices remain patterned by religious identity and grammar school access, creating both division and pragmatic accommodation. Each school existed in a local ecology of competition and collaboration, demographic pressures and complex community identities.

Third is political and systemic fragility. Leaders described a broken system: prolonged Assembly suspensions; years of ASOS; suspension of inspections; funding shortfalls; and a strongly held view that system supports for schools are not working well. The year between our two case study visits (2023-2024), however, highlighted a system transitioning between past and future and there was cautious optimism regarding the revived Assembly's proposals for change.

Fourth is the question of sustainability. An ageing workforce, the lack of coherent professional development pathways, declining applicant numbers, teaching principals in impossible positions, leaders questioning whether they could continue, all pointed to a system under strain. People were running on commitment, making the most of the limited opportunities available for professional learning and growth.

Fifth is the centrality of relationships and networks, often sparked through initiatives such as Area-Learning Communities and Shared Education. What sustained leaders was children flourishing, strong teams, and peer networks where honesty was possible. WhatsApp groups, coffee meetings, and trusted networks weren't extras but essential infrastructure preventing burnout.

Finally, diversity and succession remain problematic. Gender gaps persisted, with some governing bodies seen to be favouring male candidates. Succession planning was rarely systematic beyond the efforts of individual schools.

Northern Ireland's education system navigates unique challenges whilst maintaining commitment to community and pastoral care. Yet this research suggests the leadership foundation is increasingly fragile. Principals hold together vital community institutions through strong local ties and moral commitment, often doing so at considerable personal cost. The question isn't whether Northern Ireland has dedicated leaders but whether the system can sustain them and continue attracting the next generation into roles that look increasingly difficult from the outside.

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 Northern Ireland included two 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

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contexts. At 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 Northern Ireland. We also include a brief overview of the school system and leadership development landscape in Northern Ireland 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 Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is the smallest of the three UK systems studied, with just over 1,000 schools in total. While many schools are located in larger urban centres, including Belfast, the province includes large rural areas, often served by small schools: for example, in 2022, 193 out of 440 rural primaries had fewer than 105 pupils.¹

Since 1999 responsibility for education has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly, as part of the wider Good Friday Agreement, with schools policy and implementation resting with the Department of Education and its arms-length bodies. However, the power-sharing agreement has been suspended various times, including between 2017-2020 and 2022-2024, meaning that education policy has lacked sustained focus and investment. One consequence is that schools in Northern Ireland have been funded at lower rates than other parts of the UK, with the recent Independent Review describing “a financial crisis”.² The last decade has also seen extended periods of industrial action – mostly Action Short of Strike (ASOS) – which has impacted on many aspects of school development, including inspections by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Since the Assembly was restored, in 2024, the Education Minister Paul Givan has pursued an ambitious agenda to revise the national curriculum and to invest in professional development for teachers and leaders.

Given its small size the school system in Northern Ireland is remarkably complex, reflecting historic sectarian divides, more recent efforts to develop Integrated and Irish Medium sectors, and academic selection at age 11. In the following section we indicate the main categories of school in describing the school leadership workforce (more detailed descriptions are available [here](#)). Today, while many schools educate a mix of children from different religious communities and many families classify themselves as having no religious affiliation, school choices are still commonly influenced by sectarian and cultural differences.

In terms of governance and administration, the Education Authority (EA - a Non-Departmental Public Body) has had responsibility for funding and overseeing most categories of school since it replaced the Regional Education and Library Boards in 2015. All schools have a local governing body, but levels of operational autonomy differ widely by governance type: for example, in controlled schools the EA is the employer, while in voluntary (grammar) schools this responsibility sits with trustees. Various statutory and non-statutory bodies provide support to the different categories of school (e.g. Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Controlled Schools’ Support Council etc.).

Support for formal leadership development in Northern Ireland has been limited in recent years, reflecting the political and funding challenges highlighted above. The Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH NI) was paused in 2017 and has not been reinstated, although the new

¹ See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-60031084>

² INVESTING IN A BETTER FUTURE: THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND (2023) accessed at <https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/files/independentreviewofeducation/2024-01/Investing%20in%20a%20Better%20Future%20-%20Volume%202.pdf>

TransformEd strategy includes a commitment to launch a new version alongside wider provision for middle and senior leaders as well as changes to how schools are supported to improve.

In the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 survey of attainment by 15 year-olds, Northern Ireland's outcomes in mathematics and science were similar to the OECD average, but significantly above the average in reading.³ In PISA 2022, pupils reported significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than OECD average.

³ See <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/oxford-education-deanery/digest/pisa-2022/>

3. The school leadership workforce in Northern Ireland

About the workforce data:

The Department of Education (DE) collects annual data on teacher numbers, enabling DE and the Education Authority (EA) to develop policy and meet statutory responsibilities.⁴ For this study we have drawn on two data sources, both part of the Education Workforce Statistics:

- **Published statistics.** DE produces annual school workforce statistics that are publicly available on the Education Workforce Statistics page.⁵ These are accompanied by documentation on data collection, validation and scope.⁶
- **Bespoke tabulations.** With the support of colleagues in DE Analytical Services we received additional aggregated statistics relating specifically to principals and vice principals. These data allowed us to examine changes in the age and gender profile of the leadership workforce and to explore indicators of sustainability such as sickness absence, vacancies and leave patterns. They also enable direct comparison with equivalent data from England and Scotland.

Workforce Overview:

As indicated in the previous section, Northern Ireland's school leadership workforce spans a diverse set of school types and management structures. There are just over 1,000 schools employing around 1,875 principals and vice-principals (1,117 principals and 758 vice-principals). Leadership team structures vary considerably: many small primary schools operate without a vice-principal, while larger schools - particularly in the secondary and grammar sectors - often have multiple leadership posts. The table below illustrates the distribution of teachers and leadership roles across school types and management categories, highlighting the concentration of staff in primary and post-primary sectors and the relatively small numbers in special and preparatory schools. Note that some cells were suppressed due to low cell counts.

Table 3.1 – Teacher and leader headcounts by school type

School type	Management type	Teacher	Principal	Vice Principal
Primary	Controlled	4050	381	200
	RC maintained	3552	353	183
	Other maintained	205	27	9
	GM integrated	293	25	23
Secondary	Controlled	2600	53	69
	RC maintained	2849	54	74
	Other maintained	99	supp	supp
	GM integrated	772	15	25
School type	Management type	Teacher	Principal	Vice Principal
Special	Controlled	1119	38	45
	RC maintained	66	supp	supp

⁴ At present, personal-level workforce data are not available to researchers. Developing appropriate sharing infrastructure, including privacy notices, secure systems for data transfer, and a clear review process for applications, would allow future research to make fuller use of individual-level information.

⁵ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/education-workforce>

⁶ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/education-workforce-data-collection-and-validation>

Grammar	Controlled	932	16	32
	Voluntary	3229	50	92
Preparatory	Voluntary	93	6	supp
Special	Other maintained	17	supp	supp

Demographic Composition:

Age Profile

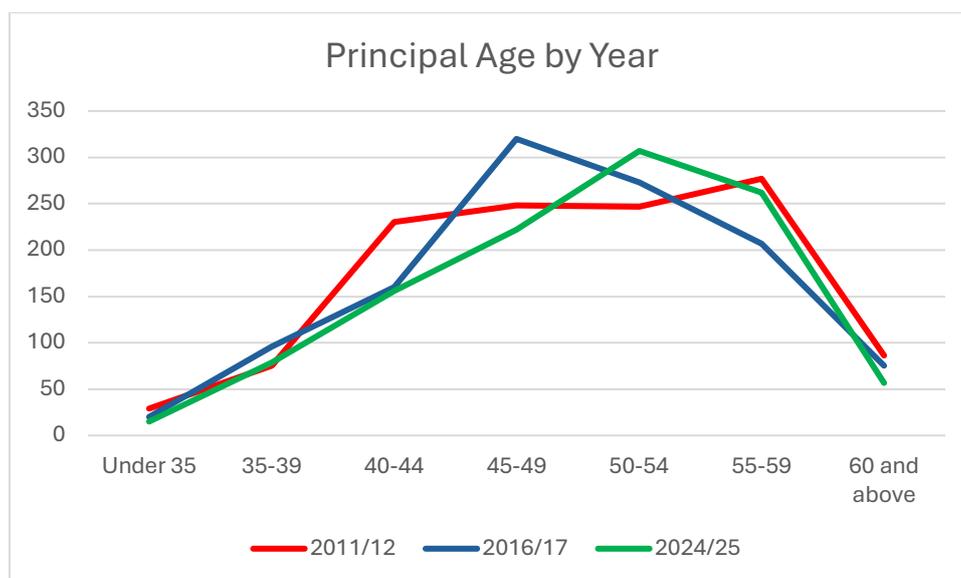
The data show a clear ageing of the school leadership workforce in Northern Ireland over the past decade. Among principals, the proportion aged under 40 has fallen slightly since 2011–12, while the 50–59 group has remained consistently large and the 50–54 band in particular had grown to be the single largest group by 2023–24 and 2024–25. The share aged 60 and above has declined a little but remains notable. The average age of principals increased from 49 to 50 between 2010 and 2024. Vice principals show a similar pattern, although with a slightly younger profile overall; the 45–54 and 55–59 groups remain the biggest segments, and the proportion under 40 has gradually decreased. Taken together, the figures suggest a leadership pipeline that is still heavily concentrated in mid- to late-career stages, with limited growth in younger leaders coming through.

Table 3.2 – Leader Age Profile for Selected Years

		Age Group						
		Under 35	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60 and above
Principals (%)	2011/12	2.4%	6.3%	19.3%	20.8%	20.7%	23.2%	7.2%
	2016/17	1.7%	8.3%	13.9%	27.8%	23.7%	18.0%	6.5%
	2023/24	1.7%	6.8%	15.0%	19.8%	28.8%	22.9%	4.9%
	2024/25	1.4%	7.2%	14.2%	20.2%	28.0%	23.9%	5.2%
Vice Principals (%)	2011/12	4.6%	11.7%	20.0%	19.6%	19.6%	22.0%	2.6%
	2016/17	3.2%	13.5%	17.9%	20.6%	22.0%	18.1%	4.7%
	2023/24	2.7%	8.9%	19.6%	21.1%	23.3%	19.8%	4.4%
	2024/25	3.3%	8.4%	19.9%	21.7%	23.6%	18.5%	4.6%

The ageing pattern among principals over time is illustrated in Figure 3.1 (below). In 2011/12, the age profile was relatively broad-based, with substantial numbers of leaders spanning from their late 30s through to around 60. By 2016/17, the cohort of younger heads had moved into the middle age brackets, while many older principals had retired—but there was limited replenishment from younger entrants. In 2024/25, this trend is even more pronounced: the largest concentrations are now in the early and late 50s, with relatively few principals in their late 30s and early 40s stepping in behind. This shift underscores the challenge of succession planning as the workforce approaches retirement.

Figure 3.1 – Leader Age Profile for Selected Years



Gender Profile

Male and female representation among school leaders in Northern Ireland shows a marked difference from the overall teaching workforce. While women make up around 77% of all teachers, only 61% of principals and 64.7% of vice-principals are female. This gap is most pronounced in the post-primary sector, where just under half (48.9%) of principals are female, compared with 71.2% of teachers. In contrast, primary and preparatory schools have a stronger female presence in leadership, with 63.3% of principals and 70.2% of vice-principals being women, though still below the teaching workforce share of 84.4%. Special schools show the highest female representation among principals (69.2%) and grammar schools display near parity with 48.5% and 51.6% of principals and vice-principals, respectively being female. Overall, these patterns suggest lower rates of progression to leadership compared to their male colleagues, albeit with appreciable variation by school type and phase.

Ethnic Minority Participation

Ethnic diversity within the school leadership workforce in Northern Ireland is extremely limited. Available evidence suggests that principals and vice-principals are almost entirely drawn from a White background, reflecting both historical patterns in teacher recruitment and the wider demographic profile of Northern Ireland, where 96.6% of the population identifies as White (93% in Belfast). No official workforce statistics on ethnicity are published, but anecdotal and administrative sources indicate that representation of minority ethnic groups in leadership roles is negligible. This lack of diversity raises questions about pathways into leadership and the visibility of minority communities within the education system.

Sustainability Indicators:

Vacancies

Vacancy patterns highlight ongoing challenges in sustaining school leadership capacity (Table 3.3). Across recent years, around 30–35% of advertised leadership posts remain unfilled, with some principalships re-advertised and vice-principal roles occasionally left vacant for cost reasons—reducing opportunities for leadership development. The data show that fill rates for

principal posts in nursery and primary schools have fluctuated sharply, dropping as low as 48% in 2020 before recovering to nearly 69.8% in 2024. Vice-principal vacancies are even more problematic: in 2020, only one in twelve posts was filled (8.3%), and although rates improved to 67.6% by 2024, persistent gaps remain. Post-primary schools generally fare better, with principal posts often filled at higher rates (typically above 66%), but vice-principal vacancies still show volatility. These patterns suggest structural pressures in recruitment and retention, compounded by financial constraints and an ageing leadership pipeline.

Table 3.3 – Leadership vacancies in grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland, 2010 - 2024

		Number of unfilled vacancies						
School type	Grade of teacher	2010	2016	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Nursery, primary and prep schools	Principal	9	23	13	13	14	11	15
	Vice-principal	9	13	11	13	10	6	6
	Classroom teacher	96	226	184	198	134	116	144
Post-primary schools	Principal	1	0	4	0	1	1	1
	Vice-principal	4	5	2	5	4	0	3
	Classroom teacher	48	74	147	87	79	89	146
All grant-aided schools	Principal	11	24	17	14	15	12	16
	Vice-principal	17	19	14	19	15	6	11
	Classroom teacher	160	350	370	342	249	227	333

		% vacancies filled						
School type	Grade of teacher	2010	2016	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Nursery, primary and prep schools	Principal	76.3	64.6	48	65.8	58.8	65.6	68.8
	Vice-principal	69	55.2	8.3	48	41.2	53.8	64.7
	Classroom teacher	80.2	70.2	59.7	69.3	72.3	74.5	74.6
Post-primary schools	Principal	92.3	100	20	100	80	66.7	75
	Vice-principal	69.2	54.5	75	44.4	77.8	100	72.7
	Classroom teacher	87.3	81.3	73.8	89.4	89.5	87.3	84.4
All grant-aided schools	Principal	79.2	67.1	43.3	68.9	62.5	65.7	69.8
	Vice-principal	63	55.8	33.3	48.6	60.5	70	67.6
	Classroom teacher	82	72.3	66.5	79	81.4	81.6	79.9

Nb. Special schools are not included due to low numbers

Sickness

Sickness absence among school leaders remains a notable sustainability concern. In 2024/25, principals and vice-principals lost an estimated 7 working days per person to sickness, compared with 9.4 days for teachers overall. Table 3.4, below, shows the number of working days lost to sickness by school type in 2024/25. This reveals a considerable cost relating to staffing, cover and disruption in the sector. By estimating the average number of days lost by school type using teacher headcount figures, we see substantial variation: primary leaders averaged 7.5 days, while secondary/post-primary and special school leaders had slightly lower figures (6.3 and 6.1 days respectively). Teachers in special schools experienced the highest absence at 14 days, suggesting sector-specific pressures. Overall, leadership sickness rates are lower than those for classroom teachers.

Table 3.4 – Working days lost due to sickness by school type, 2024/25

School Type	Principals/Vice		Teachers	Total
	Principals			
Primary	9,020		74,517	83,537
Nursery	1,188		1,187	2,375
Secondary	1,838		53,154	54,992
Special	506		15,643	16,149
Grammar	136		5,262	5,398
Peripatetic	102		5,942	6,346
Total	12790		156007	168797

Leavers and Joiners

Leadership churn in Northern Ireland remains significant, with persistent gaps between leavers and joiners. Over the past decade, annual leaver rates have ranged from 7.4% to 10.4%, while joiner rates have generally been lower, averaging 6–9%, albeit with a ‘spike’ in recruitment in 2021/22 after recruitment was paused in 2020. There is unevenness in the in- and out-flows from year to year. The most recent year (2024/25) saw 9.2% of principals and vice-principals leave compared with 7.8% joining. These figures, combined with an ageing leadership profile and vacancy pressures, as above, suggest succession planning remains a critical challenge for the sector.

Table 3.5 – Estimated Principal and Vice Principal leavers and joiners by year

	2024/25	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2016/17	2012/13
Leavers	172	142	158	147	133	178	215
	9.2%	7.6%	8.5%	8.2%	7.4%	9.2%	10.4%
Joiners	146	146	173	214	114	154	136
	7.8%	7.8%	9.3%	12.0%	6.3%	8.0%	6.6%
Remaining	1699	1725	1694	1638	1671	1755	1856

4. Selected findings from the survey in Northern Ireland

About the survey:

In this section we draw together a selection of responses to the UK survey. The full UK survey report, published separately, provides significantly more detail on the methodology and findings, including on many areas not covered here.⁷

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. 240 leaders from Northern Ireland responded to the survey, including 155 headteachers (including principals and heads of school) as shown in Table 4.1. In this section, except where indicated, we use headteacher responses as a straightforward point of comparison between the three nations.

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 few 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 extent to which school leaders perceive local status hierarchies to exist, for example as a result of historic and current attitudes around prestige, performance and parental preferences. In

⁷ 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.

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Northern Ireland, 64.9% of heads agreed with this statement (and only 15.2% disagreed), which is lower than England (72.2%) but higher than Scotland (57.5%). 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 in Northern Ireland (79.8%) were between Scotland (85.7%) and England (67.5%).

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 Scotland (85.2%) and Northern Ireland (82.2%) are more likely to report regular collaboration with other local schools than heads in England (68%).

The most striking divergence, however, relates to inspections. Just 32.9% of heads in Northern Ireland agree that school inspections provide an accurate picture of their school, notably lower than either England (49.2%) or Scotland (45.2%), presumably reflecting the prolonged period of ASOS in Northern Ireland which has limited the ability of the Education and Training Inspectorate to conduct full inspections. Given this, it is perhaps surprising that 39.8% of heads in Northern Ireland agree they learn new things from the process, which is higher than England (26.6%) but notably lower than Scotland (54.4%).

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
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
	England	27.5	27.7	18.2	22.3	4.3
	Northern Ireland	12.4	12.4	35.3	34.6	5.2

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
As a school, we learn new things from school inspections	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 48% in Northern Ireland and 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)

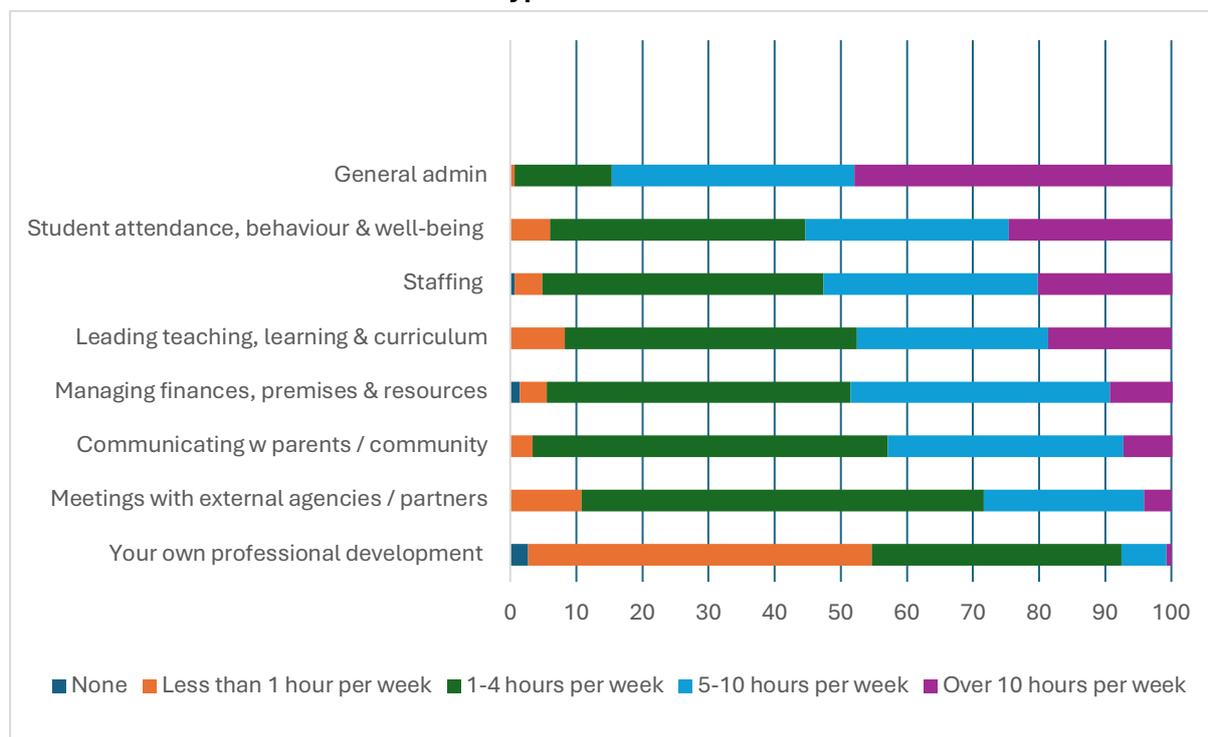
		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Teachers feel empowered to take on leadership roles within the school	England	1.4	7.6	7.9	53.7	29.4
	Northern Ireland	9.1	12.3	11.7	51.3	15.6
	Scotland	3.5	6.5	7.4	52.6	30.0
	Total	3.1	8.1	8.4	53.1	27.3
There 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
	England	1.2	3.6	8.1	23.3	63.7
	Northern Ireland	1.3	0.0	6.5	20.9	71.2

School leadership has become more difficult since Covid	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 Northern Ireland.⁸ The responses show that Northern Irish 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 England and Scotland). ‘Your own professional development’ comes bottom (as it does in all three nations). In between, we see relatively small differences in the time spent on the other five areas. What is notable is that leaders in Northern Ireland (like England and Scotland) 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. 18.6% of heads in Northern Ireland say they spend over 10 hours a week on this area, which is higher than Scotland (8.3%) and England (5.4%), but this may be due to the relatively high numbers of teaching heads in small schools in the province.

Chart 4.1: headteacher time use in a typical week in Northern Ireland



⁸ 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.

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 19.1% of heads in Northern Ireland describe themselves as ‘mostly’ or ‘sometimes sinking’, which is lower than both Scotland (29.2%) and England (21.9%). Around a third of leaders in all three systems describe themselves as ‘mostly surviving’ (England - 33.9%; Scotland – 36.1%; Northern Ireland – 38.2%). 42.7% of leaders in Northern Ireland describe themselves as ‘sometimes’ or ‘mostly thriving’, which is similar to England (44.2%) but higher than Scotland (34.8%).

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

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.⁹

Responses for all leaders in each nation are shown in Table 4.5. This shows that the ‘drains’ in Northern Ireland are similar but different to the drains in England and Scotland. ‘Poor work-life balance’ came top in Northern Ireland, followed by ‘The weight of leadership’, ‘Operational/administrative burdens’ and ‘Staffing issues’. We explore these issues further in the locality case studies below.

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%

⁹ 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.

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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%

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, although ‘Community engagement and relationships (inc. governors, parents)’ does feature more strongly in Northern Ireland than the other two nations.

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 (64.2% in Northern Ireland) is one where the aspiration for the role emerges over the course of a career in schools. In contrast, a much smaller proportion (12.2% in Northern Ireland) stated that they had "always wanted to be a head" since starting their careers. Meanwhile, a surprisingly large proportion of heads (23.7% in Northern Ireland) 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?’ Aspiration – based on the proportions that replied ‘Yes, perhaps’ or ‘Yes, definitely’ - is lowest in Northern Ireland (24%) compared to Scotland (39%) and England (33.1%).

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 two locality case studies completed in Northern Ireland – Coast and Urban/Rural. 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. sector support bodies, partnership leads) and employers (e.g. Chair of Governing Body) 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 – Town/Rural	Urban including deprivation, rural and border

Locality case study: Northern Ireland Town-Rural

Following a brief description of Town-Rural and the data collected, this case study provides an overview of how interviewees perceived and understood Town – Rural as a place. It then 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

The locality of Northern Ireland Town-Rural includes a large urban centre and a surrounding rural area with several significant towns, and many small villages. Overall, the urban area is less affluent than the average for NI with areas of significant deprivation. The rural parts of the locality are on average better off than the urban centre, but there are pockets of very deprived neighbourhoods throughout the towns and villages. There is not a single dominant employer or industry.

All types of school found in Northern Ireland are present in the locality: Catholic Maintained, Controlled schools, Integrated, Irish Medium, with both primary and post-primary in all sectors. There are also Grammar schools - both Voluntary and Controlled. The largest proportion of schools are Catholic Maintained, reflecting the historic balance of communities’ religious identities.

Over time there has been a declining school population with the number of schools in the rural areas reportedly halving over a period of 20 years. We also heard about new Irish medium schools opening in the same period. The interaction of falling rolls, the importance of schools to communities, cultural and religious identities, all combined with selection, has created a complex picture amongst schools. There is competition for students whilst also collaboration to respond to common issues and national initiatives. There has been some investment in the school estate in recent years with new schools and campuses both in the urban and rural areas, sometimes accompanying mergers and reorganisations, but we also visited some schools in poor condition.

A number of partnerships have grown up across the area. As well as Education Authority sponsored Area Learning Communities at secondary level, a local Principals group meets regularly in the urban area. Equivalent partnerships in the rural areas are more patchy. Shared Education partnerships have led to enduring collaborations amongst some schools in some contexts.

There were also important external changes felt directly in schools when we visited. It was soon after the NI Assembly had been restored, the Independent Review of Education had reported,

industrial action had ended and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) had recommenced inspections. It was a moment of change in the Northern Ireland system.

Interviewees

Table 5.2: Breakdown of interviewees by role

Locality	Vice Principal	Principal	Local Leader	Grand Total
Town/Rural	1	11	3	15

The visits and interviews in Northern Ireland Town Rural took place in October 2024. Across our sample we visited Catholic Maintained, Controlled schools, Integrated, Irish Medium and Grammar schools. To support anonymisation we do not indicate the governance arrangements for individual schools in Table 2 below.

Table 5.3: List of Interviewees

Name	Gender	Role	School/Organisations	Type	Time in role (Years)	Time In post (Years)
Gracie	F	HT	Cairnhill Secondary	School-Secondary	1	1
Edith	F	HT	Stoneford Secondary	School-Secondary	1.5	1.5
Logan	M	HT	Glenburn Secondary	School-Secondary	2	2
Maryam	F	DHT	Tullinwood Secondary	School-Secondary	2	2
Daniel	M	HT	Carranmore Secondary	School-Secondary	4.5	4.5
Harrison	M	Local Leader	National Support	Sector Org	5	5
Lyra	F	HT	Rivermount Primary	School-Primary	6	6
Zachary	M	HT	Kilthorne Primary	School-Primary	6	6
Louis	M	Local Leader	Consultant #4	Independent	7	7
Ellie	F	HT	Birchgrove Primary	School-Primary	7	7
Maeve	F	HT	Ravenhill Secondary	School-Secondary	8	8
Samuel	M	HT	Fernleigh Secondary	School-Secondary	9	1
Heidi	F	HT	Brackenridge Primary	School-Primary	9	9
Darcie	F	HT	Ballinrye Primary	School-Primary	14	14
Ezra	M	Local Leader	Central	Govt Agency		

Place

The schooling landscape in Town-Rural is multifaceted and evolving. In this section we focus mainly on how school choices and intakes are shaped by historic and continuing cultural and religious identities, academic selection at secondary level, changing demographics, and local geographies, all of which interact with changing economic circumstances, evolving national initiatives and the agency of individual leaders.

In both the rural areas and the larger urban centre, principals were keenly aware of the economic circumstances from which their pupils came. Ellie's primary school was on the edge of a small town in the middle of the locality:

“So [Town] is, I suppose, well known for being highly deprived. You know, there's a high level of deprivation here... we have a high level of unemployment in [Town]... so our parents traditionally would be from a farming background, but what we're finding now is a lot of town children are coming out to us... And you do have the more affluent families out at this end. We wouldn't really have a, you know, the social housing around us.... the dynamic is definitely changing, and we are beginning to see more, umm, more families who are less well off moving into [Town], into our school.” Ellie, Principal, Birch Grove Primary

Gracie's secondary school was in a different town, towards the edge of the locality with students travelling to her school from quite a wide area:

“It brings in sort of quite a wide area of that rural demographic, if you like. And then of course, you have the children from here at the town itself. [Town] itself would be regarded as being quite a socially deprived area, so in terms of like free school meals, we would be sitting just slightly under 40%.” Gracie, Principal, Cairnhill Secondary

Both Ellie and Gracie described a range of circumstances, making a distinction between the rural towns themselves and the smaller communities and villages beyond. In the larger urban centre, a number of principals spoke in terms of greater concentrations of either deprivation, or affluence:

“In [Area], and according to the stats and the Department of Economy [more than half] the children in this area are defined as being in poverty. And we have 39% of the working age are defined as employment deprived, and domestic abuse in that area has doubled since 2005.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary School

In a different part of the city, Zachary described a more varied pattern:

“So, we've got some very, shall we say, affluent families here, but we also very much serve the areas ... [that are] socially disadvantaged. So, we've got a huge, huge range of children within school.” Zachary, Principal, Kilthorne Primary School

In another rural town in the locality, Logan saw a legacy of the divisions and conflicts of the past in the economic circumstances of families whose children attended his school:

“But the reality is it's a ... post-conflict area. There would have been high levels of issues around the conflict, certainly when I would have been growing up. Thankfully, that is behind us now largely, but for some of the young people ... their parents maybe have been unemployed, their grandparents maybe have been unemployed or parents in the past that have worked in some of the factories in the town that have since closed.” Logan, Principal, Glenburn Secondary School

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Local Leader Harrison, who was familiar with the varying circumstances across the locality that school leaders described, also took a longer view and spoke about changes over time and the difference made by investment in the area:

“And comparing [urban area] then with [urban area] now, it's vastly changed... obviously you've got the legacy of the troubles, but that is by and, mostly, by and large settled. I'm not saying there isn't legacies from that, but it is obviously presented a more, benefits in terms of the economy and in terms of inward investment and so on, so that there's things that have happened within [urban area] at an economic level and at a job, employment level etcetera and a peace level which it has benefited [from].” Harrison, Local Leader

Interviewees described a complex picture of the factors influencing which schools students attend. Common to all areas in Northern Ireland, the structures that Ellie described as she grew up were still very evident:

“You passed your 11 Plus and you were Protestant. So you're going to [Town] Grammar. That's it. If you didn't pass your 11 Plus and you were a Protestant, you went to [Town] High School. If you were a Catholic, you went to another post primary. So you, it was very, very straight and there were no tributaries going any other way.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

Ellie's reflections on her own schooling highlight both the historic assumptions about the link between school choice and community religious identity, and also the impact of selection and grammar schools. The broad patterns she described were still evident in the way leaders spoke about their schools. Logan's school for example served a wide area beyond the town in which it was located:

“It is a big school, but it's a Community School because, well, it's the only Catholic post primary school in the town for a start. So therefore, it is, it serves the community that it has done,... you know, we are the only maintained school within 10, 15 miles that way and 50 miles that way.” Logan, Glenburn Secondary School

Principals' accounts also suggested a very varied and nuanced pattern however. Selection for Grammar schools and location of schools certainly influenced these patterns. For example, in one town, the value placed on grammar school education meant the school, a controlled grammar, was the choice of all communities, the rural location and difficulty of travel being a factor:

“We're a school that's integrated. We've been the only grammar school in town, so everyone came to us. So of the integrated schools list when they list them in Northern Ireland, we're not an integrated school but we were ranked [highly] for our diverse population.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhills Secondary School

In the urban area, with schools closer together and greater choice in terms of school types, Ezra described how parental choices had begun to change in recent years, suggesting that while grammar was still preferred, there was a move away from single sex schools:

“It is a co-ed grammar school. So some people, instead of sending their children to [School] as an all-boys, or [School] as an all-girls, [School] is like very high marks and very difficult to get into, so they would still want a grammar school education and a co-ed. So they would have no problem sending children across the city to [School].” Ezra, Local Leader

However, this pattern was not consistent. Daniel, the Principal of an all-girls Post-Primary school in the urban area, explained that his school was over-subscribed, with an “all-

encompassing” intake: “there are more girls who would normally go to the grammar stream who are coming here, so we're getting a bigger stretch of ability”. One implication was that the school now has “more middle-class pupils coming”, meaning that the proportion of children on free school meals has reduced in recent years, although it remains high at over 40%.

We visited some schools with intakes from both the Catholic and Protestant communities, particularly in rural areas: for example, Ellie, at Birchgrove Primary (a Controlled school) described her school’s intake as about 60% Catholic and 40% Protestant. Nevertheless, it was clear that religious identities continued to influence school choices in most contexts. Maryam, the Vice-Principal of an Integrated school, put it as follows:

“It’s about, you know, where do you send your child to school to hold your identity? And that’s a big thing for us because integrated education is about celebrating the identity of all. It’s not about tolerating identity. And that can be very difficult for Catholics because they don’t want, well it’s not they don’t want, but I suppose it’s that feeling intimidated by sharing somebody else’s views. And at the minute in [Town] then, the Protestant community feel very threatened by the Catholic community and therefore feel like they’re being put out. So their best, or they think their best way to do it is to show solidarity and stay together in [another] school.” Maryam, VP, Tullinwood Secondary

Cultural considerations were also important for some parents. For example, Heidi, the Principal of an Irish Medium primary school, explained that the school’s enrolment numbers were increasing, partly thanks to non-Irish-speaking families choosing the school: “a lot of our parents wouldn’t have Irish at home, and it is a big decision for them to send their children to an Irish medium school.”

These evolving cultural and religious themes were interacting with demographic, geographic and, sometimes, logistical factors. Louis, who had worked in the area over several decades, highlighted declining demographics as a result of emigration:

“There was also demographic trends that, enrolments were going downward as well. And there’s of course a brain drain from the [Area] of the Province because there’s no big commerce or industry... There has been for a significant period of time. And one of the greatest reasons for that is simply the rurality of it. The lack of facilities, and if young people want to get ahead, they have to go somewhere else to get a job.” Louis, Local Leader

For schools in rural areas, the practicalities of travel and logistics influenced school choices. For example, Gracie’s school was a controlled Post-Primary:

“Not all their children are going to choose to come, to come here because it depends basically in some of those schools, you know, it depends whether the children live to the north or the south because of buses and things like that as well, you know. So outside of the fact that within the immediate locality we’re the school of choice, we would have quite a lot of competition with other schools, whether the [Area] schools or the [Town] or the [Town] schools.” Gracie, Principal, Cairnhill Secondary

All these issues created a sense that schools were competing for students in order to maintain viability, but in a context in which established community perceptions and expectations could be hard to shift and in which levels of academic achievement were only part of a much bigger picture. As Samuel expressed it:

“But the challenge here is, in being in a rural area, is bums on seats. I know effectively because we’re having to bus people in to keep it viable and sustainable.” Samuel, Principal, Fernleighs Secondary

A final observation was another small but significant demographic shift; an increase in families and children who have moved to Northern Ireland from other parts of the world, referred to locally as ‘newcomers’. Schools experienced this differently:

*“Other schools ... will have 30 languages ... whereas we don't have that here at all.”
Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary*

*“So what happens is quite a lot of the schools around here are oversubscribed. They're really, really, really full. And so when they [‘newcomers’] come to us, it's probably a notion of ‘I have to come here’, because we've got places ... We've lots of Syrian refugee children. We've lots of children from Afghanistan... But it is very, very diverse and I have to say, very rarely, like I think once or twice the very odd racist comment or something. But it's dealt with very, you know, that is not OK. And we talk about why it's not OK.”
Maryam, VP, Tullinwood Secondary*

Schools and Relationships

In common with all schools in Northern Ireland, schools in Town-Rural were overseen and supported by an array of national bodies including the Education Authority (EA) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) who were the employing organisations for teachers in controlled and maintained schools respectively at the time we visited. There were some networks and partnerships of schools facilitated by the two organisations, based on geography. For example, EA provided some funding for ‘Area Learning Communities (ALCs), groupings of secondary schools. Daniel described the group in the urban area:

“It's been two levels, one's formal, we meet five times a year and we've, we've a Chair appointed amongst the 5, 12 schools. I was Chair last year and we have a Coordinator appointed that we, we use some of the funding of the 12 schools. And this person draws us together and brings up the agenda, etcetera, and all keeps the administration part manageable for us.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

The second level Daniel referred to was the informal relationships that developed within the group. The ALC included all the secondary schools in the area, controlled, maintained, grammars and integrated. We heard of similar ALC groups in the rural parts of the locality.

There were also very local partnerships in different parts of the locality that were initiated by schools themselves:

“[Town] is almost forgotten a lot. So last year I gathered up 19 of our [Town] and local area principals and got lots of meetings lined up... your locality leadership networks. If we didn't do anything about it, they wouldn't exist.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

The meetings Ellie referred to were with EA and Department for Education (DE) officials, but it also prompted consideration of more extensive networks.

“I've said, what do you think about us creating a professional learning community where my literacy coordinator meets with your literacy coordinator, maths - maths, SENCO - SENCO? ... what I get from meeting with other principals, I want them to get from meeting with each other because EA aren't doing it.” Ellie, Birchgrove Primary

In another town, there was a more developed local network amongst the secondary schools:

“So the five heads and then there's somebody from the College comes as well. We meet every term, but then we also have other groups. So the pastoral group meet with our pastoral heads, there's an SEN group meet with SEN leaders, and there's a careers group with careers leaders. So that network works well. We share a lot of good practice. The

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schools, I think it works because we're not really in competition.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Other relationships and partnerships between schools had grown out of national initiatives like the Shared Education programme where schools serving different communities were paired or brought together in small networks.

“It's a Nationalist neighbourhood. We are very involved in Shared Education with a partner school over in [Area Name] and we began that journey in 2010 when I was just appointed here.” Darcie, Principal Ballinrye Primary

Darcie expressed a strong commitment to the intentions of the programme

“What is a child in [Town] going to do? I mean, how often are they going to meet a child in [Town],...we are opening these children's eyes to just looking for things that make us similar and not what makes us different. You know, we have moved on so much. Children don't even fully understand what we grew up with.” Darcie, Ballinrye Primary

An enduring relationship had been also been established between the schools:

“And over the years they've become great colleagues as well, you know, and they will learn from each other. And, you know, when they come now, it's almost like they're an extension of this school. When we go over there, we're like an extension of their school family, which is lovely.” Darcie, Ballinrye Primary

The experience was not universal, but by no means unique:

“I'm on my own here as a principal without a vice principal. I do know through past shared education programmes, there are, you know, a group of principals that I have a wee close network that way, four or five.” Lyra, Principal, Rivermount Primary

Identity

Leaders in Town Rural

As in all seven of the localities we visited, leaders' individual and collective identities in Town Rural were shaped by multiple factors and were always evolving. That said, the connection between place and identity appeared particularly important and distinctive, shaping career choices and the ways in which leaders described their pastoral commitments to the communities they served.

One way in which the connection to place was expressed was through leaders' own family histories and upbringing in particular communities.

One common theme was of having studied or worked elsewhere in UK, but then returned to Northern Ireland:

“There were incentives to stay in Scotland or go down to England. But I wanted home so I came home.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

Ellie had returned immediately after training. Others chose to return at a later stage after a significant period:

“Me and my family relocated to Northern Ireland... But I'm from here originally. So, I, you know, went to secondary primary school here, secondary school here and did my A levels here, went to university here.” Samuel, Principal, Fernleigh Secondary

Logan was leading a school in the town in which he'd grown up:

“But anyway, so trained to teach in England, umm came back ... My two children attend the school. I'm from the local area and which means that I'm, I'm really invested in the school and the success of the school. I'm passionate about that.” Logan, Principal, Glenburn Secondary

Others, whilst not necessarily working directly in their home community, had returned to or had remained in the area they grew up in:

“I'm from the just outside the city. I'm from just outside the city, about 5 miles away.” Zachary, Principal, Kilthorne Primary

“Well, I am actually from [Town] myself. I, my family live down on down the road about a mile and a half away from here.” Lyra, Principal, Rivermount Primary

Most leaders had chosen to work in schools that matched their own religious community and background. That said, only a minority of interviewees expressed a strong personal faith:

“If I wasn't a Christian and a strong believer in the Bible and in my faith, I would not have sustained this journey and I would not be here ... I can guarantee you that.” Ellie, Birchgrove (Controlled) Primary

Daniel (Principal, Carranmore Secondary) described his own Catholic faith as follows:

“Whether I've strong faith is debatable, but I have a good faith. Like I practise every Sunday, and we pray every day.” However, he explained that while only “maybe two or three” of the wider staff were not from the Roman Catholic community, relatively few were practising: “we're Roman Catholic, but I would say the majority of our staff do not practise the faith.”

Leaders' own educational experiences had often shaped their professional identities and career decisions. For example, we quoted Ellie above, who explained that there “were no tributaries going any other way” between the Catholic and Controlled sectors when she was growing up, meaning that – as a Protestant - she was always likely to end up teaching in a Controlled school, albeit one with a mixed intake. Other experiences shaped other decisions: for example, Logan was committed to working in a non-selective all-ability school, relating this to his own path through education:

“I failed my 11 plus, so I feel very passionate that, you know, I had that label at 11 where you failed... I'm really invested in the school and the success of the school.” Logan, Principal, Glenburn Secondary

However, some leaders - particularly younger ones - described identities that were not bound to a particular type of school. For example, Maryam's decisions were based on practical considerations and the fact that her first job happened to be in one sector:

“I had an interview for [School], which is right beside where I lived in [Village] at that time and got the job in [School], which is why I ended up in the integrated sector... when it came to getting a job, I literally went, ‘that school's closer to me, I'm going to go there’. And it wasn't a huge thing for me.” Maryam, Vice Principal, Tullinwood Secondary

Community Leaders

Leaders spoke in distinctive ways about the significance of the principal role in the community around the school.

Maeve was clear that the role extended beyond the school itself and the families whose children attended:

“So in Northern Ireland I am always principal of Ravenhill. Everyone knows who you are at every time in your life... It's just the way it is. But I knew that when I took the job. That's the Northern Ireland thing.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

This sense of leaders' identities being closely linked to the particular community that their school served was often reflected in a strong commitment to pastoral issues, a theme that we return to below in discussing the leadership of care. Daniel was one of several interviewees who characterised themselves as 'pastoral leaders':

“I am essentially a pastoral leader. You know, don't get me wrong, I'm into data and all that... but I'm, essentially, the child has to be, we have to support the child at heart... I suppose, when it comes to empathy and that sort of area, I'm strong. You know, I would say, I see children. I'm out in the corridor quite a bit. I meet the parents etcetera and I, the closer I am, I suppose, as a leader, the closer I am, to the pupils and the staff and the parents, the more accurate my decision-making is.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

Similarly, Darcie explained that “that ethos of pastoral care and well-being for children and their families has always been at the heart of everything that that we do here”, and described how she and her staff were working with organisations beyond the school for the benefit of pupils in the community:

“In recent years a huge amount of work has been done to build on community networks and become more outward facing... you know, all of the things that are ongoing in this area, the paramilitary engagement is still here ... and I suppose as a group of people, we're very like-minded in the sense that we want the best for the children... people here are very committed to the area and very heavily invested in it.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Evolving professional identities

All our interviewees had moved from teaching into leadership, but their leadership identities had developed in different ways.

Some had always seen themselves in the role. Maeve even related a memory from her own time at school:

“So I loved school when I was at school... I didn't actually work particularly hard, but you know, I did a lot of the sport and all the singing, so I loved being part of school. And I remember thinking one night ... I'd love to be a head of a school to just be in the corridor and know everyone and just to be in charge of a school!” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Zachary described a very early conversation about leadership and seeing himself as a principal in the long term and, in his case, in a particular school:

“When I was doing my final year teaching practice at [University Name], I was a student in what was the old [Kilthorne] Primary School building. The principal at that time was in his second year of post, and he said 'who knows [Zachary], maybe you'll be back sitting in my seat one day'. And I held him to because I'm here.” Zachary, Principal, Kilthorne Primary

Kilthorne was Zachary's second headship and he described having actively chosen a headship in a smaller school to develop his experience.

More typically, interviewees came to see themselves as leaders – and subsequently as principals – as they progressed through their career. These identity shifts were frequently influenced by inspiring role models that leaders had worked with, and/or by the experience of taking on additional responsibilities and coming to see that they had more to offer. Others had found themselves in leadership roles almost by accident, or felt compelled to take on a role due to pressure from those around them, as Ellie described:

“I thought, oh crumbs, I'm VP, I'm expected to take over this school, my child's being born, what am I going to do? And I remember having a lot of pressure put on me by the Chairperson to say, ‘Ellie, we'll support you through this, we know you're going off on maternity, would you take on the job?’ And I said, ‘no way, no way, no way.’” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

Leadership

Recruitment

Process, applications and selection

The recruitment of principals in Town-Rural is managed by the employing bodies of the respective schools in Northern Ireland, working with schools' Governing bodies; the EA in the case of controlled schools and CCMS for maintained schools. Some schools, Voluntary Grammars and a smaller number of Grant Maintained schools are their own employing authorities. In the case of teaching staff, principals themselves, with governors, manage the recruitment of teaching staff following the policies and guidance of their relevant bodies.

“So, for example, our recruitment all goes through the Education Authority. So we, they advertise for us, we follow their procedures, but the recruitment, it's the Governors make recommendations.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

“CCMS give us the guidance for teaching staff. Internal posts as well.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

Leaders we spoke to also reflected on the interview and appointment process. For appointment of principals it was usually a single interview.

“At principal level. Could be, yeah. Could be four to five questions plus a presentation. ... [for example] take my cousin ... I think she was asked five questions. Certainly wasn't any more than that.” Harrison, Local Leader

Harrison was speaking about the process in controlled schools. Logan had relatively recent experience of the process in maintained schools which, although also a single interview, had a slightly different approach:

“So, it became more of a competency based model for principal and I actually really liked it. So, they set out five key areas that you look at like leadership and you know, teaching and learning and I think it's like financial management and budgeting and things like managing resources and so on... And it's very much then about constructing for your application form, constructing examples that demonstrate how you have led in those areas.” Logan, Glenburn Secondary

The regular practice was also to hold the interviews away from the school:

“That’s all very confidential... the interviews weren’t in school. They were conducted in [a local] hotel and there, I don’t know why it was there. Sometimes it’s in an office, but it was in the [local] hotel, which was a bit surreal and a bit strange.” Logan, Glenburn Secondary

Supply and Appetite for Principalship

As indicated in Table 2, our interviewees had been in post for periods ranging from 1-14 years, and there was no sense that principal turnover was excessively high. That said, interviewees indicated that levels of turnover across the locality had been higher since the pandemic, with low numbers of applicants coming forward in some cases.

For example, Daniel was in his fifth year as a principal:

“From COVID... there was a significant amount of change of leadership [across town]. And so it’s a bit of a merry-go-round and I know people are moving schools, etcetera and that and it’s largely settled now. Yeah. So I’m one of the elders.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

When vacancies occurred, generally posts were filled:

“I think there are still those people that aspire and desire to be principals. There still is that vision and desire and purpose that they want to take on the mantle.” Harrison, Local Leader

Darcie and Zachary’s reflections were typical however, in reporting that principal posts attracted fewer applicants than in the past and were often hard to fill:

“I know so that three of those positions were not filled on the 1st tranche of interviews. They had to go to a second and indeed one of them a third.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

“We’ve got some bigger schools than here, and over this past year, there are seven principals who have retired or stepped out from a position within [urban area]. Two of those positions I know have yet to be filled, even though they’ve gone out to be interviewed twice, I believe, because we’re not getting the quality coming in to the job. And when we talk about sustainability of leadership for the future, I mean, that’s a big thing.” Zachary, Principal, Kilthorne Primary

Darcie interpreted the reduction in applications as a general unwillingness to take on the role as a consequence of its demanding nature:

“I think people don’t want the jobs anymore because it’s, so it just takes so much out of you, I think. And people see that, and people want more of a balance in their lives. They don’t want that, you know, endless 24/7, because that’s what it could be. It’s never finished as a principal, you know.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Ezra was not the only interviewee to report much greater interest in Vice Principal positions:

“Vice principal appointments, we’re looking at maybe 20, 25, 30 applications. Principals, single figures. I don’t know if that’s all over, but certainly that’s what we’re getting in the Northern Ireland system.” Ezra, Local Leader

Harrison highlighted that there was an unwillingness to take on the principal role:

“There’s an appetite to avoid headship I think at the moment. What you’ll find is that ... what I am hearing, that there may be limited pools in terms of staff.” Harrison, Local Leader

Maeve and Ellie extended the point to suggest that the characteristics of applicants had also changed. For Maeve it was the understanding of the role that had shifted:

“Sometimes, the people who could do the job really well are so aware of what the job involves that it frightens them. And the people who have perhaps less awareness but see the position of the head, those are the people who are going into the job.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Ellie observed that, especially in Primary Schools, relatively inexperienced leaders may be appointed:

“But there’s a lot of young heads coming into jobs and I don’t think they realise what they’re stepping into and they’re in there before they know it.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

Teacher Recruitment

A further theme of conversations about recruitment was in relation to teachers, understood as being relevant in terms of the future pool and supply of potential leaders.

The situation was different in primary compared to secondary. Harrison discussed initial appointments for Primary Schools:

“There are students coming out of [Teacher Training College], there are students coming out, so I think that that end is there, but what tends to be is that they’re going in at a maternity cover level. They’re going in at a temporary contract. There’s less full-time places available.” Harrison, Local Leader

Harrison’s point was reinforced by many people’s experience - that securing a first permanent position was difficult. Ellie related that to a suggestion of a perception of relatively low turnover of teaching staff:

“So you probably don’t have a great scope of jobs here. Definitely, no. There aren’t many jobs here. So when you get your job, you hold on tight and there’s definitely not that same availability”. Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

Secondary principals however reported difficulties in recruiting staff, particularly to some specialist subjects:

“One of the biggest challenges we have is recruiting staff, which is not what Northern Ireland used to be like. But in secondary now (it’s) really, really difficult. So I have some appointments where I’ve actually maybe gone three or four times to try and get someone.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Maeve reported her experience being repeated in networks of peers that extended across Northern Ireland. There were leaders however who reported a different experience. Samuel, who had also held leadership positions in England, was more upbeat:

“There’s a low turnover of staff. It’s a real joy to recruit here because you have piles of candidates who actually, there’s a decision-making process for teaching positions... I think there’s enough scope, and the culture is right too and people still want to teach here.” Samuel, Principal, Fernleigh Secondary

Diversity

When asked about (lack of) diversity in leadership, some interviewees interpreted this to relate to the religious backgrounds of staff and the extent to which teachers and leaders move between types of schools throughout their career.

At the leadership level, there was a perception that it was relatively rare to move sectors to take on a new job:

“Movement between sectors, probably relatively limited.” Harrison, Local Leader

Similarly, thinking about the example of Grammar schools specifically, Ezra said:

“I think the leadership does tend to come from within the grammar sector.” Ezra, Local Leader

Daniel, who had moved from teaching in grammar schools to a non-selective school as a Vice-Principal, had the same impression:

“It probably was unusual for a teacher, particularly in leadership here, certainly here in Northern Ireland, to jump from a grammar sector to the non-grammar sector.” (Daniel)

Talking about the teacher workforce more generally, Ezra’s perception was that staff bodies were becoming more diverse in terms of their community identity:

“I know anecdotal evidence is no evidence, but there is an infinitely greater level of diversity in schools now... there is a big realisation within schools, I think a lot of them, that we’ll get the best person or or should get the best person, the best, the best fit for what they are. So it’s got a long way to go is my point. But compared to where we were, it is, it is like night and day.” Ezra, Local Leader

However, Daniel acknowledged that, in his context, change on the ground was slow:

“We’re a Catholic school, but my goodness, we welcome everybody. ... But if we’re drawing from a population that hasn’t really changed, it ain’t going to change on the ground. By and large, it has not changed that much... staffing, non-Roman Catholic, maybe two or three.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

Other interviewees interpreted diversity to relate to the ethnicity of leaders, recognising non-white leaders were under-represented in the local population.¹⁰ On ethnicity, a common observation, articulated here by Maeve, was that the population in Northern Ireland is less diverse than other parts of the UK:

“Northern Ireland in terms of ethnically diverse where we live is virtually non-existent.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

When it came to appointments, Maeve commented that recruitment processes tended to give preference to candidates whose experience most closely matched the job description, possibly disadvantaging those with different types of experience:

“In terms of employment and in terms of leadership, the best person gets the job regardless of their background, the best person gets a job. So that idea of equality, diversity, building equity doesn’t come into it because the best person gets the job.....”

¹⁰ Gender was not raised as a diversity issue in Town-Rural, despite the findings outlined above that women are under-represented at senior leadership levels (relative to the majority female teaching population) in Northern Ireland.

different ethnic backgrounds applying with a very different experience, and I can think of one recently, I thought, oh, I'm so excited to interview this person. Then their experience was so different that they just couldn't translate anything into the type of questions that we ask. So, and then it's disappointing because you would have liked to have that person, but you know you can't, you have to follow the recruitment process.” Maeve, Ravenhill Secondary

Succession Planning

We did not hear anyone speak about a co-ordinated strategic effort to ensure that there would be sufficient principals for schools in Town-Rural, either currently or in the future. As outlined in the next section, there were some organised programmes aimed at developing leaders' capabilities, and many schools were making use of these.

Several individual schools and principals were focussed on developing leadership potential and on the potential for recruiting future senior leaders and principals:

“There's been sufficient movement for people to have a go to apply for SLT... The leadership is, is versatile. They're open to learning, they're open to discussion. I would say when I leave, I would have no difficulty. There will be a successor, a potential successor in the school.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

Maeve described a similar, deliberate approach to preparing staff for roles within her school:

“So what we have done now is we have a programme in school called Associate SLT. So we bring somebody up onto SLT for a year who's a middle leader to develop their leadership skills to help them with greater understanding of the school, because right now in my team, there are now two people who are either going to retire this year or next year.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Such reflections were common, but not universal. Inevitably, such approaches were more constrained in smaller schools, where there was less scope for staff movement. Although the industrial action (Action Short of Strike) had ended by the time of our visit, there was a recognition that this had also reduced opportunities for staff development in recent years.

As we have noted, however, we didn't hear of efforts or strategies beyond individual schools to co-ordinate such efforts. Louis, looking back over his career, took the view that there was not a planned approach nationally:

“If you wanted good succession planning with a PQH, you would have said, listen, we need to double the number of places on PQH to have people in place for when all this falls off the edge of the cliff. There was never any thinking like that.” Louis, Local Leader.

Training

Leaders spoke about the experiences, training and development that had prepared them for their current roles. Formal programmes and courses were an important element of what they described.

Leadership Programmes and Continuing Professional Development

Most leaders spoke of a desire for professional development generally and several had sought out programmes – including masters degrees – which could help them prepare and apply for leadership roles. The reflections of Maryam and Gracie were typical:

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“I wanted to always improve myself and wanted to do more and you know, I had that, I have a master’s degree in collaborative leadership, did that as well, loads of different like wee CPD courses and stuff.” Maryam, Vice Principal, Tullinwood Secondary

“I’ve always been very career orientated and, you know, I, I did a good bit of study myself ... I’ve always really had just a real appetite for, for learning.” Gracie, Headteacher, Cairnhill Secondary

We heard about the Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH) a programme that had been discontinued several years previously:

“As part of all the cuts, RTU [Regional Training Unit] disappeared. So there is no Professional Qualification in Headship here anymore. And there’s no RTUs. And at that point in time, everything was handed over to the Education Authority (EA).” Louis, Local Leader

We spoke to principals whose time in their current roles ranged from 1 to 14 years which meant that some had experienced PQH and others had not.

“I did a master’s in leadership and management. I did it in maybe 2010, 2011 two-year course and I did, I did sort of one-day, two-day courses. But the PQH, by the time I came into [leadership] 2017, 2018 was largely defunct.” Daniel, Carranmore Secondary

Of those principals who had done the PQH, there were mixed views:

“And I did my PQH, it was fine. The whole point to PQH is you learn from everyone... We had a residential, which was good. The lectures, what did I learn from them? They were OK.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Edith was more unequivocal, but saw the programme as good preparation for senior leadership generally rather than principalship per se:

“I did the PQH also quite a while ago and, but I really enjoyed it, and I definitely got more out of it.... so I find the PQH was definitely much better preparation for becoming a senior teacher, even though it’s supposed to be about becoming a principal.” Edith, Stoneford Secondary

Darcie, having done both a masters and the PQH saw them as complementary:

“So those two courses were very instrumental, I think in how things turned out for me... the Masters was very academic. It was very interesting. I loved it. I loved the study. I loved being in absolute control of it... PQH then came after that and that was more practical.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Whether or not they had done PQH, most principals had undertaken masters study on their own initiative:

Logan had made an active choice to undertake masters study rather than PQH:

“I had thought about doing the PQH and read reviews about it and read the ETI [Education Training Inspectorate] report about it, which wasn’t overly complimentary. So, I just took the hit financially and went back to study.” Logan, Principal, Glenburn Secondary

Gracie and Samuel had also both chosen to undertake masters study:

“I did the Open University Masters in Education Leadership”. Gracie, Principal, Cairnhill Secondary

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“The MA I did in Catholic school leadership was interesting from a different perspective and that did help me.” Samuel, Principal, Fernleigh Secondary

Across all the conversations, it was clear that the absence of a national principal preparation programme in recent years meant that leaders had followed individualised paths. While several principals had completed university-run masters programmes, dependence on self-funded study meant that not all potential and serving leaders were able to pursue such opportunities:

“I need(ed) professional development. Nothing. Master’s, that’s all you can do. And I couldn’t afford it. So I ended up trying to find other forms of professional development and they’ve been few and far between.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

Ellie suggested that one of the motivations for accredited programmes was validation of leadership capability and ‘looking strong on paper’:

“I don’t look strong on paper. I haven’t got a PQH and I haven’t got a master’s and I haven’t got whatever else you want, a doctorate. But umm, I’ve done the work. I just haven’t got somebody to say you’ve got this.” Ellie, Birchgrove Primary

The absence of the PQH notwithstanding, there were other professional development programmes available provided by, amongst others, EA, the support councils for different sectors such as the Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC), CCMS and others.

The EA programmes were widely mentioned by school leaders who were encouraging their staff to take part. Steps Into Leadership is a programme aimed at middle leaders:

“Steps Into Leadership programme. They’re doing three different projects. That’s been really good for them. It’s good for us as a school. That programme, initial programme, I think is working well.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Edith was also incorporating the programme’s project work into her school’s plans as well as another EA programme, Senior Pathways:

“We have a number of staff who are engaged and some with the Steps into Leadership and then a number with the Senior Pathways. And what I’ve done is I’ve given them all a project from our school action, this year’s action plan.” Edith, Principal, Stoneford Secondary

Ezra also spoke about induction support for principals and vice-principals new to role:

“Support for vice principals who are first time and support, then ultimately, first-time principals support and allows them to get a network as well.” Ezra, Local Leader

Other programmes, taken up by some schools, were quite specific, such as a programme offered by CCMS aimed at supporting principal’s well-being or that offered by CSSC aimed at whole school development.

“I’m taking my whole school through ethos and value and vision. I’m doing a professional development year’s course with them [CSSC] at the minute and that’s where I’m getting this stuff from that I’m working with my staff on.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

Some took different approaches:

“(A) systemic team coaching module. And that’s working with senior leadership teams across a period of maybe a year and a half to two years. So that’s certainly a more longer-term relationship and it’s dealing with a group of senior leaders within the school and taking them through a group coaching approach.” Harrison, Local Leader

There was enthusiasm for the range of programmes described here, and a sense of prioritising this for staff because, with the long-running industrial action, the scope for staff engaging in these more discretionary opportunities had previously been more limited. As we noted at the start of this report, when we visited long-running industrial action had recently been suspended:

“... one of the greatest sort of issues has been Action Short of Strike (ASOS) in terms of, I think professional learning has been impacted.... The professional learning of staff members is a priority; they've spent a lot of time not learning, (not) sharing best practise.”

More generally, although there were programmes available, the idea that there was not a clear path in terms of professional development to prepare for leading a school was articulated a number of times:

“(I) would like to see a planned pathway that, how do you navigate through CPD to actually get to where you need to be? Because I think I, I just went with what I liked and did the things that I liked to do. But was that the best CPD journey?” Maryam, Vice Principal, Tullinmore Secondary

Harrison took more of an overview, expressing a similar point:

“You could say that that is a career path, but the missing link is when they go through those, which are middle-management courses, what's next? Because there is nothing next. ... the next level is not there. So you decide, ‘do I need a master’s? Maybe I need to go down the master's route? Or maybe I need to take on the course at [Teacher Training College] to say that I've shown extra qualifications (or) The Chartered College of Teaching?” Harrison, Local Leader

Informal Development and Experience

There was great value given to professional development programmes, but a consistent theme in conversations was that the most significant feature of development and learning in terms of leadership was practical experience and applying ideas:

“Yeah, the PQH taught you things ... But like, it's really only experience ... it's really only when you have firsthand experience that you are going, ‘right, now’.” Lyra, Principal, Rivermount Primary

The experience Lyra referred to came in a number of ways. Some of the programmes had practical projects and experience built into the programmes. More typically, leaders spoke of experience in roles:

“I hadn't planned to be a principal, which is interesting that I'm now a principal. I had no real ambitions at that stage. However, being an acting principal allowed me to scope, to stay in the chair, look at it.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

Daniel's experience as an acting principal was an important step for him. The points he goes on to make about what he gained from reflecting on experience were echoed by other leaders:

“There's people much better qualified than me as leaders, absolutely, and I'll be first to admit that. But the same time I had acquired confidence in myself that I also had qualities that that no qualification could bring me.... So I cherry picked. I learned more from what didn't work, than what did work. And largely, I promised myself once I became a principal, I will be myself, be myself. And I think it largely has worked.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

Zachary makes a similar point about gaining expertise and self-confidence from the experience of being the principal of a smaller school before moving to his current role:

“So I did the three years as a teaching principal in [School Name], I gained lots of experience, experience in school development planning and action planning assessment probably helped to get the role here.” Zachary, Principal, Kiltborne Primary

In most leaders’ accounts, they identified people who they regarded as models, or who had actively supported them and created opportunities:

“So two key people in my life who I still think, what would they have done in this situation? One was the vice principal whose job I got when he left. He was amazing. He was so pastoral and just so measured about everything. So I always wanted to think, what would he have done in this situation? How would he approach it? And then the other was the first headmaster they had in that school, he was just brilliant.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Darcie recalled an important figure in her early development:

“She was the principal and there were three or four other Irish girls, we all landed over at the same time, and she was very keen to develop us and give us every opportunity, you know, umm, from courses to just mentoring and coaching before mentoring and coaching ever became a thing.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Daniel made an observation, again echoed by others, that there were models that he didn’t wish to emulate:

“I was more exposed to leadership in my second school... I was more exposed to leadership there but, with respect, I probably learnt more of how it doesn't work in that school.” Daniel, Carranmore Secondary

Practices

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

School Improvement, Attainment & Progress

Inspection and Accountabilities

Harrison’s observation captured one important theme that leaders referred to repeatedly:

“There's been a legacy because we're now post industrial action, schools are trying to reset, trying to initiate and develop what has probably been static or stagnant for want of a better word. And the Inspectorate as well, with their new inspection framework, has tended to focus minds a little bit. And to coin a phrase, not scare the bejeepers out of them, but basically they're conscious that they could be having an inspection visit.” Harrison, Local Leader

During the extended period of industrial action, inspections by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) had effectively been suspended. With the resumption of inspections, ETI had published an updated approach to their inspections and leaders were reviewing what that might mean:

“ETI are back in schools and their rhetoric is now, things are different. It's context based. So we're taking them at their word that it's context based. And we're gonna hope that whenever we show them that we've entered these children for Essential Skills, that's

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gonna be OK because that's the level those children are at.” Maryam, Vice Principal, Tullinwood Secondary

Some were clear about the additional tension the prospect of inspection provoked:

“If I got the phone call tomorrow, there's no doubt about it that it puts the stress level through the roof, because you just want people to see the school the way it is. And it could be difficult to do that on a short visit maybe.” Logan, Principal, Glenburn Secondary

In addition to the accountability felt through the prospect of external inspection, principals described activities at the school level. Working with a school's governing body was frequently mentioned. Maeve had linked their work to the anticipated inspection:

“The Governors ...they'll come to events in the school so they are very supportive, it's a big commitment. So this week we had a really funny meeting because at some stage this year we'll have a school inspection. So I wanted (them) to work out the answers to this new framework themselves. So we give them all the information and they're just going, 'we don't know what to do'. Well, that's why we're doing it. So ... it's quite informal in committee meetings and we get a lot of work done. The full Board will be very different.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

More generally, Daniel's description of governors' role reflected the general expectation of governing bodies:

“We have a Board of Governors of nine members. I'm not a member. I'm a secretary to it. We meet once every six weeks. And we, we have various subcommittees as well. The Board, we, our Chair, for example, is a former principal, a very experienced principal, and she's chosen on purpose to mentor me as well. They, they, they challenge me in a very respectful way, I'm held to account.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

Principals also spoke of the activities and structures within the school through which accountability was exercised. Daniel was clear about his role in that respect:

“There's always a friendly but straight conversation and the staff know that this'll be, I call this my de-escalation corner... so it could be a department, or somebody's off. It's all about where, where are we at and how do we improve it?” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore

Darcie spoke of shared monitoring activities:

“With regards to curriculum and with regards to teaching and learning... we have there in that calendar, that kind of monitoring and evaluating calendar is we have our scheduled meetings so that we always know... we always know exactly who who's taking responsibility for the goals that are set and check ins and so on.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

Zachary reflected on the impact of industrial action on some practices:

“Because planners weren't being handed in, weren't made available to coordinators. We weren't able to monitor, evaluate, review the way we would like to.” Zachary, Principal, Kiltborne Primary

Ezra reinforced this point, suggesting that the extended period of a number of years over which the industrial action had extended, meant that there were staff in schools in leadership roles less familiar with the practices:

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“There is a feeling that post industrial action, that is the big elephant in the room that needs to be addressed, that middle leadership capability and the ability of them to line manage according to what they should be doing.” Ezra, Local Leader

Leading Improvement

In conversations about the priorities for their schools, school leaders spoke of a range of themes, consistently in terms of either maintaining high standards and expectations or in terms of improvement.

The achievement of pupils and their attainment in external assessments was a consistent thread:

“We're doing really exceptionally adding a lot of value to our lower achievers. Their achievement is phenomenal. We have a group in the middle who do enough to get by and under the radar, those kind of well they call them the grey children. A big target is focusing on those children.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Maeve was principal of a grammar school. Maryam, Vice Principal in an Integrated Post Primary school with a cohort with a wider range of ability, had a similar focus:

“(We have) a focus on the GCSE results, OK, to try and improve them using data-informed practice. And I would say here, a lot of it was anecdotal about, oh they should have passed, and why didn't they pass? Where I'm trying to move them more to a data-informed approach.” Maryam, Vice Principal, Tullinmore Secondary

Darcie, in a primary school, was equally aware of pupils' achievements and was reflecting on the impact of the COVID19 pandemic and lockdowns on the school:

“What's not going so well is the standards there. It has been a drop in standards without a doubt in terms of performance... Pastorally, I think everything's really, really good. And standards wise, big job to do, big, big job to do.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Teaching, learning and curriculum

All principals understood the design of the curriculum and practice of teaching and learning as areas at the heart of their work, whether with an oversight role or direct involvement. The specific focus varied from school to school. Samuel very clearly linked teaching and learning to standards and students' attainment:

“So the teaching and learning in terms of, and I think outcomes have perhaps, aren't as strong as they could have been as a result of all those [industrial action] measures in terms of the key areas for us, it's very much the planning, teaching and assessment area. Health and well-being we will continue to do work in that area. Curriculum, there's this good curriculum breadth.” Samuel, Principal, Fernleigh Secondary

Darcie's reflections on teaching suggested a desire to change the approach to pedagogy:

“Teachers are very traditional and they think that they're there to teach, but they should be, the move now is that you're more of a facilitator and, you know, you should be helping children shape their learning and, you know, thirst for knowledge and learning. But I think for some, it's hard to let that go....So yeah, it that traditional prescriptive way of teaching. It's been hard to chip away at that.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Culture

Several principals reflected on their work over time in the school and efforts to address more cultural aspects of the school, in areas such as student behaviour and the adoption of shared values.

Gracie had taken up her role after the return from lockdown and described some challenging behaviour from students as they returned:

“Whenever I came into the role, the first thing was to consolidate behaviour management.” Gracie, Cairnhill Secondary

Maeve, a longer serving principal, spoke of a significant change in staff culture:

“When I came, there'd been really poor behaviour, and I couldn't understand why in a grammar school you would have such poor behaviour and such a high rate of suspensions. I couldn't understand that. I was going ‘these are really good kids.’ But then the more I listened, I thought, well, if I was talked to like that, I would misbehave...it just needed to move with the times. So we put in new data systems, new students council. Och, it's just it's just totally different. So it was a real challenge and I knew it was going to be.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Zachary, principal in a primary school spoke in similar terms of addressing behaviour and talking about values:

“And staff recognise that when I come in, behaviour and standards had slipped a bit, and they've lost their values a little bit. And so, we did a lot of work with all the stakeholders at the start, and we created our values.” Zachary, Principal, Kilthorne Primary

Care

Leaders spoke of a range of practices in which they were involved that can be understood in terms of care.

Social Issues and Family Support

Ellie outlined an issue that all school leaders discussed in some form:

“I suppose it's, it's the elephant in the room and it's the needs of the ever-changing society and children. And you're not, you're not just a teacher anymore. You're a social worker, you're a family worker... if you have that type of a school where people feel that they can come in and say, ‘I'm, I'm low on heating oil’ or ‘I need uniforms’ or ‘I could do with a food hamper’. You know, you're trying to help them navigate and do everything. Whereas before 25 years ago, you were the teacher, but now social worker.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

Most leaders suggested that schools' formal role in safeguarding and liaison with other services had also increased, Ellie was making the point that as well as that expanded activity, she felt the role the school extended beyond that.

Darcie described working proactively beyond the school to address social issues:

“You know, and we are kind of trying to reach out as well in terms of, before social services intervention happens that they are signposted, families are signposted towards the youth service or any of the other interventions that are here or the agencies that are here try and support families before it gets to that stage. You know. So early intervention

and remediation would be something that we're all very, very mindful of and very interested in.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Daniel, expressing the idea slightly differently, was also concentrated on working with groups beyond the school for the benefit of pupils:

“.galvanise the staff and galvanise the support the best we can and work closely with the community, which we're doing as one of our priorities. Reach out because they have many resources there and so have we, but as a force together we're we're much better.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Pupils with Special Educational Needs was another area about which all leaders spoke. Louis, reflecting again over a long career summarised how he saw the change:

“It had been there for years, but special educational needs. The demand for support for special education needs has been going up and up and up... And not only is there a growing number of children with special educational needs, but the complexity of those needs has increased very significantly. .. But the special schools now are bulging at the seams, bursting, with their numbers and more and more statemented children are being placed in primary schools.” Louis, Local Leader

Harrison spoke of the initiative to include more children in mainstream schools:

“SPIMS, which is special needs classes. If they've got room in their schools they've been canvassed for, again, for want of a better term, to take these on... Most of them have done them voluntary. Some have been a little bit press-ganged into it, but those classes are now moving into mainstream. And that's not necessarily been always a smooth process.” Harrison, Local Leader

Zachary's school had a well-established unit of the kind Harrison described:

“So, the speech and language unit works along with the health trust here in in this area...And then that what they're working to do is obviously get the children up to speed for exiting criteria ... So, it's another, it's another add on. It can be a very time consuming add on because from a SEND point of view, we've got 17 pupils there at the minute.” Zachary, Principal, Kiltborne Primary

Zachary referred to the additional demands such a unit places on the school, but was also committed and took pride in the impact on individual children:

“But I'm very proud that we've been able to sustain this child here. And the behaviour support team are amazed at the journey he's gone through, and the social services are amazed to see the journey that he's been on and where he's got to considering everything, he's been through in his early, early stages.” Zachary, Kiltborne Primary

More generally, leaders described meeting increasing needs, and also the limited and sometimes slow access to resources with which to address the needs. Heidi's observations were representative:

“Since I took the role, I do feel that the needs of children have become greater. There are more special needs areas and schools. The needs are more complex than they would have been years ago. And I don't know what the reason for that is, but they are. They're more complex. Access to services is so slow.” Heidi, Principal, Brackenridge Primary

In Gracie's case, as staff developed expertise in specific areas, she found her school was itself regarded as a valuable resource:

"We would be the school that would be recommended to children nearly in crisis and things like that there through CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services]. So CAMHS think very highly of us and, you know, sort of point other people who are maybe having a bit of a crisis somewhere else towards ourselves... so that's, that presents challenges for us too mind you, ... you're sort of maxing out your, your capability to be able to, to deliver for them." Gracie, Principal, Cairnhill Secondary

Inclusion

Leaders also spoke of a wider set of issues affecting all pupils and students and the approach they and their schools were taking, suggesting a view of inclusion that went beyond thinking about specific special needs. Pupil's attendance at school was a common theme:

"Every day that you're not here is a day when you're not learning something. And we need to really focus on the attendance so that we are, we've a new attendance policy." Maryam, Vice Principal, Tullinwood Secondary

Maryam reflected on an approach again reaching beyond the school, and on the effect of the long running industrial action on the activities about which staff felt confident:

"Action short of strike action has been going on for so long that there'll be lots of people maybe never had to make a parent phone call. So we're just encouraging ours [staff] that if they [the student] are off for a couple of days now, you make contact home just to see what's going on, have a general chat about the child. Just again to build that positivity and the link between home and school." Maryam, VP, Tullinwood Secondary

In the section on Culture above, Gracie described working on behaviour management when she became Principal. She reflected further on issues she saw as affecting attendance and pupil's attitudes to school:

"I hate, I keep having to go back to the COVID thing...the whole thing just destabilised and children just so disaffected with school... we found that whenever the boys came back in after, you know, the lockdown ... because it's a rural community, they had been out working and farming and things like that. They literally were out in a man's world and living that life ... things that they had been exposed to through that, they weren't really consistent with, you know, the approach that we would expect here in school." Gracie, Principal Cairnhills Secondary

Daniel described a specific approach to working with students that he linked directly to caring:

"We, we are a restorative practice school ... the ethos for the school is, is when a child, say, doesn't have a good day, it's not punitive response to it. We're moving away from that completely. It's understanding the child... I would say that, I suppose at a risk of, of contradicting myself, there are moments ... the school would take a strong stance ... pupils know there's certain lines that [they] cannot cross... But in this school, I have to say the girls, by and large ... they come in with a heavy baggage... but by and large, the girls know when they're in a good caring school and they respond largely positively." Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

Well-Being

Alongside the more general issues alluded to in the previous section, leaders spoke explicitly about well-being. They were devoting resources and planning programmes explicitly to address students' well-being:

“And we are investing heavily in well-being, mental health and well-being ... with our own well-being practitioner.” Samuel, Principal, Fernleigh Secondary

Darcie was prioritising both school processes and the curriculum:

“We're also looking then at our pastoral systems in school, looking at how we're teaching about our citizenship, our emotional health, well-being and various other aspects.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Daniel too was thinking in terms of how staff practices and the curriculum addressed students' well-being:

“First priority is the whole preventative curriculum. And what we've done is there, there, there's no master plan out there for any school for the preventative curriculum because it's one of those things that's so, so vast. But we, we have gonna, we're going to focus on addressing bullying and the whole mental health.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

A number of leaders spoke about the need also to attend to and plan for staff well-being. Ellie linked it directly to teachers' effectiveness in their role:

“I have this kind of image in my head where if it's not working for them, I've definitely failed because I need them to be ready to teach the children. And I am constantly trying to provide the pastoral care for them. And I think that's a huge change in my role.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

Daniel related staff well-being to the focus on children's well-being and saw it as being equally important:

“There was a huge focus on the children, particularly the most vulnerable children, the huge amount of work done by staff. It was remarkable. I've never seen anything like that and it still continues. Probably what it lacked at that stage was staff well-being.... staff would say when I came in here, they, they, they noticed that well-being, staff well-being became the forefront.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

The focus on staff well-being was quite general amongst leaders:

“So we're very much staff health and well-being is a big priority for us. Again... we're doing an interim action plan this year and then we're looking at our school development plan for the next three years ... but staff health and well-being is a big priority.” Edith, Principal, Stoneford Secondary

Ezra expressed the view that there was quite a general shift in perceptions and actions for example regarding mental health:

“I think it's a different, there's a different understanding about mental health and all now. Even the Inspectorate, the way they're dealing with inspections, the language people are using.” Ezra, Local Leader

Leadership, Values and Professional Beliefs

Alongside discussion of practices and the priorities of schools, leaders spoke about their values and ideas about leading schools more generally.

Moral Purpose

The idea of ‘making a difference’ to children and young people’s lives was stated explicitly by almost every principal and leader:

“I did feel I could make a difference and I just I knew that I would always have the children at the heart or whatever I would do.” Heidi, Principal, Brackenridge Primary

The idea of education as potentially transformative and a vocation for teachers was also commonly held:

“For people probably of my generation and older, teaching was always a vocation, and that’s not to say that people, you know, would let people abuse you and work you like a workhorse, but there was more... I suppose you taught because it came from the heart.... just that all consuming passion to realise and understand that education is so empowering, and you have so much power to make such a difference in children’s lives.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

For some leaders, it was also closely related to the sector or type of school in which they chose to work. This often linked back to the points made above about leaders’ identities; for example in the case of Logan (Principal at Glenburn Secondary) who working in non-selective schools because he himself had failed his 11 Plus. Similarly, Maryam was reflecting on the values of her principal:

“But you could not meet a more integrated man...He lives and breathes integrated education.” Marayam, Vice Principal, Tullinmore Secondary

Professional Values and dispositions

In addition to underpinning values, interviewees articulated their professional beliefs and described the qualities and approaches they saw as necessary for successful leadership.

There were different views about the qualities required of leaders. Harrison expressed a typical view stressing clarity of ambition and exceptional personal traits:

“I think there’s a certain charisma around the person that’s leading that, and I think you can’t divorce that from the success because they’re driving something forward. They’ve got a clear goal. They’ve got a clear ambition, clear standards. They develop the team that’s around them, that buy into that vision, and they then set in place strategies that will help achieve that.” Harrison, Local Leader

More common was a view that leaders must be able to build relationships with staff and develop teams, even if the principal led this as ‘the captain’:

“You’re part of a team here. I might be the captain of the team or the ever. I’m a player just like everybody else. I’m here to serve my community as a school and I’m very proud to be able to serve the community the way I do.” Zachary, Principal, Kilthorne Primary

Edith saw interpersonal skills and treating people fairly as critical for gaining respect, which did not necessarily equate to being liked:

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“I mean, the, the interpersonal skills have got to, you know, come into it just how you how you treat people, how you deal with people because that's it... the ability to be able to build working good working relationship, positive working relationships, you know, and it's again, you know, somebody has said to me, it's not about being liked, it's about being respected. That's the key thing, I suppose.” Edith, Principal, Stoneford Secondary

Lyra considered developing others as a hallmark of a good leader, relating it to what she saw as her own less desirable experience:

“I think I suppose, a good leader is someone at the same time who can allow their staff to grow and develop professionally. Because, you know, I suppose in my experience I almost felt I was thrown in at the deep end.” Lyra, Principal, Rivermount Primary

Ultimately, according to Gracie, leaders are able to get people ‘on board’ in pursuit of a ‘shared vision and values’. Perhaps contradicting Harrison’s more charismatic view of leadership, she reflected on a situation where she thought that hadn’t happened:

“My predecessor as principal had joined us and was here for just under four years. And that was very positive in many ways that phase ... ultimately that situation didn't really didn't really quite work out ... what I actually learned from that was you have to be very clear with your whole school community and particularly with your staff that you have a shared vision and shared values. ... that particular leader had come into school and had very, very clear, strong views and vision and whatever, but didn't work through that or bring staff along.” Gracie, Principal, Cairnhill Secondary

Finally, we highlighted above how some aspects of school leadership practice appeared to be distinctive to the context and culture of Northern Ireland. We quoted Daniel (Principal of Carranmore Secondary) in the section on Community Leaders, who described himself as “essentially a pastoral leader” – a phrase that we heard echoed in several other interviews. Daniel was also clear that his approach to leadership was not about adopting entirely new ways of being, but of remaining true to himself:

“I thought my my biggest concern going into principalship was ‘will I need to change?’ ... leaders who are more out there, who are probably, not more in your face, but probably more aggressive, you know, just jumped headfirst into conflict sometimes. This is what I had observed like and I knew it didn't work. But then you have to be very brave and bold to believe in yourself that the qualities you have are going to work.... There's very basic things as a leader that if you have in place with the staff, you'll by and large be OK... I want people to respect each other.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

Drains

School leaders discussed their experience of their roles and aspects that they found draining.

Workload and Weight of Leadership

There were many different aspects to what drained leaders, but a common thread was the cumulative burden in terms of workload, but also the weight of responsibility and constant pressure:

“I'm going to say the job is relentless... You're never finished. And that's, and that's just the way it is.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Maryam was explicit about the workload, and the inference of the long hours required:

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“And just the workload, just it is relentless. You know, I could literally work morning, noon and night. You still wouldn't have all the work done that you need to do.” Maraym, Vice Principal, Tullinmore Secondary

Zachary detailed the many facets of the role and a sense of tension between his original motivations as a teacher and how he perceived the Principal role:

“The budget, the SEND behaviour, major challenges and HR, you know, just dealing with.... I went to university to be a teacher, to be an educator. I've come through there. I am where I am now, but as well as being the lead teacher of the school, I'm also the lead counsellor of the school, sorting everybody's health and well-being, apart from my own, pupil welfare, pupil health and well-being. You know, I'm the lead recruiter with the HR.” Zachary, Principal, Kiltborne Primary

Ellie spoke of the implications in terms of when she was able to address some aspects of the work:

“We don't work in an office, we work in a live environment. So, I very rarely, and other principals, get time to actually do the work we need to do as leads in school. That work's done at home at night because that door never stops, that phone never stops, those emails never stop, people never stop needing you.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

A specific demand on time that was discussed by most principals arose from beyond the school - from the Department for Education (DE) and the Education Authority (EA). As we have highlighted elsewhere, the elected assembly in Northern Ireland had resumed work and industrial action had been suspended a few months before we visited. There was a perception that as a consequence, there were increasingly new initiatives and requests made of schools. Maeve was very pointed:

“The challenges bizarrely tend to be the Department of Education and the Education Authority, they're what bring the challenges... And that's the Friday e-mail with seven attachments where you look and go, ‘really?’. I think for newer principals who don't have the confidence to say ‘no’, that would be very challenging and very difficult because there's things we're asked to do that are just actually ridiculous.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

The volume and timing of requests was mentioned widely:

“The DE initiatives just we're being swamped at the minute, right as principals and emails always seem to be sent out at 4:00 on a Friday.” Zachary, Principal, Kiltborne Primary

A particular context was that of principals in small schools where they unavoidably also had a teaching commitment. Heidi, who had long experience of this, reflected on the challenge and the tension between ‘two different jobs’:

“This is the first year that I'm not teaching a class, but I know a lot of principals, principals in schools. It's the same size as mine or smaller, maybe are teaching and doing this job. They're two separate jobs. And you do feel as if you're doing neither well and you can't because you're in class... So you're just pulled in all directions. And I know that's not just typical of me, but I know a lot of people feel like that. And then just the constant pressure, keep raising standards and all of that.” Heidi, Principal, Brackenridge Primary.

Lyra, who was still a ‘teaching Principal’ in a small school with Thursday and Friday each week not in the classroom, also commented on the external demands and timing:

“But the level of admin, the emails that come through, an e-mail comes through maybe from the department or from EA and it has 6 attachments, all completely unrelated... and you could have on a Friday afternoon, you could have three or four of those emails come up with all those attachments. And that's horrendous. I personally find that really horrendous because you're going, how can I even begin to prioritise those things now at this end of the week?” Lyra, Principal, Rivermount Primary

Finance, Resources

There were specific areas that were discussed as draining for leaders. Material resources and finance was one in particular:

“School budgets are just another story altogether. 90% of our school budget is taken up with staffing... school budgets have not really increased. I don't know when was the last time there was an increase per child... we would be classed as a socially deprived area. We would have a percentage of children of free school meals, for example... We have been a minus figures for the past three years. It's not enormous... So we have cut back an awful lot. Things that we would have used paid for using the the budget before this we fundraise for now.” Heidi, Principal, Brackenridge Primary

Heidi outlined the effect over time of rising costs and demands on resources. The very high proportion of the school budget spent on staffing was mentioned widely, sometimes with higher figures than the 90% Heidi mentioned.

Daniel suggested the challenge was preoccupying:

“Sustainability in terms of finance, which is, is the one thing maybe you may come across, it may be one of the questions, but finance increasingly is, is dominating my thinking... we're, we're staggering from one year to the next, you know what I mean, it's not great for planning, like we're, we're going to assume the money is there next year.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

SEND and Inclusion

The challenge of resources was also related to specific issues. Ellie related it to the availability of specialist services and provision to support pupils:

“A challenge that we find here in [Area] is access to facilities and resources. So if I have a child who needs access to an autism unit or needs access to a nurture unit, I don't have it in [Town].” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

In the section on Leadership Practices above we quoted Louis and Harrison describing the increasing number and complexity of children with special needs and move to supporting children in mainstream schools. The increasing demand and complexity was spoken of as a drain, very often in terms of the leaders' efforts to secure resources and support for children:

“Access to the services seems, I don't know whether to us as principals and teachers, access to the service is so complex, as I said, that you feel as if they're trying to put you off from doing that...” Heidi, Principal, Brackenridge Primary

Heidi discussed a particular example at length, explaining how the process felt very personal and discouraging:

“She's in P4 now. But we've been trying to access services since she was in P1.. The amount of paperwork that you have to fill out before you get to stage one, for example. And then there are different stages. Have you done this? Have you done this? Have you done this before? You eventually get to a stage where you can access one to one support

for a child. It just seems that they're trying to put you at arm's length..." Heidi, Brackenridge Primary

Lyra gave a vivid account of the impact on the school and staff of being unable to secure specialist support:

"This was off the wall stuff until it got to one day where I just rang and I said, I need to talk to somebody. This cannot go on. We need support. We've been asking for support. Nobody's given us support. It was, it was awful. It was awful. And I said, either my teacher's going to get sick or this child, something's going to happen... And finally, then we got some hours of behaviour support,... That was hard, that was horrendous. That affected everybody on this staff." Lyra, Principal, Rivermount Primary

Lyra described feeling as if 'Nobody's given us support'. The feeling of not being able to access support when needed from external agencies was experienced acutely and spoken of frequently.

Lack of Support

The 'lack of support' was often couched in terms of systems and the difficulty of navigating them:

"Things more than anything else that drain you just day on day, trying to find somebody to solve a problem in EA and you get passed from person to person to person and it takes up time that you don't have... In this system everything is just, sometimes I think I feel like swimming backwards, being dragged backwards in [unclear], can't go anywhere because I'm trying to navigate that system." Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Louis had a role that meant principals sought his advice and help independently, again couching the lack of support in terms of how accessible or appropriate support was rather than the behaviour of individuals:

"The people that are, the principals that ring me for help, very often they feel that the walls are closing in on them, that there are so many problems and there's so little support for it... the sort of problems that come along and when when you go looking for support and advice, principals keep saying to me it's not there. Or the support that you get, and they're not criticising the person individually because they're, the people they talk to are nice and sympathetic and everything else, but they don't have the specialist knowledge either." Louis, Local Leader

Lyra again vividly expressed how the processes were experienced personally:

"I've stopped ringing like the Education Authority now for unless I really, really have to... You know, it's like they're there and we're here and it doesn't really matter. You're just a number. It's not important." Lyra, Principal, Rivermount Primary

Complaints and Disputes

There were aspects of schools' work discussed that arose from the local community and relationships. Complaints and disputes were experienced as draining:

"Things like parents complaining, you know, about things you've done and like we have a, one... they've taken a tribunal against us, and you just think, I have followed the letter of the law and all the policy." Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

The example given by Ellie was a dispute that had arisen from the way the school had handled an issue with a child and had become quasi-legal. Gracie also highlighted the way in which complaints were expressed and the immediacy of them:

“We're in a culture now where you can vent and say whatever you want to say behind a keyboard and all of that kind of thing, you know. So that hasn't helped.” Gracie, Principal, Cairnhill Secondary

Staff resilience and HR challenges

A further aspect of relationships experienced as draining were those with and amongst staff. There was a common view expressed that since the pandemic staff resilience had diminished and sickness rates increased:

“Just staff and in terms of sickness rate and so on. And that there has there been a shift, I think really post COVID and people's attitudes ... and it's trying to kind of keep on top a lot of times. And so, sickness absence can be an issue.” Logan, Glenburn Secondary

Ellie noted the impact on relationships between staff:

“A common thread. Staff attendance.... it's a very small minority, but it does impact, it impacts other staff and their, the staff morale because they think ‘gosh, that person's off for a week.’” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove

The issue of relations between staff and formal processes related to Human Resources (HR) were often referred to as particularly challenging and emotionally draining:

“In terms of draining, the hardest thing that I find about the job can be staff related issues ... you know, a couple of kind of protracted grievance issues between a few members of staff that has been quite draining for me... And you just don't like seeing that happening between people. And so that has been draining.” Logan, Principal, Glenburn Secondary

Logan gave an example of an issue that was between staff. Darcie reflecting on a case initiated by the school highlighted the professional expertise needed as well as the impact on the principal:

“The human resource management, when you end up with a case that needs to be managed... trying to manage it out as policy would state that you should.... I just didn't feel that I got the support that I should have had with that particular person. ... in general HR I think is something that does take its toll on principals. And again, I think it's because we don't have the professional expertise, but nor are we supported there.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Poor Principal Well Being

Principals were conscious of the impact on them personally of the demands of the role. Ellie recounted a conversation with another principal she had spoken to recently:

“He says, ‘I have ten more years left’, he says, ‘I cannot do it anymore.’ People are honestly in really bad places with the job and it's not looking any, there's no light at the end of the tunnel... Our mental health definitely is taking a battering.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

Concern about poor well-being, either in the present or long term was both a consequence of some of the draining aspects of the role, and in itself draining. Gracie highlighted the immediate impact:

“It potentially threatens your well-being, you know... it's extremely difficult even just to keep on top of the emails for any one day, let alone be out on the ground and, and dealing with everything.” Gracie, Principal, Cairnhill Secondary

Daniel's observation was a common one, a concern about 'maintaining the pace' and burn out:

“You know, I, I can't maintain this, this, this pace, it's not possible. It's not good for me.... I've seen colleagues now in my previous school who became principals in their 40s and they, they're burnt out and they, they left the profession.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

Lyra echoed Daniel's point and reflected on trying to find a balance and recognise limits”

“Part of me feels I can't keep putting the level of work into this job without it killing me... it is hard because you're trying to do your best at everything and you're never getting the best at everything. So that in itself then it's having that impact on how you feel... But there's a balance there, isn't there... you must look after yourself and preserve yourself like a sense that you've got an awareness... there's a sort of limit to it really.” Lyra, Principal, Rivermount Primary

Sustains

We asked about things that sustain leaders in their roles as well as what drained them.

Children, Making a Difference, Moral Purpose

In the section above on Leadership Values and Professional Beliefs, leaders commonly expressed their values and beliefs in terms of 'making a difference' and focusing on children. These values were also explicitly linked with sustaining leaders in their roles. In Maryam's case, she linked 'making a difference' to changes in society and individuals”

“That notion of being better in the future. Like that notion of challenging community stereotypes. That wouldn't have been a driver for me in the past. But now when I see it here more, you just think, oh, it's just so wrong. You know, I just want these children to realise they're more than that.” Maryam, Vice Principal, Tullinwood Secondary

Darcie articulated a similar motivation in more general terms, and Ellie focused more directly on 'wanting the best for children':

“But if you at the heart, if you don't believe in education as empowerment and bringing about change and for the better in children's lives, well, then you're not the right job, you know.” Darcie, Ballinrye Primary

“It is about the children. It has to be about children. I shouldn't be here if I don't want the best for every child that comes through that door.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

In each case the principles were offered as sustaining ideas for principals.

Leadership Opportunity and Autonomy

A number of leaders spoke about aspects of the work being sustaining in themselves. Working directly with children and young people was one of those aspects:

“The children are what keeps you in leadership. I love the buzz.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Daniel expressed a similar sentiment:

“... genuinely, I see the pupils and that's it. It makes sense.” Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary

Gracie described the taking of responsibility and making changes as rewarding and sustaining:

“And I suppose as well, just really, you know, that sort of responsibility that I have to take the school through this phase now, but more importantly, to be pitching it in the right place for my successor... I just feel there's excitement in the fact that you can actually do that and navigate that, you know.” Gracie, Cairnhill Secondary

Maeve highlighted achievement and satisfaction in doing a good job and making a difference:

“I love the fact of doing a good job and the teachers knowing they have done a good job too.” Maeve, Ravenhill Secondary

Logan also highlighted the importance of a sense of achievement, and also moments in the daily life of the school:

“In terms of sustaining, I am enjoying what I do. You do have that sense of achievement. There are, there are so many times during the school year when you're kind of uplifted by things that have happened and things that go well.” Logan, Principal, Glenburn Secondary

Relationships

Relationships were central to how most leaders spoke about what sustained them. Relationships and teams within a school were discussed as important elements of leadership roles in the section on Professional Beliefs. Those relationships were also seen as a key feature of what sustained interviewees:

“The people and the relationships and the team.... if you didn't have those, I don't know that you'd do the job.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Gracie described the process of working together as a staff as both a source of satisfaction and of reassurance:

“It was like a real team effort, everybody on board, networking around and whatnot ... and it all connected and like, wow, we're here. So that's sustained me, you know, to know that people really have that investment in working together.” Gracie, Principal, Cairnhill Secondary

Heidi included the formal governance of the school and families connected to the school in the network of sustaining relationships:

“And like you couldn't do this job if you didn't have the support of your governors, of your parents, of your staff.” Heidi, Principal, Brackenridge, Primary

Edith, like many principals, in addition to the wider set of relationships, identified both a specific close working relationship and personal networks beyond the school.

“I don't know that I would have stayed in teaching if I hadn't (had) kind of, you know... the people that I work with, we have a brilliant staff, you know, and again, particularly, I suppose, [Name] my vice principal, you know, the way her and I work together, it's fantastic, you know, and I think also the support that I have been able to build kind of outside of school has helped me as well.” Edith, Principal, Stoneford Secondary

The importance of informal networks and peer-networks was highlighted by many interviewees. As Heidi describes, such networks may be varied or smaller groups of trusted colleagues:

“I'm part of like for example, WhatsApp, [similar school] principals and then a group of the local principals here. But then you always have one or two principals that you would be closer to, and you would say things to those people ... you can say things and brainstorming, you know, it's confidential. So you do need somebody to be able to kind of offload to.” Heidi, Brackenridge Primary

Darcie highlighted networks of friends beyond professional circles:

“Just to have a good network of people, a trusted network, but not a network of colleagues, but a trusted network of friends who know me and what I stand for and my value system and that I can talk to and they'll say, well, yes, Darcie or no Darcie.” Darcie, Ballinrye Primary

Logan also mentioned family:

“I suppose what also sustains me is family and friends and, you know, the wider support network, umm, that I would have because you couldn't do it without it, definitely not.” Logan, Principal, Glenburn Secondary

Feedback

Positive feedback was another feature of leadership roles that added to satisfaction and sustained leaders:

“And for getting the feedback from families and, and teachers and sit down in that ethos day and get the feedback. Those are the things that sustain me and keep me going in this job.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

Heidi reinforced the point, suggesting that the recognition of the schools' contribution to families was a central consideration for her:

“And you're doing that, and you get that acknowledgement and appreciation from parents and what they, that's all you want. That really is what you want.” Heidi, Principal, Brackenridge Primary

Principal Well-Being

Poor well-being was seen as both a consequence of draining factors and drain in itself. In the same way, high-levels of well-being were seen as inherently sustaining:

“Something you need in school is energy and to devote time and that enthusiasm. And that only comes from if you're well rested, if you're able to maintain fitness and well-being and health.” Samuel, Fernleigh Secondary

Many leaders described activities and their life beyond school as contributing to their well-being. In Darcie's case, it was the opportunity to travel:

“And I love to travel. That sustains me massively. Every break, every opportunity I'm out of here. And you know, it's long haul, it's short haul, it's whatever. I just love to travel. It just feeds my soul, and that's what keeps me going.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Support

Leaders were very clear that their roles involved working through and with others, and routinely required support of individuals or other organisations both from within and beyond the school. Most schools required support from the Education Authority for some aspects of their work, and for Controlled Schools this included many administrative and organisational practices. In the section on drains, we highlighted comments from many heads who found the support inadequate or absent.

“When I try to seek advice from the powers that be on ‘what do I do here, can you direct me?’ They didn't know the answers either ... These kind of things that were problems that I was facing on a day-to-day basis.” Lyra, Principal, Rivermount Primary

Other leaders were more positive and generally found link officers helpful, but as Zachary explained, frequently developed other networks of support:

“We do have a link officer from the Education Authority and if we have a question or a query on certain things, I'll e-mail the link officer of the link officer will be very good at picking an e-mail back with a link to wherever it might be. However, when it actually comes to the nuts and bolts of the job or the emotions of the job, as it very often is, it's, it's the principal colleagues.” Zachary, Principal, Kilthorne Primary

An array of other organisations were referenced by leaders. For example, the Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC) courses and services were not mentioned in relation to organisational administrative functions, but their support to Principals both personal and for school development was mentioned positively:

“But if I can refer to the Controlled School Support Council, they have been excellent in providing frameworks for use, research.” Ellie, Principal, Birchgrove Primary

The Catholic Council for Maintained Schools (CCMS) was also mentioned as a supporting organisation being the employing authority for Catholic Maintained schools:

“I do find them [CCMS] really useful in terms of the direct support that I would get in my role, in particular the, the HR person, the senior HR person, then the legal advice that they can provide. ... some parents aren't happy and threatened legal action and so on. So CCMS legal team have been very supportive and guiding us through a couple of tricky situations there.” Logan, Principal, Glenburn Secondary

Another more formal source of support mentioned was the governing bodies of schools.

“Governors are very, very supportive in a critical friend type of way. They wouldn't be short about saying, you know, we need to look at this or I just heard that when I was in

the hairdressers. Or did you ever think about XY or Z very involved in the life of the school, very, very supportive.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Darcie was particularly valuing the connections with the community provided by governors. Gracie focused on the support in her role and the value of being challenged.

“Governors, because they will ask you the questions and, you know, there's, you know, they're very supportive, but there's, you know, the element of challenge that you very really need.” Gracie, Principal, Cairnhill Secondary

Networks and Peers

Formal sources of support notwithstanding, as Zachary suggested, principals spoke of networks of peers as an important often most valued source of support. Principal networks, as we outlined in the section on Place, were sometimes co-ordinated and organised:

“Well, we have a [Town] Principals group as well, so we would meet maybe once a term and that could be there could be anything on the agenda the the principals themselves. That's everyone, controlled, maintained. And that's everyone.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Edith mentioned a similar group, noting some of the undercurrents in very locally based groups:

“In [Town] we have a [Town] learning community. So, the principals, we all meet to about 12, 13 of us, we all meet across the year a number of times. And actually, there's a support in that as well, but it's a bit different because even though you're not maybe competing, you are competing a wee bit.” Edith, Principal, Stoneford Secondary

More informal groups, often online, were particularly valued:

“This morning, we had an e-mail from someone to the [Similar Schools] group. (It) was going, ‘I'm dealing with this, has anyone else had this and can you do what they want?’ We're like, ‘well, yeah, I've done that, but I had to think about this.’ So there's support with other principals. Is there support in the system? I guess the EA would say there is support, but in some of the courses I've gone through, at the beginning, I just thought this was a waste of my time.” Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary

Finally, Darcie described a Northern Ireland wide online group that a number of principals referred to:

“Then there's the Northern Ireland Principals group and it's just solely a Facebook page. But it's amazing. So, you know, say I needed an answer to something like ‘under industrial action, can I ask a teacher to whatever?’ If I put that into that up, I would have an answer in 2 minutes. If I rang EA I could be waiting two weeks.” Darcie, Principal, Ballinrye Primary

Locality Case Study: Northern Ireland - Coast

Following a brief description of Coast and the sample of schools, this case report provides an overview of how interviewees perceived and understood Coast as a place. It then sets out the collective and individual professional and personal identities that interviewees articulated. The main focus is then on leadership. We outline how school leaders are recruited and developed, the nature of the role and the experience of leading, including what school leaders say drains and sustains them and how they are supported.

Introduction

Northern Ireland Coast is one of the 11 Local Council areas in NI. It includes a significant coastline dotted with villages and towns as well as towns and villages inland, some in very rural settings. Economically, the population is more affluent than the average for NI as a whole, although Coast includes some communities suffering significant deprivation. At the time we visited (in autumn 2023), the Stormont Assembly was suspended, long running industrial action (Action Short of Strike) continued, an Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland had not yet published its final report.

School types in NI-Coast are typical of NI as a whole. There are Controlled, Roman Catholic (RC) maintained, some Voluntary and a small number of Grant Maintained schools. Roughly one-third of post-primary (secondary) schools are selective Grammar schools with the remainder (non-selective schools) divided between mainstream controlled, RC maintained and Integrated schools. There are also a small number of special schools. Primary schools are roughly three-quarters Controlled, with the remainder split approximately two to one between RC maintained and Integrated.

Selection, through transfer tests (11+) and parental choice, shapes where secondary students go to school. Grammar schools tend to be in towns, drawing pupils from a wide area. Some grammar schools have linked Prep schools and it is common for parents to pay fees which supplement state funding. Significant rural areas mean that there are many small schools, with, in primary, usually teaching Principals. There is a general decline in the school age population, meaning there are surplus school places overall. The impact on schools is very local and specific, but schools are increasingly actively recruiting students.

There are a mixture of formal and informal partnerships across the area. At secondary there is an Area Learning Partnership supported by the EA. There were also long-standing partnerships based in different parts of the area, one example we heard about comprised primary heads based around a town. Many heads also sustained informal networks based on, for example, geography or historic relationships.

Interviewees

Table 1: Breakdown of interviewees by role

	DHT	Employer	HT	HT-Local Leader	Local Leader	Grand Total
Northern Ireland Coast	5	1	11	1	4	22

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Across our Northern Ireland sample we visited Catholic Maintained, Controlled schools, Integrated, Irish Medium and Grammar schools. To support anonymization, we do not indicate the governance arrangements for individual schools in Table 2 below.

Table 2: List of Interviewees

Name	Gender	Role	School/Organisation	Type	Time In post(Years)	Time in role (Years)
Grace	F	School Improvement Partner	Central	Govt Agency	4	4
Louie	M	School Improvement Partner	Central	Govt Agency	2	2
Daisy	F	Mentor, Performance Review Assessor	Consultant #1	Independent		
Sienna	F	HT, Chair Area Principals Group	Mill Primary	School-Primary	7	7
Poppy	F	Retired Principal	Consultant #2	Independent	12	12
Elsie	F	HT	Yew Tree Primary	School-Primary	4	4
Emily	F	DHT	Yew Tree Primary	School-Primary	4	4
Leo	M	HT	Oaklands Primary	School-Primary	0.5	0.5
Ella	F	HT	Lilac Primary	School-Primary	13	15
Harry	M	HT	Honeysuckle Primary	School-Primary	2	8
Oscar	M	HT	Hillside Secondary	School-Secondary	9	9
Evelyn	F	HT	Treetops Secondary	School-Secondary	2	2
Phoebe	F	DHT	Woodside Secondary	School-Secondary	4	12
Joseph	M	DHT	Woodside Secondary	School-Secondary	4	6.5
Archie	M	HT	Ivy Secondary	School-Secondary	9	13
Henry	M	DHT	Ivy Secondary	School-Secondary	3	3
Theodore	M	DHT	Ivy Secondary	School-Secondary	1	4
Freddie	M	HT	Woodlands Primary	School-Primary	4	4
Jack	M	HT	Red House Primary	School-Primary	4	4
Charlie	M	HT	White House Primary	School-Primary	3	3
Theo	M	HT	Wayside Primary	School-Primary	3	3
Alfie	M	Chair of Governors	Woodside Secondary	School-Secondary	0	0

Place

Schools and Communities

Leaders and headteachers were very aware of the ways in which their work in schools was shaped by the mixture of communities they served. The location within a town or the wider coastal and rural parts of the locality, the socio-economic circumstances of families, historic relationships, religious identity, the type of school; all played a part and interacted in complex ways.

The mixture of relatively wealthy families and those more economically disadvantaged was evident in the headteachers' descriptions of their schools:

“So this is [Town] suburbia and you know quite nice houses and you know relatively affluent area. We have really high levels of parent engagement and we have great, on the whole, great support from parents.” Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

In the same town, Archie's school was a post primary school:

“Yeah, this school, I think is mixed in a way that reflects the mixed nature of the area by way of the socioeconomic background. [Area] is, I think, it's a good example of some of the extremes of Northern Ireland. You know there is wealth here, but there's also social need here.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Evelyn, in another post-primary spelt out one of the implications:

“There are areas of deprivation. We'd to buy a child last week of her school shoes and obviously we do that very subtly and you know we speak to the mum... [Town] you have the affluent area of [Town] and then you have areas of deprivation.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

The mixture of circumstances was not confined to towns:

“Our location is kind of seaside, a little seaside village that used to be thriving, probably up until the 90s... So we have 33% FSM. When I came here eight years ago that was more like 40%. So we have some new development in the area which is bringing kind of a new type of family into the area.” Charlie, Headteacher, White House Primary

Charlie's school was in a village, an important feature of the locality, with a large proportion of schools located in small rural communities, but still with relatively easy travel to some larger centres. Harry, in another village described some of the challenges and changes:

“So in a village I suppose one of the challenges in our school or in this area is there's actually two primary schools that serve the village ... So the challenge that that brings with us is that the two schools are small. There's a lot more commuting ... so you would have they would live in [Village] and move sort of live or work out towards [Town] ... There will be a small element of farming community sort of towards the outskirts.” Harry, Honeysuckle, Primary

Village schools were often small, an issue heightened, as in Harry's case, when there were two schools. Such circumstances arose for a range of historical reasons, often (although not in Harry's case) because there would be both a controlled and a maintained catholic school in the village, neither of which could be easily closed or amalgamated. The resulting challenge of

small pupil numbers was widespread. Both Harry and Charlie noted a change in the demographics of their villages; for example, Harry observed increased levels of commuting. Some schools had introduced wraparound care in order to attract and retain parents in a competitive landscape:

“And that is, that's where we have noticed a challenge is that now schools are moving obviously to this wraparound care so they've got breakfast club and they've got afterschool care.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle, Primary

The challenge of maintaining pupil numbers was raised by many interviewees, especially in primary schools, with competition between schools driving some interesting decision-making. Jack gave an account of a predecessor's thinking:

“The reason why she had gone integrated at the time was in Northern Ireland there's too many primary schools. So whenever she decided to go integrated, it was because there was another school in the village which was much bigger, and it was a Roman Catholic primary school quite an aggressive marketing ploy which rubbed other schools up the wrong way and so within the [Area], Red House was not well thought of with other primary schools, but to be honest, she didn't really care.” Jack, Headteacher, Red House Primary

Leading a school to become integrated was a significant step. The school was well established by the time Jack became headteacher. The issue of competition was general in the area as Ella explained:

“There's quite a lot of competition in this with the schools because each of the local villages has a school and one of those is an integrated school... we would lose children to the integrated because they can offer more and they have a little bus that drives around the villages and picks up children from each village”. Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

Ella's response to keep her school viable had been to accept a new *statutory* (Special Needs Unit) in her school, although the tight timeline to open this had added considerable strain:

“As part of the trying to boost our numbers and looking at where the school is, we've agreed to take on one of these special provision units this year ... the decision was made in May that that would start and then the building work happened over the summer... We weren't quite ready for September. They started in October.” Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

The issue of competition was not felt as keenly everywhere. Some schools served communities that were evolving more slowly:

“A lot of those original families that came to the school in the 70s. You know the grandparents are living in these houses and their their grandchildren are. You know, it's very much a family school, generational school. When you've been here as a child you want to come as a as a parent do you know. So it's it's the grannies and grandmas are our closest neighbours as a rule now and the parents are you know a wee bit further out.” Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

Yew Tree was in [Town], and more generally the [Town] schools were experiencing the pressures of falling rolls. Sienna summed up the effect on relationships between schools:

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“It always gets a wee bit tense at times about open enrolment because while we, we work together really carefully, at the end of the day we are all in competition with one another too.” Sienna, Headteacher, Mill Primary

Parental choice was also strongly influenced by religious identity whether Protestant, Catholic, Other or None. Louie highlighted, however, the nuanced and varied patterns of choice:

“We have to be careful of oversimplifying the situation... My previous school, we weren't formally integrated, and what often principals of controlled schools will say very clearly is, we are integrated, we're just not called integrated. Some parents who live locally, choose to send their children to the local school because their friends play there... those Catholic maintained schools, they are very welcoming to children from all faiths.” Louie, Local Leader

Selection for transfer to secondary schools was an important feature of schools, affecting the choices of school and the mix of communities represented in grammar and post primary secondary schools. The impact was not straightforward, affected by location, the mixed population and access to transport routes from out of area. Leo was aware that for some parents considerations about secondary education affected the choice of his primary school:

“We will have a number of children from no faith or a different faith because parents think this will be a way of getting good grades to get into one of the other grammar schools, one of the non-Catholic grammar schools within the area as well.” Leo, Headteacher, Oaklands Primary

Woodside Secondary was a grammar school located in a town with a mixture of economic backgrounds, but as Alfie noted, the pupils attending were largely drawn from a more affluent background. Woodside was also relatively easily accessed from beyond its immediate locality:

“The majority of pupils should come from a a good middle class type background and I don't like using the these terms middle class stroke professional, but there is a section uh drawn from the local area... We do have a smaller percentage of ... free school meals, FSM pupils, that are pupils that are assisted, if you like, by government and so on. We also have a small number of SEN special educational needs pupils.” Alfie, Governor, Woodside Secondary

Hillside Secondary was also a grammar school, but located in a smaller, more rural and less accessible town. Selection notwithstanding, Oscar suggested the school's location had an impact on the mixed nature of the school's students in terms of their background and economic circumstances:

“I suppose the social demographic would be very broad and we would have children from very deprived backgrounds and we would have children from a very affluent backgrounds... think it's just geography and [area], I would argue is a very deprived part of Northern Ireland. We would have some very significant deprivation here in the town and we're in the middle of it.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Interestingly, we visited several non-selective post-primary schools that were oversubscribed and performing well. Evelyn, the head of one of these schools suggested that some parents were now actively choosing post primary secondary schools rather than taking the tests for transfer to grammars:

“Many years ago there would be this idea of snobbery in [Town], it would be quite a middle-class town and people would want to send their children to a grammar school. That has now started to, it's about the best education that their child will get. And we're oversubscribed every year”. Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

Schools and Relationships

Schools in Coast had relationships with other organisations through the formal structures of governance, and also between schools through networks of leaders.

The Education Authority (EA), a national agency, has a role in overseeing the quality of schools' work, with individual officers (who were experienced leaders) typically working with a sizeable group of schools across a geographic area:

“Most of my schools are controlled schools... I think I've got about three or four integrated schools and there is probably a desire for more... there are two Catholic maintained schools... There are also some prep schools... they're associated with the main grammar schools.” Louie, Local Leader

From the point of view of headteachers, some found the relationships complex and overlapping:

“It's complex - CCMS (Council for Catholic Maintained Schools) employ the teaching staff. Umm, and the Education Authority (EA), then employs the non-teaching staff. And then that's one of the things I have found quite a bit of a challenge, the blurred lines between, if something goes wrong, who do I contact?” Leo, Headteacher, Oaklands Primary

Some schools were independently constituted grant grant-maintained or voluntary schools, with their own boards of trustees. Woodside was a grammar school with voluntary status which made relationships complex:

“You have the Department of Education (DE) as well, which provide the funding ... And then you have the support mechanism of the EA which used to be the old library boards as they were called. And then you have your own local governance here. So you do. But I mean, ultimately the purse strings are controlled by DE really aren't they... I mean we have more freedom to do things. ... appointments are all done in house. You know, it's definitely voluntary [status] has its benefits.” Phoebe & Alfie DHTs, Woodside Secondary

Across NI Coast there were also groups of principals that met, established with varying degrees of formality. Sienna described a long-standing area group, organised by the heads themselves with quite a formal structure and 'rotating chair' who was one of the headteachers:

“The [Area] principals' group has 26 schools represented. So it's a large group of primary all primary Yep. And within that we would have connections with two special schools.” Sienna, Headteacher, Mill Primary

In another part of the locality, Harry described a more informal group, again of primary principals, that comprised schools in and close to a town, partly motivated by their feeling that some of the national supporting organisations were not able offer sufficient practical support:

“Local heads. So we would have a very supportive group of principals based sort of [Town], [Town] this kind of area probably about 15 of us, 15 to 20 of us and we'll meet

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regularly and but we are we we do share workload as well where, where we can because the support is, just the support is not there.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

Area Learning Communities were groups of secondary schools established and facilitated by the EA. Oscar describes attending their meetings, but gaining more benefit in his eyes through another network:

“In this area there's, we have Area Learning Communities. So to be honest, whilst I attend those meetings and I'm part of that group and I get on well with those people, I don't actually work with those people. We don't share resources in any way... the most important group I'm part of is the Association of Controlled Grammar School Heads. There are 16 controlled grammar schools in Northern Ireland.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Other connections between schools arose from working together on nationally promoted initiatives. We heard a number of examples of connections arising from Shared Education projects:

“The other side of the [Area] there's a Catholic school that we would have done shared education with. The idea is great, the children are mixing, but the children mix anyway because of where we are. If they're all playing (for the) football team, they don't care if they're Catholic or Protestant... it's chasing the funding. I can see in the larger cities, towns where there's maybe a Catholic school down the road from the Protestant school, they can walk to each other. But we were 4-5 miles apart, so we're going to need a bus.” Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary.

The nuanced response, recognising the particular circumstances of small, dispersed communities and the need for funding to support the work was typical. More generally, there was a suggestion that many of the connections and partnerships described depended heavily on individual relationships, and were disrupted by some of the features of local circumstances, such as competition for students:

“I think what happens on the ground is the sense of competing for students means that you can end up with schools being very much in their own silos, not just in [Area] but everywhere across Northern Ireland. You know, there's a real sense of competition. So cooperation between schools then sometimes falls at a more personal level.” Theodore, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Identity

Leaders in Northern Ireland Coast

Leaders spoke consistently about the connection between the identity and significance their school had in the community, and the professional identity of the headteacher role:

“When you go around then it's the head wears the, it's not your name, it's your school name. And whether you like this, I know you sound silly, but you epitomise that school.” Daisy, Local Leader

Evelyn, headteacher of a maintained school, was very clear about the school's religious identity, and also articulated very clearly what she saw as commonly held values:

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“We're still proud to be a Catholic faith-based school and, you know, everything we do in here is gospel values - about respect and inclusion and you know everybody trying to be, a kind word goes a long way ... That should be everybody's values and I think that's what transcends that that, you know, that's how everybody should be behave.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

Archie, whose school was seeking to become formally integrated, understood his school's public identity as representing values and the nature of the school:

“It will still be controlled, but it will be controlled integrated and what that does, it affirms what we already do, but it's more, and it's more intentional. It's saying we've got, we've got a big diverse, for Northern Ireland the school's quite diverse.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Other headteachers focused on the character of the school itself. Oscar highlighted a 'corporate', visual identity:

“We do have a corporate identity and you'll see there's a collection of there staff ties, adult staff male ties, we're getting pins for the ladies.... and that's really important because we do identify around that badge.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Ella, in a small village primary school, identified the nature of the relationships as expressing the school's identity:

“...real family atmosphere. It kind of hits you when you walk in through the door. You get that feeling that everybody knows everybody and everybody's auntie and uncle and all the rest ... so it's a very family orientated school.” Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

Other leaders articulated an individual identity and connection with particular types of schools:

“I wanted a sort of social deprivation, high social deprivation kind of school. That's where I think my skills are best suited. So, I went [to interview] for practice, and ended up getting it.” Theo, Headteacher, Wayside Primary

Theo expressed a commitment to working in a disadvantaged area. Oscar related a personal account and family experience to his commitment to his school:

“I know they've had a very negative feedback on academic selection, but if you take me and my family as an example, my three brothers, my dad didn't go to university, my mum didn't go to university, my mum's very limited education. My dad could have gone to university, didn't ... He's a quantity surveyor. So we, his sort of family before him. ... there wasn't wealth in our background and we got the opportunity to go to a selective school.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

For Jack, his personal history and experience meant that the nature of the school he went on to lead presented a challenge to his identity as a professional:

“I grew up in an estate in [Town]... I did manage to somehow pass my transfer test ... there was basically three boys in the whole of the estate that went to the boys' grammar school and at times I felt a bit ostracised by that and was called lots of names... But in terms of integration, you know, I, for me it's been a learning curve because I was not part of that group, that family as it were. So I've been trying to really ascertain what is it about integrated schools that makes them different.” Jack, Headteacher, Red House Primary

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For Elsie, now headteacher of the school she attended as a child, the connection had been to a specific area and community:

“So I was a past pupil of Yew Tree primary school. Yes, I grew up just very locally and when I got married and before children I moved back into the area because I knew this was where I wanted to raise children and hopefully this is where I wanted them to come to school.” Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Primary

We heard a number of accounts of leaders who had trained or started teaching outside Northern Ireland and then returned. Ella’s account was very representative:

“I am originally from Northern Ireland ... and I left to go to study teaching in [Town in England]. I was there for 20 odd years in the end, so I worked in primary education the whole time... there was always the question of are you going home or when are you going home and at which job change are you going to be looking back home? and I thought the only way to get back in over here was to come in at this level [Headteacher].” Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

Sometimes, like Elsie, the connection to a particular community was more specific within Northern Ireland:

“But I’m from here So I moved because my wife was pregnant. We wanted to come home for family reasons, you know, so there was my motivation, it wasn’t a case of career progression... dare I say luck and timing, whatever you put it down to, a job with leadership attached to it came up at Ivy Secondary.” Henry, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Evolving professional identities

Developing an idea of themselves as a leader emerged in different ways for leaders. Some either started or developed very early in their career the understanding that they would take on more senior roles:

“Head of Department, like very young so for the second year at my other school, and I suppose when you go into the middle leadership, you then think you know, will this be a step towards something else.” Henry, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Harry had always thought in terms of progressing:

“I’ve always thought whatever career I want to go in, I want to progress no matter what, even if it wasn’t teaching, I’d like to go in and progress for me.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

Oscar had chosen jobs explicitly to prepare for headship:

“I did that because I had vital pastoral experience to that point and I knew I wanted to be a head teacher, so I went there to be, you know, head of safeguarding, head of pastoral care and so on.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

More typically, the idea of leadership developed, usually through gaining experience:

“...but over the years, it was a larger school, there’s 600 pupils, and over the years I got more and more responsibilities and was on the senior leadership team for quite a while.” Jack, Headteacher, Red House Primary

Sometimes, especially in smaller schools, circumstances meant that leaders took on roles they hadn't been prepared for, bringing increased confidence:

“So then I was thrust into running this place and so by the time September came around, I didn't really have any thoughts on becoming a principal, but by the time September 2020 came around, I had already been thrust into it.” Theo, Headteacher, Wayside Primary

Some leaders suggested they had not had any aspirations or thoughts of leadership:

“I never had any career aspirations. I never had any desire to even end up in this job and for me it was just you know if a post came up in school like timetabling and I was a logical thinker. I like the challenge of doing something new.” Phoebe, Deputy Headteacher, Woodside Secondary

Many leaders described active encouragement of others being an important factor in influencing the idea that they may take on leadership roles:

“I'm 40, I've two young children. It's not my time. I've still so much to give in the classroom. And he really encouraged me to go for it. And I went for it.” Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

Evelyn's account included both encouragement and mentoring of others, and unexpected circumstances meaning she took on the headship role:

“I just was very lucky to be supported and mentored by great people in the college who gave me opportunities, who let me be a wee bit different and say like I'm thinking about doing this, what about that? ... he was off work. And the Board of Governors asked me to step in as principal.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

Leadership

Recruitment

When discussing the recruitment and appointment of headteachers in NI Coast, generally appointments were made and posts were not left unfilled. There was discussion, however, of the process becoming more difficult and of diminishing numbers of applicants for roles.

Process, applications and selection

Most schools in Coast were not the direct employer of staff, meaning that the external organisation that was the employer was closely involved:

“Well, basically, if you're a controlled school and you want to advertise, have a new principal, then you have to send your, have a conversation with EA [Education Authority] and HR [Human Resources] ... EA deal with all of that, so they do all the advertising and all of that and they set it up and they liaise with the Board of Governors and get a recruitment panel in place... at the end of the day it's the Board of Governor's decision.” Grace, Local Leader

Harry described his experience of the selection process:

“I've been to interviews where there's been ten people on the panel... So you go in, there's normally a presentation, maybe an in-tray exercise or some presentation that's

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been set up for you to prepare. You then would go into the interview room, deliver your presentation and then there'll be a number of questions. What we're finding actually is if Board of Governors can make a decision on that first day, most likely they will make a decision.” Harry, Honeysuckle Primary

Ella, contrasted her experience in Northern Ireland with interviews she'd experienced in England:

“So over there [England] I was going through two days of rigorous interviews, tasks, challenges. Here I had a 20 minute interview up at the church with tea and coffee and then once I was put through for that, had another interview at the EA again, but 20 minutes. Job done. Very different. And that's still, that's still the way. So I've been on the appointments panel to appoint principals in other areas and it is still interview based.” Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

Accounts of the selection process for maintained schools were similar, but the interviews themselves were different and the central employer CCMS had trained leaders in the process:

“Maintained have gone to a new model now with CCMS, which is competency based, they just moved to that and I think they quite like their role.” Grace, Local Leader

Some schools, such as Voluntary schools, were the direct employers. Alfie, chair of a board of governors for a Voluntary Grammar, made clear the process was handled by the governors:

“I just formed a small committee myself, the bursar and another long-serving Board member who I knew and worked with and set up a small committee to get going in this.” Alfie, Local Leader

He described a process similar to the one Ella had experienced in England:

“We got a good consultant there uh to assist us, but we'd a lot of work to do in preparing, in preparing the job specification, the job role and an information booklet... there were shortlisting at the end of that month. And then there's a series of interviews... There was role play, presentations, data analysis, strategic thinking come in. So at end of the day we had a clear winner.” Alfie, Local Leader

Supply and Appetite for Principalship

There was a general recognition that the number of applicants for any particular post had declined in recent years. Louie offered some numbers:

“15 years ago, 20 years ago um there could have been 28 people in for a big job. Now we could have eight.” Louie, Local Leader

Oscar cited specific instances where recruitment had been challenging with a small number of applicants:

“[School name], advertised for a head teacher two years ago ... big ... It had three applicants first time around. ... got an experienced head in the end. One of our little partner schools here, it's a small 11 to 16 school just five miles away. ... They advertised for a head recently and didn't appoint.” Oscar, headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Harry referred to a 'declining appetite', suggesting that potential applicants in senior roles were less likely to aspire to and apply for roles:

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“A declining appetite very, very much very declining appetite. So my senior teacher has been here for a long time...So I don't think that that's where she's going.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

Leaders reflected on the apparently diminishing appetite. For some, it was clear that the perceived demands of the role were a factor:

“You look at being a principal thinking what? My goodness, that's a near impossible job. You know, being up there to be shot down and have to be everything, you know, all things to all men.” Henry, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Oscar suggested that the demand, combined sometimes with a relatively small difference in pay was a factor:

“People are aspiring to be vice principals, but then when they become a vice principal, they realise the financial incentive to be a head is not significant enough to deal with.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Sienna made clear how her staff saw the role:

“My staff, I think they would phrase it better ‘I just would not want your job, right. I could not do what you have to do. How do you juggle so many balls in the air at one time and have to go from one thing to the other without support?’” Sienna, Headteacher, Mill Primary

Progression

A number of leaders referred to opportunities for staff to gain promotion to senior roles below headship:

“The fields of applicants applying for senior posts are so low, but part of that as well is your restrictions on your ability to advertise.” Sienna, Headteacher, Mill Primary

Sienna referred to the restriction that most senior posts below Vice Principal in schools were advertised internally in a school:

“... but for senior teachers they're kind of first rung under the SLT in Northern Ireland. ... the majority of those are internal recruitments and very, very rare to see a school looking for a senior teacher.” Theodore, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Leaders suggested that the practice might sometimes make it difficult for aspiring leaders to secure a more senior role. Theodore put it baldly and spelt out the potential serendipity of opportunities:

“If you happen to be in a school with the age profile of the senior teachers similar to yourself and they're not going anywhere. Tough luck.... People, staff would come down and say, ‘Look I'm desperate to get going here. Can you advise me?’ And you're sitting there going; ‘how do you advise someone around timing and luck?’, you know.” Theodore, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Diversity

Leaders also reflected on the diversity and range of people both amongst staff and in leadership positions. The idea of diversity was understood in different ways. Evelyn spoke about teachers in her school:

“I think nowadays it's the best person for the job. Maybe years and years and years ago you would have to be specifically and I think more it was about Christian ethos. And our staff are very mixed and again that's because the best person for that, you want in front of your children gets the job.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

She was thinking in terms of diversity of religious and community identity and noting an increasing diversity amongst the staff. Other leaders focused on gender and progression into leadership. Sienna reflected on differences and suggested that proactive ‘encouragement’ was required:

“But I do think a lot of ladies need encouragement to go for it, but also tend to go for it later once their children are up a little bit, you know. So some young fellas could reach VP by 35, might take a lady to 45 to get to the same stage, you know.” Sienna, Headteacher

Several leaders reflected on selection processes and the decisions of governing bodies. Grace put it quite baldly:

“Where are you have, where you have a mixed Board of Governors, it'll be, you know, it'll be fairly balanced... it could go either way and depending on the quality of the candidate in general. Where you have a Board of Governors where it may be perceived more of a old boys' network, where it is very heavily male orientated or entirely male orientated, then it will be there will be a huge glass ceiling for a female to get that job and irrespective of their ability.” Grace, Local Leader

It was a perception shared by Ella:

“And it's the governors. And to them a principal is a jolly male bigger guy with a beard.” Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

Grace suggested that decisions were sometimes made despite processes intended to make decision-making open:

“But the end of the day it's the Board of Governor's decision, it's all very stringently marked. And the marking grid and all the rest of it. ... sometimes it'll be the case that maybe they want the safe pair of hands and they all have had a wee parlay some night before somewhere, and about who they want.” Grace, Local Leader

The observations of those like Grace and Ella notwithstanding, the experience of Poppy, a former headteacher, reflected a shift in the balance amongst headteachers noted by others:

“Suppose when I became principal, the principal group that I would've been in, predominantly men. When I left, predominantly women.” Poppy, Local Leader

Training

Leadership Programmes and Continuing Professional Development

Leaders discussed their learning and preparation for their roles. Uniformly, some kind of formal learning was valued:

“I did my PQH [Professional Qualification for Headship] which was very rigorous. Doesn't exist anymore in Northern Ireland. I have to be honest it was really, it was rigorous um but beneficial.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

PQH was a nationally supported preparation for headship programme, and as Evelyn remarked, it had been suspended several years earlier and when we visited had not been replaced.

Headteachers who had taken the programme generally, like Evelyn, found it valuable.

“So I did not do PQH because I had a masters, I did the two courses offered by, was it called RTU [Regional Training Unit], then? Before that Early Steps into Leadership and Leadership Pathways. So I did those. Then I did the Great People Manager programme.” Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

PQH was not mandatory, and some leaders like Elsie, spoke of other programmes they had undertaken. With the suspension of the PQH in 2015, certificated programmes were generally fee paying masters programmes and leaders commented on the gap:

“And actually not being trained. So that I have a bugbear about that, you know. So I didn't do PQH.” Charlie, Headteacher, White House Primary

For those in a position to take the courses, there were a number of programmes mentioned:

“As you look around the senior leadership table, you're thinking, OK, is there not another step? So I did the University of Ulster the PG Dip in Headship. So it was two years and that was an excellent course... it felt universally based and felt research based.” Theodore, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Other leaders mentioned masters programmes they had undertaken, feeling the need for development and learning that Charlie referred to.

Other than leadership development and preparation for headship, serving heads spoke of some development available to them through the Education Authority (EA) and other support bodies. Leo had valued programmes for first-time principals:

“I will actually give the EA credit... I'm part of a ten-day first-time principals' course... the likes of the finance training and things like that has been very, very useful... first-time principal treatment from CCMS. The ethos training from the EA I didn't attempt, but I did attend the ethos training from CCMS because I thought for me personally for my school, the Catholic ethos is more important, but certainly in the initial period, yeah, the, the training provided for first-time principals is good.” Leo, Headteacher, Oaklands Primary

Harry, a slightly more experienced headteacher, had benefited from coaching, albeit the opportunity was dependent on funding that was not always available:

“(support) through the EA for funding for a coaching and leadership development programme... the one that I did was that coaching for relatively new principals or

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principals in smaller schools, because that's a challenge in itself.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

More generally, the concerns about opportunities for professional learning voiced by Oscar were often mentioned:

“My vice principals don't get that opportunity because there's no centralised professional development going on .. (the) area learning community... there is some work goes on there, but it's very limited.... There's not enough, there's not enough professional development going on in Northern Ireland at all. It goes on within schools, but even then is very limited because we've no time to do it because we're losing that time to industrial action.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

The industrial action that was continuing when we visited had meant that time for activities like CPD were significantly curtailed. Oscar's points were echoed by Sienna:

“There's no organised route for professional learning, it's down now to individual principals to sort.” Sienna, Headteacher, Mill Primary

Evelyn gave an example of some of the school based training she was organising:

“We've got a middle leadership course starting in January, I think we've about 29 wanting to do it. So we've done it for six, we're doing it over six months ... Within the school, yeah and again because they're probably sick of listening to us, we're bringing in external people to take that.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

Informal Development, Experience and Mentoring

Valued as organised development and training was, a strong theme in discussions was the importance of more informal and continuing types of learning. Archie emphasised learning from the experience of being in role:

“You can't really learn the stuff like that on a course, you learn it through you're still being standing at the end of the day.” Archie. Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Theodore made a similar point, reflecting on demonstrating to himself and others increasing capabilities and gaining further experience:

“More opportunities opened up to me because then the other school they were thinking here, 'you know you're doing a good job with that. There's other things coming up you know would you consider going for them?' So you know in that informal sense...” Theodore, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Harry linked practical experience and learning from others in leadership roles to development programmes:

“During PQH, the principal said to me, you know, you're here for, it was about two weeks, and a couple of those days I want you to shadow me, just come through my day with me. And I found much more value in those two days than in the rest of it, you know.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

Archie developed the idea of experience and felt that experience gained in his first headship was essential to his success in his second (and current) headship:

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“I learned so much there. I suppose if I’d known about it, I probably would have thought there’s no way I can do that. But there’s lots of staffing issues, lots of union issues, lots of finance issues, lots of governance issues. And, but I suppose I learned more in those four years than I could have ever have learned... So I couldn’t have done this job without doing that job.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Recognising the point about the importance of experience, leaders described structured approaches to making the opportunities available to staff:

“The associate is a voluntary role, you have to apply to it and you have two or three years on the senior team getting exposed to the senior leadership duties, carrying out the duties, being seen as a senior leader. And the idea is that you become so experienced and so skilled that you will either get a senior post here or you will qualify for a senior post elsewhere.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

The principle of Oscar’s approach was also described by other heads. Evelyn also spoke of developing people, but also emphasised the benefits to the school:

“When I got this role, I’m very conscious that you have to be developing people all the time because you don’t know what’s going to happen. And yes I am enthusiastic and you know, but other people need develop too.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

The importance of headteachers and other leaders in schools as mentors and role models was a frequent point of discussion. Sienna described a principal who’d mentored her in preparation for a specific role:

“Got appointed vice principal.. but then was mentored very much by my boss ready for this role. So I was only VP for two years when he retired, right?” Sienna, Headteacher, Mill Primary

Leo was explicit about having drawn on particular role models and examples:

“I would see aspects of my leadership from [school], from [name] as VP you know. And then, especially [name], who was my last principal. So yeah, no, I would definitely see things like that that I use, which certainly I’ve got from him and even umm, my PQH placement principal [name].” Leo, Headteacher, Oaklands Primary

Some leaders however, had drawn on negative role models from their experience:

“The head I worked for, the one of those executive heads I worked for in [English Town] when it became the Federation, he taught me more about how not to do a headship.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Oscar too spelt out the impact of negative experience, one he nevertheless valued:

“She was influential in that we had a terrible relationship, really terrible. She her, her view, she, she and I could not get on and I did not agree with how she ran the school and I tried to be constructive and supportive and she wouldn’t engage in that... and that perversely, had the biggest impact on my leadership style, that negative experience.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Succession Planning

In the sections on Recruitment, the observations about the diminishing appetite for headship amongst middle and senior leaders, and the declining number and quality of applicants for headship posts were very consistent. The section on Training highlights the opportunities for professional development of staff that exist, albeit formal courses are not available to all, and the development of leaders in their own schools was dependent on the practice in individual schools. No one spoke, however, of a coordinated approach across the locality to developing potential headteachers or planning for potential vacancies.

Career Intentions

Another striking feature of conversations was headteachers' reflections on their own development.

"I can't see for my own well-being or physical health doing this job when I'm 60." Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

Elsie's assertion of the limit to her time in the role was consistent amongst the leaders we spoke to:

"I'd be aiming, I'd be aiming to not be working after about 60. If had to go earlier? I would just make it work and I would probably be able to do something else." Joseph, Deputy Headteacher, Woodside Secondary

Some headteachers observed that opportunities to work in the education system in a different capacity would be welcome, but were perceived to be absent:

"In theory I'm doing this for 20 years. That won't happen... I feel that I've got, I've got a broader impact I can make, but I don't think the systems really allow for that." Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Ella made a similar point, seeing potential for a wide knowledge of schools as being valuable:

"Inspectors are such a valuable resource that the whole thing, see I think the whole thing needs to be career progression. So once you sit in this seat, there's nothing to go to afterwards." Ella, Lilac Primary

Practices

School Improvement, Attainment & Progress

Heads discussed in detail the experience of leading schools in Coast. Identifying priorities and improving their schools was central to how they understood their role.

Leading Improvement and Performance

Planning for improvement of schools was something all heads discussed in some way. Charlie described working with a small group of heads when there had been some EA funding to support a partnership:

"Working with [name], having the resources behind it when there was a little bit more resource available to give us a like sub cover away from school... And the first thing we were looking at was like school action planning and so on and that kind of strategic

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development of our schools. And that was really year one and then year two was bringing our SLTs involved with that.” Charlie, Headteacher, White House Primary

A central idea about improvement and how well a school was doing was expressed in terms of pupils’ attainment in tests and exams:

“When I arrived here, Hillside Secondary was described to me by a DE official as a sleeping giant... only about a third of the school were qualifying to attend Queens [University] ... So 2019, the last set of exams prior to COVID alterations, we went from about a third to two thirds, we doubled that. That to me was the more important stat.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Oscar related exam achievements to the opportunities that opened up, in this case entry to prestigious universities. In Harry’s small primary school, he was conscious of the benefit to the school’s reputation of improved standards and attractiveness of the school to parents as well as the direct benefit to pupils:

“That sort of drive for literacy and numeracy. And we have noticed that the, you know the results have come up, our standards have come up and based on obviously good teaching but also good use of those programmes but selling that so it's selling our school.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

Archie too had sought to improve students’ achievements in exam results, expressing his satisfaction and measure of success in terms of the choice afforded to local parents at secondary level:

“There was quite low expectation when I started if I'm honest with you, it was like even the walls were all grey... it was a real sense of we're a non-selective school, we're a controlled non-selective school... we will get parents now who are saying ‘we don't need the transfer test because you can come here’. We wouldn't have had that even nine years ago.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Some heads identified altered priorities in their schools as a consequence of the COVID pandemic and accompanying lockdown. In Ella’s small primary there quite specific developmental challenges:

“We're not where I want us to be and that's a long journey to go down. So I don't know how long that's going to take, but you certainly feel children are different. Children, yeah, they they even those youngsters in my class that are P3 and the amount of speech and language issues that we're having to address.” Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

In Evelyn’s post-primary school, students’ behaviour and school routines had become a priority:

“It was going it's back to basics I would say is what we're trying to do at the moment and it won't happen overnight, um, it will take maybe another year to get everybody going right this is just normal this is this is back to the way it was.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

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In addition to the impact of the pandemic, the extended industrial action was widely seen to have prevented leaders from addressing improvement priorities. For example, Charlie talked about the impact on planning, as the action had inhibited staff from being involved in new developments:

“I feel like industrial action has really stopped that.” Charlie, White House Primary

Theodore and Henry described the delicate balance they were maintaining and the inhibiting effect of industrial action on developing or seeking to improve aspects of the school’s work:

“We thought you know, we’ll pull back we’ll not demand anything, we’ll not put anyone in a position that you know clashes with their conscience of We’re not we’re not maybe pushing on with some initiatives that we would deep down like to.” Theodore and Henry, Deputy Headteachers, Ivy Secondary

Teaching, learning and curriculum

The areas of schools’ work that leaders spoke about in relation to improving students achievement were mainly related to the work of teachers and the curriculum. Elsie’s school had identified a particular area of their curriculum, albeit the work was constrained by the industrial action:

“We’ve committed to developing, within the confines of union action, our Forest School programme.... we’d release each of our Forest School leaders to get together and share plans, share best practice.” Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

Theodore spoke of longer-term development of the schools’ curriculum as being instrumental in ensuring the full range of students had opportunities:

“You’re catered for whether you would be wanting to go traditional or want them to go more vocational... have done that over a number of years.” Theodore, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Oscar referred to direct work with students and families as being a strand of their effort to improve results, again reflecting on the impact on the industrial action:

“Interviews with families based on academic performance throughout the year, all that work is is much, much reduced. So I do feel our results last summer were affected by industrial action.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Inspection and Accountabilities

One of the principal means of accountability and evaluation of quality for schools in Northern Ireland is inspection by ETI. However, as Louie outlined, the industrial action had meant that inspections had not been taking place in schools for many years:

“Because of action short of strike... schools do not engage in ETI (Education and Training Inspectorate) inspections. ... basically that means that schools are not doing inspection processes.” Louie, Local Leader

As we outlined in the previous section, headteachers were committed to improvement and were identifying priorities and planning, but it was clear that the lack of external validation via inspections coupled with ASOS limiting scope for change within school made it hard for leaders to feel clear about where and how they were making a difference.

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One source of formal accountability was through governing bodies, but accounts of how this worked were varied. Evelyn described both challenge and support:

“So I answer to the Board of Governors and and we meet regularly and I can pick up the phone to them if I'm worried about it... you're held accountable. So you know, they're fighting to make sure I'm only looking after this school. So we're making sure that I'm doing my job correctly. So they're very good, they're very visible and they're very supportive.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops

Ella described a different experience:

“Our governors meetings were very much over who's bringing the buns and and what's been happening at the local church... It was lovely, it was great but the challenge function wasn't really there.” Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

Alfie, who chaired the governing body of a voluntary grammar school, took the accountability role of the board very seriously:

“We are self-governing... We have drawn up a school development plan, it's a three year plan. All schools here are required legally to prepare that... I'm putting a lot of emphasis on because, um, in previous times, let's say the Board of Governors weren't really terribly, uh, terribly involved in the oversight of this document.” Alfie, Local Leader

He went on to describe a structured approach:

“The governors are responsible for it. We are now monitoring at every Board of Governors meetings meeting and on the targets. They're there and uh, this is a, this of course this, this, the school development plan is cascaded down to departmental plans and then then the principal and the senior management team have to have to monitor that and make sure that's happening.” Alfie, Local Leader

The Education Authority (EA) are the other main body that have a role in overseeing schools' work. Headteachers often spoke positively about and valued contact with individual officers, but there was rarely a strong sense of being held accountable:

“We don't have the EA officers coming in to work with us.... they they look after our finances, they look after our recruitment processes... EA solicitors are excellent. Beyond that, they have very little day to day.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Archie expressed a particularly bald view:

“There's nobody above us really So even ETI and the Department and EA, they think they monitor and stuff, but they don't really, it's like everyone plays a big game, but there's nothing really going on there.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Care

There were a significant group of practices and activities that leaders described, characterised here as 'Care', that were not directly related to learning in classrooms and achievements in tests, but were nevertheless given high priority and required significant effort.

Social Issues and Family Support

Organising and providing a wide range of activities for children and communicating in different ways with families was important of Elsie:

“We had a Facebook page and so we introduced social media, which is a very celebratory tone to all that we do here. We started a breakfast club, We started after school childcare. We broadened all our clubs... I think we're more accessible, aren't we? More accessible to people than we were before.” Elsie & Emily, Headteacher and Deputy, Yew Tree Primary

Henry described a different kind of engagement beyond the school:

“This new thing now with the PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland), they phone in and let us know what houses they've been to if the pupils belong to (our school). So taking those calls every day is right, OK, you follow up on that. So the day passes, you can (say) right, ‘I've done nothing that anyone would traditionally think my job is.’” Henry, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Evelyn described the principles and values she understood her school to apply, linking them to a positive reputation for the school in the town:

“Because of the reputation that has been built up over the years, ... parents in the [Town] area are sending their children to our school because of our school, not because of religion. And they are more than happy to send their child ... because of what goes inside the walls of this college. We're inclusive. it doesn't matter, you know what your financial or social background is. We work with you. Your child has the right to be educated, you know what I mean. We make sure that they're fed and that they're warm. So then we can educate them.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

Leaders spoke in detail of attending to what they called the pastoral needs of students, in ways which were distinctive to Northern Ireland. Sienna emphasised the importance of direct relationships with parents for example:

“When you have those relationships at all levels, you know, I can lift the phone to nearly all of my parents and say, you know, look, I'm giving you a wee ring, can we have a chat, you know, and it could be a something difficult. But because that relationship is there.” Sienna, Headteacher, Mill Primary

Phoebe's perception was that this pastoral work had changed:

“I mean the pastoral needs in the school have just exploded, they really have in comparison. It is not the same job as what we went into, you know, in terms of teaching.” Phoebe, Deputy Headteacher, Woodside Secondary

Safeguarding was usually included in the discussion of pastoral needs and the demand on staff that Elsie described was typical:

“We would still have quite significant safeguarding issues that we think about at the weekend and that we sort of ruminate over.” Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

There was a feeling amongst some leaders that the wider concerns dealt with by schools were an increasing and new feature of leaders' and teachers' work:

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“Sure you're seeing a huge responsibility for the teachers nowadays, huge... It's absolutely mushroomed, even even in the time I've been involved in it, and it is a legally very, very it's a it's a complex, very complex area.” Alfie, Local Leader

Daisy suggested the changes represented a shift in the role of schools:

“Schools have become not just centres of education, they are centres of parenting, they're centres of social uh trying to maintain a social balance.” Daisy, Local Leader

Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

All headteachers spoke about the specific area of SEND as a significant priority. Some headteachers had sought to ensure their schools were particularly effective in specialist areas:

“With my SEN background, there is I suppose more of a let's be inclusive and diverse and let's be well known for catering for children with SEN. And I think again just locally we would be considered just now we're the first school to have a sensory den as far as I'm aware.” Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

Elsie had a particular expertise in the area she described. In Evelyn's school, there had been a long-standing effort to develop expertise amongst the staff:

“Our special educational needs here and the the school is known throughout [Area] and [Area]. You know parents are fighting to get their kids in here because our our special educational needs is is superb.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops

A more general view was that there had been a significant increase in the number of children with special needs of various types, and a shortage of specialist school places. Harry outlined his experience:

“We are finding more and more and more children are coming into mainstream schools with moderate and moderate learning difficulties. But the support is not there. The support, it's not there. So we're finding more challenges coming into school, but the support is not there.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

Harry's reference to support was referring to he and his staff lacking expertise, and there not being experts on whom he could call for advice or help. More generally, some heads were describing situations where the limited number of specialist school places in the area meant that there were children in their schools who it was challenging for them to support. Leo described a situation in his school:

“And in our area of most need, say for example special educational needs. It's it is a real shambles. I mean I I have two kids who should have been in a special school come September. Umm and but there wasn't a space for them and I I have a child with extreme needs and he was recommended for a special school in March... He has Downs syndrome and he can't be left on his own and we just didn't have adequate supervision.” Leo, Headteacher, Oaklands Primary

Ella, who we explained above had agreed to open a new SPiM unit in her small rural primary school, had faced challenges in recruiting staff and building a shared culture with such a shift in staffing profile:

“We did have two Foundation Stage classroom assistants and five special needs assistants. I now have 12 special needs assistants and just one Foundation Stage. And that has brought a whole new level of management. A whole new layer... staff relationships and part of that, they've been thrown into jobs, some of those jobs quite hard going and we haven't had a chance to do the ... team building because it's been get that unit up and running ... a few cracks are starting to appear.” Ella

Well-Being

Another specific area that leaders spoke about was the overall well-being of both students and staff. In Ella's school, the well-being of students had become a priority:

“And I would say post COVID we've really seen a difference and then there's been a complete shift in focus as to we came away from standards and to more of the well-being and building those relationships back again.” Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

Leaders were also clear that attending to staff well-being had become a higher priority:

“Staff would say that we make ourselves available that you know... and that's, you know, that's that connection plus care. ... You know, they're getting the support from us as a school to say, you know, we know that you are not just a worker... you know, we want to support your life too.” Henry, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Poppy, recently retired from headship, reflected on the focus on well being and the role of the headteacher:

“And so you're managing the stress that the teachers were under as well as the demands that were coming to me, you're juggling that. Umm, and then the being all things to all people. It's I suppose managing the wellbeing of your staff, keeping the parents on board, keeping myself sane.” Poppy, Local Leader

Leadership, Values and Professional Beliefs

In discussing the experience of leadership, their priorities and practices, leaders sometimes implied, and often stated very explicitly, values and beliefs about leadership and their roles.

Values

As well as the starting point of being concentrated on pupils, the idea of being part of a community was a strongly stated value:

“It's about our pupils and it's about the community that we have been welcomed into... We're part of the community. It's not ... and as long as I'm able to sit in that chair, I will, I will fight I will fight for that.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

Archie spoke in terms of values guiding behaviour in his school and placed respecting community as an essential part of the values:

“There's almost no rules as such, which inspectors can't get their heads around at all, but our values are that it's really, you know, respect the school, respect each other and respect the community. If you're not doing that then you're breaking the rules sort of thing.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Beliefs and dispositions

Leaders and headteachers also spoke about the principles underlying their approach to leading and managing:

“The biggest thing for me in the school culture is relationships. All right. You know, I have to have difficult conversations sometimes. But if it is underpinned by a really good, strong relationship, it makes that conversation a lot easier to have.” Sienna, Headteacher, Mill Primary

Sienna’s focus on relationships and people was representative of the way leaders spoke. Louie expressed the emphasis on people in terms of developing their capabilities and encouraging them to take initiative:

“I think that in a really effective organisation, people are empowered and there's a high reward, low risk culture... that creative learning culture that I think the best leaders create and that space for people to grow. And I think you have to intentionally invest in people. You have to put that training, that opportunity in front of all your staff.” Louie, Local Leader

Alfie, thinking in more explicitly hierarchical terms also emphasised a focus on people:

“It is all about the principal then getting the right people in the right place below him in order for him to be able to function as he needs to function.” Alfie, Local Leader

Concentrating more on the leaders themselves, Louie emphasised a value and belief in sustaining a child-centred focus:

“Successful leaders I come across, are able to see through their busyness to focus on the children they're working with, and that is particularly strong. So I think that child-centred focus is really important.” Louie, Local Leader

Alfie listed a more general set of skills and capabilities:

“I mean the principal has to have a very broad range of skills. You know everything from teamworking and strategic thinking, analytical skills and all that, but they have to have a fair knowledge of the legal framework in which they're dealing with employment issues etcetera, etcetera. And one of the big issues for us was change management.” Alfie, Local Leader

Grace returned to an emphasis on relationships and the ability to work productively with people:

“Where it doesn't work is where they don't have a high level of emotional intelligence and where they're not good at, um, if I say relationships, you know what I mean by that? About really working people, working with people and really high-level skills in working with people.” Grace, Local Leader

Context

There were some observations about leadership that were very specific to the context of Northern Ireland. Archie, having also worked in England, made a comparison:

“If this was the English system, there's no way I'd have this much freedom. I wouldn't be a given as much, I suppose it is autonomy.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Harry, reflecting on the changes he'd observed even over his relatively short career, suggested a review of expectations, a point made in various ways by other heads. Harry emphasised particularly the challenge of a small school and being a teaching principal:

“Need a complete review of leadership and what we expect from our principals and leaders and what structure does that look like. ... that involves all of that, do we need teaching principals.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

Harry's point was echoed by Louie who also raised the issue of how sustainable long careers in headship were:

“I'm not sure it's sustainable to have teaching principals anymore. I think the job is too big.... I think the biggest sustainability issues for me is what happens when people are getting these large jobs earlier.” Louie, Local Leader

Drains

Workload and Weight of Leadership

Speaking about the aspects of leadership that were challenging and drained them, leaders spoke about a variety of specific aspects of their roles, but always about the cumulative effect of those different aspects:

“Long workload, long hours, sorry and workload. That's a bit of a drain.” Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

The long hours and heavy workload of Ella's 'long workload' were at the core of the cumulative effect. Poppy enumerated the spectrum and immediacy of demands on headteachers:

“But that everything, the diversity of the of the role and the jumping from one thing to another, the having plans to do something, you know, curriculum-based or your school development plan, and then the day goes completely pear shaped because a parent appears up.” Poppy, Local Leader

Archie summed the point up, and his use of the work 'relentless' was typical:

“I think there's not one thing there that I don't enjoy, but I think the grind of it all is, as I said... it's not one thing, it's just lots of one things, relentless, and it's that ...It's not even about lonely, it's not a lonely job, I know people say it is, but it's more you are on your own ultimately.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

The relentless, 'lots of one things' was combined with the weight of ultimate responsibility in Archie's description. Oscar outlined the impact on him personally in the early part of his time as a headteacher:

“In the early part of my career when I was learning this, it was it was personally damaging. My marriage failed, all those types of things. There was obviously more to it than that. But that that you know the job when you were starting out in a school of this scale that needed the work that was done here, I was doing 70, 80 hours a week standard and that was damaging.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Primary

Admin and Bureaucracy

Headteachers spoke of the range activities involved in managing organisations and leading processes as administration, often finding it draining as it was perceived to take them away from other activities:

“I’m here for the kids primarily and the staff and a week could go past and I haven’t been outside this door and that’s not good. And that’s because I’m either doing administrative stuff that needs doing or I’m trying to deal with [issues].” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

Sienna emphasised both the types of concerns and how general it was as an issue for headteachers:

“The minutes of the principals’ meetings, if you looked at them, are more about the bureaucracy rather than teaching and learning, and I think that’s sad that it has degenerated into that. So you’re looking at your maintenance issues, you’re looking at HR issues and communication issues within EA and the lack of support for special needs children.” Sienna, Headteacher, Mill Primary

Harry, feeling the pressure keenly as a teaching head in a small school with limited administrative support, was very aware of what he perceived as the increasing expectations on schools:

“More and more and more coming down to the principal’s desk that we are expected to deal with and that we wouldn’t have had, you know, in times gone by... weekly... I have to check every member of staff to put their sickness in... and it’s almost as if it’s being passed down to school... principals do feel more and more and more is being passed back down to schools for us to sort and to deal with.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

Leo was very aware that the demands on maintaining the school and the organisation were in tension with what he saw as the primary concerns of his job:

“So much of my time is dealt with HR or maintenance, chasing up someone to fix a boiler, have you got three different quotes for renewal for this alarm company...working with the kids, getting into helping and developing staff ... that’s what I see my job as, currently that’s not what I’m doing.” Leo, Headteacher

For Leo, like many other interviewees, these wider demands were taking him away from the teaching and learning related issues that he wanted to focus on:

“I see myself as an educationalist. How much of my time is dedicated to education, hmm, percentage-wise, 5%?” Leo, Headteacher

Lack of Support

Alongside administrative burdens, headteachers spoke particularly of ‘lack of support’. They were referring most often to specific help beyond the resources of a school like technical and expert advice, for example finance, estates or HR, or specialist services for children with additional needs. Theo spelt it out in detail:

“It’s the support systems that I think used to be there, that I’m told used to be there around schools, and that to me is part of the isolation bit... when problems come and

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they will come, you're on your own, you know. All of the services that we would have relied upon before are gone... the education system crumbling around you, and that sounds very melodramatic, ...it's the most draining on a weekly basis, you know, the child in crisis and you're looking for support. You think you've done as much as you can as a school. And so you look for something bigger, there's nothing there." Theo, Headteacher, Wayside Primary

Many of the services that Theo referred to were provided by the Education Authority. Elsie made that clear:

"I'm disappointed with the Education Authority. My School Improvement Professional, he is a wonderfully hardworking, easy to reach person. But aside from him ... I think the umbrella Education Authority as a whole is not supportive of my leadership and skills in general." Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

Elsie's positive reference to the School Improvement Professional was a widely shared sentiment. Different officers worked with particular groups of schools, but headteachers were positive about them. There were a range of other services that headteachers felt were no longer available however, Ella listed some related to teaching and learning:

"We're not getting the support, the services just aren't there. We used to have literacy support, maths support, and they would come in and work with subject leaders and tell us what the latest thinking was and do training. Gone. All those services are all just slashed." Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

Daisy listed other more technical services and issues that require support that were perceived by heads either to be not available or of poor quality:

"Employment legislation, human resources. Can you suspend a teacher? Can you do this? Can you do that? What happens if? And even working with children, what is the legal situation where a teacher, for example, has been accused of X&Y? Is there support there or do you have to run to your Union? And heads are doing that when they should be getting support from the Education Authority." Daisy, Local Leader

Sienna was clear about how she saw her situation:

"The feeling now as a principal, even in seven years, I feel much less supported today. Other than my colleagues that I've great relationships with. But if it wasn't for them, I feel so isolated that if there's a crisis, if something happens, I'm responsible and I've so little support to turn to." Sienna, Headteacher, Mill Primary

Finance, Resource

All leaders referred to limited resources. The lack of support and services described in the previous section was linked by many to cuts to budgets at a national level. In terms of their own role, finance was widely discussed by heads:

"I actually think it's impossible to lead at the minute, it's almost like learned helplessness for me, because when you take our main roles, if you take the management role ... I've given up looking at the school budget because it's a joke. We'll never, you can't make your budget balance." Freddie, Headteacher, Woodlands Primary

Freddie's difficulty in balancing the budget was related to staff costs, with heads suggesting that staffing accounted for very high proportions of their budget even with minimum staffing. Sienna made the same point:

"But in this minute in time, the finance is so tight that I can't ... I can't actually pay my staff bill." Sienna, Headteacher, Mill Primary

Oscar described a different pressure and lack of discretion to spend money when there was potentially budget available:

"I know I couldn't buy an Interactive whiteboard. I wouldn't get permission, approval to buy an Interactive whiteboard because it costs over £300. I needed to create a classroom last year. I wasn't allowed to do that because we're not allowed to do capital spend. You know, we had the money to do it. We had planned for it, but because of capital spend rules in the Education Authority, we weren't allowed to do it. So that's draining." Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Ella described a longer term pressure with her budget linked to pupil numbers:

"Current context, fear of low numbers, that is draining me. ... but we know there aren't enough children in the village, so that's a constant drain." Ella, headteacher, Lilac Primary

SEND and Inclusion

In the section on Care we outlined some of the challenges headteachers described with increasing numbers of pupils with SEND in mainstream schools. The challenge of limited support and resource for those pupils was referred to constantly in discussion about what drained leaders:

"Think in terms of SEN as well, I think it is literally shocking what is happening to this generation of children who have SEN needs. I don't think we're overidentifying. I think these issues are there and I think there's a massive generational gap of support of early intervention". Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

Elsie spelt out the challenge. Ella had the same view, identifying it as her biggest challenge and drain:

"Special needs is just the biggest one at the minute, and particularly since COVID. All these children are coming through with all these needs and and there's just, it's just it's it's a waiting game. It's a priorities game." Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

Leo again detailed the day to day consequences in his school:

"For people outside of the education bubble, they're like, what do you mean you got hit today? That's that that shouldn't be right. And it shouldn't be right, but the reality is we have kids with such extreme needs now coming in that all aspects of school that that is an aspect of our job." Leo, Headteacher, Oaklands Primary

Complaints and Disputes

A consistent observation was that the volume of complaints had increased, often but not exclusively from parents, and frequently the tone and persistence of them had intensified.

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Charlie's experience of finding a particular complaint time consuming and personally difficult was quite common:

"Particularly difficult parent at the moment ... I could have had 20 successes in that week but I can only fixate on this personal criticism and I don't know if, I've written 'thin skin', I don't know if that's something that you ever get used to but I'd love to be able to be that person to go, 'that criticism's peripheral.'" Charlie, White House Primary

Elsie spoke of the continuing, albeit 'low-level' nature of some complaints:

"It's low level, low level constant. It's a good way of describing it, I don't anticipate legal action but you never know ... I would hope that I would have enough um communicative skills to bring it down and to talk with someone and to reason with them and before it got to that point. But I don't know." Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

Joseph spoke of the long running and time-consuming nature of complaints that involved legal action:

"That really came into play when over grading and things like that then, you know and we had a few sort of long, long running nasty appeals over grades and it involves many other people like public ombudsman and then solicitors and data controllers and things like that" Joseph, Deputy Headteacher, Woodside Secondary

Staff resilience and HR challenges

"Children are not as resilient and staff aren't to be honest haven't been as resilient after turning back, coming back after lockdown." Phoebe, Deputy Headteacher Woodside Secondary

Phoebe's reference to a lack of resilience amongst both staff and students was a widespread perception, often linked in people's minds as Phoebe suggests to the impact of the COVID pandemic.

Leo reflected on the amount of time he spent as a leader responding in different ways to staff:

"I do find then that the staff are coming in and I get it where they're coming from, the they unload and they burden everything on you, and they can be the fourth or fifth person into your office that day." Leo, Oakland Primary

Archie observed that the lack of resilience in staff was seen in the flexibility that some staff now expected in their role:

"Staffing, I've found again since COVID that I'm dealing more and more with stuff that I don't have any I shouldn't be, shouldn't come near me... People want more time off to do stuff that in the past you wouldn't have dreamt of going near a leadership team." Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Oscar's account emphasised that the challenges working with staff were not new as he recounted some long-term issues:

"It's personnel, it's always personnel... I've had several of those in the last few years where there's just that entitlement of someone who isn't putting the work in, is not a good colleague, And in those situations, you know, I have to deal with that. That can't be a vice principal... alcoholic on staff... He was unwell and I respected that, but he wasn't

fit to be in school. So those types of things are very draining.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Poor Principal Well Being

Several leaders reflected on the personal impact of drains and pressures. Sometimes, it was particularly intense challenging episodes:

“It's been a very, it's been a tough couple of months with a particular situation in school and then you get all the physical things, you don't sleep and there's all that and like I think I probably can't do this until retirement.” Freddie, Headteacher, Woodlands Primary

Heads reported the experience of poor well-being itself having a cumulative effect. Freddie's suggestion that he couldn't continue until retirement reinforces the points about career intentions noted in the section on recruitment.

Archie described the impact on him:

“I'm still a long way from retirement. I'm not even thinking about retirement, but um I'm pretty done as well, do you know what I mean?... Sleep is not good. Health is not great. Linked to all those things. But I still think that's worth the sacrifice, if that makes sense ... you can't have a salary like we do and do the job we do without having to work really hard.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Archie was sanguine about the personal cost, but the sense of not being able to sustain the role was quite widespread as Harry reported:

“I can see my friends and colleagues who are in their late 40s going, 'I'm done, I'm done,' you know, and the thought of working with, you know, it's just that the pressure, so the the burnout is there.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

Sustains

Children, Making a Difference, Moral Purpose

Almost every leader spoke first about children and young people in some way when talking about what sustained them in the role. For some, they spoke directly about being with children in school:

“What sustains is the children, the children, the children.” Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

Sienna spoke about the direct response, in this case to a Christmas tree:

“Do you know, standing putting the lights on that Christmas tree today and seeing the children's faces as they walk past, you know what? That's why I do what I do.” Sienna, Headteacher, Mill Primary

Other leaders spoke more generally about the bigger purpose of education and 'making a difference':

“More than just taking your your wage and it is about a vocation or a sense of quality or a sense of wanting to contribute something and that, like that sort of value. Those sort of

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deep values do kind of sustain and kind of keep you going.” Freddie, Headteacher, Woodlands Primary

Elsie spoke about specific children and the collective work of the school needed:

“When I see an actual difference in a child who's maybe come to our school with really significant difficulties, emotional and behavioural issues ... And then when their child gets somewhere and see the progress they've made. And from the support, don't mean just me, I mean the whole school support. I just find that so uplifting.” Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

Archie too spoke about the collective effort of the school, but also spoke in terms of the impact on groups of children especially, he implies, those who may be disadvantaged:

“We're making a difference as a school. You know, you look around there's children, Henry (Deputy Headteacher) will talk to you about his pastoral [work]. But you know, there are children here in all sorts of circumstances, and so that that's still, that's still that drives that side of things as well.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Leo reflected again on the balance of what drained and sustained him:

“Just as I'm looking at it myself, I'm kind of quite struck that there's very little mention of the kids in the things which drain me, but the things that sustain me is all about the kids from my kind of point of view.” Leo, Headteacher, Oaklands Primary

Leadership Opportunity and Autonomy

Some leaders were overt about the motivating and sustaining aspect of being able to influence and lead:

“And I do think I am in a position and a privileged position where you can lead, you can make changes, you can do things in school for the children. And I think that I get a lot of pleasure from that you know because I am in a position where I can make a difference to better the pupil experience in this school you know and that that to me is a huge ... you know the reward that comes with that.” Pheobe, Deputy Headteacher, Woodside Secondary

Archie spoke about having the scope to take initiatives:

“The autonomy bit is really important to me. I'm allowed to take risks here that might take five years to see the benefits of them. But you kind of know deep down it's the right thing to do.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Relationships

All leaders spoke about the relationships around them in terms of sustaining them and enabling them to carry out their role. Working relationships in their schools were one set of vital relationships:

“No but I mean that, you know, the relationship I have with Theodore and the relationship I have with Archie, the relationship with three of us have together is an absolute essential part of the sustain process.” Henry, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

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The close-knit senior teams were spoken about by most headteachers:

“I don't find it lonely, but I have three brilliant vice principals and have a really good relationship with my chair so I'm very fortunate there. I like working with people who are ambitious and competent and want to do well and I've got lots of those people here. So that's inspiring. And and you know, makes you want to stay working with them”. Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Evelyn referred to a wider staff group when she talked about teams:

“I've a brilliant team, I've a superb team and everybody has their, their role and they they fulfil their roles to the highest standard imaginable. They really are. They're great, so that helps. So everything's in place, we work and everything. Policies and procedures are there to protect.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

Oscar made a similar point emphasising the importance of the collective effort to his being able to sustain his role:

“Now it's you know, that's all I'm past all of that. I've got the right people in place. I'm not doing all the things that I used to do because someone else is doing it and I wouldn't have it any other way now.” Oscar, Headteacher, Hillside Secondary

Relationships beyond the school were also important. We have referred to organised groups in the section of place, and Harry stated strongly the value he placed on those peer networks:

“colleagues that are going through the same thing as me. It's not just me. And actually part of that area learning community when we go to those meetings is just putting the world to rights. It's venting” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

A number of headteachers spoke about personal networks and their importance for sustaining them:

“I had two good friends who were great at just saying - right let's up the mountains - and that refreshed me and helped me find a little bit of perspective on some of the issues that there were. So that was great. So you had to find that. Now it took me years to be able to do that.” Poppy, Local Leader

Family and close personal relationships were often mentioned:

“The other thing I must say as well, which I think has had a massive impact on where I am now, is my home life. I'm very, very lucky that my husband had a job and a role that was flexible so I didn't have to go and pick the kids up at two o'clock or three o'clock. He was there to do that.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

Harry mentioned the range of personal relationships that helped sustain him:

“The fact that, supportive wife, the supportive back you know home sort of you know my wife does accept that the job is pressurised. ... So yes, you do you feel alone a lot of the time. But one message on WhatsApp or one coffee with a friend makes you realise it's not. So around here certainly support network.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

Feedback

Feedback and recognition something else spoken of that was sustaining and motivating:

“Something that sustains me is, you know, specific, recognisable praise. OK. And I don't mean I'm all about the glory!” Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree

Harry referred to the feedback in terms of students:

“When you get, and it is rare, now, but when you get, you know, a card for a letter from a parent, you know, or you meet a child, you know I'm still I'm probably, I've gone through. I'm at that point my career now. I did teach children 10 or 15 years ago and when you meet them and their parents still talk about you, you know, highly. And I remember doing this. I remember doing that and you do feel a sense of well, it was worth it. It was worth it.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

Henry spoke of feedback from the wider staff group:

“The staff here really good, it's really nice and it's nice when they come along and sort of say ‘ohh thanks for that’ and appreciate it and then you suddenly realise that we're almost working for them, although we are their professional superiors we're almost serving them.” Henry, Deputy Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Ella was reflecting on the culture within a closer team:

“You know, we're all very good at sharing, so so what my senior teacher, come in to see me to say, your classroom assistants were messaging us last night to say how fantastic you've been in looking after. It was a personal issue, you know. But the fact that the staff will come and tell you, yeah, where the positives, you know, that's really good.” Ella, Headteacher, Lilac Primary

Support

We have detailed some of headteachers views on support in other sections. In the Drains section we highlighted views about support from EA, especially technical support and support from other services. We also noted that generally contact with EA school improvement staff was more positive. In terms of other formal avenues of support, governors were also mentioned in the section on accountability, but a number of headteachers explicitly referred to them as sources of support:

“I think our governors, just their, their current makeup are very supportive and we're a proper collaborative team. Governors are supposed to be your critical friend and just not let you away with anything but listen, support and advise. And I think I've definitely got that with the current governors.” Elsie, Yew Tree Primary

Harry found his governors similarly supportive

“We have a full cohort of governors, very, very supportive. I have to say our governors is a major strength here. They are loyal, they are very, very supportive and they will also assist.” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary

In terms of support, CCMS as the employer for maintained school teaching staff provided some similar services to the EA. Headteachers views were again mixed:

“CCMS are a wee bit more, further distance, if I needed something I would, I would ask them. I think they’re reducing their staff numbers. But I would only go to CCMS if there was something that I wasn't too sure about.” Evelyn, Headteacher, Treetops Secondary

Leo was more equivocal:

“I wouldn't say high quality .. I wouldn't say in terms of the support that at the minute it's it's, it's not great. ...sometimes you can be waiting for days and you know.. I had an HR issue and I think four out of the five people that I was asked to contact were all off on leave, or on the sick.” Leo, headteacher, Oaklands Primary

Networks and Peers

The main other sources of support that headteachers spoke of were firstly the local headteacher groups, usually organised across an area or around one of the towns in Coast:

“[Town] Primary Principals Group. And excuse me again. I find them very helpful, especially in the early days. A collegiate group of principals locally and within that group I had two gentlemen again like my school improvement professional that I could lift the phone to.” Elsie, Headteacher, Yew Tree Primary

Sienna, referring to a group in a different area had similar feelings:

“I think what I love about the group is it's diverse. You have such a range of experience. You have people who are brand new into the role. You've people have been doing it for a lot longer than I have. But there's never a silly question. And that's the lovely thing about that, the ethos of that group.” Sienna, Mill Primary

The networks also took the form of WhatsApp groups and confidential chats

“So we are the sanity for each other. But we tackle problems together, we share problems and they're at the end of the WhatsApp group. Really, really useful support mechanism there.” Ella

“The support that I get is from my principal colleagues. You know, the best support that I have is the principal WhatsApp group that I can say confidentially this is a challenge I have, does anybody know?” Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle Primary